

November 2, 2010

The UK and France Agreement on Defense and Security Cooperation in Warhead Maintenance

On November 2, France and the United Kingdom agreed to a landmark treaty on defense and security cooperation. The treaty—signed by President Nicolas Sarkozy and Prime Minister David Cameron—calls for the development of certain military activities such as integrated carrier strike groups and a Combined Joint Expeditionary Force (CJEF). In a subordinate agreement, the two countries also plan to cooperate in ensuring the safety and viability of their nuclear weapons stockpiles. Joint activities in the nuclear weapons realm will involve the construction of a simulation facility in Valduc, France, where scientists from both countries will conduct work on the safety and security of their respective country's warheads, and the establishment of a joint Technology Development Center in Aldermaston, UK, to develop simulation technology for the center at Valduc. Current plans indicate that the Valduc facility will become operational around 2014 and construction costs will be split equally between France and the United Kingdom.

The timing of the agreement is largely the result of French and British policies to cut military spending; savings will be realized by increasing interoperability through the pooling of specific resources and expertise. Cameron stated that “rather than both countries building identical and expensive facilities to ensure the safety of our nuclear weapons, we will build together a joint facility, jointly owned and jointly managed, sharing our knowledge and expertise and saving millions of pounds.” However, the agreement cannot be explained by the need for financial saving alone. As Sarkozy pointed out, the agreement is “a historical fact that will allow us to make some savings.”

While the announced agreement has been applauded by industrial giants such as BAE Systems plc and Dassault Aviation, who stand to gain considerably from new government contracts, others are more skeptical. Some military officers and senior political players on both sides of the channel are publicly expressing reservations, whereas others are encouraging even more nuclear cooperation, such as a joint nuclear weapons force.

The announcement has confused a number of people due to the inclusion of the agreement to test the safety and reliability of nuclear weapons. Both the UK and France have ratified the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) that bans all nuclear weapons test explosions anywhere. The word “test” in this case refers to components testing, computer simulations and experiments that do not involve nuclear explosions—all of which are permitted under the CTBT.

The United Kingdom's Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR)—unveiled on October 19—contained a plan to cut defense spending by 8 percent over four years. The

plan includes scrapping a small number of Royal Air Force squadrons, the retirement of naval assets and the delaying of a final “main gate” spending decision on the replacement of Britain’s naval nuclear weapons system until 2016 (after the next general election). In a re-assessment of its nuclear weapons configuration, the SDSR also contains a commitment to reduce the number of operational warheads onboard each Trident nuclear submarine from 48 to 40, to reduce the number of total operational warheads from 160 to 120, and to reduce the overall stockpile to no more than 180 nuclear warheads. This represents the latest step in the United Kingdom’s support for multilateral nuclear disarmament. By comparison, France currently possesses fewer than 300 operational warheads with none in reserve. This is far below the United States, which has approximately 2,480 operational warheads, and Russia, which has approximately 4,600. While there is limited public information on the size of China’s nuclear arsenal, it is believed to have between 170 and 180 operational strategic warheads.

In addition, the United Kingdom has taken the lead on international cooperative disarmament verification research, investigating how to verify the dismantlement of nuclear weapons in partnership with Norway and a London-based think tank VERTIC. The UK and France have also jointly taken the global lead by holding meetings on “confidence building measures towards disarmament and non-proliferation issues” with senior policy makers, military officials and technical experts from the five permanent members of the UN Security Council. The first meeting was held in September 2009 in London and the second, to be hosted by France, will be held in early 2011.

The Following CNS Staff members are available for comment:

Dr. Patricia Lewis, Deputy Director, (831) 647-6575, patricia.lewis@miis.edu

Miles Pomper, Senior Research Associate, (202) 842-3100, ext. 318, mpomper@miis.edu

Dr. Benoît Pelopidas, Postdoctoral Fellow, (831) 647-3085, bpelopidas@miis.edu

Thomas Young, Research Associate, (831) 647-6654, thomas.young@miis.edu

The James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies strives to combat the spread of weapons of mass destruction by training the next generation of nonproliferation specialists and disseminating timely information and analysis. Based at the Monterey Institute of International Studies, CNS is the world’s largest nongovernmental organization devoted exclusively to research and training on nonproliferation issues.

###