
France

Chirac-Mitterrand: uneasy cohabitation

by Philip Golub

In the three months which have passed since the legislative elections which brought a conservative coalition led by Jacques Chirac to power, the contradictions inherent to the power-sharing arrangement between Chirac and French President François Mitterrand have come increasingly to the fore.

Fundamentally divergent orientations make these contradictions inevitable in the areas of anti-terror policy and certain specific aspects of French defense policy. Hence a first significant row erupted over the new government's intent to harden anti-terror legislation in May. Mitterrand argued in favor of a rather vague notion of civil liberties against the supposedly repressive nature of the government's proposed legislation. This dispute has in fact become a permanent feature of the relationship between President and prime minister.

More recently and perhaps more importantly, Mitterrand and Chirac have clashed over the issue of defense policy, notably on the issue of French participation in the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI).

Chirac: 'SDI is irreversible'

Speaking before the Association of the Diplomatic Press May 23, Premier Chirac declared that his "government has adopted a much more positive attitude towards SDI than its predecessor. SDI is an irreversible tendency," said Chirac, fully justified by the ongoing ballistic missile defense research in the Soviet Union. He then added at the time, "It would be irresponsible for France to stay by the way-side. . . . We cannot afford not to associate ourselves."

A few days later President Mitterrand chose to rebuff his prime minister publicly during the graduation ceremonies of the St.-Cyr officers' academy. Co-thinkers of the previous defense minister, Paul Quilès, in the defense ministry followed up Mitterrand's attack on Chirac and the SDI by inserting a dogmatic critique of SDI into the official defense monthly of the ministry, *Armées d'aujourd'hui* (*Armed Forces Today*). The latest skirmish of this cabinet warfare is the publication of a half-hearted defense of SDI in the military

journal, *Défense Nationale*.

In reality, the debate over ballistic missile defense is not so much military or technological as political. President Mitterrand has consistently opposed the idea of an SDI/TDI (Tactical Defense Initiative), although French labs working on high-powered lasers have produced some excellent laboratory results over the past two years. Mitterrand knows that, were he to concede policy-making powers to Chirac on defense, he would in effect be giving up his major constitutional prerogative in international military and security affairs. Hence Chirac, by raising the SDI issue, is directly challenging the President's policy-making powers. Out of this emerges the constitutionally defined dilemma of two contradictory executive authorities which negate each other.

All major defense and foreign policy decisions will therefore be stalled until the presidential elections which are regularly slated for 1988 but which could occur earlier if the stalemate of cohabitation becomes unbearable. That this is not the case for matters pertaining to internal security affairs is made clear by the increasingly successful efforts of the Chirac government in anti-terrorist matters. The government has recently signed a series of bilateral anti-terrorist accords with the United States, the Federal Republic of Germany, and Italy. Although the details of these accords have not been made public, they are said to involve measures to facilitate extradition of known terrorists, joint anti-terror actions when called for, and reinforced intelligence cooperation. The government is not constitutionally bound to seek out Mitterrand's blank check in affairs which normally pertain to government activity.

Nonetheless, the dilemma remains: a government with limited powers facing a President with limited authority.

The result is government by consensus, where consensus can be achieved. The deeper flaw in the arrangement is made only too clear in the ongoing negotiations over the French hostages still detained by the Iranian-controlled Hezbollah and the Islamic Jihad, which also detain five American hostages. Prime Minister Chirac has either been forced to accept or has chosen to accept political responsibility for the eight remaining French hostages. At the same time, President Mitterrand has continued to engage in his own, discreet but visible personal diplomacy vis-à-vis the Syrian and Iranian governments. Special envoys of the presidency have flown to Damascus repeatedly over the past weeks even in the midst of the government's official negotiations with these governments. There is no serious reason to believe that the French Executive, which is a house divided, will find means to free its hostages except at an extravagant political price, a price Chirac cannot accept to pay given his historical and recently reiterated ties to moderate regimes in the Mideast. Nor is there any reasonable hope that the crude Iranian and more subtle Syrian blackmail will cease. A deadly game is thus in process not only between France and her blackmailers, but between the President and prime minister of France.