Current status

France possesses approximately 300 nuclear warheads, approximately 290 of which are deployed or operationally available for deployment on short notice. Its delivery vehicles consist of approximately 40 aircraft assigned to a total of 40 cruise missiles; and four nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines (at least two of which are always fully operational) equipped with nuclear-armed long-range ballistic missiles. The French stockpile is expected to decrease to around 290 warheads within the next few years. France has stated that it has no additional nuclear reserves, although FAS estimates that it does have a small inventory of spare warheads. France is no longer thought to be producing fissile materials for nuclear weapons. It is believed to have an estimated 6 tons of plutonium and 26 ± 6 tons of HEU.

Modernization

In its latest white paper of April 2013, the French government reaffirmed its position that “nuclear deterrence” is a means of protecting France’s vital interests. France is the middle of a broad modernization of its nuclear forces involving submarines, aircraft, missiles, warheads, and production facilities that will continue for another decade. The modernization programme will ensure that it can maintain its capability until at least the 2030s.

The new Le Triomphant submarines are quieter and the M45 missiles are gradually being replaced with longer-range M-51 missiles. The M-51s will be modified, starting in 2015, to the Tête nucléaire océanique. In addition to modernizing its submarine-based nuclear forces, France is also introducing a new and more capable delivery platform to its nuclear air force that is both aircrafts and missiles. This modernization is expected to result in a quantitative reduction of nuclear-capable aircrafts. France is also introducing a new nuclear warhead to its air-based nuclear deterrent (Tête nucléaire aéroportée) as it is to its sea-launched ballistic missiles.

Economics

The French government has indicated that it spends approximately US$4.6 billion on its nuclear forces each year, though a recent report from Global Zero estimates that the total cost for 2011 was approximately $6 billion. The government announced in November 2011 that the deficit would have to be cut by 20% in 2012 with half of the savings coming from spending cuts, but the nuclear weapons budget will reportedly only see a 1.3% decrease.

International law and doctrine

Officials indicate that France will reject calls for nuclear reductions in the near term, which, especially when considered in context with its substantial nuclear modernization, is in conflict with France’s obligations under the NPT to negotiate disarmament. In April 2013 France released a new white paper that highlights the importance of “nuclear deterrence” as a strictly defensive protection from aggressions by another state against France’s vital interests and, thus, the “ultimate guarantee” for the country’s sovereignty. However, vital interests are not specifically defined in the white paper.

Public discourse and multilateral engagement

There is scant debate in France over the composition or cost of its nuclear forces. France has not attended either of the conferences on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons in Norway or Mexico, nor did it participate in the open-ended working group on nuclear disarmament in 2013. It has issued joint statements with the United Kingdom and United States disparaging both initiatives as well as the high-level meeting on nuclear disarmament hosted by the UN on 26 September 2013 as “distractions” from “ongoing” work on nuclear arms control.