

Report from Paris by Laurent Rosenfeld

Mitterrand shifts on beam defense

No matter how much whining Paris has done about "militarization of space," France wants in on the new technologies.

Three weeks after U.S. Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger offered Western European nations a partnership in developing the technologies of the Strategic Defense Initiative, French President François Mitterrand announced his own plan for a large European research program along the same lines as the SDI.

Concretizing a proposal floated early last year at The Hague, Mitterrand announced the creation of the European Research Coordination Agency, or Eureka for short, on April 17, following a full meeting of the French cabinet. This agency should have juridical and financial autonomy, and would be mandated to coordinate national R&D work. The French foreign minister, Roland Dumas, will discuss the proposal with all the European Community heads of state in his upcoming round of visits to all the European capitals.

According to the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica*, Mitterrand proposed an initial funding of \$4 billion over a five-year period, half from governments and half from industries. *La Repubblica* also cited a statement by French Defense Minister Charles Hernu, who referred to "Star Peace," countering the nickname "Star Wars" given by hostile media to the SDI.

The Mitterrand proposal calls for European Community-wide (and interested non-EC) cooperation in developing six areas of SDI-related technology work:

"*Optronics*," systems combining

electronic and optical components, extending from lasers to sensors, from lenses and prisms to mirrors, from optical fibers to computers;

New materials, including composite materials and carbon fibers, ceramics, and new alloys, with emphasis on light and strong materials capable of substituting for steel and aluminum in aerospace;

Large computers, especially fifth-generation computers, where Europe is far behind Japan and the United States;

Power lasers and particle beams, probably for both military and civilian use;

Artificial intelligence, that is, improved computer software;

Ultra-rapid and ultra-miniaturized electronics, capable of performing thousands of operations per second.

Although this initiative is officially labelled "civilian," it is obvious that Mitterrand has military applications in mind. It is widely believed that this French initiative was taken with the tacit consent of the West German government, whose chancellor, Helmut Kohl, endorsed President Reagan's SDI the day after the Mitterrand initiative was announced.

Other European nations, Britain for example, may resist the initiative, which may once more assign a leading position to a Paris-Bonn axis.

The French position on beam weapons has clearly changed in the recent period, away from Mitterrand's

December 1984 diatribe against "militarization of space," repeated this spring by Defense Minister Hernu at the meeting of the Wehrkunde Societ for Strategic Studies in Munich. It is a wise shift, because France's independent nuclear deterrent, the *force de frappe*, is already obsolescent, in view of Soviet missile strength targeted on Western Europe. And the French government certainly got a little scared when it saw U.S. experts making direct contact with French labs and scientists and French high-tech companies trying to be involved into the SDI. This already led the defense minister, at the beginning of April, to commission the Aerospatiale company the study the effects of particle beams against ballistic missile nuclear warheads.

Shortly, after a popular TV show featuring the famous actor Yves Montand on the Soviet danger and the SDI response, Hernu made some confused comments which pointed up the government's lack of a coherent strategic perspective. But he did stress that Europe, including France, had a very important role to play in the SDI. Hernu specifically cited the role of mirror technologies where, he said, France is number one in the world.

But Mitterrand's policy does not amount to a pledge that France will participate directly in the Reagan initiative. Rather, the French government is trying to promote its own "independent" bargaining position, to avoid becoming a junior partner in an essentially American enterprise. Thus, Mitterrand gives a lot of importance to the idea of a common European posture vis-à-vis the American offers, in order to be able to bargain with the U.S. administration. Mitterrand's initiative is certainly not directed against the United States, but is aimed at trading some advantages in exchange for a European or French participation.