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Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

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When Russia targets airfields, France strikes back from the sea



On 6 November, the French Directorate General of Armaments announced that it would soon sign a contract with European missile manufacturer MBDA for the supply of the MdCN Mk2, a new version of the naval cruise missile already in service with the French Navy.

MBDA is owned by Airbus, Britain's BAE Systems and Italy's Leonardo, leading European aerospace and defence manufacturers.

The missile is designed to strike targets deep inland and will be launched from FREMM multi-purpose frigates, jointly developed by France and Italy, and from French Suffren-class nuclear-powered attack submarines.

The French Ministry of Defence states that the new missile will have a range of more than 1,000 kilometres and will be more resistant to satellite navigation jamming.

The first deliveries to the navy are expected in 2030, and the ministry has not disclosed the value of the contract or the number of missiles.

In France's 2025 strategy, Russia is identified as the most immediate threat to the interests of France and its allies. In the event of a war in Europe, Moscow could temporarily disable allied air power by attacking airstrips and fuel depots, buying time while the allies repair damaged bases or redeploy aircraft.

Missiles launched from French ships and submarines would force Moscow to reckon with a counter-strike even while allied aircraft are grounded.

For the other allies, it remains an open question whether they will be able to rely on French ships in the first days of a conflict, when Paris itself needs them.

When airports are the first target

On 27 January, during the Topaz exercise, the French Air Force simulated an immediate threat to the Mont-de-Marsan air base in the south-west of the country, where Rafale fighters are stationed.

Units had seven hours from the warning to prepare for redeployment, after which aircraft, personnel and equipment were dispersed across four bases.

Twenty-four hours after the evacuation order, the aircraft carried out a simulated strike with SCALP cruise missiles, the air-launched counterpart of the naval MdCN.

The Air Force thus tested whether it could hit distant targets even after leaving its home base. Such a response still depends on whether the alternative runways are usable and whether ground crews can refuel, arm and prepare the aircraft for combat.

Ships and submarines do not need runways, and a frigate's commanding officer can change position during an operation. A submarine can remain hidden even while approaching an area from which a target is within range of its missiles.

> In April 2024, the French Navy demonstrated that a frigate and a submarine can conduct coordinated missile strikes

Paris can also deliberately send a frigate to ensure its presence is noticed, as a warning before deciding whether to use force.

If the appearance of a frigate would unnecessarily exacerbate a crisis, Paris can prepare a response from a submarine without the adversary being aware of it.

The submarine's reactor is used solely for propulsion, allowing it to remain underwater for long periods, and the MdCN carries a conventional rather than nuclear warhead.

In April 2024, the French Navy demonstrated that a frigate and a submarine can conduct

coordinated missile strikes.

The frigate Aquitaine, off the coast of Brittany, and a Suffren-class submarine, off the south-west coast of France, each launched a missile, and both missiles struck the same range target simultaneously.

The test showed that crews at two distant positions can coordinate a strike, and that the simultaneous arrival of multiple missiles makes it more difficult for an adversary's defences to intercept them.

The first strike in Syria was carried out by a reserve frigate

France used the MdCN in combat for the first time on 14 April 2018, in a joint operation with the US and the UK against facilities of the Syrian chemical weapons programme, following a chemical weapons attack on the city of Douma near Damascus.

The frigate that was meant to be the first to strike the target failed to launch its missiles because of a technical malfunction. The reserve frigate Languedoc took over the task and fired three missiles at the chemical weapons warehouse near Homs, which was also targeted by American and British missiles.

Paris sent three frigates to the eastern Mediterranean, and an additional ship enabled the French Navy to play its part.

The head of the French Navy at the time, Admiral Christophe Prazuck, later told MPs that the manufacturers had identified where the system had failed and that modifications had begun on the ships.

He also warned that a ship must be able to defend itself against enemy missiles at the moment it launches its own. The admiral learned that lesson from an operation in which the Allies themselves chose when to strike.

In a conflict with Russia, France would have to provide a reserve ship and protection for frigates approaching the area from which they are to launch missiles. Of the eight French FREMM frigates, six can launch the MdCN, while two are configured for air defence and do not carry this missile.

> France will acquire 85 per cent more cruise missiles by 2030 than originally planned, and 170 per cent more by 2035

France has three Suffren-class submarines in active service. The fourth, De Grasse, was handed over to the Navy by the shipyard in June, but in mid-October it was still undergoing final trials before being declared ready for combat duties. France currently has nine vessels capable of launching the existing MdCN: six frigates and three submarines.

That does not mean the Navy can deploy all nine in a crisis. Some ships are always undergoing routine maintenance at the shipyard, and others have tasks they cannot abandon.

A frigate protecting an aircraft carrier or tracking an adversary's submarine cannot at the same time sail to the coast from which it would engage targets on land.

France does not disclose how many MdCN missiles the Navy possesses. The last public data dates from 2013, when the French Senate noted that the planned procurement had been reduced to 150 missiles.

In August, the French Parliament amended the law governing military procurement several years ahead of schedule. Under the amended law, France will acquire 85 per cent more cruise missiles by 2030 than originally planned, and 170 per cent more by 2035. These figures cover both the naval MdCN and the SCALP, carried by aircraft.

The longer range raises questions about accuracy

The procurement agency has not disclosed how much greater the range of the new missile is than that of the existing one. The increased range allows the frigate to operate from more positions and remain farther from the opposing coast and its defences.

The ministry also states that the new missile will be more difficult to detect, making it harder to intercept.

> France has not yet said how accurately the Mk2 can hit a target without a reliable satellite signal

In July, the European Union Aviation Safety Agency issued a warning about jamming and spoofing of satellite navigation signals, such as GPS, in the Baltic and Black Seas.

The warning applies to civilian flights, but it illustrates the challenges military forces would face in areas closest to Russia. France has not yet said how accurately the Mk2 can hit a target without a reliable satellite signal.

Paris is delaying a decision on the use of missiles

France is the only European NATO member that already employs a European-made cruise missile to strike distant land targets from both frigates and submarines.

British submarines use the American Tomahawk cruise missile, and in March 2025 the Netherlands tested the missile for the first time from the frigate De Ruyter off the US coast. London has also agreed the modernisation of the Tomahawk with the US Government.

Unlike these countries, France does not depend on an American decision to sell for the acquisition and replenishment of its missiles. This independence gives Paris greater leverage when negotiating with allies over who will develop and produce long-range weapons in Europe.

On 2 March, French President Emmanuel Macron, in a speech on nuclear deterrence, stated that Europe also needs the means to respond in a major conventional conflict before resorting to nuclear weapons.

Under the European Long-Range Strike Approach (ELSA), France is working with Germany, Italy, Poland, Sweden and the United Kingdom to develop long-range weapons and early-warning systems.



Europe needs the means to respond in a major conventional conflict before resorting to nuclear weapons - Emmanuel Macron

Even this level of cooperation does not change the fact that the decision on whether a French ship will use a missile in a crisis remains with Paris.

The British example shows how slowly dependence on American weapons fades. Along with France and Italy, the UK is developing Stratus, a programme for a new generation of cruise and anti-ship missiles, and until it is completed British submarines will continue to use the Tomahawk.

In 2024, Italy launched a study on whether the French MdCN could be installed on new Italian frigates. If Rome orders the missiles after the study, it will gain the ability to strike land targets from its ships.

For most allies who do not have such weapons, the more important question is whether they can rely on the support of the French Navy, and what they can offer in return, from target

information to protection for ships.

By 2030, when the first new missiles arrive, France is likely to be the only European NATO member able to strike land targets from ships and submarines without relying on American missiles.

Paris will use this advantage in negotiations on European defence. It will offer joint training and operational planning to its allies, but will not cede to anyone else the decision on when, and whom, French ships may target.

Allies must know in advance whether French ships and submarines, in a war with Russia, would attack targets in their defence, and what Paris would demand in return.

That answer does not have to await a new missile, because it also applies to the ships and missiles that France already has.

The best test would be a joint exercise without a scenario known in advance, in which aircraft depart from a base under attack and the French Navy engages a target on land instead, with communication between the commands cut.

Without such an exercise, European governments would learn only in the first hours of a war whether France's maritime response is part of their defence or solely part of France's defence.