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Science and Weapons Daily Review

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10 March 1986

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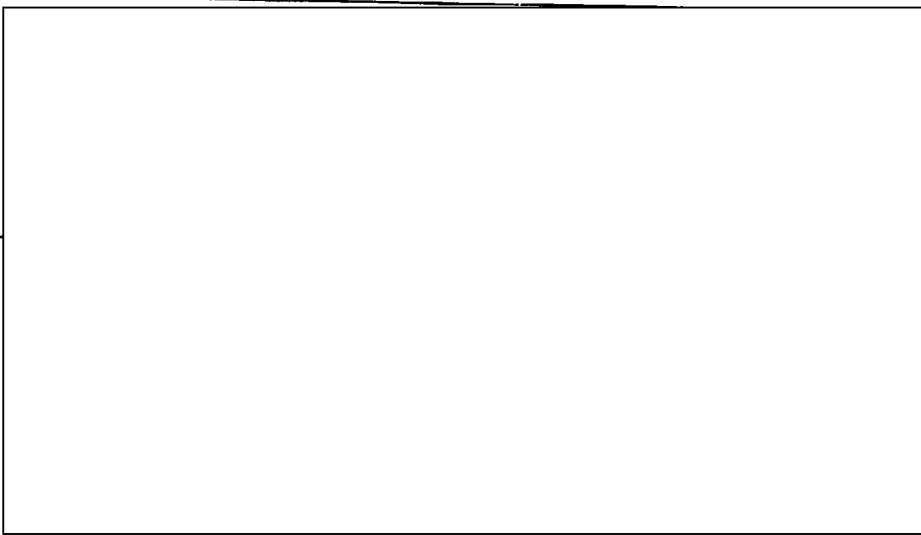
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France has announced that it soon will begin construction of its first nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, the Richelieu. Likely to become operational in the mid-1990s, the Richelieu will give France the capability to maintain air superiority and support ground forces off the coast of Africa and the Mediterranean and is an indication of France's determination to guarantee its defense.



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FRANCE: CONSTRUCTION OF NUCLEAR-POWERED AIRCRAFT CARRIER

The French Defense Minister signed an order on 4 February 1986 to begin construction on France's first nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, to be named Richelieu. The French Defense Council decided to build the carrier in 1980; however, funds only recently were appropriated. The Richelieu will be built in Brest and probably will become operational in the mid-1990s. It is intended to replace the aging Clemenceau and Foch aircraft carriers. the ship's primary missions will be:

- Contribute to nuclear deterrence.
- Cooperation with NATO in wartime.
- Support French operations abroad.
- Protection of shipping routes and control of sea area.
- Maintain a naval presence in Mediterranean.

Comment:

The new carrier, with its nuclear propulsion, modern weapon systems, and US-designed catapults, represents a considerable technical improvement over the Clemenceau class. The new carrier will support the French efforts to project power and support ground forces off the coast of Africa and the Mediterranean. The construction of the new nuclear carrier, coupled with the modernization of the SSBN forces and reorganization of the French Army, indicate that France is determined to guarantee its defense.

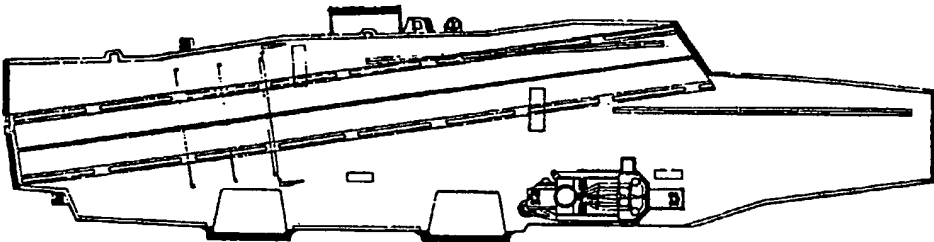
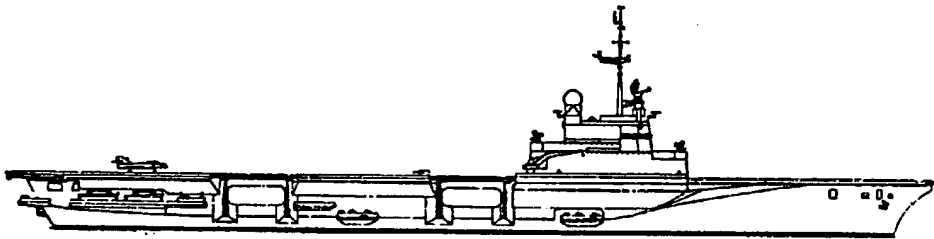
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Preliminary Design Drawing of the Richelieu



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The following table compares the characteristics of the Richelieu and the Clemenceau class:

	<u>Richelieu</u>	<u>Clemenceau</u>
Displacement (metric tons)	36,000	32,780
Length (meters)	265	265
Aircraft (capacity)	40	40
Catapults	2 USN Type C7	2 Mk BS 5
Missiles	2 Crotaie Mk 2 3 Sadral point defense guns	guns only (to be replaced by Crotaie)
Propulsion	nuclear; 2 200- megawatt reactors; 82,000 shp	steam; 6 boilers 126,000 shp
Speed (knots)	27	32
Complement	2,000	1,338
Elevators	2 19-by-12.5 meters; 50-ton capacity	2 16-by-10.97 meters

The Richelieu's capability to satisfy French naval operating requirements could be constrained or enhanced by the aircraft selected to operate from it. For political reasons, French policy calls for the Richelieu to carry a naval version of the Rafale fighter aircraft, which is being developed by Dassault-Breguet and the Societe Nationale d'Etude et de Construction de Moteurs d'Aviation (SNECMA). If a naval version of the Rafale is not successfully developed, the French might have to rely on their aging fleet

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of US-built F-8 fighter aircraft and the French-built Super Etendard. The French Navy has expressed an interest, however, in purchasing carrier-capable versions of the US-built F-18 fighter aircraft; a decision to buy the aircraft probably will be made sometime this year. The Richelieu's hangar capacity, approximately 138 meters long by 29 meters wide, and 6 meters high, is 30-percent larger than that of the Clemenceau class. The new carrier probably will not have an advanced early warning aircraft for several years. The Richelieu will be equipped with two 50-ton-capacity elevators and will have two catapults, probably longer than those on the Clemenceau class, to accommodate the new and future aircraft. [REDACTED]

The construction of the carrier comes at a time when France is experiencing economic problems in its defense budget. The majority of French policymakers, however, appear to believe the Richelieu will increase France's influence. [REDACTED]

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