This dissertation investigates the role played by France in the supply of military equipment and the transfer of technology to South Africa from 1960. This Franco-South African defence cooperation was opportune for South Africa, as she faced escalating international criticism over the apartheid issue and, from December 1963, the first military embargo, one joined by her erstwhile arms suppliers. The accession of the National Party (NP) to power in South Africa in 1948 brought a range of legislation that gave substance to the nationalist policy of apartheid. The suffering of the South African black population and the refusal of the South African government to revise its domestic policy, despite the growing international pressure, induced the newly-independent, Afro-Asian countries to press the United Nations (UN) to take tougher actions against Pretoria. At the same time opposing Black Nationalist movements, the African National Congress (ANC) the South West African Peoples’ Organisation (SWAPO) and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) adopted militant actions in response to increasingly repressive race legislation in South Africa and South West Africa/Namibia. Furthermore, when in 1961 South Africa left the British Commonwealth, she lost the long-term military commitment from London she had enjoyed for much of the twentieth century. South Africa would now have to satisfy her defence needs elsewhere. Pretoria knew that she needed a strong, well-equipped defence force in order to face the growing internal conflict as well as a possible military onslaught from outside the country. As a result, South Africa faced the first arms embargo in 1963 when her traditional arms suppliers, Britain and the USA elected to observe the voluntary terms of the embargo instituted by the UN. France, at the time under the leadership of General Charles de Gaulle, identified an opportunity to strengthen her relations with South Africa and acquire the much-needed strategic materials for her nuclear programme; he decided to fill the space in the military market vacated by Britain and the USA. From 1964, France became Pretoria’s most important arms supplier, a relationship that lasted throughout the Gaullist administration. De Gaulle’s decision to supply South Africa with French military equipment and the transfer of technological know-how was based mainly on political, military, and economic considerations. In short, De Gaulle wanted to free France from a military dependency on the United States, which had come to dominate NATO, and, by extension, Western Europe. Feeling hemmed in by les anglo-saxons, France, facing a shortage of North American uranium for her nuclear programme from 1957, sought new partners to shore up her own strategic vulnerability and ensure a role for her in world politics. Moreover, in the early 1960s, Apartheid had not yet become an electoral issue in France, as it was in Britain and the USA, and, in any case, France herself was drawing negative comment for her actions in the Algerian war of national independence. The logical outcome was a comfortable rapprochement, for the moment at least, between Paris and Pretoria. This military cooperation was broad-fronted and sustained until France implemented her first full military embargo in 1975 and voted for the UN mandatory arms embargo in 1977. But, by this time, the weapons industry in South Africa, home-grown with French assistance, was well-established and placed South Africa in a position to launch military campaigns against the frontline states, commencing with Operation Savannah in late 1975. This study analyses the content and impact of the military cooperation between Paris and Pretoria and creates a better understanding of political and economic dimensions that were the key in the conduct of Franco-South African defence relations between 1960 and 1990.

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