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Nuclear Disarmament

Michel Rocard's Speech at the Meeting of Global Zero

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We present here, with the kind authorization of Michel Rocard, whom we thank warmly, the complete text of his speech at the Global Zero meeting in Paris (2-4 January 2010).

Publishing this does not mean that we share all his analyses, or his optimism - very relative though that is - about the likelihood that the French government will adopt the objective of abolishing nuclear weapons. In any case, it is not necessary to be optimistic to try to influence the course of events, as Michel Rocard himself has shown. And he is right to suggest in his conclusion that "the French Republic" is much more than the Head of State. Just as one swallow doesn't make a springtime, four swallows can announce one, and a flock of them certainly will make a springtime.

That is why ACDN and Monde sans guerres et sans violence (MSGSV, World without war or violence) is launching the "VERY LAST ATOM!" campaign, with a view to obtaining a referendum in which the French people are consulted about this question.

Concerning Michel Rocard's other position statements on the same subject, please see the links proposed after his text.

Global Zero has set itself the objective of a world without nuclear weapons. In this perspective, the case of France is neither the most important nor the most difficult.

That doesn't mean it is simple. France is probably, among the five official possessors of nuclear weapons under the Non-Proliferation Treaty, the nation where nuclear deterrence - in the absence of any vision of coercion - is the most deeply rooted both in public opinion and in the overall strategic vision of the vast majority of people in high positions, both civilian and military.

It is worth recalling quickly why this is so. In 1947 an open international treaty between the USA and the UK acknowledged that the UK could possess the bomb with US approval and (except in the case of vital threats) under US command. The French authorities of the day then quickly reached the conclusion that the bomb was necessary for a nation with the status and importance of France. That produced a serious disagreement with our Anglo-Saxon allies. It was not a matter of jealousy or proliferation: France was then burdened by a powerful and dangerous communist party! And yet that "Fourth Republic" period was the time when France began studies and research, through decisions by men of the Left such as Guy Mollet and especially Pierre Mendès France (this would prove important later). De Gaulle was the one who had the bomb built, after he took power in 1958 and created the Fifth Republic. De Gaulle tested it and integrated it into our armed forces. That effort was made despite great hostility from the USA, who conducted a quasi-war by its secret services. France's technical success was interpreted as a huge political victory, confirming our independence and sovereignty, and marking a heavy disagreement with our US friends. This made "the bomb" very popular.

Yet France, wisely, signed the North Atlantic Treaty, and the French bomb was integrated into the NATO peacetime military system, which was under US command.

That created no problem as long as NATO's so-called "massive retaliation" doctrine gave the supreme guarantee to all our population and all our territory.

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However, for fear of automatic or accidental war, NATO shifted in 1962 to the doctrine of flexible response. Its message to the USSR became, in simple words, "as long as you don't use nuclear weapons, we won't either". The ratio of conventional military forces in Europe, including US troops, then changed, moving to 6:1 in favour of the Warsaw Pact.

Now France, unlike Britain, is not an island, and has a long history of being invaded from the east. A Soviet advance westwards with conventional forces was a possibility. Nobody has ever doubted that our US friends would come and help us. But the notion of flexible response implies "response after..." That could mean after several million deaths.

Charles De Gaulle's reasoning on this situation led him, not in a moment of anger as has been claimed but after more than three years of long reflection, to withdraw the French army in 1966 from NATO's peacetime military organization, that is to bring it out from the US structure and to have the French authorities alone evaluate the possibly critical character of threats, even merely conventional ones. That was needed in order to restore to France exactly the same (no more) freedom to defend her vital interests as the UK already had thanks to a protocol added to the 1947 treaty.

This decision was met with huge relief in France, because our leaders of all stripes, and military ones as well as civilians, had reflected long about the strategic uncertainty created by the doctrine of flexible response.
Public opinion was unanimous and it adopted the theory of deterrence as its own.

I will not go into the question of whether this French posture contributed a great deal, a little or nothing to the Soviet Union's relative timidity with conventional forces in Europe against the West in the following 23 years - there were no provocations, almost no manoeuvres. Suffice it to say that nobody will remove from the minds of the French people what their answer is: a great deal.

At the start of this story the French Left opposed nuclear arms. But from 1970 to 1975 it seems that the money put into nuclear weapons was not put into conventional ones. Around 1980 the conventional fire-power of France's army, navy and air force was half that of the German Bundeswehr, and barely 5% that of the USSR. Having no choice, given the continuing Cold War, we rallied to deterrence, which President François Mitterrand and all his Prime Ministers, including myself, strongly defended.

Through this, deterrence became a kind of element of National Heritage.

One must add that this is a nation which dominated the world three centuries ago, and has not forgotten, which built and lost a great colonial empire, - all things which I would like to ban from our memories so as to conduct more cooperative and more modest policies. The possession of the bomb comforted the national pride of a great many of our citizens who were finding it hard to live with the discovery that France's grandeur belonged to the past.

Forgive me this long look backwards. It is not as foreign to our subject as it may seem: it is essential that France play a full role in triggering the diplomatic movement of the five official nuclear powers towards eradication. For that to happen, you have to help us by pushing for it, and to do so you have to understand.

During this period, my personal contribution to « nuclear détente » was limited. One thing I did (I'm proud of it) was to persuade President Mitterrand to sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty, which De Gaule had rejected. France had observer status in 1990 and became a full member in 1992.

My second contribution was to lead President Mitterrand to reduce every year from one the number of our nuclear

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tests, with the intention of stopping them completely in eight years. After my departure this plan was disrupted. The tests were unfortunately resumed by Jacques Chirac, with 6 in a single year. But now that's all over - the Mururoa base is closed, decommissioned, decontaminated.

Just after the implosion of the USSR, I considered that the game was changing. Deterrence makes no sense unless there are two opposing nations or blocs.

Further, deterrence exists only if the protagonists, no matter how violent their hostility, are rational and respect a rational code of exchanging signals about possible crossings of the red line, that is threats that will be considered critical. The Cuba Missile Crisis made this very obvious.

Today, however, we are not two, we are an incertain multiplicity. The risk is very high that we may see the government of some nuclear-armed state pass into the control of irrational fanatics, either laymen or purportedly religious leaders.

At the same time, the strategic analysts of the whole world continue to reflect on possible conflicts that may occur in the current state of tensions. These are numerous, but there is not a single one for which analysis can say that the use of nuclear weapons is appropriate.
For me, then, the first obvious point is that now in the Post-Cold-War era, in the last 20 years exactly, the major risk is proliferation, both of nuclear weapons and of radioactive materials.

The second obvious point, equally clear, is that the struggle against proliferation cannot be waged by one nation alone, even of immense power. The whole international community has to participate, because once the principle is generally agreed there will have to be pressures on the proliferators, even sanctions such as isolation or embargo.

Even the great community of NPT signatories will not be enough. The authority of the Security Council is absolutely essential. And that brings me to the third obvious point: the Security Council will never agree to take sanctions against the possessor of a nuclear weapon as long as any nation maintains the right to keep its own. The thing is as simple and obvious as that. It follows that public commitment to eradication is of major importance, irrespective of the time needed to bring it about.

I will say frankly and cordially to my friends in Global Zero that I am rather fearful that there will be a multiplication of second-ranking arguments, and that these may threaten to obscure the lucid and vigorous clarity of the above three obvious points.

It was in 1996 during the work of the Canberra Commission de Canberra, to which I had the honour of belonging, that I first took this position publicly.

I must confess that since that affirmation, as Gareth Evans well knows, I remained for thirteen years tragically isolated as the only member of France's political, administrative and military establishment to take this line consistently. Political correctness about national independence based on deterrence had become the firmest cement in France's national unity. Even the parties of the Left were silent, the socialists (my own party) and the communists. Nobody dared to commit blasphemy. And there was no person comparable to me in three other official nuclear powers, the US, the UK and Russia - I know very little of China.

In 1998 or 1999 I co-signed, with my friend David Martin, a British Labour MP who was first Vice-President of the European Parliament, a declaration entreating the French and British governments to jointly begin negotiations on

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nuclear disarmament as required by Article VI of the NPT. Nothing happened, of course; we did not receive the shadow of a response or comment.

It was not until 2009 that the weight of those three obvious points - proliferation the greatest danger, all the international community must combat it, the Security Council will not agree while exceptions remain - began to make people think in France.

I was delighted, therefore, to be able to publish in autumn 2009 a declaration signed at last by four personalities who had finally overcome their hesitations: besides myself, my colleague Alain Juppé, former PM and an heir of Gaullism, Alain Richard a former Minister of Defense, and the prestigious General Bernard Norlain, former commander of the air combat force.

So far nobody else has budged. There is no public debate among those in positions of responsibility. But their silence is no longer saying what it used to say. It has become a silence of perplexity.

The presence here yesterday of the Secretary-General of the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, my friend Pierre Sellal, confirms at least that France is no longer isolating herself, she is seeking dialogue, taking a few steps, limited but clear and transparent, in the direction of limitation. His speech yesterday quells my fear that France might seek to oppose or paralyse the movement which will perhaps begin in New York in May at the quinquennial Review Conference of the NPT.

In any case, I heard yesterday that France is joining Global Zero as part of a group of four leaders, following the model you have set in motion. That made it a great day for me.

Michel Rocard

Michel Rocard's other position statements on the same subject

For a Middle East without Weapons of Mass Destruction

With Yehuda Atai and Jean-Marie Matagne

Worldwide nuclear disarmament is the only response to anarchic proliferation

With Alain Juppé, Bernard Norlain, Alain Richard

Appeal to All Europeans To Prevent War Against Iran

With Yehuda Atai and Jean-Marie Matagne

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