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Ban Treaty adopted

Is Nuclear Deterrence Dead?

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The Treaty to ban nuclear weapons, adopted in New York on 7 July 2017 by 122 UN member states, could sign the death warrant for France's doctrine known as "nuclear deterrence" ("dissuasion nucléaire" in French). From now on, it will be impossible for France, or more precisely for one individual, the president, to claim to be protecting the nation's "vital interests" by threatening to liquidate the people of another nation, without thereby being clearly guilty of a crime against humanity.

This Treaty forbids the development, testing, production, manufacture and acquisition by any means of nuclear weapons and other explosive nuclear devices, along with stocking or hosting them. It forbids use, and threat of use.

These bans will apply without reservation or time limitation to all states-parties to the Treaty, which will be opened for signature on 19 September 2017 by all states, including those that neither negotiated it nor voted for it. It will enter into force 90 days after receipt of the 50th ratification, acceptance, approval or adherence. The UN Secretary-General will be the depositary for it. At that point on, the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons will become illegal for the states-parties, but also immoral for the other states, if not in their own eyes, at least in the eyes of the "international community".

However, of the nine states currently listed as possessing some 15,000 nuclear weapons in all - USA, Russia, France, UK, China, Israel, India, Pakistan and North Korea (with the first two having more than 90% of them) - none took part in the negotiations and none seem inclined at present to join the Treaty. France, the UK and the US had held a joint press conference on 27 March 2017 when the first conference session opened; they published a communiqué straight after the adoption of the new Treaty saying that they have no intention of joining it and will not recognise it as having any judicial effect.

The reach of the Treaty is therefore mainly symbolic. By stigmatising nuclear weapons, as has been done for biological and chemical weapons, as instruments of crimes against humanity, the Treaty outlaws from humanity those states that possess them, could use them and already do use them as means of threat, domination, and political-military terror. France is one of this group. Her "nuclear deterrence", condemnable from before its birth, is now condemnable like the other weapons of mass destruction. Does this mean it is dead? In the best of cases, "nuclear deterrence" is merely moribund, and its death-agony could last as long as other nations still have nuclear weapons. So the Calvary of humankind is not over. To abolish nuclear weapons means that, beyond their prohibition, we need to aim at eliminating them.