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Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, the only President of France to have understood nuclear deterrence

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In May 1980, a year before retreating from power, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing organised military manoeuvres intended to test when one should have recourse to nuclear weapons. This gave him the opportunity to assess their absurdity, and he revealed this later in his memoirs.



Officially, France's nuclear weapons, from the beginning, have served no other purpose than to deter the potential enemy from attacking and invading France - as had occurred in 1870, 1914 and 1940. "If you attack our 'vital interests' we will make you pay by destroying your cities", said the "anti-cities" strategy, which seemed clear enough. In fact it was far from clear.

For one thing those "vital interests" were in reality never defined, nobody knew where they began - was it the Oder-Neisse Line, the Neckar River, the Rhine, the Marne or the Seine? Perhaps it was the Gironde near the Atlantic coast? For another thing the enemy so designated during the Cold War was likewise equipped with nuclear weapons, in greater number and of greater power: if we had wiped out one or more of his cities, he would not have failed to do the same to us - no, still worse. This "deterrence of the weak to the strong" founded on the principle of a first massive strike, therefore condemned France to suffer physical destruction in the name of political survival. What a curious way of defending our "vital interests"!

To avoid that absurdity, someone invented the idea of nuclear weapons that could strike the enemy's troops rather than his cities. These were the *Pluton* missiles. But when the French army got them, at the start of 1975, the PM of the day, Jacques Chirac, stated that to make them truly "deterrent", the army should prepare to use them effectively on the battlefield, and that the Head of State should not hesitate to order this in such a circumstance. From that point it was only one small step to making them weapons of use, weapons intended to re-establish a balance upset by an enemy advance - and that step was quickly taken by the strategists and by some political leaders. Why renounce the contribution of these weapons, since we had them on hand? People began to talk of "tactical missiles". A subterranean debate took place.

But were these weapons, called "tactical" or "pre-strategic", really operational? If an attack were to come from the East, at what point would the generals decide to seek the President's permission to use them? To see and feel this clearly, President Giscard d'Estaing ordered the organising of military manoeuvres in May 1980, in the zone of West Germany that was still occupied by France. The commanders of the 'Blues' had to bow to an obvious conclusion: if

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they used their tactical weapons to stop the enemy tanks (hypothetically four times more numerous), then the 'Reds' would retaliate with theirs, and do more damage. Because that lot had tactical missiles too! So it was better to not use them and to withdraw the 'Blue' troops into French territory, in the hope of carrying on the struggle there, with conventional arms. President Giscard, confined to his Elysée Palace stricken by a nasty flu that greatly reduced his powers, waited near his "Jupiter" command-post for the generals to ask him to authorise nuclear weapons. The request never came.

He drew the lesson from it, one which he revealed later in his memoirs. But he revealed also another even more radical conclusion he had reached (apparently before those manoeuvres of May 1980) : so as not to provoke the destruction of France, he had resolved to never be the first to use any nuclear weapons, be it tactical or strategic. But if the deterrent function of those arms rested precisely on their first strike use, then in the case of a "conventional" defeat, he had resolved to capitulate - remarking correctly that France has risen again from more than one occupation during her history, but would not rise again if she were annihilated:

*"(And then, concerning mutually assured destruction, whatever happens - and I write all this in parentheses to emphasise that this decision has always been buried inside me - **whatever happens I will never take the initiative of the action that would lead to France being wiped out.** If her destruction was begun by the enemy, I would immediately take the decision needed to avenge her. But otherwise, I want to leave it to ...her inhabitants' fidelity to their hidden convictions to take the final chance to revive French culture one future day)" (Le pouvoir et la vie, Tome II, 1991, p. 210)*

This means the following: if the Cold War had become hot and the tanks of the Warsaw Pact tried to invade France, the President of the Republic would not have sent the Soviet leaders a nuclear "final warning" (the formula made official in 1981 after the election of François Mitterrand) by bombing their tanks, and if France were invaded he would have capitulated rather than bombing their cities. He would have preferred France to be occupied than to be wiped out. As in June 1940. People can hide their convictions from the occupier, can resist secretly while awaiting better days, and in the end the nation rises again from an occupation. Not from an annihilation.

All that is very good sense. Yet Giscard d'Estaing seems to be our only President to have figured it out.

Doubtless it was not in his intentions, as he wrote his memoirs, to dispute France's "deterrence" strategy which he accepted when in office. During his term as President, from 27 May 1974 to 21 May 1981, he ordered 62 atomic tests, 9 of them in the atmosphere (1370 kt) and 53 underground (849 kt), making a total power of at least 2219 kt (2,22 Mt) - in other words 0,87 kt (equalling 870 tonnes of TNT) for every day of his seven-year term, at the rate of one test every 41 days (Source : Paolo Scampa).

Despite that, as his post-presidential words attest: against a determined enemy who also has nuclear weapons, they are of no use. Neither as battlefield weapons, nor as deterrents. On the contrary, we must avoid using them, lest we commit collective suicide. Giscard d'Estaing had understood that. It is his greatest merit and it lives on after his death.

In the only situation where he admits they can be used, the worst, nuclear weapons serve not for deterrence but for revenge. They are like Samson burying himself with his enemy under the ruins of the temple. Yet even this use does not seem realistic, despite what Giscard says. For using nuclear bombs as a "second strike" against the cities of an enemy who had "begun" to destroy France, would surely push him to "finish the job" by destroying our country completely. That would literally be "mutually assured destruction". One may therefore hope that in such a situation Giscard would have used his intelligence and concern for his compatriots (and French culture...) to renounce revenge.

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Our nuclear strike force is therefore nothing but a myth, the "Maginot Line" of the atomic era, an extraordinarily expensive defense line which would not only fail to stop an aggressor from invading France, but would even incite him to destroy her.

This so-called "defense" was already a nonsense during the Cold War, and it is even more senseless today. The current President, his PM, his government and his minister of defense need to listen to the voice of the ex-President. And, why not, the voices of the many French citizens with similar views.

In short: Valéry Giscard d'Estaing was perhaps very naive in his ideas about "sniffer-planes" and even nuclear deterrence. Yet he became, later on, the most sensible, certainly the least deranged, of France's Presidents in the matter of defending the nation's "vital interests", that is our lives.

Those who pay homage to him in the coming days would do well to think about this.

Saintes, 3.12.2020

Jean-Marie Matagne
President of ACDN

contact@acdn.net.

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