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Let's make an end to the nuclear terror

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LET'S MAKE AN END TO NUCLEAR TERROR

The French nuclear doctrine does not just need to be "rethought", as former Defence Minister Paul Quilès declared recently ("Libération", 9 January). Nor does it need to be maintained, as is the view of Bruno Tertrais (former president of the National Assembly's Defense Commission). No, it needs to be abandoned now! This "doctrine" is criminal in its essence, absurd in its justification (it claims to ensure national security), and catastrophic in its effects. It is invalid today not simply because "we live in a changing world", but because it always was criminal, absurd and catastrophic, right from the beginning.

A CRIMINAL "DOCTRINE"

"Criminal" is a very accurate word for this doctrine, because it depends on threatening, or rather promising (a precondition of credibility) to explode nuclear weapons of mass destruction on enemy cities - what is called the "anti-cities" strategy. Its brutal principles were formulated by General de Gaulle in the Council of Ministers on 3 January 1963: "When we are sure that we can kill 40 or 50 million of our aggressor's people (as we will be in 6-9 years), then we will be sure that we won't be attacked." (Alain Peyrefitte: C'était de Gaulle, p. 342). Today, counting our bombs as equalling 56.7 million tonnes of TNT (one tonne of dynamite for each French man, woman and child) and comparing the figures with Hiroshima, France can theoretically kill a billion people. This is only a modest contribution to overkill, however, since USA and Russia together have the capacity to kill everybody 15 times.

Speaking of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, a member of de Gaulle's cabinet, Alain Peyrefitte, remarked to the General after the Council of Ministers of 4 May 1962: "Hundreds of thousands of dead men, women, children, old people destroyed in a split-second, and hundreds of thousands dying in later years in horrible suffering, isn't that what they call a crime against humanity?" (Ibid., p. 165) According to Peyrefitte: "The General just raised his arms in the air, meaning 'not my problem!'" Maybe it wasn't his problem; unfortunately it is ours now.

Required to answer a similar question, the International Court of Justice in the Hague declared on 8 July 1996, after examining the existing treaties since Nuremberg (where "crimes against humanity" were first defined), that the use and the threat of use of nuclear weapons are "generally contrary to the rules of international law". The Court also confirmed unanimously that there exists a legal obligation for the USA, Russia, France, the UK and China to negotiate a global disarmament treaty banning all nuclear weapons. This obligation is even more obvious today, since on 19 May 2000 those five states signed an "unequivocal undertaking" to eliminate all their nuclear arsenals (the revised Article VI of the NPT - the Non-Proliferation Treaty). Two months later France "honoured" this undertaking by deciding to build a new nuclear-missile-launching submarine of the new generation (a fourth SNLE-NG).

Given the fact that morality, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (one of the pillars of the United Nations), and international law in general all condemn the use and the threat of nuclear weapons, can one argue nevertheless that threat is not the same as use, that threat is intended to avoid use, and that really a deterrence strategy protects us from war? No, one cannot. The alleged "realism" of this "strategy" is a tissue of nonsense.

MAGIC POTION, ABSURD NOTION

The intention of France's so-called "weak against strong" strategy was (and officially still is) to deter a supposedly nuclear-armed aggressor not only from using nuclear weapons against France but also from "attacking France" (as de Gaulle used to say) by any means, even by mere conventional weapons. So as to add flexibility to what seemed to be a rather absurd threat, the probably over-precise notion of aggression was replaced by a magic notion: the head of State could use nuclear weapons if he judged that France's "vital interests" were attacked. These were never defined, for good reason: to define them would have meant (and would always mean) that if these predetermined "vital interests" were damaged, then the president would have no choice but to provoke the catastrophe. We may nevertheless assume that an invasion of part of France's territory would have constituted an "attack on France's vital interests". In this sense, it is justifiable to speak, as Quilès is now doing, of a "Maginot line" (alluding - as I did already in my 1991 state doctorate thesis - to the historical Maginot line which supposedly guarded France's eastern frontier before 1940). What then would happen in response to an attack? Nothing at all, except capitulation.

Before the so-called Gulf War of 1991, President Mitterrand indicated that France - in fact he himself as the Head of State - would refrain from using nuclear weapons, calling them "barbaric". That choice of words earned him criticism from right-wing believers in the "doctrine". And there is good reason to criticise: if these are barbaric weapons, then they are barbaric not only in Iraq but everywhere, even in Europe. And therefore a civilised nation with a civilised Head of State cannot use them under any circumstances - in which case they do not deter...

And yet the criticism is unfair: Mitterrand is not the only French President, nor the first, to have confronted the incongruity of nuclear threats. His predecessor Valéry Giscard d'Estaing was even more explicit - and his words are not read often enough, even by right-wing thinkers.

TACTICAL OR STRATEGIC?

Let us recall that during Giscard's presidency (1974-81), as also during Mitterrand's (1981-95), the "doctrine" said that in the event of an attack by the "designated enemy" (the Soviet Union and other members of the Warsaw Pact - countries with which we were on excellent terms since we had commercial, astronomical and other links with them), and a threat to France's "vital interests", France would send a "final warning" in the form of a nuclear strike against the enemy's numerous tanks (which we hoped would stay tightly grouped, so as to ensure an effective strike).

Alongside the medium-range air-to-ground missiles, we had the Pluto, a ground-to-ground missile, which had the task of delivering this warning. Given its range of about 100 km, the strike would necessarily have hit West German territory - a detail that did not delight our German friends. Too bad: for the sake of being protected by our nuclear umbrella, they could put up with that little inconvenience! But there was a more serious anomaly, even in Giscard's day, and he worried about it.

"To clarify the use of the tactical nuclear weapon", Giscard tells in his memoirs how he asked his army chiefs to organise a "full-scale exercise, in which we would test the decisions that had to be taken." (Le pouvoir et la vie, vol II, p. 203.) This took place in May 1980 and began in the "French Zone" of West Germany. The generals, who at first hoped that they could "play their trump card", themselves concluded, when they were forced to "pull back" by a much more numerous enemy (as was written into the game), that they did not have to choose the option of using nuclear weapons nor to ask the President for the necessary authorisation to do so. "They considered that it was better to keep our battle forces intact and available rather than expose them to nuclear destruction." Giscard comments thus: "So, no request goes to the President! The demonstration is not complete.[...] But progressively, as we pull back towards our own frontier, we leave the domain of 'final warning' and enter the domain of strategic deterrence. A limited strike by us would immediately trigger retaliation direct onto French soil. Then there would remain only the choice between the white flag of surrender and 'mutually assured destruction'. A better choice would be to keep our remaining cards in our hands, unplayed." (Ibid., p. 210)

So we might as well scrap the tactical nuclear weapon!

Scrap it? Not really, since the "doctrine" is a tough adversary, and so is the military-industrial lobby. During Mitterrand's presidency, the tactical nuclear weapon was renamed "pre-strategic", to show that it was solely a way of delivering the "final warning". To cajole the Germans, we spoke of a missile which - if one believed the enthusiastic declarations of Charles Hernu, Mitterrand's first Minister of Defence - kept on increasing in range, and eventually was able to travel 480 km, far enough to land ... on East German territory. For some strange reason, that still did not satisfy our German allies. Finally, the Hades missile (likewise named after the god of Hell) was scrapped in 1996 after costing more than 11 billion francs. This was good news for the Germans, but even more for the French - because our military planners, hoping to deceive the enemy, had had the bright idea of shifting it around the roads of France in "normal-looking" trucks. Since the "designated enemy" had surveillance capabilities (human and technical ones) that were better than ours, it is safe to bet that in the kind of conflict imagined the enemy would have located, followed, and destroyed them by pre-emptive strikes... along with the surrounding French population. But let's not dwell on that.

What makes this story terribly droll (if that's the right word) is that this "warning" would not have been even heard by its intended audience. Colonel Paris, who made a close study of the specialised Soviet literature, drew this conclusion: "There is no trace here of the French concept of the 'final warning' given by a limited nuclear strike preceding strategic strikes against cities. The Soviets see France's pre-strategic nuclear weapon solely as a tactical one." (*Revue Défense nationale*, janvier 1988, p. 56-57.)

So we might as well scrap the pre-strategic nuclear weapon!

A SUICIDAL WEAPON

That leaves us with "our strategic" weapons lurking in the ocean depths. What value do they have as deterrents? None at all. Once again, Giscard is the man who admitted it. And remember that he, like Mitterrand, was in a position to use them during the Cold War. He says in a long parenthesis:

"(And then, as far as mutually assured destruction is concerned, whatever may happen - and I write this in brackets to stress that this decision was always buried deep inside me - whatever may happen I will never take the initiative of doing something that would lead to France's annihilation. If her destruction was begun by the enemy, I would immediately make the decision necessary to avenge her. But otherwise, I would wish to give some chance to France's landscape, houses, trees, ponds, rivers and to her inhabitants' hidden loyalty to their convictions... I would wish to give them a final chance to revive French culture some day.)" (Op. cit, p. 210)

You read it correctly: even to avoid total defeat (like the defeat of 1940) and foreign occupation (which would force the people to hide their convictions), President Giscard would not have used nuclear weapons. He would have surrendered... which would be a wise decision, since besides landscapes and culture France has inhabitants - living human beings, indeed, who love life even more than power. In fact the French people have proved several times that they can survive an occupation and revive their culture (as have other peoples, of course). And we may add that to commit collective suicide in the name of defending vital interests would be a paradox unworthy of a nation which prides itself on its logic. To commit suicide - or to impose suicide, since one person would be making the decision - would also be a huge paradox for a nation which prides itself on its historic thinking about human and democratic rights.

So we might as well scrap nuclear deterrence? Yes, but the "nuclear deterrence" apparatus is still in place - it cost

1500 billion francs between 1945 and 1997 and will cost at least 400 billion between now and 2010 (Cf. Bruno Barrillot, *Audit atomique*). Besides providing fantastic profits for some people, and breeding fantasies of power which are encouraged by a lobby that constantly besieges the government, the National Assembly and its Defence Commission, these weapons need to acquire "a useful value for France."

What useful value? Revenge. That is what Giscard had resolved, at least that is what he said: "If France's destruction was begun by the enemy, I would immediately make the decision necessary to avenge her". In this scenario, the enemy would have "begun the destruction" of France (by nuclear strikes), and the President would retaliate. Perhaps so as to incite the enemy to finish the job, to complete "the annihilation of France"?

Let us hope that Giscard, despite those words which are untypical of his "tactical" mode of thinking, would have known how to resist the "Samson complex"; and that his successor, who despised barbarism, would likewise have refrained from bringing the whole edifice down on his head; and that our current president, Jacques Chirac, who voted to abolish individual capital punishment and who attends church services, would similarly be unable to take a step that would cause millions of people, including many of his compatriots, to die in atrocious ways.

ON THE BRINK OF THE ABYSS

Suitable neither for deterrence nor revenge (except in a madman's hands), nuclear weapons are not usable (except by madmen). It is true that President Truman, who was a reasonable man and a good Christian (he thanked God for giving his nation the Bomb), ordered its use on 24 July 1945, during the Potsdam Conference, leading to the explosions of August 6 and 9 - the latter one (Nagasaki) occurring without explicit authorisation - even though he had known with July 13 that the Japanese government was on the point of capitulation. It is true that today the good Christian George W. Bush and his team are coldly considering its use soon against Iraq (Cf. the Nuclear Posture Review, the official declaration of 11.12.02, etc.) and later against North Korea, or Iran, or any state located by them on the "Axis of Evil." The Christian faith is obviously no vaccination against the dizziness extreme of power. And nor is the Moslem faith. As for the worst religious fanatics, any plans they have to explode a "nuclear suitcase" (or nuclear power-plant) in a Western country are not going to be deterred by our "deterrent". If they did commit nuclear terrorism, who would we destroy in revenge? Would we target Osama bin Laden with an H-bomb?

So what use are these weapons? They have never achieved anything except to proliferate (on the principle that "what's good for you is good for me") and thus to create the conditions for a catastrophe - a catastrophe which is inevitable, unless the great powers decide to rid the whole planet of all weapons of mass destruction, biological, chemical, nuclear or emerging technologies. (India has just indicated a willingness to join them in this). Which nation could take the initiative in setting up the elimination process? France, for instance. Fifty NGOs in five continents and numerous prominent people have appealed to France to do just this.

General Lee Butler, who was head of the US Strategic Air Command and thus had the duty of implementing nuclear strikes if ordered by the President, declared in 1996: "Nuclear weapons are fundamentally dangerous, extraordinarily expensive, militarily ineffective and morally indefensible". Those are the words of an expert. It is time to change direction and return to the slogan launched by Mikhail Gorbachev in January 1986: "Abolish nuclear weapons by the year 2000!"

Instead, we have reached 2003, and seem on the point of re-opening the Pandora's box that was closed after the bombing of Nagasaki. Is there still time to act? What is required is the political will to act. And that is precisely what should be expected of the President of the Republic, who is bound by the French Constitution to respect international treaties, and therefore to honour the NPT - and expected of the Prime Minister, who wrote recently: "When one

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listens to the planet, one sees how much it needs France. A crazy world needs a wise France. Independent of the religious fanatics who can lead the world to war and of the "petrodollar fanatics", [...] we will devote all the forces we can to the essential task of humanising the world. France will fight for international law, so that all forms of violence weaken and retreat."

Nuclear violence should be top of our hit-list!

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