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France as an Obstacle to Abolishing Nuclear Weapons

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I wonder if France has ever been a champion of disarmament, except in 1925 in the campaign against poison gas in warfare... But here the subject is nuclear weapons since 1960.

I'm a New Zealander, I live far away from France, in the Pacific. Yet this region is well aware of France's nuclear policies, since so many atmospheric and underground tests were conducted in Polynesia. My country is one of the many anti-nuclear countries - indeed we consciously rejected the so-called "nuclear umbrella" when we forbade the visits of US warships in 1985. And before that, in 1973, our government had sent a frigate to Polynesia to protest against France's nuclear tests. What is most remembered here now is the 1985 "Rainbow Warrior Affair" - the manslaughter of Greenpeace activist, killed by French agents (whose incompetence was a bit laughable). The subversive aim of Greenpeace was to tell the truth about nuclear activities - which are better understood, I believe, in the anti-nuclear countries.

Today the biggest obstacles to nuclear disarmament are the USA, Russia, France, UK and China - none of whom (I think) attended the big conference in Oslo in March 2013 on the humanitarian effects of the bomb. It's a sort of Five-Headed Cartel. But Russia and the USA have at least managed to negotiate the START treaties to reduce their arsenals; China has sometimes expressed (perhaps insincerely) a willingness to renounce theirs; and the English are being pressed by the Scots to wonder whether they can really renew their Trident system.

France, on the other hand, delayed for years before stopping atmospheric testing, and then before stopping underground tests. Let me speak of the last of those, in 1995-96. President Chirac, newly elected, authorized 8 tests. The populations of the South Pacific, including those of eastern Australia, protested vigorously. I personally took part in the citizens' delegation (from NZ, Samoa and the Cook Islands) which spent 14 days in France expounding the dangers of nuclear radiation and critiquing the theory of deterrence.

I admit that France never violated the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) before 1992 - that's because she had delayed for so long before signing it... and then signed it hypocritically (in my view): France is one of few countries that constantly infringe Article VI.

Since 1995, of course, France has done nuclear experiments in the lab - as do USA, etc - experiments in vertical proliferation which help to encourage horizontal proliferation by Indians, Pakistanis, Koreans, Iranians ... France, without being the only guilty country, continues to play a negative, arrogant, and obstinate role, one that is quite unworthy of her republican traditions of democracy and human rights. Besides, the arguments used by presidents Chirac, Sarkozy and Hollande to justify their bombs seem perfectly suited for recycling by the Iranians (etc) who are developing their own. One might have expected France to take a more enlightened position (one is less disappointed by Russia, China and Israel). Furthermore, somehow France has lodged in the minds of numerous French citizens the historically absurd notion that she owes her seat on the Security Council to her possession of nuclear weapons!

Could France contribute to nuclear disarmament?

She could doubtless do more than 188 other countries can - most of them vote for anti-nuclear resolutions at the UN, and 20 or so do the same at the European Parliament. France could do more than the anti-nuclear group of Canada/ Malaysia/ Mexico/ Australia/ Ireland. France is powerful, people love Paris, the world looks to Paris! She may have lost her empire, but France still has one of the biggest economies (number 6?); France is one of Europe's leading nations; France can criticize the top nations (like USA or China) and refuse to be intimidated by them. France is therefore capable of breaking the Five-Headed Cartel and forcing a radical change to the game.

A French government wishing for applause from abroad should renounce some current projects (developments of submarines, missiles, new warheads...), but should above all use France's influence on the governments of the US, UK, Russia

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and China in order to set up genuine negotiations for genuine multilateral disarmament - which would simply be honouring her obligations under the NPT, a treaty text that was approved by almost all the countries of the UN. We are waiting for that, we have been waiting for over 40 years!

The French people should be pushing their government to commit to that, for example through the referendum long proposed by ACDN, which I for one endorse and which I have supported by writing my own letter to President Hollande.

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