

Should we abandon nuclear deterrence ?

mercredi 19 août 2009, par [Luc SAVOYANT](#)

Citer cet article / To cite this version :

[Luc SAVOYANT](#), **Should we abandon nuclear deterrence ?**, *Diploweb.com : la revue géopolitique*, 19 août 2009.

Hum... Vous semblez apprécier le DIPLOWEB.COM. Nous vous en remercions et vous invitons à participer à sa construction.

Le DIPLOWEB.COM est LE media géopolitique indépendant en accès gratuit, fondé en l'an 2000. Nous vous proposons de participer concrètement à cette réalisation francophone de qualité, lu dans 190 pays. Comment faire ? Nous vous invitons à verser un "pourboire" (tip) à votre convenance via le site <https://fr.tipeee.com/diploweb> . Vous pouvez aussi rédiger un chèque à l'ordre du DIPLOWEB.COM et l'adresser à Diploweb.com, Pierre Verluise, 1 avenue Lamartine, 94300, Vincennes, France. Ou bien encore faire un virement bancaire en demandant un RIB à l'adresse expertise.geopolitique@gmail.com.

Avec 5 000€ par mois, nous pouvons couvrir nos principaux frais de fonctionnement et dégager le temps nécessaire à nos principaux responsables pour qu'ils continuent à travailler sur le DIPLOWEB.COM.

Avec 8 000€ par mois, nous pouvons lancer de nouveaux projets (contenus, événements), voire l'optimisation de la maquette du site web du DIPLOWEB.COM.

There is still today in France broad consensus on the nation's nuclear deterrence, even though the conditions prevailing when it was created have changed profoundly. Given the major risk of proliferation today, France could play an important card by suggesting a disarmament process that includes the complete abandonment of nuclear deterrence.

As part of its strategy of geopolitical synergy, www.diploweb.com is pleased to present this article, which first appeared in *Défense nationale et sécurité collective*, June 2009, pp. 133-138.

JUST AFTER the appearance of the White Paper confirming the principle of French deterrence, at a time when we can detect signs of a second Cold War in the Caucasus, when Iran has regional pretensions and China is significantly improving the performance of its ballistic missile submarines, the above question might seem incongruous, if not unwelcome. Nevertheless, when France chose to equip itself with nuclear weapons, it did so while proclaiming their temporary nature, endorsing the aim of general disarmament.

Where are we today ? The question should not be pushed aside on the pretext that there is consensus on the matter. The obvious fact of setbacks to non-proliferation must be considered, as must the consequences of the unilateral breaking of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty by the Americans and the inadequacy of deterrence in the face of terrorism and non-state threats. Also, we must measure the impact of the persistence of the great powers' nuclear choices on threshold countries which have not yet acquired nuclear weapons. Could France, whose voice is still heard round the world, make the historic choice of renouncing them ? Without lapsing into the wishful thinking denounced by Hubert Védrine in his book *Continuer l'Histoire*, [1] the singularity of this choice could, if founded on multilateral negotiations, create the conditions for highly significant progress in the anti-proliferation campaign. It would also lay the foundations for a new balance in the UN Security Council and, by doing so, would support the project for relaunching the issue, which France has espoused. Finally, in these new conditions, the relevance of a European anti-missile shield must be studied.

A well-established consensus

The White Paper evokes both the strategic uncertainty in relation to proliferation and the multiplication of ballistic vectors, as well as the possibility of a technological breakthrough, to justify the maintenance of French nuclear deterrence. Nonetheless, although the threats have changed, the concept of deterrence has hardly altered. Some subtleties concerning possible tactical or pre-strategic use in order to re-establish deterrence have appeared but these do not alter the essence of deterrence, which aims to bring unacceptable risks, in relation to the objectives sought, to bear on any potential aggressor.

Recent events tend to support this policy. Russia, whose return to the international scene, foreseeable though it was, has not failed to surprise us. It has resuscitated the spectre of a modern Cold War in which the ideological threat has been replaced by the threat of energy blackmail. This tension over energy supplies could, in future, constitute the source of a more adversarial relationship with China. Although at the moment still dependent on its exports, China could soon become more independent as its domestic consumption grows. This new

position, bolstered by a war chest estimated today at \$1,800 million, could create an environment in which deterrence made sense. The recent development of China's oceanic strategic component and the growing financial crisis make this scenario entirely plausible.

In addition proliferation, which had been checked but not eliminated by the adoption of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), appears to represent the most direct threat to our security. After the Indian and Pakistani nuclear tests in 1998, and North Korea's in 2006, it is now Iran which is the object of suspicion on the part of the international community. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) is struggling to justify its actions which, all too frequently, are not supported by an international consensus. Between the impatient, sometimes aggressive, attitude of the United States, a more flexible Europe favouring negotiation, and the ambiguous postures of China and Russia, the non-proliferation message is often inaudible. The countries incriminated are not slow to exploit this lack of coherence and consistency.

In this uncertain climate, the precautionary principle requires us not to give up a deterrent which took so long to develop into an effective tool and whose contribution to today's peace is so manifest. The British have recently decided to modernize their submarine component, reinforcing an already well-established consensus within the community of declared nuclear states.

A major risk : proliferation

This analysis does not, however, take into account a more complex reality. To begin with, although the principle of deterrence and the balance of terror apply readily enough to the context of a bilateral relationship, or one between two blocs, the issue becomes much more complicated with the multiplication of actors. It is true that it is still characterized today by bilateral relationships (Pakistan/India, India/China, China/Russia, China/United States, etc.), as Bruno Tertrais has pointed out in his study on a nuclear Asia. It nevertheless remains true that the unbalancing of one of these relationships, the unilateral breaking of the ABM Treaty, for example, would naturally impact on the other carefully constructed equilibriums. One consequence could eventually be the multiplication of ballistic delivery systems.

The question also arises of the place of a French-style *tous azimuts* deterrence in this set of relationships. Although this position does not fit into a policy of equilibrium, it has to be appreciated that it is primarily an instrument of national independence. This is how General de Gaulle understood it and this is how it must still be understood today. As such, how can others be forbidden access to this status ? In addition, to raise a topic which concerns the West at the moment, how is a nuclear and independent Iran more dangerous or destabilizing than a nuclear Israel ? The regime of the mullahs presents a certain stability and a controlled power which enables us to put the adventurous (and scandalous) propositions of Ahmadinejad into perspective. Also, it is not beyond the bounds of reason that an Iranian bomb could constitute a useful counter-weight in the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as has been the case between India and Pakistan since their accession to the ranks of nuclear powers.

But to tolerate this development would most certainly be to open a Pandora's box. How could Taiwan and Japan, to name but two, be persuaded to resist the nuclear temptation ? This would be to re-launch proliferation which, in time, most certainly constitutes the most serious danger.

Finally, can we reasonably invoke the risk of a technological breakthrough to legitimize the maintenance of a policy of nuclear deterrence ? As envisaged by the White Paper, this hypothesis comes up against the twin principles of reality and coherence. The signature of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty now forbids France to conduct new tests and means that the development of our deterrent weapon must depend on simulation alone. Our possibilities for development are de facto limited by this constraint and could not cope with a technological breakthrough, which would by definition be unpredictable. Also, seen from the angle of a new proliferation threat, a technological breakthrough would of course be available to an advanced country like ours and would downgrade nuclear deterrence. This scenario would also dispose of the moral argument that this new weapon would be 'dirty' and consequently unusable by our Western societies, the 'purity' of the existing bomb having yet to be demonstrated.

Renouncing nuclear deterrence

In response to the major risk of proliferation and considering the existing strategic equilibrium between China, Russia and the United States on the one hand, and to a lesser extent, that between India and Pakistan on the other, France could decisively adopt an original approach leading to the abandonment of a nuclear deterrent posture. Such a choice should not be unilateral but proposed to the international community and associated with a number of conditions. Too often, France has set off alone down the disarmament road (reduction in the number of nuclear warheads, signature of the Test Ban and Non-Proliferation Treaties, dismantling of surface-to-surface missiles) without gaining any benefit. Similarly, the action plan proposed in the White Paper only formalises measures already undertaken internally. As the value of example in international relations does not seem to have the same effect as a negotiated agreement, such a plan has little chance of coming to pass.

On the other hand, putting the complete dismantling of our nuclear deterrent into the balance would allow us to initiate negotiations with ambitious objectives, in line with our security imperatives. This initiative, whose force depends on the credibility of our existing deterrent, would have a good chance of bringing Europe together, and would effectively support the White Paper proposal for a dialogue on the role of nuclear deterrence and its contribution to our mutual security. Most European states in effect base their collective security on NATO, while French deterrence, which remains national, plays no part in it.

Negotiations supported at a European level, if possible bringing in Britain, and discussed within NATO, should initially aim at the dismantling of the Iranian nuclear programme and transparency measures on the part of Israel. Under the aegis of the IAEA, whose role would be strengthened, these disarmament measures combined with a truly significant effort by the Western camp would certainly prove more effective than the current scolding from the sidelines. This initiative, based on a series of steps, would constitute a decisive advance in the fight against proliferation.

In a second phase, with the status of nuclear force no longer associated with permanent membership of the UN Security Council, this process would open the way to the resolution of the problem of representation in this decision-making body. The negotiations should, on the one hand, guarantee our position as a permanent member of the Council, while on the other hand encouraging access to emerging powers which have renounced nuclear weapons, with an eye to the representation of major cultural blocs. It would then be possible to tie the accession

of India to permanent membership to the abandonment of its nuclear strike capability. This process would naturally have to involve Pakistan, for whom security guarantees would also have to be given.

This proposal means, in effect, that a part of our defence would rest on NATO and would therefore have to contain clauses on representation in that organization, in particular strengthening its European component. The disarmament of the three great powers, China, Russia and the United States, has its own dynamic and would not come under this initiative. Developments in it would nonetheless have to be followed, while preserving an indispensable equilibrium.

Finally, this proposal contains residual risks which would have to be countered. The North Korean problem is one. The irrational behaviour of this type of actor and the technology transfers to which it can give rise mean that the risk will persist of clandestine proliferation, which the Proliferation Security Initiative cannot effectively prevent. Faced with this type of threat, to which current deterrence anyway has no answer, the relevance of a European anti-missile shield will have to be studied. This is the idea supported by Bernard Laverni in his book *La Grande Muraille Nucléaire du IIIème Millénaire* (The nuclear Great Wall of the 3rd millennium). [2] This is not the only alternative. Pre-emptive strikes on illicit installations might be an acceptable mode of action. Although difficult to establish in the institutional context of the UN, and unthinkable in the case of a country with powerful capabilities of reprisal or destabilization, they should not be completely ruled out.

As previously stated, fundamentally, the weight of this proposal rests on the current credibility of our deterrence. France is the only totally independent country from this point of view and which has the size and legitimacy needed to initiate this process. This is a real political choice which commits us for the foreseeable future. The precautionary principle evoked above is, however, a non-choice. We have only to consider our inability to foresee the future. More seriously, by the resources it absorbs to maintain the status quo, it deprives us of the ability to mould this future according to our interests. The considerable advantages which can be expected from renouncing nuclear deterrence, one of the most important of which is the gain to the fight against proliferation, and the re-balancing of the UN Security Council, amply justify taking the risk. In fact, the actual process of disarmament will only begin at the conclusion of negotiations in which procedures have been agreed and which therefore contain guarantees of reversibility in the event of failure. Finally, the financial headroom provided by the abandonment of our nuclear component could be advantageously redeployed, firstly to the optimization of our defence system, notably to the benefit of the new strategic function contained in the White Paper, 'knowledge and anticipation' which could become a new centre of excellence in the same way as the AEC at the birth of deterrence, and in risk prevention in crisis-prone regions. In any event, to do nothing is to run the even greater risk of proliferation, with a threshold effect below which it will be particularly difficult to return.

Copyright June 2009-Savoyant/défense nationale

Défense nationale et sécurité collective is a publication whose purpose is to tackle all—national and international—political, economic, social and scientific issues by considering them from the viewpoint of defence. This specific aspect enabled it to outlive WW II and later on all the crises, hardships and regime changes that followed. Its readers in France all still share a common interest in defence and security, despite any differences in opinion, origins or political sensitivity. [See](#)

P.-S.

Lieutenant-Commander Luc Savoyant is currently attending the Joint Services Defence College, Paris

Notes

[1] Paris : Editions Flammarion, 2008.

[2] Paris : L'Harmattan, 2005.