

France and disarmament from one century to another

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From the beginning, France was one of the pioneering countries in the field of disarmament, an activity that occurred from time to time and now happens mainly in a European framework. However, France's nuclear posture often seems conservative.

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DISARMAMENT, in the broadest sense (non-proliferation, arms control, humanitarian disarmament, confidence-building measures, arms reduction and disarmament in the strict sense of the word), and in whatever framework (unilateral measures, bilateral or multilateral negotiations) is a subject of particular interest for France. Contrary to popular belief, French diplomacy has always been a major player on the disarmament scene, and has pursued an active and multifaceted policy since the time of the League of Nations. From the efforts of Jules Moch in Geneva [1] defending a non-proliferation regime, through criticism of the American-Soviet duopoly, France has displayed a degree of activism in a great number of initiatives, for instance the French plans of 1978 and 1991, President Mitterrand's speech to the United Nations in 1983, or more recently President Sarkozy's speech at Cherbourg in 2008). France is one of the handful of countries with all-round expertise in disarmament questions that structured the debate in the twentieth century.

For the coming period, it is worth examining whether the disarmament agenda will allow France to keep this role, or whether it will find itself increasingly on the defensive on account of the progress—temporary or lasting—of the nuclear disarmament theme.

France and disarmament : a constrained, atypical player

In disarmament negotiations, France has always sought to reconcile its interests as a military and nuclear power with its diplomatic priorities which have led it to favour one or other negotiation, or to abandon certain types of weapon. In this respect, France set itself apart from other foreign ministries that traditionally put disarmament at the heart of their foreign policy, as a moral imperative. In this category we find several Western powers (Sweden, Ireland, Austria, Norway and New Zealand) and some of the larger Southern countries like Mexico and South Africa that are usually not tied by strong security constraints such as membership of military alliances or a particularly challenging security environment. At the other end of the spectrum, most of the major strategic players have usually built their disarmament diplomacy essentially around the defence of their own security interests. Most of the countries represented in the major multilateral forums follow the general line and subscribe to the views of the regional groupings (for example, non-aligned, Western group or European Union) to which they belong without displaying any great activity in preparing their positions.

Several markers indicate the particular position that brings France close to its major European partners, notably Germany and the United Kingdom. Examined closely, the Europeans, in their adherence to disarmament treaties, rival each other for the prize for who has signed up to the greatest number of commitments. [2] In nuclear matters, unlike China, India and the United States, France (together with the United Kingdom and Russia) has ratified the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). Like most of the European Union countries as well as the developing

countries, France has signed up to the major humanitarian treaties (the Ottawa Convention on anti-personnel mines, and the Oslo Convention on Cluster Munitions) whereas, once again, China, India, the United States, Russia, Israel and a number of regional powers have stood aside from these documents, as imposing too many military constraints.

While in the United States adherence to a treaty is subject to critical analysis of security interests, and can easily come up against virulent Senate opposition, France has, for some 20 years, distinguished itself by a desire to sign up to documents in disarmament affairs, and no longer to practice the 'empty chair' policy that had previously seen it boycotting the Geneva Conference work in the 1960s. This attitude is relatively new. On the basis of criticism of American-Soviet arms control, France only acceded to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) in 1992 (24 years after it was opened for signature [3]) and the Biological and Toxic Weapons Convention (BWC) only in 1984 : two treaties where France had, moreover indicated a respect for the letter and the spirit from the moment of their signature in 1968 and 1972 respectively. For a long while, France refused to join conventional negotiations on Mutual and Balanced Force Reduction (MBFR), which lasted from 1973 to 1989, before signing up to the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Agreement (CFE) in 1990.

It was therefore only in the 1990s that France undertook to become the *bon élève* of non-proliferation and disarmament, multiplying initiatives and, for example, restarting negotiations on the Chemical Weapons Convention. Notwithstanding certain initial hesitations on occasions, in a matter of a few years France quickly signed up to bans on nuclear testing, on anti-personnel and cluster weapons, thereby accepting serious constraints on its defence systems.

On the other hand, amongst the aspects that have scarcely changed in decades of disarmament diplomacy, insistence on strict and demanding verification measures constitutes one of the more original aspects of the French position. France figures amongst the first-rank powers attaching the greatest importance to the existence of robust verification mechanisms, whose absence it has often criticised in the bilateral American-Soviet and then American-Russian agreements. France equally attaches a sustained importance to the identification of levers that encourage other powers to rally to this position, so that treaty constraints should be accepted by the greatest possible number, through implementation clauses guaranteeing the adherence of all the most relevant states, as for the CTBT. France is reluctant to accept exceptions to this principle other than in the case of humanitarian agreements, like the Ottawa and Oslo Conventions referred to earlier.

France, however, remains a constrained player, and is still often perceived as hostile to disarmament. This image derives from its firm position on nuclear disarmament, which limits its room for manoeuvre. Hence its reputation, unfair when you examine the fact of the matter, of being the country the most conservative on nuclear affairs, and the least willing to embrace abolitionist rhetoric, which is, moreover, not untrue (see below). Given the weight of nuclear questions on the international disarmament agenda, France as a nuclear power cannot always impose its initiatives and is the object of recurring suspicion : its initiatives are more readily perceived as just so many attempts to set the nuclear debate aside rather than as innovative proposals (which indeed they sometimes are). Little by little, France has likewise found itself supposed to be, generally, more reticent, and its diplomacy to be often depicted as rigid and arrogant. Norway hesitated before inviting France to join the Oslo process, whereas Germany and the United Kingdom were associated from the start, in spite of the fact that both countries

have often proved more constrained than France during negotiations. [4]

The EU, a new framework for French disarmament diplomacy

In the recent evolution of French disarmament diplomacy, one factor is sometimes overlooked, that of the development of the European Union's Common Foreign and Security Policy, which has made disarmament and non-proliferation a major axis over the last ten years. It has led to a reconciliation of the policies of member states, who tackle the great majority of negotiations with a common approach, formalised in common positions or in EU declarations. If the texts are sometimes the product of laborious compromises and painful negotiation, they have nonetheless become the expression of a genuine European policy. [5]

If important differences still remain between member states (essentially on nuclear questions), it should be recognised that the Europeans have converging views on 90 per cent of the disarmament agenda, and ever more frequently act in concert in order to give substance to this 'effective multilateralism' that is put forward as the trademark of the EU. If the European diplomats engaged in the preparation of these texts underline the recurrent difficulties in negotiations and the real differences that remain between member states, the fact is that a large part of the positions of the 27 nations on disarmament matters is now formulated within this framework, and the rest of the world recognises the EU as a player.

For France this is a real constraint but also a genuine lever, as when the French Presidency of the EU in 2008 got the 27 to adopt an action plan submitted to the United Nations including the following elements :

- . universal ratification of the CTBT and the completion of its verification regime, as well as the earliest possible dismantling of all nuclear testing installations, transparently and open to the international community ;
- . the opening, without delays or preconditions, of negotiations for a treaty banning the production of fissile material for nuclear weapons, and the establishment of an immediate moratorium on the production of those materials ;
- . finalising of transparency and confidence-building measures by the nuclear powers ;
- . further progress in the undergoing discussions between the United States and Russia on the development of a legally constraining post-START arrangement, and an overall reduction of nuclear weapon stockpiles worldwide, in conformity with Article VI of the NPT, particularly for those states possessing the largest arsenals ;
- . the inclusion of tactical nuclear weapons, by those states that possess them, in the overall arms control and disarmament process, with a view to their reduction and elimination ;
- . the opening of discussions on a treaty banning short- and intermediate-range surface-to-surface missiles ;
- . adherence and implementation of all states to the Hague Code of Conduct ;

. and in addition, greater activism in all areas of disarmament. [6]

This plan largely takes up the proposals contained in the Cherbourg speech of February 2008. This Europeanisation of disarmament diplomacy is, however, now a fundamental factor for all the Europeans, including the French, who should transform this constraint into a trump card.

Encourage non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction

Announcing its intention to join the NPT in 1991, France embraced non-proliferation with the enthusiasm of a new convert. Breaking with 30 years of political and theoretical criticism, this choice has led France to become progressively one of the countries most committed to the battle against the proliferation of WMD. In the forefront of negotiations on the Chemical Weapons Convention from 1989 to 1993, France worked for extension of the NPT in 1995, sought (unsuccessfully) from 1996 to 2001 to give the Biological Convention a verification protocol, encouraged the adoption of new verification tools (additional protocols) for the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and launched the Hague Code of Conduct on ballistic proliferation in 2003. These diplomatic choices illustrate French political priorities in non-proliferation matters : the promotion of multilateral regimes, the defence of export control regimes, and support for robust verification instruments.

Since 2003, developments in the Iranian nuclear crisis have gradually placed it at the heart of French non-proliferation diplomacy. Even if it was initially a matter of favouring a diplomatic approach to the Iranian affair, in contrast to the United States's military treatment of the Iraq crisis, this commitment, alongside the United Kingdom and Germany in managing the Iran dossier, marks a new turning-point. Progressively, and whilst still remaining within the United Nations framework, developments in the Iranian crisis have led France to find itself in the front rank of defenders of the non-proliferation regime in the face of violations and the risk of seeing Iran creating a precedent capable of bringing this regime down. This concern with the limits of non-proliferation regimes has led France to support new initiatives, like the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) or the adoption of Resolutions 1540 and 1887, which go beyond an approach based on simple multilateral treaties. Fighting proliferation has thus become the essential element of French disarmament diplomacy. This position renews the terms of a classic French paradigm : the link between disarmament and security. Prevention of proliferation is an element of our security.

New arenas and new practices in disarmament : constraints and opportunities for France

In parallel with these non-proliferation developments, developments in the international disarmament debate should be noted. The dissolution of the bloc system has liberated national diplomacies, making discussions more difficult, particularly on nuclear matters, even, and above all, amongst Western nations. Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) have made themselves major players, to the point of provoking the launch of negotiation processes outside the traditional Geneva boundaries. Dysfunction of the Geneva Disarmament Conference, which has not produced a treaty since 1996, and regular blockages within the framework of

negotiations subject to the rule of consensus, explain these developments and create novel diplomatic situations, which are for a country like France, well positioned in the multilateral UN system, so many new constraints.

In the face of these new practices, associating media campaigns and which call for effective rhetoric, France sometimes finds itself wrong-footed or otherwise in difficulty. While other powers ignore these movements, and when its Western partners sometimes associate NGOs with their delegations and play the media card enthusiastically, France often stands aloof, with a critical attitude and rational discourse that is less than sensitive to outside pressures and to the spirit of the times.

From this viewpoint, we have to distinguish the dynamics of the high-profile humanitarian measures (mines, cluster munitions) to which France eventually rallied, from the anti-nuclear rhetoric on which it makes only minimal concessions.

France and the nuclear abolition debate : the last of the Mohicans ?

Revived with President Obama's Prague speech of May 2009, the nuclear weapons abolition debate has had little effect in France, even among experts. [7] Basically, France doesn't take the abolitionist perspective seriously, and would only accept the prospect of a world without nuclear weapons as an ultimate objective at the price of multiple caveats, as during the NPT review talks of 2010.

By continuing to urge an orthodox but now extreme minority interpretation of Article VI of the NPT that establishes a link between nuclear and complete, general disarmament, France puts herself in an intellectually rigorous position, but excludes itself from the dominant paradigm. This opposition should not be caricaturised as the posture of a 'nuclear junkie'. Based on an exemplary track record, French nuclear disarmament policy has moved with the times, and continues to do so, as the Cherbourg speech shows. It is neither a categorical refusal of all forms of disarmament, nor a last battle to protect an asset of French *grandeur*. It has more to do with a strong and clear vision whereby, in today's world, France could enjoy greater security with deterrence than without it, and the feasibility and the advantages for security of a world without nuclear weapons are still to be demonstrated. In a world of proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and missiles, France is clearly reluctant to abandon what is often described as an insurance policy.

A second factor that comes into play is a form of French rationalism that excludes on principle the temptation and sees the dangers of double talk combining the modernisation of nuclear forces (which is, in varying degrees, the policy of the five nuclear powers recognised by the NPT) with abolitionist rhetoric.

France's 'conservative' position is often criticised, but can be understood through the solid link between disarmament and security. From the French viewpoint, disarmament is not a goal in itself, based on moral values ; it should generate greater security, and disarmament measures should be judged in that light. If the security of France, of Europe, of the world can be enhanced by a specific objective, it is worthwhile pursuing it. If, on the other hand, the security benefits are doubtful, prudence should prevail. The last 50 years of French disarmament

diplomacy should be viewed in the light of this basic principle. It should not be interpreted as a purely conservative policy or as a selfish desire to maintain a status of strategic advantage, when France has actively supported bans on whole categories of weapons in its possession, and accepted many nuclear and non-nuclear disarmament measures. The history of past negotiations proves that France is perfectly prepared to accept heavy constraints on national policy if, in the final analysis, the world is a safer place.

For France the challenge of the new century is to make the link between disarmament and security better understood, and to continue successfully to promote an agenda that it can claim as its own. It cannot be reduced simply to the debate on the elimination of nuclear weapons, which is, by definition, only one element of a vastly wider spectrum. In the next few years other priorities will emerge, demanding equally sustained attention. The effective prevention of proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and respect for the relevant treaties, would therefore seem to be a precondition of new steps in the process of nuclear disarmament. Dealing with the question of missile proliferation is a priority in the absence of a constraining international regime in this area. Salvaging the conventional weapons control system in a Europe in deep crisis since the freezing of Russian participation in the CFE process in 2007 is an issue that has been too neglected. Regulation of the arms trade and the fight against illegal trafficking are also subjects worthy of genuine efforts.

As the agenda and the mechanisms of disarmament develop, France should continue to make its voice heard on well-understood national interests allied with universal objectives. It cannot rest content to follow, eyes closed, the passing fancies of the moment.

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issues from the viewpoint of security and defence. Its editorial independence allows it to participate actively in revival of the strategic debate in France and in promoting it in Europe and the rest of the world. [See](#)

P.-S.

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Notes

[1] For this golden age of French diplomacy on the disarmament stage see Jean Klein, *L'entreprise du désarmement 1945-1964* (Paris : Éditions Cujas, 1964).

[2] In the French case, one of the very rare exceptions is the 1963 Partial Test Ban Treaty, which France never signed, doubtless because one of the main aims of the Treaty was to hinder or stop Paris from joining the nuclear club by limiting the test programme that was just starting. This abstention became a trivial matter after the signing of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT).

[3] On this point, see Camille Grand, 'La politique française de non-prolifération nucléaire', *Défense nationale*, August-September 1994.

[4] For the Oslo Convention negotiations, see Camille Grand, 'La Convention sur les armes à sous-munitions et le Processus d'Oslo. Une négociation atypique', *Annuaire français des relations internationales* 2009, vol. X (Brussels : Bruylant, 2010).

[5] See Camille Grand, 'L'Europe et le désarmement : entre prolifération, dissuasion et abolition', in *L'Etat de l'Europe 2010* (Paris : Fondation Robert Schuman, 2010).

[6] See the letter of the President of the Republic to the United Nations Secretary-General (5 December 2008) on behalf of the European Union, available on the site of the French delegation to the Disarmament Conference :

http://www.delegfrance-cd-geneve.org/IMG:pdf/SKMBT_C25208121115370.pdf

[7] On France and abolition see Bruno Tertrais' 'French Perspectives on Nuclear Weapons and Nuclear Disarmament', in Barry Blackman (ed.), *Unblocking the Road to Zero, Perspectives of Advanced Nuclear Nations* (Washington, DC : Henry L. Stimson Centre, 2009, and Camille Grand, 'France, Nuclear Weapons and Non-prolifération' in Camille Grand et al., *US-European Non-prolifération Perspectives : A Transatlantic Conversation* (Washington, DC : CSIS, 2009).