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Nuclear Deterrence, a strategic nonsense and a tragic one

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Donald Trump has agreed with Vladimir Putin to share the spoils of Ukraine - "You get the conquered land in the east, I get the remaining rare minerals!" In so doing Trump is ratifying Putin's aggression and validating the exercise of might - economic and military might - as a norm of international conduct. What became of the frontiers, sovereignty and independence that were jointly guaranteed to Ukraine in 1994 by Russia, the US and the UK, in the Memorandum of Budapest, in exchange for the return to Russia of some 1900 nuclear weapons? Buried. The Rule of Law? Human Rights? the UN Charter? International Law? Trampled! And the height of indecency is that the invaded country is now accused of leading us towards "World War III", because for three years it has resisted the aggressor.

Thus, from the plains of Ukraine to the the "Riviera" of Gaza, these two dominating Heads of State, owning the two atomic arsenals that outclass all the others, are using their military supremacy, both conventional and nuclear, to claim the right to dictate together the fates of the people which their so-called conventional arms (Russian in Ukraine, American in Gaza) are already attacking.

To resist this new Yalta, do we have to fall in step with these powerful idiots, arm ourselves as best we can, inflate our military spending till it goes from 2% to 3% or even 5% of GNP (what the Poles pay)? Must we boast of our nuclear weapons and devote to them an even larger share of our defense budget? That is the path apparently sought by President Macron and now by some other European leaders, pushed by their legitimate wish to resist the arrogant dictatorship of nations stronger than they are. And this is where nuclear deterrence returns to the front of stage.

What a terrible illusion!

"Nuclear Deterrence" is a strategic nonsense.

On the national level alone, it is full of incoherences and inconsistencies:

- To defend republican values, including fraternity and Human Rights (including the right to life) by threatening to kill millions of civilians.
- To subordinate France's "vital interests" to the plan of first use - the French principle of "final warning" is such a plan - of weapons which would not fail to provoke a devastating response from a State like Russia, which has 25 times more of them, more advanced and more "speedy" than ours.
- To claim to guarantee our security with these arms, while forbidding nations without them from getting them.
- To thus encourage their proliferation, while claiming to combat it.
- To ban weapons of mass destruction that are biological and chemical yet to authorize them for ourselves when they are atomic.
- To say they are "just for deterrence, therefore not for use," when they cannot deter unless we are ready to use them.
- To try to reduce expenditure, to the detriment of the nation's social, educational, ecological or health needs, yet to waste billions on devices that do not protect us from terrorists (obviously) or from other nuclear States.
- To mobilize humankind to save biodiversity and combat climate disruption, while placing the whole planet on the edge of atomic self-destruction.

In the words of US General Lee Butler, the last head of Strategic Air Command, who would have set the US nuclear forces in motion if the President had so ordered: *"Nuclear Weapons are fundamentally dangerous, extraordinarily costly, militarily ineffective and morally indefensible".* In brief, nuclear deterrence, so-called, is no more than a stupid and expensive wager, which will always be lost: *"If you attack me, I bet that I will commit suicide with you."* And in this case the Me and You are entire populations. You, we, everyone and anyone, those on this side and those on that. Here comes the damage!

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Deterrence is also a tragic nonsense.

Nuclear arms, said to guarantee peace, have been seen to do the opposite. Those of NATO did not prevent Putin from invading Ukraine. He spoke of their possible extension to Ukraine as a major motive for his "special operation", he used his firstly to deter Europe and NATO from coming to the side of the land invaded, and then to "sanctuarize" the Ukrainian territory he annexed. The deterrers are deterred, the strategy backfires. The chief culprit in the war (to be fair, there are others) is rewarded. Thus nuclear arms, far from averting war, provoke it. Their power does not protect widows and orphans, it oppresses them and serves injustice. They are weapons for Crimes against Humanity, and, without even being used, they engender other crimes. Israel's nuclear arsenal has for decades encouraged that State to flout the rights of Palestinians and the resolutions of the UN - and the result was the Crime against Humanity of 7 October 2023, and then the Gaza massacres, more Crimes against Humanity with even more victims. And that ruled out any political solution, except that of Trump and Netanyahu: push the Gazans into the sea and the West Bank people into Jordan! That would leave finally only one apartheid state, Israel, Jewishly pure - or nearly.

If extended to Europe, France's supposed deterrence would be even more catastrophic and even less credible.

To start with, the decision to use the weapons, if deterrence fails, belongs ultimately to one man: the Head of State. That is admittedly criminal suicidal, infamous, foul and totally antidemocratic, but that's how it is. How can we believe that a group of learned European leaders could make it? The other Europeans would need to entrust their fate to the President of France. But supposing they did, how can we imagine that this man would be ready to "save Danzig" - or Gdansk, Tallinn or Bucharest - thereby exposing Paris, France and the French people to annihilation? President Giscard d'Estaing himself admitted in his memoirs that during the Cold War he had promised in his heart never to be first to use nucear arms, preferring an occupation of France - from which she might recover - to mutual destruction. That was simple commonsense, yet far away from official strategy (and proof that that was absurd). So nobody will believe in the "French final warning", least of all Mr Putin. Incidentally, no one can predict what goes on in Mr Macron's head. For that is the divine "uncertainty" promoted and cultivated by French strategists: to intimidate the enemy, the Head of State, alone, must have the power to decide the nation's fate. Yet when you consider how Macron took the decision to dissolve the National Assembly, you have to shudder.

To state it clearly: France's nuclear force is a huge waste, even from the military point of view. If there is extra money for armaments expenses, it is surely to provide Ukraine with the conventional arms they urgently need to stop the Russian advance, and drive them back, and to negotiate a ceasefire in a better position, despite the views of Mr Trump, Moscow's man in Washington (1). But the French "nuclear umbrella", or the British one, cannot replace the "American umbrella". Nuclear Deterrence makes no more sense now than in the past. It would make even less sense if we had to extend it to Europe to defend against new aggressions. We need to stop believing in this monstrous weaponry, stop investing in it, because it is unusable, except for acts of criminal, suicidal stupidity.

And it has only one sensible use: to serve as a bargaining counter, to be placed on a negotiating table. We really need to rid the planet of these weapons and remove them from the hands of present and future tyrants, if we are to extract the world from its current warring chaos and from the unprecedented arms race which inevitably leads to war.

French diplomacy, if it wishes to serve the people of France, Europe and the world, needs to inform the other nuclear States, in particular those currently at war like Russia and Israel, that France is ready to renounce her nuclear arms, with reciprocity of course, by effectively implementing Article VI of the Non-Proliferation Treaty - and so France must invite all the states with nuclear weapons, inside and outside the NPT, and all those that host nuclear arms on their soil, to come and meet in Paris, Geneva or Vienna to negotiate and plan for the total and duly controlled elimination of all nuclear and radioactive weapons.

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If France does not do so, a shared-initiative referendum will have to force her to it, matching to the wish of at least 70% of French citizens.
7 Français sur 10.

"Do you agree that France should participate in abolishing nuclear and radioactive weapons and engage with all the States concerned in negotiations aimed at elaborating, ratifying and implementing a treaty to ban and eliminate nuclear and radioactive weapons completely, under mutual and international control that is strict and effective."

That is the question asked in this referendum.

Parliamentarians and citizens, unite! Demand to have your say on this vital question. It will be a great service to the cause of respect for rights and humanity. It costs nothing and can bring huge returns to peace, in Europe and elsewhere.

Jean-Marie Matagne, President of ACDN (Action des Citoyens pour le Désarmement Nucléaire)

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(1) Cf. Régis Genté, Notre homme à Washington : Trump dans la main des Russes (Éd. Grasset, oct. 2024)

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