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Abolishing Nuclear Weapons: Is "strict and effective mutual international monitoring" possible?

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Publication date: Wednesday 30 May 2012

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A follower of Jean-Marie Collin's blog, after reading the interview with Jean-Marie Matagne, describes Matagne as a "utopian dreamer".

Here is the reply of the fasting dreamer :

« Just one more utopian dreamer. We KNOW VERY WELL that that kind of international monitoring WON'T WORK. »

The objection that it won't work is, of course, one that we put to ourselves, and we responded to it in the very formulation that we made for the referendum we are seeking:

« Are you in favour of France participating, with the other states, in the complete elimination of all nuclear weapons, in the framework of mutual international control that is strict and effective? ».

Maybe you didn't notice, but we added the word "MUTUAL" alongside "INTERNATIONAL". Why?

1. First, we must look at what "international control" means. According to the Advisory Opinion given on 8 July 1996 by the International Court of Justice, there exists an "obligation to pursue in good faith and to bring to conclusion negotiations leading to nuclear disarmament in all its aspects, under strict and effective international control."

This formula of "strict and effective international control" comes from Article VI of the Non-Proliferation Treaty. It clearly shows concern for "strict and effective" verification without going into technical details of verification procedures. This is normal, because the procedures are matters for military and diplomatic experts. But in order to get these experts involved, the negotiations first have to start. Negotations were theoretically foreshadowed when the NPT entered into force in 1970. They never began. So nobody has real experience of such negotiations, at least not in this domain.

2. It is true that if "international control" means only monitoring entrusted to an international agency like the IAEA, we would have reason to fear "negligences". The IAEA failed in the case of North Korea, and nearly failed in the case of Iran - and it constantly fails in the case of Israel because it is not authorized to poke its nose in there.

3. On the other hand, there is conclusive experience of bilateral verification, between the Russians and Americans. Verification worked perfectly for the application of the first START TREATY. It made possible, ON THE SCHEDULED DATE and TO THE SATISFACTION OF BOTH PARTIES, the reduction in strategic nuclear warheads from over 10000 on each side to less than 6000 (even under 4000 in the case of the Russians). And verification is working for the new START treaty. Military commanders and information services are not naïve choirboys. They know very well where to look for what the opponent may want to hide. When suspicion arises, one party must be able to conduct one or more impromptu inspections (a procedure included among the convention's emergency procedures).

The verification between the Russians and Americans was BILATERAL rather than international. Obviously when a nation is particularly concerned about another nation's arsenal (e.g. USA/Russia or India/Pakistan), it will be much more vigilant than other nations.

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4. Now imagine the 9 declared nuclear states agreeing on GENERAL disarmament: each one will be concerned about the arsenals of the other 8 and will thus claim the right to subject each of them to control that is BILATERAL and RECIPROCAL, in other words MUTUAL. Theoretically this would make in total 36 possible mutual controls. Add that of the international agency, and you get at least 37.

Of course not all those theoretical controls will happen. There will certainly be mutualisation and delegation. A whole architecture will have to be conceived to guarantee the system's robustness without making it unworkable. But it is important that each nation can, in pursuit of its own interests, exercise suspicion and if necessary "visiting rights". As a well-known American said concerning disarmament, we must "trust and also verify."

5. You call me "utopian". I've been interested in nuclear disarmament for 26 years, 5 of which I spent on a doctoral thesis centred on this subject - admittedly not long enough to know all its realities. I consider nevertheless that the utopians are not on my side of the debate: the utopians are those who imagine (on the pretext that we narrowly escaped several nuclear wars in this last half-century) that the miracle will be repeated over and over for ever.

But if you are still keen to classify me as a "utopian dreaming of a world without nuclear weapons", be aware that I am in good company. Besides a certain Barack Obama, here is a list of the signatories of "Global Zero".

Here is the start of that group's "historical preamble":

"During the whole nuclear period, even at the height of the Cold War, leaders had foreseen a time when the world would be able finally to rid itself of nuclear weapons.

In 1986, the Soviet PM Mikhail Gorbachev and the US President Ronald Reagan recognized that 'a nuclear war could never be won and must never be fought.' For Reagan, nuclear weapons were 'totally irrational, totally inhumane, good for nothing but killing, possibly destructive of life on earth and civilization.'"

The continuation of that historical preamble may be consulted here. It holds some surprises for you.

Having said that, I admit you may find solace in the fact that among the signatories of Global Zero there are only 5 French names:

Danielle Mitterrand, General Bernard Norlain, former PM Michel Rocard, plus two former Ministers of Defence Paul Quilès et Alain Richard (what, two!). But not one French Head of State to stand alongside Mikhail Gorbachev or Jimmy Carter. No François Hollande either.

If I am utopian, it is perhaps at this point: my belief that the current President of France can and may wish to apply his slogan of "change now" in this domain also. On my 14th day of hunger strike, I am waiting to see whether he does. And to see him, since I have requested an audience.

Jean-Marie Matagne, 28 May 2012

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