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Towards a nuclear-weapons free Europe and a nuclear-weapon free world: the case of France

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In moving towards a nuclear-weapons free Europe, the case of France is certainly the most complicated. This is not only because of its arsenal and its modernisation but also because of its current strategy and its behaviour in the last two decades.

Following the 1995 Review Conference of the NPT, France agreed upon the statement of "nuclear disarmament in good faith" and simultaneously prepared a total renewal and modernization of its nuclear weapons arsenal. And at the 2000 Review Conference, France confirmed its agreement with the 13 steps, in total contradiction with its military programme. During the 90's France decided upon: 1- a programme of new missiles, the M51, able to hit Beijing, 2- a new submarine, the fourth, each one of these equipped with 96 warheads, 3- a new aircraft, the Rafale, equipped with new nuclear missiles and 4- a programme of research and testing for new nuclear weapons with the Megajoule Laser and new computing facilities. France is not "in good faith" in nuclear disarmament issues. That is the first thing to keep in mind.

France signed the NPT in 1992, when all these new projects had been decided, so no-one in the world made any objection to France's participation in a new nuclear arms race. Then in 1995 France undertook new nuclear testing in the Pacific Ocean, just before signing the CTBT (1996). But at the Megajoule, the real testing will be performed in the laboratory, contradicting the principles of the CTBT, with the goal of preparing the next generation of pure fusion nuclear weapons using a trigger by laser instead of by pits of uranium or plutonium as is currently done. And now France proposes the FMCT on fissile material cut-off when it is clear that France itself has more fissile material than needed available for any new development of a nuclear weapon. Where is the "good faith" in all these facts?

But the most difficult problem to be tackled is France's official strategy of nuclear deterrence. The doctrine expressed since the beginning and repeatedly confirmed is that the "security of the vital interests of France is based on its nuclear deterrence". After making such a statement it is clear for French politicians that no nuclear free world can be discussed. More seriously, other States could use the same statement in promoting nuclear weapons for their "security", making nuclear proliferation possible and out of control. For France even a "first strike on a non-nuclear State" is officially conceivable if "vital interests" are at stake. The big issue to be tackled is therefore "security": how can we convince French public opinion that "security" is lower with nuclear weapons than without them?

Actually, France is a major actor in the game of proliferation; selling nuclear reactors to states like Libya is a typical example. Such a reactor will produce 250 kilos of plutonium per year and less than 10 kilos makes a nuclear bomb possible. Moreover, Areva, the nuclear firm that acts as seller, is totally controlled by the Commissariat for Atomic Energy (CEA) who are developing and managing French nuclear weapons.

In France, there is also a problem with public opinion. The answer to the question "Do you think France could have a military defence without nuclear deterrence?" is NO for 61%. Ironically, 49% think that "nuclear weapons are useless" and for a "first nuclear strike against a non-nuclear State" there is only 16% of positive support. These numbers were recently published by... the French Ministry of Defence! It means that French public opinion can possibly be brought to oppose the nuclear doctrine if a large debate on the subject can be organized. This is the goal of peace activists in various NGOs working together within the framework of Abolition 2000 Europe.

Basically, on the "security" issue, the Mayors for Peace campaign, which focusses on the idea that "cities are not targets", is the appropriate one for Mayors, as they are the first representative level in charge of "security" for their citizens. The additional project of a Convention for the elimination of nuclear weapons, a campaign being developed concurrently in France, is important because it works to promote the idea that nuclear disarmament is possible, which is precisely the idea of which the public opinion is not yet convinced. A lot more work has to be done, in the hope that pressure by other European States will also contribute to making French politicians change their minds.