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For Global Nuclear Disarmament, the Only Means to Prevent Anarchic Proliferation

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Conceived in the desperate struggle of World War Two, nuclear weapons became a tool for mutual deterrence between the two protagonists of the Cold War, as well as the UK, France and China. Deterrence, as part of the strategic supremacy of the two superpowers, played a role in limiting conflict during the Cold War; and has in part retained that function ever since. However, two profound changes on the world stage make it essential to re-evaluate the role of nuclear weapons in the future.

Firstly, the diversity of conflicts which has followed the end of the blocs has reduced the leverage offered by deterrence mechanisms. Many actors have engaged in such conflicts with purely local goals, immune to pressure from any global power and posing no threat to the vital interests of nuclear powers. These powers have themselves built sustainable mutual relations based on political cooperation. Only non-state actors attempting to spread fundamentalism pose a global threat. The circumstances in which deterrence is relevant are increasingly constricted.

Secondly, the regulatory instruments starting with the 1968 Non-proliferation Treaty are losing their effectiveness. They were capable, twenty or thirty years ago, of persuading some states not to acquire nuclear weapons, and others to abandon them. But the obligations of the nuclear powers which underpin this system, have come to nothing. Israel, India and Pakistan entered the 'club' without resistance; it has been impossible to resolve the most difficult regional crises, and those who possess nuclear weapons have made only the most limited progress in the process of disarmament which they signed up for.

These failures of non-proliferation, confirmed and underlined by the actions of Iran and North Korea, have cumulative consequences: the legitimacy current agreements is weakened by the acts of proliferation that have been allowed, and the effectiveness of a system built on a small number of actors who share an understanding of their strategic adversaries has been undermined by the new arrivals. There is a risk that this phenomenon will snowball, with a mutually reinforcing circle of institutional instability and an increasing number of protagonists. International security is thus at risk. And we should add that the relative success in containing the proliferation of other types of weapons can be put at risk by nuclear weapons, the most deadly of weapons of mass destruction.

The consequence of these observations is clear: the success of non-proliferation is a necessary precondition of peace, and rests upon urgent and much more radical initiatives being taken by the five nuclear weapons states recognized by the Non-proliferation Treaty. They must abandon any development of new nuclear weapons; offer more initiatives and take more political risks to overcome major regional political crises, and engage in a process leading to the structured elimination of nuclear weapons, and the three de facto nuclear powers must be associated with this process.

US President Barack Obama, has taken very promising positions in this direction beginning with his April 6 Prague speech, and then in his meetings with Russian President Dmitri Medvedev. A major strategic shift may be underway. The foreseeable obstacles in its path remain massive: the vested interests of power in the political and military establishment of the United States; the mistrust of change amongst Russian and Chinese leaders; the regional strategies of India, Pakistan and Israel, and the difficulty in persuading North Korea and Iran to renounce their nuclear programs.

France, with its tradition of independence and the sense of responsibility shown by its minimum deterrent, its solid security arrangements, and its long and constructive engagement in all effective arms limitation initiatives, has a special role in this debate. France has just as much interest as other nuclear powers in the re-establishment of a credible non-proliferation regime. The message of peace and justice that France wishes to impart to the world imposes a duty to be a dynamic and creative actor in a process of effective, balanced disarmament which could be getting underway, and which is the wish of the vast majority of the peoples of the world, and all our European partners.

The signatories of this declaration, backed by all their experience in this subject, express their wish that France should state firmly its engagement for the success of this process of disarmament and its resolution, when the time comes, to draw the appropriate consequences of this for its own capabilities. This means opening the necessary debate in French democratic institutions and in active preparation for the impending negotiations, in the first case the Review Conference of the NPT in 2010.

http://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/2009/10/14/pour-un-desarmement-nucleaire-mondial-seule-reponse-a-la-proliferation-anarchique_1253834_0.html

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