France, a pyromaniac fireman of proliferation

"We've got it in France, why can't they have it in Morocco?"

Nicolas Sarkozy, President of the French Republic, Speech delivered at Marrakech, October 2007

The risk of proliferation, in other words the misappropriation for military purposes of the infrastructure, equipment, technologies and materials of civil nuclear programmes, has not traditionally loomed large in the debates on nuclear power in France. While public opinion and political decision-makers appear, as elsewhere, to be anxious about the risk of escalation in nuclear arms at the global level, for the most part their analyses seem to disconnect this issue from the questions raised by the development of the French nuclear industry.

French nuclear plans: detached from proliferation issues?

In the first place this risk is completely ignored as far as activities in France are concerned. In a country which had a military nuclear programme before embarking on a civil one, the interaction between the two raises few questions. The idea that the nuclear installations operating in France might help the development of nuclear programmes in other countries seems incongruous. For example, it is likely that very few French people know that since 1974 Iran has had, and still has, a 10% share in the Eurodif uranium enrichment plant at Tricastin.[77] What is more, when in the midst of the Iranian enrichment crisis a report on proliferation recalled this state of affairs in detail, it was largely ignored by politicians and the national media.[78]

Likewise, the consequences in terms of proliferation have very rarely been a subject of debate where French nuclear technology export projects are concerned. During the 1970s and 1980s, France showed itself generous in this area. Most of the official and unofficial nuclear-armed countries enjoyed its help. The development of the Israeli nuclear weapon relied on French technology, as did the Iraqi programme which was abandoned after Israel itself destroyed the Osirak reactor, of French origin. The South African programme, too, benefited greatly from French support.

Even the reprocessing of spent fuel, a proliferating technology *par excellence* whose origin is obviously the military need to obtain separated plutonium, raises but little concern. When the Carter administration decided to stop reprocessing in the USA in 1977, because of its proliferating nature, France embarked on a massive programme of commercial reprocessing at La Hague. At the same period, it was not opposition in France, but rather a US veto, which stopped France from delivering a reprocessing plant to Pakistan.

This indifference continues. When in 2007 the economic media announced as the "contract of the century" the draft agreement for Areva to supply two reactors to China, it mentioned the difficulties arising from China's insistence on extending the contract to encompass fuel management, including a reprocessing technology transfer. This news did not create much of a stir, and there was no public follow-up on the refusal announced by Areva – which was perhaps motivated more by commercial than geopolitical logic. Similarly, the nuclear cooperation accords signed by France with India, an officially nuclear-armed country but not a signatory of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) have attracted very little public attention. India's military programme has clearly been reliant on the diversion of civil cooperation, although it is blacklisted by the international community. The

[77] By way of the Atomic Energy Organisation of Iran's 40% holding in Franco-Iranian consortium Sofidif, which in turn holds 25% of the multinational group Eurodif, whose principal shareholder is Areva. The dividends that Iran has accumulated, estimated at several tens of millions of euros, are frozen in French bank accounts in consequence of the international restrictions linked to the Iranian enrichment programme.

[78] Schneider, M., *The Permanent Nth Country Experiment – Nuclear Weapons Proliferation in a Rapidly Changing World*, Report commissioned by the Greens/EFA group in the European Parliament, March 2007.

cooperation established between France and India in the nuclear field, formalised by a joint declaration in February 2006, has aroused no debate. It has a counterpart in the shape of a draft agreement between India and the USA whose ratification, in comparison, was debated in Congress and more widely for over a year.

Salesman of the French nuclear industry

The President of the French Republic, Nicolas Sarkozy, has willingly put on the mantle of salesman for the French nuclear industry since he came to power in mid-2007. In particular he is pursuing a policy of actively promoting nuclear power, accompanied by the offer of cooperation, in the countries of North Africa and the Middle East, where the aim is above all to maintain influence by offering an alternative to cooperation with the USA.

This posture aroused opinion for the first time when France offered to deliver an EPR reactor to the Libya of Colonel Gaddafi, who was received with great ceremony at the Elysée palace in autumn 2007; a nuclear cooperation agreement was signed between the two countries. But France has also in recent months signed similar agreements with a number of other countries in the region – Algeria, Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) – without giving rise to the same reaction.

On every occasion, these agreements are negotiated without any form of prior debate, and announced as a *fait accompli*. The government, through the mouthpiece of it Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner, has justified this policy once and for all: "the demands of countries who want to benefit from this clean, inexpensive energy are legitimate." He calls for a "new nuclear era […] synonymous with collective security and shared prosperity"![79]

The President and his government seems to see no connection between their policy of encouraging the development of nuclear power in some of the most unstable parts of the world, and the problem of proliferation. But the revelations about the clandestine network around one of the key individuals in charge of the Pakistani military nuclear programme, the successive crises in North Korea and Iran, and (to some) the breaking of the Indian embargo begun by the United States are seen on the international stage as worrying signals.

The arrangements put in place to prevent the development of military nuclear programmes are being tossed aside one by one. France is wrapping itself in virtue by advocating a strengthening of the guarantees against proliferation around three 'imperatives':

- not to export "any technology to countries which do not respect their obligations" (in the context of the NPT or UN Security Council resolutions)
- to apply to "the exporting of enrichment and reprocessing technologies […] much stricter criteria" than to the exporting of reactors and fuel, and to offer countries access to a "multilateral supply mechanism" (fuel bank) for which France would, of course, be one of the main suppliers
- "only to export non-proliferating, ie light water, reactors" – exactly the main technology that France is offering for export.[80]

Obvious weakness of guarantees

These proposals, not without commercial ulterior motives, display extreme naivety. Many countries have benefited from technology imports (including of French technology) while avoiding their international obligations. Some countries have acquired enrichment technology without officially importing it. Finally, while pressurised water reactor technology has not been diverted to military ends by countries which have chosen more direct means, it is still not intrinsically non-proliferating.

It is precisely the obvious weakness of guarantees of this sort that has led to the present crisis. The international non-proliferation regime appears "on the point of imploding", in the words of Joschka Fischer, the former German Foreign Minister. In this context, the mere fact of suggesting that nuclear

[79] Bernard Kouchner, *Les Echos*, 29 April 2008.
[80] B. Kouchner, *ibid*.

technology can be developed, with no danger and for the benefit of all, in any country that shows itself tractable enough, is tantamount to playing with fire.

The French attitude is all the more open to criticism in that the 'need' to resort to nuclear power in the countries concerned is questionable. None of them has the regulatory system, the capacity of expertise and inspection, the qualified personnel, the maintenance infrastructure or even the grid capacity. The ASN, which underlined the importance of this issue in January 2008, estimates that it would take around 15 years to develop the necessary structures to operate a nuclear reactor in a country that was starting from scratch. The French Government has set up an agency, Agence France Nucléaire International, within the Commissariat à l'Énergie Atomique (Atomic Energy Commission) to help the countries concerned to "prepare the institutional, human and technical environment" that they will need.

A reactor such as the EPR, with a power rating of 1,600 MWe, is too large for the needs and the grid capacity of countries whose total installed capacity is currently between 1,900MWe (Jordan) and 6,600MWe (UAE). Jean Syrota, the former president of Cogema, has commented that "other reasons than the desire for efficient and rational management of an electricity system must therefore be found."[81] These countries undoubtedly have access to other energy options more in keeping with their capacities and needs, and without the same risks.

The real intentions of countries entering into the cooperation proposed by France should therefore be considered with caution. Similarly, the far from negligible potential for political destabilisation in these countries, including the risk of terrorist groups getting hold of sensitive material or equipment, or indeed of hostile political movements gaining control of the installations, must be taken into consideration. By pretending to be unaware of these problems, the French authorities are pursuing an irresponsibly inflammatory policy towards the risk of proliferation.

[81] J. Syrota, "L'avenir du nucléaire civil", *Politique étrangère*, 2008/1, spring 2008, pp. 161-171.