In the face of nuclear weapons, Emmanuel Macron is “Behind in strategy and morality”

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It seems President Macron felt compelled to make out the justification of nuclear weapons as a major event marking the beginning of his five-year term. On July 4, 2017, he was airlifted on board the Terrible—a missile-launching submarine at Ile Longue in Brest Harbor—before heading off on July 20 to Istres airfield—home to the airborne component of the air-to-ground medium-range missile system (ASMPA), which is installed on Mirages whose prominent visibility conveys, in the words of the Ministry of the Arms Forces, “our French determination to act.” Behind a smooth façade, this display in favour of nuclear dissuasion harbours many serious ambiguities of which Emmanuel Macron appears to be unaware.

Already in 1969, as a fervent opponent of nuclear weapons, François Mitterrand, evoking General de Gaulle’s choice in favour of dissuasion, did not hesitate to assert that the latter was “behind in strategy and morality.” In his words, “Premising security on the notion ‘to each his own nuclear bomb’ presages certain war and death for all, with the conqueror being the one who dies fifteen minutes after his foe.”

But a few years later, on the occasion of his 1981 presidential election, Mitterrand would willingly position himself as rallying late in support of the nuclear state.
President Giscard d’Estaing had experienced for himself that possessing a nuclear weapon set him “behind in strategy.” In his biography, he recounts how, if France were confronted with Soviet aggression, doctrine would have him proceed with a tactical nuclear strike on Soviet armies, thus provoking a nuclear escalation threatening to obliterate France. Under these conditions, the President of France concludes that he would have no choice but to refrain from firing. He sums up that when it comes to strategic dissuasion, “Whatever happens, I would never take the initiative for an action leading to the annihilation of France.”

Today, Emmanuel Macron similarly finds himself “behind in strategy and morality.” The premeditated crime against humanity which lies behind nuclear dissuasion implies a negation and denial of the moral values that underpin civilization. Perhaps one can grant the president attenuating circumstances, given that clerics, lay and religious alike, have betrayed their mission of promoting these values by themselves putting up with nuclear weapons. Yet there is something fundamentally indecent about spending billions of euros on an instrument of death which threatens rather than protects us, to the detriment of so many life-affirming projects that desperately lack funding.

François Mitterrand could have added that General de Gaulle was also “behind in democracy.” It is remarkable that Emmanuel Macron decided to justify nuclear weapons in the absence of any democratic debate. Not a single deputy in France’s Assemblée Nationale spoke up to question the nuclear choice of the President of the Republic. Even the usual rebels subordinated themselves without offering up the slightest protest. And where are the environmentalists to be seen, in a context where nuclear weapons should prompt their unyielding opposition? It is true that they are supposed to be represented in government by a Minister of State—but what we have is indeed a minister of state rather than a minister of environment.

Faced with the terrorist threat

More generally, to claim that faced with the terrorist threat, France is at war, is also to lag behind in strategy and morality.
Terrorism is not a war. The linchpin of terrorist strategy is to use the simplest technical means in order to circumvent and defeat even the most sophisticated means of military dissuasion. Even as the great industrial powers purport to possess the arms which render their national sanctuary inviolable, the weapons of terrorists bring violence, destruction and death to the very heart of their cities. Terrorism turns the defences of modern societies on their head, so that the most powerful weapons end up useless and vain in the hands of political and military decision-makers. The strategy of terrorists therefore posits a refusal of war. Indeed, war is precisely characterized by a reciprocity of actions decided upon and carried out by both adversaries. But in the face of terrorist actions, no reciprocal action may be undertaken by the opposed decision-makers, who find themselves unable to respond tit-for-tat to an ever elusive adversary. It is therefore misguided to claim to combat terrorism with war.

We cannot sidestep the need to understand terrorism under the fallacious pretext that this would lead to justifying terrorist action. The reality is that, like all violent strategies, terrorism has its own political rationality. It is vain to deny this by pointing to its intrinsic immorality. Eradicating terrorism, i.e. uprooting it at the source, first requires understanding its historical, sociological, ideological and political roots. Only when the political dimension of terrorism becomes understood will it be possible to look for the political solution it requires. Ultimately, conquering terrorism does not require war but rather the construction of justice.

In the face of the extreme tragedy of war and terrorism, should we not be driven, simply out of realism, to at last reflect on the possibilities afforded by nonviolent strategies? To opt for nonviolence is precisely to refuse to symmetrically imitate the violence of others, which inevitably traps all parties in a spiral of violence. Nonviolence breaks the cycle of resentment, retribution and vengeance, and should allow us to catch up where we have fallen behind.

Of course, nonviolence also represents a risk: it is precisely the risk of hope.
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