

France: Can the 'Lumiere de Monde' Risk a Brown-Out?

Written by Gal Luft

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As the outcome of the French elections reverberate across Europe many eyes are directed at the energy policies Francois Hollande's new government might adopt as they too will have global impact, most importantly on the future of nuclear power.

Since the 1970s, France has been a successful purveyor of atomic energy worldwide. Nearly 75% of its electricity is currently derived from 58 operating reactors. But in the post-Fukushima world, public sentiment has turned against nuclear power in most of Europe including France. And while all but two of Japan's nuclear reactors have been switched off some big decisions are about to be made in Paris about the future of 22 French reactors that will reach the end of their 40-year lifespan in the coming years. Unlike the Sarkozy government that was inclined to re-license the reactors for another 20 years, Hollande is no friend of nuclear power. Throughout the elections his party repeatedly called for closing down the aged reactors, and Hollande himself pledged to reduce the share of nuclear power to 50% of France's electricity. This month his commitment was reiterated by his Prime Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault.

Ruling against a second life for the reactors will harbinge the end of France's love story with nuclear power. One of the first casualties of a re-write in French nuclear policy would be the potential withdrawal of state-controlled EDF foreign investment in a new nuclear facility in Suffolk, United Kingdom. The new French president has insisted, among other things, on prioritizing French investment dollars on investment in France and in its work-force but not necessarily in its own nuclear industry. Another aspect of his policy platform is to make French industry competitive again which raises the troubling question as to whether gutting one of its flag-ship industries, in nuclear power and technologies, serves this laudable end. The decision to bid farewell to nuclear power would also have global implications as it will essentially crown China as the new world leader in all matters nuclear at a time when scores of countries, including volatile Middle Easterners, are planning to join the nuclear club.

Whether or not France ends up phasing out its reactors would depend on Hollande's vision on how to replace the 425 or so terawatt hours of electricity nuclear power currently provides the French economy. One option for Hollande is to use his anti-nuclear stance as a way to endear himself to Berlin. After the disaster in Japan, Germany was the first European country to announce its plan to bid farewell to nuclear power and move aggressively towards green power. Adopting a similar stance would be music to German Chancellor Angela Merkel's ears particularly as the two leaders will be looking for issues on which they can agree. But one hopes that Hollande knows that even the winds of Normandy and the sun of Provence will not come close to replacing nuclear power. France's installed capacity for photovoltaic power is about 100 times less than Germany's, and the French economy is not sufficiently prosperous to embark on massive subsidization of renewable energy, as its northern and southern neighbors, Germany and Spain have done in recent years. Furthermore, by now Europeans like Americans have come to realize the false promise of green jobs as a major driver of economic growth. With unemployment above 10% France does not have the luxury of dismantling the 30,000-job nuclear industry without replacing it with an equally labor intensive one.

So what are the options? Going back to coal generated electricity is a non-starter as France virtually shut down its coal mining industry in 2004. But natural gas could provide some respite. During the campaign Hollande sounded open minded about hydraulic fracturing, the technology to extract natural gas from shale which the Sarkozy government banned last year in face of concerns about potential environmental damage. In this, France and the United States, the epicenter of a shale gas revolution can find common agenda and the environmental studies

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currently conducted in the United States could pave the way to lifting the ban in France. But even if Hollande himself warms up to tapping into France's 180 trillion cubic feet of non-conventional gas, his Socialist Party and his likely coalition partner the left wing party Front de Gauche are both vehemently opposed to fracking especially since the shale deposits are concentrated in the Paris area and in Southern France areas not conducive to mining operations. France's Environment and Energy Minister Delphine Batho told the French Senate recently that the ban on fracking would not be lifted and that the ban is "not open" for discussion. So if France is to replace nuclear with natural gas it will have to do so with imported gas.

This would be a historic mistake not only for France but for the West writ large. Nuclear power has given France national pride but it has also protected her from Russia's coercion and intimidation, enabling the Elysee to adopt independent and fearless positions vis-à-vis Moscow while Germany, increasingly dependent on Russian gas, is more deferential to the Kremlin. By relinquishing nuclear power in exchange for foreign gas dependency France would risk joining other European nations currently at Gazprom's mercy. Increased reliance on Algerian Liquefied Natural Gas bears even bigger risks. Other than Morocco, Algeria is the only Arab country in North Africa that escaped the turmoil of the Arab Spring. Yet the country has all the ingredients for unrest and banking France's energy security on it would be a spectacularly bad idea. With the backdrop of all for those less than perfect options one comes back to nuclear. Atomic power served France well. It has proven to be a safe, clean and reliable source of energy. AREVA, the French nuclear conglomerate, is a world leader in nuclear engineering. Having a Western democracy like France in a leadership role in the nuclear arena has also served the United States well in more than one way. At a time when so many Middle Eastern regimes are eyeing civilian nuclear power it is in America's interest that France continues to remain a dominant player in this space. Without France's know-how and technical infrastructure it will be China, which despite Fukushima is moving full speed ahead with its nuclear expansion, that will become the world's hub on all nuclear matters and it will be in China, not the West, where the best practices and safety standards of the new generation of nuclear reactors will be determined. France therefore has a historic role to play in global energy security and, by extension, in global security. Hopefully its new government will recognize and act upon this generational responsibility. Or as another famed French leader, Georges Clemenceau, would have put it: nuclear power is too important to be left to the Chinese.

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