



Interview Dominique Vignon

'Politics interfered'



Dominique Vignon was technical director of the French-German EPR project and presided over Framatome, the company producing the EPR reactors, from 1996 until 2001, until Framatome was merged with Cogema into Areva. In 2000, he concluded the agreement with Siemens that has now been terminated by the Germans.

| by Yves de Saint Jacob

How did the French connection with Siemens come about?

After the Chernobyl accident in 1986, the Chinese were one of the few buyers left. They had approached Framatome and Siemens. For political reasons, not the Americans. For Framatome, this led to the building of the Daya Bay plant, still in operation near Hong Kong. Siemens was rejected. They then decided to make an alliance with Framatome. In 1989 they created a 50-50 joint venture, called NPI (Nuclear Power International). NPI was charged with launching a new reactor intended for export, which was known as the "common product", what would become the EPR. Later, EDF, Eon and RWE helped finance the EPR's development.

Was there any political impetus behind the launch of NPI?

No, it was industrial cooperation. Framatome had a majority shareholder, the state, and a private shareholder with a 45% interest, the Compagnie Générale d'Electricité (CGE), later to become Alcatel. Together with the English company GEC, it managed Alstom, which manufactured turbines, like Siemens.

How did this partnership evolve to become Areva NP?

In 1997, Westinghouse, the American conglomerate whose technology we had used under licence, abandoned its energy activities. Westinghouse had a nuclear division, which resembled Framatome, and a conventional turbine division, which resembled Alstom and Siemens. Alstom and Framatome made two parallel offers to Westinghouse.

Was Siemens informed?

No. But Siemens also made an offer without informing us! These

were open secrets. We had suggested to Siemens that we form an alliance with them and they had refused. It was Siemens that got the conventional division of Westinghouse. Our bid for the nuclear division failed for political reasons. The chairman of Westinghouse told me that the US government could not accept an agreement with a country with a leftist government including communist ministers! For a while, Siemens attempted to make an alliance with a British group but these attempts failed, so they came back to us. At one point, the French government suggested we investigate an operation in which Siemens would also become involved in Cogema, in other words in the full cycle, fuel plus reactors. Siemens did not want that. We therefore decided on a 34% interest for Siemens solely in the reactors business. Indeed, for Siemens, the motivation was a desire to get out of the nuclear sector for domestic reasons. Their relationship with us allowed them to retain a presence in the sector.

How do you interpret Siemens' departure now?

I am no longer in the know. Nevertheless, I think that some degree of distrust of the French was involved. They are seen as people who are not easy to get along with and for whom political considerations take priority over business considerations. What Siemens was interested in was being able to associate its products, the turbines and the instrumentation and control systems with nuclear production. What interested Areva was benefitting from Siemens' international network and reputation. The German group believed, rightly or wrongly, that the French government would do anything to promote French products without risking the European partnership. We had a stable agreement; each party had its industrial interests and then politics interfered. ■