

BRIEF

FRENCH NUCLEAR POLICY

| JEAN-LOUIS LOZIER |

France's nuclear deterrence has been the main pillar of its defence strategy for about sixty years. The country possesses an independent deterrent force designed to protect France's vital interests and ensure its sovereignty and freedom of action in all circumstances. This goal remains the basis of French nuclear policy and is widely supported across the French political spectrum. However, such policy, as well as its European and allied dimensions, tends to be misunderstood abroad including by those who rely on French military involvement in pursuit of their national security goals.

In 1954, at the beginning of the Cold War, the willingness of the Fourth Republic to launch a secret nuclear military programme was largely attributed to the then-recent defeat in 1940 and was in line with the 'never again' motto. This strategy was conceived within the framework of the Atlantic Alliance. However, the Suez episode in 1956 illustrated the limits of American engagement in support of its allies. Sputnik's launch in 1957 highlighted the potential vulnerability of the U.S. territory to Soviet missiles. It raised questions in France, and other allied countries, about American willingness to make use of its strategic arsenal to defend Europe. With this background in mind, President Charles De Gaulle set out to create an independent nuclear deterrent the fundamental principles of which remain unchanged today.

1. THE FRENCH NUCLEAR POLICY

The nuclear policy is usually delivered by the presidents but may also be part of published policy papers. President Emmanuel Macron made a speech related to the French strategy and nuclear

deterrence at *École Militaire* on 7 February 2020.¹ The new National Strategic Review (NSR), issued on 9 November 2022, reaffirms French nuclear policy in the context of the war in Ukraine and Russian nuclear sabre-rattling.²

French nuclear deterrence is, first and foremost, strictly conceived as defensive. Its fundamental purpose is to prevent a major war waged by a state actor that would threaten France's vital interests, wherever the attack may come from and whatever its form may be. It is the ultimate guarantee of France's security, protection, and independence. It ensures its autonomy of decision and freedom of action, including against any attempts of blackmail that could occur in the time of crisis (as was the case during the Suez crisis).³

France's presidents have always kept a deliberate ambiguity on what constitutes the country's 'vital interests' in order to complicate any calculus of gains versus costs by a potential adversary who would contemplate such an attack. The French territory and population are clearly part of its vital interests, though not exclusively. For instance, President Macron clearly stated that France's vital interests have a European dimension.

France's vital interests have a European dimension

Should any state underestimate France's deep-rooted attachment to its freedom and ponder threatening its vital interests, its leadership must realise that French nuclear forces are capable of inflicting irreparable damage upon that state's centres of power – i.e., its political, economic, and military nerve centres. Should a hostile foreign power attempt an aggression – fatally misunderstanding France's determination to protect its vital interests – a unique and one-time-only nuclear warning could be issued to the

aggressor state, demonstrating that the nature of the conflict has changed and re-establishing deterrence.

French nuclear forces are not directed towards any specific country, and France has always refused to consider nuclear weapons as battlefield weapons that could lead to a nuclear war. Their use would be limited to extreme circumstances of self-defence, with the right to self-defence recognised by Article 51 of the U.N. Charter.

While retaining a credible deterrent force is a strategic objective, France remains committed to disarmament that contributes to global stability and security. This is the reason why Paris is keeping the size of its nuclear force at a level of strict sufficiency and does not participate in any arms race. It is determined by the ability to inflict unacceptable damage on potential adversaries, not by the number of their nuclear weapons. In accordance with its responsibilities as a nuclear state under the Non-Proliferation Treaty, France unilaterally disarmed during the 1990s, having reduced the number of its nuclear warheads from about 600 to its current size of just under 300. It irreversibly dismantled the land-based nuclear component, closed nuclear test sites and fissile material production facilities.

French nuclear forces currently consist of two components: oceanic and airborne. The two are regularly assessed through high-level exercises or technical demonstrations such as M51 SLBM flight tests.

The oceanic component consists of 4 ballistic missile submarines (SSBN *Le Triomphant* class) based near Brest. The range of the M51 missile and the mobility of SSBNs allow the protection of France's vital interests by containing any state on earth that would consider a hostile act. This component has successfully maintained, for more than fifty years, a continuous at sea deterrence (CASD), which means that there is always at least one SSBN able to deliver a second strike on a deterrence patrol. In the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the announcement of a new alert status of Russian nuclear forces by Vladimir Putin, some credible reports indicated that 3 French SSBNs were simultaneously on a patrol mission in early March of 2022.

The airborne component consists of two Rafale fighter squadrons stationed at air bases in France;

they are equipped with a long-range supersonic missile, ASMPA, and tanker aircraft that are able to perform long-distance raids. Rafale fighter jets aboard the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier *Charles de Gaulle* are also capable of delivering ASMPA. This airborne leg is a strategic component and is, therefore, very different from NATO's dual-capable aircraft armed with the B61 non-strategic nuclear weapons. The airborne component is well suited for demonstrative measures and nuclear signalling.

These two complementary components provide France's president with a wide range of options designed to cope with any threat to its vital interests.

2. THE EUROPEAN AND NATO DIMENSIONS

France's strategic goal to establish its own independent nuclear force was achieved in the 1960s and went against the wishes of the United States, which led President de Gaulle to withdraw France from the integrated military structure of the Atlantic Alliance while remaining a member state. This move has been widely interpreted as proof that French nuclear forces are exclusively dedicated to protecting the French territory and the French population. The reality, however, is often more complex.

In a speech given on 19 April 1963, President de Gaulle – while explaining the French nuclear deterrence to his domestic critics – stated that “France must itself have the means to directly reach any state which could be its aggressor, the means consequently to deter it, and according to circumstances, contribute to the defence of its allies including, who knows, America.”⁴ The 1972 Defence White Paper specified a broad understanding of French vital interests, defined as France's territory.⁵ The debate about the value of independent nuclear forces in Europe continued for another decade. And in 1974, the final declaration of the NATO summit in Ottawa recognised that the two nuclear forces – of the United Kingdom and France – were “capable of playing a deterrent role of their own contributing to the overall strengthening of the deterrence of the Alliance.”⁶

Since then, every NATO summit renewed this statement. For instance, the 2022 Strategic

Concept reiterated, “The independent strategic nuclear forces of the United Kingdom and France have a deterrent role of their own and contribute significantly to the overall security of the Alliance. These Allies’ separate centres of decision-making contribute to deterrence by complicating the calculations of potential adversaries.”⁷

The end of the Cold War revived the debate on the European dimension of French deterrence, coinciding with deeper EU integration. In 1992, a proposal of ‘concerted deterrence’ was raised suggesting that France – while retaining its independence to make a ‘nuclear decision’ – would also consult its partners on the arrangements to be made before the release of nuclear weapons.⁸ In 1995, Alain Juppé, then-prime minister, reiterated this proposal in the context of introducing common currency and proposed to add a collective dimension to French nuclear doctrine.⁹ Both proposals, however, were met with silence by the Europeans partners. In the 2000s, presidents Jacques Chirac and Nicolas Sarkozy again tried to launch a dialogue on the role of French deterrent for the security of Europe – and again to no success, as many western European allies were more interested in disarmament policies than in deterrence and defence matters.

The UK was the only European state that developed strong relations with France on nuclear issues. In 1995, Prime Minister John Major and President Jacques Chirac issued a joint statement recognising a strong interconnection between both states’ vital interests, “We do not see situations arising in which the vital interests of either France or the United Kingdom could be threatened without the vital interests of the other being also threatened.”¹⁰ This point repeated in 2018, already after Brexit. The Lancaster House Treaties of 2010 were a cornerstone of the firm defence and security cooperation between the two nations, with the deterrence pillar supporting development, construction, and operation of radiographic and hydrodynamic joint facilities at an atomic site in France.

More recently, President Macron declared that France’s vital interests would henceforth have a European dimension, which was not a revolutionary – although more assertive – statement. However, the proposal that he made

during this 2020 speech at *École Militaire* to launch a dialogue with European partners, who would be willing to discuss the role of France’s nuclear deterrence in European collective security, did not receive any public response at that time.

The COVID-19 pandemic may have been a likely culprit behind this lack of interest. A suspicion that France was trying to replace the U.S. extended deterrence, weaken the transatlantic bond, or share the budgetary burden might have repelled the European partners from engaging.

Should any future U.S. administration withdraw from Europe, France would probably have to play a bigger role

It should be perfectly clear though that France neither has the nuclear means necessary to replace American extended deterrence in Europe nor intends to ask its European partners to financially contribute to maintaining a nuclear deterrent. However, should any future U.S. administration, challenged by confrontation with China in the Indo-Pacific, partly withdraw from Europe, France would probably have to play a bigger role than it does today to provide regional security. Hence, there should be a shared interest to engage in a strategic dialogue on such issues before they have materialised.

While the proposal itself has rarely been discussed, some critics have argued that the idea that the French nuclear deterrent could contribute to the security of others lacked credibility. In case of aggression against European countries, some have suggested, France would benefit from its independent deterrent to protect itself, show restraint, and avoid an escalation. To put it differently, the freedom of action granted by an independent nuclear deterrent force is sometimes seen as potentially leading to a possible lack of solidarity. Certainly, avoiding any thoughtless acts that may trigger a nuclear response by a nuclear-armed adversary is the policy of any responsible nuclear state, which has always been acknowledged by the “P3” at the U.N. Security Council (the U.S., the UK, and France). This does not mean, however, that these states would lack either determination or solidarity.

The price to pay in case of a defeat by a totalitarian or authoritarian state is deeply rooted in the national mindset. France stands ready to sacrifice blood and treasure together with its allies, as it

demonstrated in Afghanistan, in the Middle East, and in the Sahel. In 2015, President François Hollande conspicuously said, “We participate in the European project, we have built a community of destiny with our partners, the existence of a French nuclear deterrent makes a strong and essential contribution to Europe. France also has, with its European partners, a de facto and heart solidarity. Who could therefore believe that an attack, which would jeopardise the survival of Europe, would have no consequences?”¹¹

In the wake of the war in Ukraine and Russian nuclear sabre-rattling, the value of French deterrent for European security has been raised once again. At the end of February 2022, France clearly reminded Russia that NATO is, indeed, a nuclear alliance. France has reinforced the allied defences on the Eastern Flank, with its land troops stationed in Estonia and Romania, air forces contributing to the air policing mission

over Poland and the Baltic states, and naval forces regularly deployed to the eastern part of the Mediterranean Sea, as well as to the Baltic and Norwegian seas. These are part of NATO’s collective deterrence efforts but by a nuclear state. As French minister of defence Sébastien Lecornu said, “these forces are a clear signal to those who would like to attack the interests of the NATO countries, but also of the European Union.”

For the time being, President Macron’s proposal to pursue strategic dialogue with European partners who are willing to learn the role that France’s nuclear deterrence plays in Europe’s collective security has not met any success. And it takes two to tango. Allies must understand that France does not intend to replace the U.S. extended deterrence but rather wishes to enhance and strengthen Europe’s common defence in a more uncertain security environment.¹²

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Élysée, “[Speech of the President of the Republic on the Defense and Deterrence Strategy](#),” elysee.fr, 7 February 2020.
- ² Secrétariat général de la défense et de la sécurité nationale [Secretariat-General for National Defence and Security], “[National strategic review 2022](#),” gdsn.gouv.fr, 9 November 2020.
- ³ William Burr and Jeffrey Kimball, “[Nuclear Threats and Alerts: Looking at the Cold War Background](#),” *Arms Control Today* no 52 (April 2022).
- ⁴ Charles de Gaulle, “[Allocution du 19 avril 1963](#) [Speech of 19 April 1963],” ina.fr, 19 April 1963, video, 20:59.
- ⁵ Ministère des Armées [Ministry of the Armed Forces], “[Defense and National Security White Paper](#),” [livreblancdefenseetsecurite.gouv.fr](#), 1972.
- ⁶ North Atlantic Council, “[Declaration on Atlantic Relations \(The Ottawa Declaration\)](#),” NATO, 10 June 1974, last updated on 27 August 2010.
- ⁷ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, “[NATO 2022 Strategic Concept](#),” NATO, 29 June 2022, 8.
- ⁸ Jacques Mellick’s remarks were reported in “M. Mellick recense les différentes formules d’une doctrine nucléaire européenne [Mr. Mellick lists the different formulas of a European nuclear doctrine],” *Le Monde*, 4 February 1992.
- ⁹ See: Speech on the future of nuclear deterrence in the frame of European enlargement delivered by Prime Minister Alain Juppé at the Institut des Hautes Etudes de Défense Nationale, Paris, on 7 September 1995, and reproduced in *Strategic Digest* in April 1998.
- ¹⁰ “[Joint press conference with John Major and Jacques Chirac, held in London on Monday 30th October 1995](#),” [johnmajorarchive.org.uk](#), accessed on 12 December 2022.
- ¹¹ “[President François Hollande, Speech on Nuclear Deterrence, 19 February 2015, Unofficial translation. \(speech, Istres-Le Tube Air base, Istres, France, 19 February 2015\)](#),” Action des Citoyens pour le Désarmement Nucléaire, 25 February 2015.
- ¹² Ministère des Armées [Ministry of the Armed Forces], “[Sébastien Lecornu inaugure le camp de Cincu en Roumanie](#) [Sébastien Lecornu inaugurates the Cincu camp in Romania],” [defense.gouv.fr](#), 4 November 2022.

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