

President Macron proposes a European defence initiative

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In a speech at the Sorbonne on 25 April, President Emmanuel Macron called on France's European allies to develop a credible strategic concept over the coming months for defending the continent based on their own capabilities. These moves would count as part of the effort to build NATO's "European pillar", but also allow the European countries to defend themselves on their own "when necessary". Macron suggested that the new concept could include the German-initiated European air and missile shield (the European Sky Shield Initiative, ESSI), enhanced European capabilities in this area as well as in the deep strike, and France's nuclear deterrence arsenal, which he described as an "indispensable part of the European continent's defence". All the components of the new concept are supposed to help provide the "security guarantees expected by all of France's partners" and create a common "security framework" that will make it possible to build "neighbourly relations with Russia" in the future. At the same time, Macron reaffirmed the concept of 'strategic ambiguity' towards Russia which he announced in February (see '[France's rhetorical offensive on the war in Ukraine](#)').

The French president stressed the need to implement the objectives of the Strategic Compass, particularly to launch new rapid deployment capabilities (see '[The EU Rapid Deployment Capacity: political priorities and real needs](#)') and take anti-hybrid measures. Macron also endorsed moves by the European Commission to support the arms industry (see '[The imperative of cooperation: the European Commission's strategy for the defence industry](#)') as being partly aimed at ensuring long-term support for Ukraine. He also reiterated France's approval for measures to prioritise purchases from European arms companies (Buy European).

Commentary

- Macron announced his European defence initiative during a major speech on European issues which summarised and defended the French president's record on deepening European integration since his first speech at the Sorbonne back in September 2017. The address was also part of the campaign for the elections to the European Parliament; recent polls have given the far-right National Rally a significant lead over Macron's Renaissance party. The president's goal was to prove to the French people that an active European policy could advance the country's interests. In the field of defence, he sought to highlight the benefits for the French industry stemming from the Commission's initiatives to support the European arms sector and from the promotion of the Buy European slogan in the areas of defence and space.

- The US presidential elections in the autumn and the possible victory of Donald Trump also form an important context for Macron's initiative. From the point of view of French interests, the fear among the leaders of some European countries (particularly Germany) that Trump will return and undermine the security guarantees of NATO has provided an opportunity for France to increase its role in European security policy and bring the prospect of the EU's strategic autonomy in this area closer to reality. To further underscore his distrust of the US, Macron equated US policy with that of China (in the trade dimension) and said that Washington's list of priorities would still be topped by the United States, followed by the challenges arising from its rivalry with China. To demonstrate his openness to the defence needs of non-nuclear-weapon states, the French president softened his earlier objections to the ESSI (see ['France against Germany's European Sky Shield Initiative'](#)). By adopting this proactive approach Macron also wants to respond to concerns (which have been expressed by the EU's institutions in particular) about the risks to European integration that may arise from the expected increase in the importance of bilateral agreements between some EU countries and the US in the event of Trump's victory.
- An aspect that goes beyond the current political situation is the link between Macron's new European defence initiative and the need to build a new European security architecture (framework), an idea he has advocated since the beginning of his presidency. Before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine he had argued that the Russian Federation had to be part of this architecture. Now he insists that only a credible concept of European defence can make it possible to forge "neighbourly relations" with Russia in the future. This concept is supposed to include not only the EU's member states, but also its partners such as the UK and, in the future, Ukraine and Moldova.
- Macron's speech did not represent a change in France's doctrine of nuclear deterrence. In an interview a day later, the president reaffirmed that France would "preserve its specificity", which means treating nuclear weapons as a means for the ultimate defence of the country's 'vital interests' while staying out of NATO's nuclear planning policy. At the same time, in addition to the assertions about "the European dimension of France's vital interests", which have been part of French doctrine since the 1970s, Macron expressed his readiness to discuss how French nuclear weapons could contribute more to the European continent's defence. Nuclear deterrence is at the heart of France's defence system, and also allows the country to maintain limited conventional capabilities (especially in the domain of ground forces), despite rising defence spending. In light of the diagnosis that the threat from Russia is growing, this model of limited ground forces backed up by nuclear deterrence has raised concerns among some French experts; however, it is necessitated by France's difficult budgetary situation.
- There would be little point to a debate about how the French nuclear deterrent could contribute to European security, because the ambiguity therein – which also applies to the very definition of 'vital interests' – is at the core of the French doctrine. The fact that French deterrence was conceived as an act of distrust towards the US doctrine of extended deterrence and its ability to use nuclear weapons to defend its allies is another factor that could undermine the credibility of French deterrence in the eyes of its allies. However, such a debate could lead to specific military-technical actions that would not

change the French doctrine of deterrence. These could include joint exercises (as Macron has previously proposed) or practice flights by French nuclear-armed Rafale and Mirage jets over the territories of France's allies. The most far-reaching scenario could see some French nuclear weapons stored in countries where French nuclear-capable jets would also be stationed. These warplanes have participated in the Baltic Air Policing programme within NATO's eastern flank, but France recognises the obstacle of having to act beyond the framework of the NATO-Russia Founding Act. French defence minister Sébastien Lecornu made this clear in a joint interview with his German counterpart Boris Pistorius on 24 April, in which he referred to Poland's possible participation in NATO's nuclear sharing programme. Direct participation (which is at the heart of nuclear sharing) by France's allies in implementing its nuclear deterrence doctrine, both in terms of decision-making and weapons delivery, is out of the question.