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Sovereign, yet forward-oriented towards Europe: the evolution of France's nuclear deterrence doctrine

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In a speech delivered on 2 March at the strategic submarine base on Île Longue in Brittany, President Emmanuel Macron announced the launch of a transformation of France's nuclear doctrine towards "forward deterrence" (*dissuasion avancée*) aimed at enhancing its effectiveness and strengthening the security of European allies. In practical terms, this would involve their participation in French nuclear forces exercises, as well as overflights and the temporary deployment of aircraft from France's strategic forces to the territory of selected allies: Germany, Poland, the Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark, Greece, and Sweden. Paris does not, however, envisage stationing its nuclear weapons in other European countries. The number of warheads is to be increased, although the scale of the increase remains unspecified.

This significant evolution of France's nuclear doctrine is the result of prolonged discussions among allies, as well as a response to the threat posed by Russia and the changing priorities of US policy. At the same time, the involvement of allies in certain elements of France's deterrence policy will not entail any infringement of the fundamental principles of that doctrine: the French President's complete autonomy in decision-making regarding the launch of a nuclear strike and the French armed forces' control over the arsenal.

Characteristics of French nuclear deterrence

The origins of France's military nuclear programme can be traced back to the dissolution of its colonial empire in the 1950s and the failure of the European Defence Community project. It also constituted a response to Europe's declining geopolitical significance during the Cold War rivalry between the United States and the USSR. From 1958 onwards, President Charles De Gaulle openly communicated to allies France's intention to acquire the status of a nuclear-weapon state. The Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons recognises France as a nuclear-weapon state, as it conducted its first test before 1 January 1967. However, Paris acceded to the Treaty only in 1992.

France conducted its first atomic bomb test in 1960, and in 1964 established the Strategic Air Forces (Forces aériennes stratégiques, FAS). In the subsequent years, its nuclear arsenal was expanded; at the height of its development in the 1980s, it comprised approximately 500 warheads delivered by six ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs), fixed and mobile ground-based missile launchers, and Mirage IV aircraft capable of launching air-to-surface cruise missiles (ASMP) or delivering AN22 gravity bombs. Following the end of the Cold

War, France undertook a substantial reduction of its nuclear arsenal, which currently consists of approximately 290 warheads deployed on Mirage and Rafale aircraft (armed with ASMP missiles) or on submarines capable of launching M51 ballistic missiles (with one, or at most two, such submarines on continuous operational patrol).

The evolution of France's nuclear doctrine

From the outset, the French nuclear arsenal was limited in scope and designed to complement that of the United States. Its primary function was to safeguard national territory against attack, while also reinforcing European security by introducing an additional element of uncertainty into an adversary's strategic calculations. A constant feature of France's nuclear doctrine has been the principle of complete strategic independence. As the only NATO member not participating in the Nuclear Planning Group (NPG), France maintains a doctrine that envisages the use of nuclear weapons in self-defence and in defence of its vital interests. At the same time, according to this doctrine, the very existence of France's nuclear capability is intended to contribute to strengthening the security of both Europe and NATO. The decision to employ nuclear weapons rests exclusively with the President. Given the limited scale of its nuclear arsenal relative to that of a potential adversary (first the USSR and subsequently Russia), France does not rule out the possibility of being the first to use nuclear weapons.

However, the principles governing its use, as set out in the doctrine, have evolved over time. Whereas during the Cold War emphasis was placed on the political and deterrent character of nuclear weapons, conceived as a means of immediate and massive retaliation in response to a Soviet attack, after 1989 consideration began to be given to the possibility of the limited use of nuclear weapons in response to threats posed by a proliferating state or one supporting terrorism. The principle of *strict sufficiency* (*stricte suffisance*) was also introduced, limiting the number of warheads to the minimum required to ensure the credibility of deterrence, and explicitly ruling out the use of nuclear weapons as battlefield weapons.

President Macron's tenure has been marked by the objective of adapting France's post-Cold War nuclear doctrine to the resurgence of conventional threats, particularly from an increasingly aggressive Russia. These modifications have been accompanied by the modernisation of France's nuclear forces. In accordance with the principles set out by the President in his speech of February 2020, nuclear weapons are characterised as strictly defensive in nature, and their use is envisaged only in the event of a threat to the state's vital interests, the definition of which is deliberately kept ambiguous. Macron has also allowed for the possibility of a single warning strike intended to "restore deterrence".

The European dimension of French deterrence

A European dimension of France's vital interests has been present in its nuclear doctrine since the 1970s. During the Cold War, it primarily concerned France's eastern neighbours within NATO (the Federal Republic of Germany, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg). Franco-British doctrinal rapprochement was also of considerable significance. In the Chequers Declaration (1995), both states recognised that their core

security interests were inextricably linked.

In the context of the growing threat from Russia and the uncertain posture of the United States towards its allies during Donald Trump's first and second terms, the 'European dimension' of French deterrence has regained prominence and has become a theme frequently raised by Macron in relations with European allies. The specific modalities for operationalising this 'European dimension' however, have always been articulated with considerable restraint. Reference has been made to the participation of European allies in exercises of the French nuclear forces, overflights by strategic force aircraft over allied territory, and – in the most far-reaching scenario – to the stationing of such aircraft at their air bases.

Whereas the invitation to engage in debate on this issue in 2020 met with limited resonance in Europe (see '*European strategic autonomy or European pillar in NATO? Germany's stance on French initiatives*'), its reiteration in March 2025 (see '*President Macron proposes a European defence initiative*') generated interest among allies, particularly Germany. In August 2025, a strategic dialogue on nuclear deterrence was launched under the auspices of the offices of the President of France and the Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany. To date, the authorities of both states have sought to avoid raising excessive expectations in connection with this process. In his address at the Munich Security Conference in January this year, Chancellor Friedrich Merz emphasised that the dialogue on European deterrence remains at an early stage. Macron, for his part, has stressed that France's nuclear weapons will remain under its full and exclusive control (from production to the decision-making process concerning their use). The discussions with Paris are not intended to create an alternative to the United States' extended nuclear deterrence.

France has made greater progress in its discussions with the other Western European nuclear power, the United Kingdom. In July 2025, new agreements were concluded to deepen defence cooperation between the two countries in the field of nuclear deterrence, as well as in the development of land capabilities and industrial cooperation (see '*France and the United Kingdom: the beginning of bilateral coordination of nuclear deterrence*'). The joint declaration issued at Northwood (10 July) states that the nuclear deterrents of both states will remain independent, but may be coordinated. To this end, a dedicated Nuclear Steering Group has been established under the joint chairmanship of the Office of the President of France and the UK Prime Minister's Office. It oversees cooperation in the areas of policy, capabilities, and operations related to deterrence (including, for example, the dispatch of submarine patrols or the synchronisation of decisions concerning nuclear readiness). The agreement further stipulates that "there is no extreme threat to Europe that would not prompt a response from our two nations". Although coordination represents a step forward, the choice of wording reflects a deliberate intention to preserve ambiguity – not only vis-à-vis potential adversaries, but also with regard to security guarantees for allies.

Forward deterrence: a genuine enhancement of security or an instrument of French policy?

The speech delivered at Île Longue and the shift towards 'forward deterrence' outlined therein may be regarded as a significant evolution of French doctrine and an adaptation to the current threats to European security. At the same time, its fundamental elements remain intact: France's complete control over its nuclear arsenal and the President's exclusive

decision-making authority with regard to the use of nuclear weapons. Paris will not join NATO's nuclear planning structures, and French deterrence will remain complementary to that of the United States for European allies. Deliberate ambiguity has also been maintained with respect to the definition of vital interests, and no guarantees have been formulated for partners. Through the participation of allies in exercises and the movement of units of the French strategic forces to the territory of selected European states, French deterrence is intended to acquire 'strategic depth', yielding benefits both for Paris itself and for the allies identified by Macron as willing to cooperate with France (in addition to the United Kingdom, these include Germany, Poland, the Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark, Greece, and Sweden). Cooperation with Germany is the most advanced: shortly after the French President's speech, a joint statement by Macron and Merz was issued announcing the launch of 'forward deterrence', including the establishment – later this year – of a Nuclear Steering Group modelled on the body created between France and the United Kingdom in 2025.

France will maintain a strict separation between its deterrent and conventional forces; however, for the first time it acknowledges that the credibility of deterrence is backed up (*épaulement*) by the development of key capabilities such as early warning, enhanced air defence, and long-range strike capacities. Macron suggested that – unlike the maintenance and expansion of the nuclear arsenal, which are financed exclusively by Paris – allies would share the burden of developing these capabilities. Among the specific initiatives mentioned was the ELSA project (European Long Range Strike Approach), under which France, the United Kingdom, and Germany are to jointly develop 'very long-range' strike missile systems (in addition to the three countries cited by Macron, Poland and Italy also participate in ELSA).

The effectiveness of the revision of France's nuclear deterrence doctrine will depend on the determination of Paris and its partners to implement the principles of 'forward deterrence' and to jointly pursue capability-enhancement projects intended to underpin its credibility. To date, the record of major European armaments projects has been modest, while the most significant among them (ELSA) remain either at the level of political declarations or is at risk of being curtailed or reduced as bilateral cooperation (as in the cases of FCAS and MGCS). The coherence of European allies' policies towards states that constitute sources of threat will also prove crucial. The 'forward deterrence' proposed by Paris is likewise intended to strengthen the French initiative to resume dialogue with Russia on arms control, a point already raised by Macron in his address at the Munich Security Conference in February this year. French proposals may raise questions among some NATO allies and necessitate discussion regarding their compatibility with the Alliance's deterrence policy.