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## France, Its Nuclear Deterrence, and Europe: How to Help It Take the Leap

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## About the author



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His areas of expertise include nuclear deterrence, European defense strategy, and the interplay between military strategy and broader political and cultural dynamics. Based in France, he actively contributes to discussions on security and defense policy.

## Abstract

Since the 1990s, France has faced a strategic dilemma: while advocating for a stronger European defense framework, it has struggled to integrate its nuclear deterrent into this collective structure. As the only EU member state with such a capability, France's nuclear forces remain a key pillar of its defense model, ensuring strategic flexibility and deterring large-scale conflict. However, reluctance from both France and its European partners has hindered meaningful progress toward nuclear integration. This paper examines the factors contributing to this impasse, including France's tension between strategic independence and European solidarity, as well as European skepticism toward nuclear deterrence. It further explores potential pathways for France to incorporate its nuclear capabilities into Europe's security framework, ultimately strengthening both European strategic autonomy and continental security.

**Key words:** French nuclear deterrent, European defense, strategic autonomy, security integration

## Introduction

Since the 1990s, France has faced a strategic paradox: while actively promoting the development of a European defense framework, it has struggled to integrate its nuclear deterrent into this collective structure. And yet, its nuclear capability is the most distinctive element of its defense apparatus—a capacity that no other European Union member state is likely to acquire for decades to come.

Beyond its uniqueness, the French nuclear deterrent is also the cornerstone of its defense model. It allows France to maintain flexible, mobile, and effective conventional forces without the threat of large-scale conventional war looming over its strategic planning. But how can France contribute meaningfully to a credible European defense if it does not integrate its most decisive asset into the continent's security framework?

Paris is not solely responsible for this lack of integration. Over the past two decades, some European states have displayed indifference or even outright hostility toward military nuclear capabilities, hindering significant progress on the issue. However, France itself appears torn between a Gaullist vision of complete strategic independence and the ambition of a shared deterrent at the service of Europe.

This paper aims to analyze the causes of this impasse and explore concrete pathways for France to integrate its nuclear deterrent more effectively into European security. Such a development would not only reinforce Europe's strategic autonomy but also help France achieve its own national objective: to build a stronger European defense while ensuring greater security for the continent.

# A Brief History of the European Dimension of French Nuclear Deterrence

## The European Character of French Nuclear Deterrence During the Cold War

From the very beginning of France's nuclear endeavor, its European dimension was evident. Even before the first French nuclear test in 1960, policymakers of the Fourth Republic envisioned nuclear weapons as a strategic lever for continental Europeans, designed to counterbalance the Anglo-Saxon nuclear duopoly (held by the United States and the United Kingdom) within the Atlantic Alliance (cf. Jenny Raflik). In other words, France aspired to provide Europe with an autonomous voice in nuclear deterrence, preventing Washington and London from holding exclusive control over NATO's nuclear strategy.

A striking example of this ambition was the FIG Agreements (*France-Italy-Germany*). In November 1957, under the Fourth Republic, Paris initiated a secret protocol with Bonn and Rome, aimed at establishing a trilateral military nuclear cooperation. This ambitious project even envisioned pooling resources to develop a European nuclear infrastructure. Accordingly, a classified agreement dated April 8, 1958, laid out plans for the co-financing of an isotope separation plant in Pierrelatte: France and West Germany would contribute 45% each, while Italy would provide 10%, with the goal of jointly producing fissile material for potential nuclear weapons.

However, the rise to power of General Charles de Gaulle in 1958 marked a turning point. Determined to restore national independence, de Gaulle broke away from the multilateral nuclear cooperation initiated by his predecessors in the Fourth Republic, suspending all collaborative efforts. Instead, he opted for an exclusively national nuclear program, ensuring that France retained full sovereignty over its nuclear arsenal.

Yet, de Gaulle did not entirely abandon the idea of a strong Europe on the strategic level—instead, he reinvented it on his own terms. This unique French posture,

which combined a nationally controlled deterrent with European strategic implications, has fueled a historiographical debate regarding de Gaulle's true intentions.

- According to historian Georges-Henri Soutou, France's nuclear capability primarily served as a political tool to position Paris as the leader of Western Europe. Soutou argues that de Gaulle sought to establish a Franco-German duopoly, where France, by virtue of its nuclear arsenal, would become the *primus inter pares* of the Paris-Bonn axis. This interpretation suggests a French hegemonic ambition, in which nuclear deterrence reinforced France's dominance over West Germany in shaping European security.
- Conversely, historians such as Frédéric Gloriant propose a different reading of Gaullist nuclear strategy. They argue that de Gaulle acted as a European first and foremost, viewing France as the standard-bearer of Europe's national interests against both superpowers and against the rigid strategic alignment of West Germany due to its post-war constraints. From this perspective, France's pursuit of nuclear grandeur was not merely about national prestige, but a way to defend a "European Europe"—an autonomous Europe capable of ensuring its own security, free from exclusive reliance on decisions made in Washington or London.

At the beginning of the 1970s, French nuclear doctrine remained ambiguous regarding its relationship with Europe. The 1972 White Paper on Defense, commissioned by Michel Debré under President Georges Pompidou, did not provide a clear stance on whether France's nuclear force was explicitly linked to the security of the European continent. However, it emphasized a geographical proximity argument: French deterrence would extend to the "approaches" of its territory, making it a more credible protective force for Western Europe than the American nuclear umbrella. The reasoning was that a French response would be automatic, independent of Washington's decision-making process. In other words, France leveraged its location within Europe to reassure its neighbors, without formally committing to a nuclear guarantee for them.

The 1974 election of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing—the first non-Gaullist president of the Fifth Republic—sparked a political divide over nuclear policy. Seeking to adapt France's strategic posture to the realities of the Cold War, Giscard and his Chief of the Armed Forces General Staff, General Guy Méry, introduced the concept of



“extended sanctuarization”. This approach aimed to expand the protected zone beyond French national territory to encompass “the entire area where the security of the nation could be most immediately threatened, namely, schematically, Europe and its immediate approaches.” In other words, France began to consider Western Europe as an extension of its own nuclear sanctuary, reinforcing the credibility of its deterrent commitment in the event of a Soviet attack on the European theater. This strategic shift, confirmed by Giscard himself in 1976, implicitly acknowledged a European dimension to French nuclear deterrence.

However, the Gaullist right viewed this evolution as a betrayal of the principle of national independence established by General de Gaulle. For several years, leading figures within the RPR (the successor party to the Gaullist UDR) weaponized the nuclear issue to undermine Giscard’s presidency. They vehemently opposed the concept of “extended sanctuarization,” portraying it as a departure from Gaullist doctrine and an unacceptable drift toward Europeanism and Atlanticism that jeopardized France’s sovereignty. Any attempt to Europeanize nuclear deterrence was framed as a dangerous abandonment of nuclear independence. As historian Yannick Pincé notes, the very notion of the “Europeanization” of deterrence became a political scarecrow, used to discredit opponents by invoking a caricatured vision of Gaullist legacy.

Faced with these tensions, François Mitterrand, from 1981 onwards, adopted a measured position that combined continuity and adaptation. On one hand, he maintained strategic ambiguity regarding the European dimension of French nuclear deterrence, in line with his predecessors. Paris continued to refuse any explicit nuclear guarantee to its neighbors, preserving its full freedom of action as a last resort. This carefully maintained ambiguity allowed France to avoid automatic commitments while subtly implying that Europe could indirectly benefit from the French nuclear force. On the other hand, Mitterrand sought to reassure European allies through conventional military means (cf. Yannick Pincé). In 1984, he created the Force d’Action Rapide (FAR), an expeditionary corps designed to intervene in the early hours of a conflict, particularly alongside NATO troops in Central Europe. Specifically tasked with assisting West Germany in the event of an attack, the FAR partially bridged the gap between France’s strictly deterrent posture and the forward conventional defense strategy of the Atlantic Alliance.

Beyond doctrinal debates, a technical issue further highlighted the limits of France’s approach: the Pluton tactical nuclear missiles. With a range of



approximately 120 km, these missiles, deployed in the late 1970s, could only strike targets in East German or, in the event of a successful Soviet invasion, West German territory. In other words, West Germany would inevitably become the battleground for French nuclear strikes. This reality prompted West German leaders to demand prior consultation on any potential use of these weapons. Helmut Kohl, the West German Chancellor, was particularly insistent on being notified in advance of any French Pluton missile strike. In February 1986, during a Franco-German summit, Mitterrand took a step in this direction, agreeing to a formal consultation procedure before the use of tactical nuclear weapons. This marked the first time a French president officially associated a foreign partner—even if only in a purely consultative role—with a decision concerning France's nuclear deterrence.

Despite these adjustments, this period can still be considered a missed opportunity to further Europeanize French deterrence during the Cold War. Like De Gaulle and Giscard before him, Mitterrand refused to go beyond symbolic concessions. No real nuclear sharing mechanism was ever envisioned, as the Gaullist doctrine of independence remained deeply embedded in French strategic thinking—even though West Germany had a genuine interest in greater nuclear integration (cf. Frédéric Bozo).

As a result, the possibility of building a truly European nuclear deterrent—that is, a deeper integration of France's nuclear force into a collective European defense framework—was effectively abandoned. France preserved its nuclear autonomy, but at the cost of a missed opportunity to shape European defense more decisively, a situation whose consequences would be felt long beyond 1987.

## **The Europeanization of French Nuclear Deterrence After the Cold War**

With the end of the Cold War, French nuclear deterrence underwent a significant evolution in its European dimension. Until then, during the East-West confrontation, Paris had jealously guarded the autonomy of its nuclear force, refusing to offer explicit nuclear guarantees to its neighbors—while subtly implying that France's security inherently reinforced Europe's. However, the collapse of the Soviet threat in Western Europe and the momentum of European integration in the early 1990s changed the equation.

Against the backdrop of the Maastricht Treaty (1992) and the creation of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), President François Mitterrand initiated a new reflection on the possible Europeanization of French deterrence. As early as 1992, he publicly raised the idea of a European nuclear doctrine, while acknowledging that such a shift would require substantial political maturation. Mitterrand thus stressed the prerequisite of a genuine convergence of security perceptions within the Union before any potential nuclear mutualization could be considered.

This intellectual opening led to concrete initiatives in strategic cooperation. In 1992, Paris and London formalized their first structured nuclear dialogue by creating a Franco-British joint nuclear commission dedicated to doctrinal discussions. For the first time, the two nuclear powers of the European Union institutionalized high-level exchanges on the role of deterrence. In July 1993, under a government of cohabitation, this commission was made permanent, with the objective of aligning the two countries' strategic concepts. The underlying logic was clear: in the new security landscape, the strategic fates of France and the United Kingdom—two geographically close European nations with nuclear arsenals—were deeply intertwined.

At the same time, the French nuclear testing moratorium illustrated the growing interconnection between France's deterrent and its European partners. In April 1992, Mitterrand declared a moratorium on nuclear tests, a move welcomed in a context of détente and seen as a precursor to the future Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT). However, this suspension triggered an internal debate: how could France ensure the credibility of its nuclear force without additional testing? During the 1993 cohabitation, Prime Minister Édouard Balladur's government cautiously considered resuming testing for security and reliability reasons. Alain Juppé, then Minister of Foreign Affairs, undertook preliminary consultations with key European partners, despite Mitterrand's implicit opposition due to his commitment to the moratorium. This demonstrated that France no longer conceived its deterrence in isolation but within a broader European framework.

The election of Jacques Chirac in 1995 ushered in a new phase of reflection on the role of French nuclear deterrence in Europe. Unlike his predecessors, Chirac adopted a more assertive stance, openly emphasizing the importance of nuclear deterrence within European security. Two major initiatives illustrated this strategic shift:

1. The strengthening of the Franco-British nuclear partnership
2. A new attempt at dialogue with Germany on the role of nuclear deterrence in European defense.

One of the first significant advances under Chirac—the result of secret discussions initiated in 1992—was the Chequers Declaration, signed in October 1995 with British Prime Minister John Major. This document explicitly acknowledged that France’s and the United Kingdom’s vital interests were now perceived as interconnected.

This declaration—unprecedented between two independent nuclear powers—marked a step toward de facto European nuclear coordination. By affirming that neither country could envision a threat to its vital interests that would not also concern the other, Paris and London established a strategic precedent, subtly laying the groundwork for a more integrated European nuclear posture.

Building on this momentum, Alain Juppé, then Prime Minister, introduced in 1995 a proposal for concerted nuclear deterrence. Moving away from the extended deterrence model previously considered—which he deemed paternalistic—Juppé advocated for a structured dialogue on the role of French nuclear deterrence in Europe, particularly with Germany. His idea was based on in-depth consultations with European partners to identify the conditions under which France could position its nuclear forces as a stabilizing element for the continent, rather than a purely national instrument.

This initiative received a favorable response in Germany, where it sparked discussions on a common Franco-German defense concept. Berlin agreed to engage in dialogue on the role of French deterrence in European security, while still maintaining its reliance on the U.S. nuclear umbrella within NATO.

However, this attempt to Europeanize deterrence faced strong opposition within France's own political landscape. On the left, the Socialists in opposition, invoking a reaffirmed Gaullo-Mitterrandian doctrine, rejected the initiative outright. Similarly, a faction within the Gaullist RPR opposed it, perceiving the concept of a shared Franco-German defense as a dilution of France’s nuclear sovereignty.

These internal tensions unfolded in the broader context of France’s struggle to redefine its place within Western defense structures. From the start of his presidency, Jacques Chirac expressed his intent to reintegrate France into NATO’s integrated military command, breaking with traditional Gaullist policy. However,

this attempt ultimately failed due to maximalist demands aimed at appeasing the sovereigntist wing of his party.

Amid international deadlock and domestic political uncertainty, Chirac decided in 1997 to dissolve the National Assembly. This move led to the victory of the left in the legislative elections and the formation of a cohabitation government under Prime Minister Lionel Jospin.

Paradoxically, this period of cohabitation resulted in a convergence of positions on the European dimension of nuclear deterrence. The political stabilization helped defuse previous conflicts over the issue. However, the nuclear deterrence debate gradually receded, giving way to a more pragmatic approach focused on building a European defense. The priority shifted toward the development of common conventional military capabilities, particularly through the European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP). While nuclear deterrence remained a strategic reality, it ceased to be a central theme in presidential discourse or diplomatic discussions.

During the 2000s and 2010s, the European dimension of French nuclear deterrence continued to be mentioned in strategic discourse, yet struggled to materialize into concrete action. While Jacques Chirac had initiated a turning point in 1995, his successors maintained this stance, but failed to translate it into substantive progress.

#### From Sarkozy to Macron: A European Discourse, Limited Concrete Progress

Upon taking office in 2007, Nicolas Sarkozy largely adopted Jacques Chirac's strategic approach regarding the role of nuclear deterrence in European security. His speeches in 2007 and 2008 reaffirmed the three key principles of the European dimension of deterrence, first outlined by François Mitterrand and later reinforced by Chirac:

1. The extension of vital interests, which, according to Sarkozy, have a European dimension. In other words, an existential threat to a strategic European ally could be considered a threat to France itself.
2. A convergence of vital interests with the United Kingdom, confirming the commitment made in the 1995 Chequers Declaration.
3. A proposal for structured consultations on the role of nuclear deterrence in Europe, aiming to further integrate the nuclear issue into collective security discussions on the continent.

However, these ambitions quickly faced two major obstacles that fundamentally altered the strategic landscape:

- The European debt crisis (2009–2012), which diverted European governments' attention away from defense in favor of an urgent focus on economic and monetary stability. This crisis severely weakened intra-European solidarity and reinforced the desire among states to capitalize on the so-called "peace dividends," further reducing enthusiasm for military investments, including nuclear deterrence.
- Barack Obama's Prague speech (2009), which marked the return of a strong disarmament discourse. By calling for a world without nuclear weapons and encouraging new negotiations to reduce strategic arsenals, the American president inadvertently strengthened anti-nuclear movements in Europe. Several EU countries, particularly in Northern Europe and Germany, officially adopted more critical stances on military nuclear capabilities, further isolating France and the United Kingdom on this issue.

In response to this double challenge of economic crisis and strategic isolation, Paris and London deepened their nuclear cooperation. In November 2010, France and the United Kingdom signed the Lancaster House Treaties, strengthening their bilateral defense partnership. While these agreements covered multiple military domains, their nuclear component was particularly significant.

At the heart of this cooperation was the creation of a joint nuclear testing center, based in Valduc (France), designed to simulate the aging process of nuclear warheads and ensure their safety and reliability without conducting live tests. This agreement marked a major step toward nuclear capability mutualization, while maintaining each country's full sovereignty over the operational use of its strategic forces. It also highlighted a critical reality: in the absence of genuine Europeanization of deterrence, bilateral cooperation remained the only viable framework for France and the United Kingdom.

The election of François Hollande in 2012 marked a more cautious approach to the Europeanization of nuclear deterrence. Unlike his predecessors, Hollande avoided making strong declarations about integrating French deterrence into European defense. His presidency prioritized conventional military cooperation rather than nuclear matters.

Under Emmanuel Macron, however, the discussion on France's nuclear deterrence in Europe has regained prominence. His February 2020 speech on deterrence reaffirmed the strategic legacy initiated by Jacques Chirac in 1995 and later upheld by Sarkozy. Macron emphasized the stabilizing role of nuclear deterrence in an international landscape increasingly shaped by the resurgence of great power tensions.

Despite 25 years of discourse, little concrete progress has been made toward the integration of French nuclear deterrence into Europe's security architecture. Several structural obstacles remain:

- Persistent hostility among parts of the French public opinion, which sees any Europeanization of nuclear deterrence as a direct challenge to the sacrosanct principle of strategic independence.
- Disinterest, or even disdain, from certain European partners, particularly in Germany, where French nuclear deterrence is still perceived as a purely national posture, without any real intent for European inclusion.

Thus, while French strategic rhetoric has evolved, concrete advances toward Europeanizing deterrence remain limited. France continues to straddle an ambiguous position, seeking recognition as Europe's nuclear protector while maintaining absolute sovereignty over its arsenal.

# Current Situation of the European Dimension of French Nuclear Deterrence

## a) Growing European Acceptance

At the time of writing, French nuclear deterrence enjoys unprecedented acceptance among its European partners. Countries such as Lithuania, Poland, and Denmark have described this initiative as "very interesting" and believe it "deserves thorough consideration." This openness suggests an opportunity for France to rapidly strengthen the European dimension of its nuclear deterrence.

## b) Intense National Debates

However, at the domestic level, the issue of Europeanizing nuclear deterrence has sparked intense and polarized debates. The Rassemblement National (RN), the leading political party in France, has stated that "sharing deterrence means abolishing it," arguing that nuclear weapons represent the highest degree of national sovereignty. Meanwhile, La France Insoumise (LFI), the main left-wing party, opposes European defense integration altogether. Even within traditional right-wing circles, voices have risen against Europeanization. François-Xavier Bellamy, head of the Les Républicains (LR) list for the June 9 European elections, declared that "this idea is of exceptional gravity because it touches upon the very core of French sovereignty." These internal divisions have raised concerns among experts about the weakening of the national consensus on nuclear deterrence, leading some to advocate for a more measured and clear reaffirmation of its national character, as reflected in Emmanuel Macron's address to the French people on March 5, 2025.

## c) French Nuclear Capabilities and Strategic Implications

France possesses approximately 300 nuclear warheads, distributed between 48 M51 missiles, launched from nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs),



and 54 ASMPA cruise missiles, deployed on Rafale fighter jets. This arsenal configuration limits France's ability to deploy low-yield nuclear weapons—similar to the American B61 bombs, which provide greater flexibility in deterrence signaling.

As a result, stationing French nuclear weapons on European soil would have major strategic implications for France's deterrence policy and operational capabilities. While such a move would demonstrate France's firm commitment to protecting its allies, it would also entail risks for French nuclear capabilities. This underscores the impossibility of France replicating the U.S. extended deterrence model and highlights the need for a distinct approach to integrating its nuclear deterrence within the European framework.

## Solutions for European Countries to Anchor French Nuclear Deterrence to European Security

To enhance the integration of French nuclear deterrence into European security, European countries can take the following actions, ranked in order of priority:

### 1. Respond to France's Proposals on the European Dimension of Nuclear Deterrence

It is crucial for European partners to respond positively to France's initiatives aimed at reinforcing the European dimension of its nuclear deterrence. Countries such as Lithuania, Poland, and Denmark have already expressed interest in this approach, considering it "very interesting" and worthy of "thorough examination." A coordinated commitment from multiple European states would accelerate progress toward greater integration.

### 2. Organize Multilateral Nuclear Exercises

Conducting multilateral nuclear exercises would serve as a powerful symbol of cooperation while allowing European armed forces to gain valuable operational

experience. These exercises would also provide an opportunity for experience-sharing, particularly with countries that regularly participate in nuclear deterrence drills, thus strengthening interoperability and mutual trust.

### 3. Consider French Sensitivities

It is essential to respect French sensitivities regarding nuclear deterrence. The use of terms such as “sharing” should be avoided, as it is highly controversial in France, where nuclear deterrence is closely tied to national sovereignty. A nuanced approach and carefully chosen terminology will facilitate discussions and prevent misunderstandings, even if the terms permitted in France sometimes do not align fully with operational realities.

### 4. Clearly Express European Reassurance Needs

European countries must clearly communicate their reassurance needs so that France can respond effectively. These needs should be explicitly but discreetly conveyed through bilateral meetings, ensuring the development of tailored solutions that reinforce trust and credibility.

### 5. Accelerate the SCAF Program with Germany

Germany, in particular, should actively engage in accelerating the *Système de Combat Aérien du Futur* (SCAF) program with France. This project is a key pillar of Franco-German defense cooperation and could serve as a platform for integrating capabilities related to nuclear deterrence, further reinforcing Europe’s strategic posture.

### 6. Organize Symbolic Visits and Official Statements

Symbolic visits, such as the visit of NATO ambassadors to Istres, can enhance the visibility of French nuclear deterrence and its European dimension. Additionally, a European country inviting the French president to deliver a speech in front of a nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine (SNLE) in a European capital would visibly demonstrate France’s commitment to collective security and reinforce the perception of a shared deterrence framework.

# Solutions for the European Union to Anchor French Nuclear Deterrence in European Security

To strengthen the integration of French nuclear deterrence within European security, the European Union could consider the following actions, ranked in order of priority:

## 1. Establish European Consultation Mechanisms on Nuclear Deterrence

Although France has never been an official member of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), it has informally participated in its discussions. Currently, the creation of dedicated European forums for discussing nuclear deterrence would allow interested EU member states to engage in structured debates on deterrence policies. These mechanisms could gradually evolve toward deeper integration of nuclear deterrence policies within the EU security framework.

## 2. Develop a Collective Vision of European Vital Interests

One of the key missions of such forums would be to define a shared understanding of European vital interests, both in terms of values and institutional priorities. A common strategic vision would reinforce cohesion among member states, clarify collective security stakes, and facilitate a more unified approach to nuclear deterrence within Europe.

## 3. Regularly Promote the Mutual Defense Clause

Members of the European Commission, particularly its President, should frequently emphasize the existence and importance of the Mutual Defense Clause, enshrined in Article 42(7) of the Treaty on European Union. This clause stipulates that if an EU member state is the victim of an armed attack on its territory, the

other member states are obligated to provide aid and assistance by all means in their power, in accordance with Article 51 of the UN Charter. Regular communication about this clause would strengthen European solidarity and enhance collective preparedness against external threats.

#### 4. Leverage the "Rearm Europe" Plan to Finance New French Nuclear Delivery Systems

The "Rearm Europe" plan could be mobilized to support the financing of new French nuclear delivery systems. This initiative would help modernize deterrence capabilities, ensuring effective protection of the continent while also strengthening the European defense industry.