

Can France Provide European Allies with Nuclear Deterrence?

by Roberto Zadra

In his speech to fellow citizens on 5 March, French President Emmanuel Macron announced the opening of a “strategic debate on the protection of our allies on the European continent by our (nuclear) deterrent”.¹ It is not the first time: already in the 1990s then-president François Mitterrand alluded to a *vocation européenne* of French nuclear deterrence.² Macron himself proposed, already in February 2020, the opening of a dialogue on the matter.³ The initiative was not

very successful at the time, essentially because European allies considered the security guarantees provided by the United States to Europe through NATO sufficient, together with the repeated reassurances of NATO communiqués that the British and French nuclear forces “have a deterrent role of their own and contribute significantly to the overall security of the Alliance”.⁴

This time, however, the reactions by many European allied countries to the French initiative will probably be different. For a simple reason: excluding the deployment of its own forces to Ukraine in the event of a ceasefire and denying security guarantees to Kyiv, the Trump administration fuels the fears of European allies that Washington’s

¹ “Macron’s Address to the French Nation on Ramping up Defence Spending”, in *Reuters*, 5 March 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/macrons-address-french-nation-ramping-up-defence-spending-2025-03-05>.

² Frédéric Bozo, “L’Europe est le coeur de la dissuasion française”, in *Liberation*, 13 September 1995, https://www.liberation.fr/tribune/1995/09/13/l-europe-est-le-coeur-de-la-dissuasion-francaise_144263; Roberto Zadra, “European Integration and Nuclear Deterrence after the Cold War”, in *Chaillot Papers*, No. 5 (November 1992), <https://www.iss.europa.eu/node/414>.

³ French Presidency, *Speech of the President of the Republic on the Defense and Deterrence*

Strategy, 7 February 2020, <https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2020/02/07/speech-of-the-president-of-the-republic-on-the-defense-and-deterrence-strategy>.

⁴ NATO, *NATO 2022 Strategic Concept*, July 2022, point 29, https://www.nato.int/cps/uk/natohq/topics_210907.htm.

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commitment to collective defence is less solid than in the past. Indeed, the Ukraine crisis has shown the limitations of the traditional NATO distinction between Article 5 and non-Article 5 – that is, between those who are members of NATO and therefore protected by collective defence, and those who are not because collective defence is not valid for NATO partners – as it has laid bare how crisis management and cooperative security are having a direct impact on (the perceived lack of US commitment to) collective defence in Europe.

Europe's longstanding fears

On closer inspection, the credibility of US extended nuclear deterrence to NATO allies has been the subject of discussions, doubts and paranoias for decades – at least since October 1957, when the Soviet launch of Sputnik into space signalled that Moscow would soon have intercontinental ballistic missiles capable of hitting the United States in response to a possible use of nuclear weapons in Europe. Only two months later, in a summit in Paris, in an effort to demonstrate to European allies the seriousness of Washington's security guarantees, it was decided to institutionalise nuclear sharing within NATO: the US would deploy nuclear weapons on the territory of European allies willing to accept some responsibilities in terms of hosting and delivery.

Nuclear sharing was introduced to involve European allies more in these matters while also reassuring them, but it was never enough to reassure them completely. The Europeans

feared that, by resorting to the tactical use of nuclear weapons on European territory, the United States could be tempted to limit a nuclear war to Europe while avoiding a direct strategic nuclear conflict between Washington and Moscow. These fears emerged repeatedly in the years following the Paris summit, especially in the 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s. As Dennis Healey, British Defence Minister from 1964 to 1970, once said, "it takes only five per cent credibility of American retaliation to deter the Russians, but ninety-five per cent credibility to reassure the Europeans".⁵ The presence of substantial conventional US forces in Europe and the creation of a permanent nuclear consultation group within NATO (Nuclear Planning Group, NPG, still active but without the participation of France) in 1966 never completely eliminated European fears and paranoias that Washington was not willing to risk the catastrophic effects of a strategic nuclear exchange with Moscow to defend Berlin or Rome.

Assessing Macron's proposal

NATO's decades of experience are useful to better understand the potential and limitations of Macron's proposal. As longstanding practices in different NATO groups highlight, nuclear weapons (their number, placement, safety and security), their operational usefulness (for example, by developing common doctrines and policies) and their command and control can indeed be discussed among allies. It is also possible to develop mechanisms

⁵ Denis Healey, *The Time of My Life*, New York/London, Norton & Co., 1990, p. 243.

for political-military consultation in the event of crises or conflicts and to organise joint training and exercises, including political-military seminars and table-top exercises, as well as to discuss costs and some burden sharing. Arms control and non-proliferation are further important aspects on which an exchange of information, consultation and possible coordination is feasible. Some of these issues are discussed as part of the aforementioned NPG without France, but many debates see France at the table.

In his speech Macron added that “whatever happens, the decision has always been and will remain in the hands of the President of the Republic”.⁶ This is not in itself an obstacle to dialogue: from the 1940s to today, the United States has always maintained national command and control over all its nuclear weapons. A European pilot could never have dropped a B-61 bomb from a dual-capable aircraft based on European territory without the approval of the US.

As mentioned above, non-nuclear allied countries have repeatedly expressed reservations and fears about the US’s real preparedness to be drawn into a strategic nuclear war to defend Europe. In principle, this fear could also apply in a purely European context, but such arguments have less relevance for one simple reason: geography. The Atlantic Ocean separates Europe from the United States with about 6,000 kilometres, while Paris and London are 300 to 1,500 kilometres from most

European capitals; one can hardly imagine a nuclear war limited to a European country without a serious impact also on France or the United Kingdom. In the long term, further political and economic integration between at least some European countries would make extended nuclear deterrence by Europeans for Europeans even more credible – all the more so if the UK were involved in it too. While the role of British nuclear deterrence for North American and European allies is already discussed in NATO as the UK is also in the NPG, closer coordination and cooperation between London and Paris would be beneficial, not only for themselves but also for European non-nuclear allies.

Looking ahead

What are the implications of the increasing US disengagement from Europe and the French offer to deepen the dialogue on nuclear matters with non-nuclear European allies? Let’s put it bluntly: under the new Trump administration it is currently very unlikely that Washington will come to the rescue of Europeans in the event of an armed conflict with Russia. The transatlantic de-coupling has never been so acute and the credibility of US extended nuclear deterrence for European allies in NATO is currently at an all-time low. It is not a question of throwing the baby out with the bathwater; European policymakers must save what can be saved in NATO but also accept the offer of a more in-depth dialogue with France on these issues, and hopefully deepen the discussion with the United Kingdom, too. Germany, with the upcoming

⁶ “Macron’s Address to the French Nation on Ramping up Defence Spending”, cit.

Chancellor Friedrich Merz, has already begun to move in this direction. It would be prudent if other non-nuclear European allies followed suit.

Past experience shows that one of the most difficult questions to address is often that of the best institutional setting for pursuing such a sensitive discussion with France. While discussions with the UK would most likely continue in NATO's NPG, should those with Paris be held in NATO, or in the EU, or perhaps in a smaller setting inspired by the recent 'E5' meeting of French, British, German, Italian and Polish defence ministers? Or is it time to revive the old idea of a European Nuclear Planning Group, with France and the UK on board, but without the US?

Perhaps none of the above. At this early stage the most prudent and pragmatic way forward may be to avoid putting the cart before the horses: while a decision on the best multilateral institutional setting could follow at a later stage, interested non-nuclear allies in Europe could explore these matters further with France bilaterally and identify which subjects would deserve deeper discussion. France and interested non-nuclear European allies could also aim to develop joint bilateral declarations acknowledging an interconnection of their respective vital interests.⁷

⁷ The 1995 Franco-British 'Chequers' Declaration stated "[we] have concluded that the vital interests of one could not be threatened without the vital interests of the other equally being at risk". UK and France, *Mr Major's Joint Press Conference with President Chirac*, London, 30 October 1995, <https://johnmajorarchive.org.uk/?p=8528>. See also *UK-France Declaration on Security and Defence*, London, 17 February 2012,

However, it remains to be seen to what extent this would provide added value to existing NATO and EU collective security and defence commitments. Also for this reason, it might be more prudent to explore the matter further bilaterally at this stage.

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<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-france-declaration-on-security-and-defence>.

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