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Europe's Nuclear Alternatives: A Time of Reckoning

by Polina Sinovets and Adérito Vicente

ABSTRACT

Europe faces an increasingly urgent need to reconsider its dependence on US extended nuclear deterrence, particularly in the context of Russia's war in Ukraine and the United States' strategic shift towards the Indo-Pacific. Europe's potential to build credible deterrent capabilities of its own is limited to three alternatives: the strengthening of France's *force de frappe* as a European pillar, the creation of an Anglo-French nuclear umbrella and the establishment of a European Multilateral Nuclear Force within NATO. The best course of action for Europe is to follow a balanced approach that enhances European autonomy while safeguarding transatlantic cohesion, with NATO establishing a structured dialogue on Europe's nuclear future.

European defence | Nuclear arms | NATO | France | UK

keywords

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Introduction

The third decade of the 21st century marks a pivotal shift in the international system. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 constitutes the first major war in Europe since the end of the Second World War. The conflict has not only reaffirmed the strategic relevance of NATO as a military alliance but has also significantly heightened the salience of nuclear deterrence, particularly in the European context. Russia's repeated nuclear brinkmanship has rendered European security more precarious, while concurrently, the United States – Europe's principal guarantor of nuclear deterrence within NATO – has exhibited clear signs of strategic reorientation.

US foreign and defence policy has increasingly prioritised the Asia-Pacific region, at least in intent.¹ The Obama Administration (2009-17) first spoke of a "pivot to Asia" in 2011, signalling the shifting priority of the United States away to the Asia-Pacific, the economically most dynamic region of the world and home to China, the only country the United States could see as a peer competitor.² This tendency was continued under the first Trump Administration (2017-21), which together with the strong criticism of the transatlantic relationship and the EU, was interpreted by Europeans as a more transactional and selective approach to alliance commitments.³ While President Joe Biden (2021-25) had impeccable Atlanticist

¹ US Secretary of Defense, *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense*, January 2012, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/citations/ADA554328>.

² Anna Llanos-Antczak, "The US Pivot to Asia under the Obama Administration", in *Athenaeum: Polish Political Science Studies*, Vol. 84, No. 4 (2024), p. 172-189, <https://doi.org/10.15804/athena.2024.84.10>.

³ Marc Julienne (ed.), "The Indo-Pacific and Trump II. In Uncle Sam's Brutal Embrace", in *Asie. Visions*, No. 144 (January 2025), <https://www.ifri.org/en/node/51651>.

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credentials, he too continued to shift the focus of US foreign policy increasingly towards Asia, re-framed in geopolitical terms as the "Indo-Pacific".

In 2024, before Donald Trump's re-election, leading Republican realist scholars and experts, such as Elbridge Colby – then affiliated with the Marathon Initiative and later confirmed as US Under Secretary of Defense for Policy – argued that the United States should shift its strategic focus toward the Indo-Pacific much more decisively than it had done hitherto.⁴ These experts, connected to institutions like the Hoover Institution, Heritage Foundation and America First Policy Institute, contended that the United States "can no longer be everywhere" and must prioritise countering China.⁵ This viewpoint reflects a growing tendency among American policymakers to reduce commitments in Europe and instead strengthen alliances in the Indo-Pacific.⁶ The result is a perceived decline in US dedication to European defence as attention and resources are redirected to address challenges posed by China.⁷

In parallel, Russia's persistent threats of nuclear escalation since 2022 have accelerated concerns over a potential US retrenchment from Europe. As a result, there is growing recognition among European policymakers that the continent must be prepared to assume greater responsibility for its own defence, including in the nuclear domain. These developments have brought debates about deterrence and strategic autonomy to the forefront of European security discourse.

The central question is whether Europe can credibly deter a nuclear-armed power such as Russia in the absence of the US nuclear umbrella, and what alternatives might be available to ensure the continent's strategic security.

⁴ Elbridge A. Colby, *The Strategy of Denial. American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict*, New Haven/London, Yale University Press, 2021; Nicola Smith, "Elbridge Colby Says U.S. Should Focus on China Challenges", in *Dartmouth News*, 23 October 2024, <https://home.dartmouth.edu/news/2024/10/elbridge-colby-says-us-should-focus-china-challenges>.

⁵ Hoover Institution, *Convening January 2024: Indo-Pacific Security Dialogue*, 28 March 2024, <https://www.hoover.org/node/348888>; Andrew J. Harding, "The Pacific Pivot: An American Strategy for the Pacific Islands", in *Heritage Foundation Special Reports*, No. 296 (1 October 2024), <https://www.heritage.org/node/25157630>; America First Policy Institute, *America First Agenda*, 2022, <https://agenda.americafirstpolicy.com>.

⁶ Andrzej Kohut and Jacek Tarociński, "Colby and His Team: Pentagon Consequences of U.S. Military Presence in Europe", in *OSW Analyses*, 11 April 2025, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/node/33168>.

⁷ White House, *National Security Strategy*, 12 October 2022, p. 23-25, <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>; White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, 18 December 2017, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>. Both documents explicitly identify China as the foremost strategic competitor, calling for increased focus and resource allocation to the Indo-Pacific.

1. Historical context and current state of affairs

Since the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation in 1949, the United States has served as the cornerstone of European security, particularly through the provision of extended nuclear deterrence for European members of the Alliance. This entailed a commitment by the United States to retaliate, potentially with nuclear weapons, in response to any Soviet aggression against European allies. However, this commitment has long been subject to debate and scepticism – both within the United States and among its allies. The fundamental dilemma lies in the credibility of Washington's willingness to risk an American city, such as New York or Boston, to defend European capitals like Berlin or Paris.

Henry Kissinger, national security advisor and secretary of state under the Administrations of Richard Nixon (1969-74) and Gerald Ford (1974-77), once warned against unrealistic expectations in this regard, stating: "European allies should not keep asking us to multiply strategic assurances that we cannot possibly mean, or, if we do mean, we should not want to execute as we risk the destruction of civilization".⁸ Likewise, European leaders have expressed concern about the reliability of US commitments in the past.⁹ As former British Defence Secretary Denis Healey famously remarked, "It takes only five per cent credibility of American retaliation to deter the Russians, but ninety-five per cent credibility to reassure the Europeans".¹⁰

These concerns are rooted in historical experiences where US and European threat perceptions diverged. The Suez Crisis of 1956 is often cited as a pivotal moment when the United States' reluctance to support British and French (and Israeli) attempt to regain control of the Suez Canal by military means deepened European anxieties about transatlantic alignment. Such events contributed to France's pursuit of nuclear independence and the United Kingdom's insistence on operational autonomy for its own nuclear forces, despite deep integration with US capabilities.

In the 21st century, doubts about extended deterrence have intensified, particularly during the presidency of Trump (2017-21 and since January 2025). In his first term, Trump expressed open scepticism toward NATO, challenging the premise of collective defence. Upon being briefed on Article 5 of the NATO Treaty, the US president reportedly asked: "If Russia attacked Lithuania, we would go to war with Russia? That's crazy".¹¹ The Trump Administration's rhetoric – questioning

⁸ Henry A. Kissinger, "The Future of NATO", in *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (1979), p. 3-17 at p. 7, DOI 10.1080/01636607909450733.

⁹ Lawrence Freedman, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy*, 3rd ed., Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, p. 288-314.

¹⁰ Denis Healey, *The Time of My Life*, New York/London, Norton & Co., 1990, p. 243.

¹¹ Peter Baker and Susan Glaser, *The Divider. Trump in the White House, 2017-2021*, New York, Penguin Random House, 2022, p. 76; Mark Landler and David E. Sanger, "Trump Delivers a Mixed Message on His National Security Approach", in *The New York Times*, 18 December 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/18/us/politics/trump-security-strategy-china-russia.html>.

US commitments, criticising European liberalism, showing hostility towards the integration project, imposing trade tariffs on EU partners and cultivating friendly relations with Russia – has exacerbated European concerns regarding the durability of the transatlantic alliance. As historian Norbert Frei has observed, “The transatlantic order established after the Second World War, largely by the US [...] is disintegrating before our very eyes”.¹² The potential long-term consequence of this trajectory may be a gradual US disengagement from European defence, compelling Europe to seek autonomous alternatives.

This raises the critical question: in what ways might Europe develop its own credible defence and deterrence architecture, and is it viable to rely exclusively on European capabilities? While any such transformation would take decades, it is possible to outline three potential models that could serve as plausible foundations for a more self-reliant European security order.

2. European nuclear deterrent alternatives: Options and limitations

Given current geopolitical shifts and increasing uncertainties regarding the steadfastness of the United States’ commitment to European security, a critical question has emerged: can European nuclear forces adequately fill the void?¹³ Specifically, the potential for British and French nuclear arsenals to both safeguard Europe’s security following a US-brokered agreement and, more broadly, serve as a comprehensive nuclear deterrent for Europe in lieu of American guarantees is under scrutiny. While neither the United Kingdom nor France has enthusiastically volunteered their nuclear assets as a direct substitute for those of the United States, both nations recognise that deploying their nuclear capabilities for collective European defence could align with their national interests, as well as the broader interests of Europe. The core of nuclear strategy lies in establishing a deterrent effect potent enough to avert the most catastrophic outcomes.

Current strategic doctrines permit both the UK and France to assert a deterrent impact on behalf of their European allies.¹⁴ Their existing forces, which operate independently of the United States, enable this by presenting a credible threat of retaliation that no Russian leader could disregard. However, the conceptualisation of a European nuclear deterrent, whether through French *force de frappe*, or deepened Franco-British collaboration or a re-examination of multilateral force frameworks, introduces a multifaceted array of complex challenges that warrant

¹² Christoph Hasselbach, “80 Years after WWII: Is the US Turning Its Back on Europe?”, in *Deutsche Welle*, 7 May 2025, <https://www.dw.com/en/a-72461499>.

¹³ Paul van Hooft, “Nuclear Deterrence: Can Britain and France Take on America’s Role in Defending Europe against Russian Aggression?”, in *The Conversation*, 18 March 2025, <https://theconversation.com/nuclear-deterrence-can-britain-and-france-take-on-americas-role-in-defending-europe-against-russian-aggression-252338>.

¹⁴ Lawrence Freedman, “Europe’s Nuclear Deterrent: The Here and Now”, in *Survival*, Vol. 67, No. 3 (June 2025), p. 7-24 at p. 8-9, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2025.2508078>.

thorough investigation.¹⁵

2.1 Option A: France's force de frappe as a European pillar¹⁶

Currently, France is the only nuclear-armed state within the European Union, possessing an arsenal of approximately three hundred nuclear warheads.¹⁷ The French nuclear deterrent is composed of two components: a sea-based leg (submarine-launched ballistic missiles) and an air-based leg (air-launched cruise missiles) and is characterised by its operational independence. France does not participate in NATO's Nuclear Planning Group, and its nuclear posture remains outside NATO's integrated nuclear command structure.¹⁸ One potential solution to this challenge is for NATO to establish a European Nuclear Planning Group (ENPG). This group would operate within the European NATO structure. Importantly, it would function independently of the United States' umbrella.

French nuclear policy is defined unilaterally by the French president, who holds sole authority over the use of nuclear weapons.¹⁹ Each newly elected French president traditionally reaffirms or redefines the vital interests of France, setting the strategic boundaries of its nuclear doctrine.²⁰ In a notable development, President Emmanuel Macron stated in 2020 that the security of Europe constitutes a vital interest for France.²¹ This statement was consistent with his broader advocacy for European strategic autonomy, including proposals to initiate a dialogue with European partners on the potential role of French nuclear deterrence in protecting the continent.

The review of France's nuclear posture has gained urgency in light of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and Trump's return to power. Macron's Sorbonne speeches, in which he outlined an ambitious vision for a more united, sovereign

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Alexander Sorg, "Force de l'Europe: How Realistic Is a French Nuclear Umbrella?", in *War on the Rocks*, 26 March 2025, <https://warontherocks.com/?p=33946>.

¹⁷ Hans M. Kristensen, Matt Korda and Eliana Johns, "French Nuclear Weapons, 2023", in *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 79, No. 4 (July 2023), p. 272-281, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2023.223088>.

¹⁸ All member countries are part of the consultative process in the NPG with the exception of France, which has decided not to participate. North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), *Nuclear Planning Group (NPG)*, 9 May 2022, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_50069.htm.

¹⁹ Bruno Tertrais, "Destruction Assurée: The Origins and Development of French Nuclear Strategy, 1945-1981", in Henry D. Sokolski (ed.), *Getting MAD: Nuclear Mutual Assured Destruction, Its Origins and Practice*, US Army War College Press, November 2004, p. 51-121, <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/monographs/32>.

²⁰ Bruno Tertrais, "French Nuclear Deterrence Policy, Forces, and Future: A Handbook", in *FRS Recherches & Documents*, No. 4/2020 (February 2020), p. 18-20, <https://www.frstrategie.org/en/node/2950>.

²¹ French Presidency, *Speech of the President of the Republic on the Defense and Deterrence Strategy*, Paris, 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>.

and democratic Europe, have highlighted the need for European strategic autonomy and credible defence in response to mounting geopolitical challenges. Subsequent actions, notably Macron's recent decision to initiate a strategic debate with European allies on the possible extension of French deterrence to Europe, further underscore his determination to address anxieties about the Russian threat and potential US disengagement.²²

Nevertheless, questions arise regarding the circumstances under which such an extension would occur and the credibility of France as an alternative to the United States nuclear umbrella. Realistically, a shift from American to French (or Franco-British) extended deterrence is likely only in the event of a definitive and irreversible US strategic withdrawal from Europe. In that case, European states may prefer some form of European nuclear protection over no deterrent at all.

The credibility of extended deterrence – whether by the US, France, or the UK – relies on two pillars: deterring adversaries and reassuring allies. These two functions are interdependent and contingent upon both military capabilities and political resolve. In terms of capabilities, analysts like Fabian Hoffmann argue that France lacks the arsenal depth and the necessary diversity to deter Russia in a limited nuclear conflict scenario.²³ Others, such as Bruno Tertrais, contend that strategic effectiveness does not require a mirror image of the US nuclear posture.²⁴ Given that France has successfully deterred adversaries with its current force structure, the key factor is demonstrating political will.

International relations scholarship often points to a correlation between a state's perceived vital interests and its willingness to act. In this light, one could argue that France may be more inclined than the US to defend European allies such as Poland, as European security is inherently more vital to French national security.²⁵ Still, reassuring allies may require the forward deployment and diversification of French capabilities. This could include the potential introduction of tactical nuclear options. However, such decisions would demand sustained dialogue with European partners.

²² French Presidency, *President Macron Gives Speech on New Initiative for Europe*, Paris, 26 September 2017, <https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2017/09/26/president-macron-gives-speech-on-new-initiative-for-europe>; French Presidency, *Europe Speech*, Paris, 25 April 2024, <https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2024/04/24/europe-speech>.

²³ Fabian Hoffmann, "From Paris with Love: Extending France's Nuclear Umbrella", in *Substack Missile Matters*, 9 March 2025, <https://missilematters.substack.com/p/from-paris-with-love-extending-frances>.

²⁴ Bruno Tertrais, *A Comparison Between US, UK and French Nuclear Policies and Doctrines*, Paris, SciencesPo, February 2007, <https://www.sciencespo.fr/ceri/en/content/comparison-between-us-uk-and-french-nuclear-policies-and-doctrines>.

²⁵ Glenn H. Snyder, *Deterrence and Defense. Toward a Theory of National Security*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1961; Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, New York, McGraw-Hill, 1979.

Also, considering the key role of each new president in framing each new deterrence posture, the sustainability of the French extended deterrence may constitute an issue. Therefore, establishing a system of bilateral or multilateral defence treaties may be desirable to help maintain the stability and credibility of the French nuclear umbrella.

Moreover, the deployment of conventional French forces on allied territory, complementing or replacing the American ones, could serve a "tripwire" function, ensuring French involvement in case of aggression and thereby reinforcing the credibility of extended deterrence. A credible deterrence posture should thus integrate both nuclear and conventional elements.

Finally, any comprehensive European deterrence framework would be significantly strengthened by close cooperation between Paris and London. For example, the robust Franco-British defence partnership, established by the Lancaster House Treaties, provides a good starting point.²⁶ Acting in tandem, the two European nuclear powers could offer a more robust and credible deterrent to meet emerging security challenges on the continent.

2.2 Option B: Anglo-French umbrella

For much of the French strategic community, a joint French–British nuclear posture is seen as a more desirable foundation for providing nuclear deterrence for Europe. Such an arrangement would address the quantitative limitations of each national arsenal by combining the United Kingdom's planned total of 260 warheads with France's approximately 300. Furthermore, the existence of two separate nuclear command-and-control centres – London and Paris – would enhance the survivability of communications, command and control (C3) in the event of a crisis or nuclear attack. The United Kingdom's participation in NATO's Nuclear Planning Group (NPG) further reinforces its longstanding commitment to the defence of Europe, dating back to its acquisition of nuclear weapons during the Cold War.²⁷

Nevertheless, several issues complicate the UK's role as a potential pillar of European nuclear deterrence. These include both capability constraints and questions of political will. In terms of capabilities, the United Kingdom currently possesses approximately 225 nuclear warheads, all deployed on a single leg of the nuclear

²⁶ UK and France, *Treaty between the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the French Republic for Defence and Security Co-operation*, London, 2 November 2010, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/treaty-between-the-uk-and-france-for-defence-and-security-co-operation>; UK and France, *Treaty between the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the French Republic relating to Joint Radiographic/Hydrodynamics Facilities*, London, 2 November 2010, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/treaty-between-the-uk-and-france-relating-to-radiographichydrodynamics-facilities>.

²⁷ Bruno Tertrais, *A Comparison Between US, UK and French Nuclear Policies and Doctrines*, cit.

triad – submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs).²⁸ While the government has pledged to increase the stockpile ceiling to 260, this force lacks nuclear options in general, reducing its flexibility.²⁹

For example, according to its new 2025 Strategic Defence Review, the UK will incorporate the F-35A fighter jet ((currently operating only the non-dual-capable F-35B) into its nuclear posture,³⁰ thereby deepening the UK's contribution to NATO's nuclear burden-sharing arrangements. This was confirmed by the UK's recent acquisition of the F-35A and its participation in the US nuclear sharing framework, including the delivery of B61-12 gravity bombs to be carried by the aircraft.³¹

However, the UK's nuclear capabilities are heavily dependent on US support. The design of the British warhead, known as Holbrook, closely resembles the US W76-0, and the UK leases its Trident II D5 SLBMs from the United States.³² This dependence underscores the asymmetric nature of the UK's nuclear sovereignty. One proposal to address this issue is for the UK to develop and produce its own nuclear weapons independently. Currently, the UK is developing a new nuclear warhead, designated A21/Mk7 (also known as Astraea), as part of its program to replace existing warheads.³³ This initiative is proceeding in parallel with the United States' development of the W93/Mk7 warhead, with both countries focusing on their own sovereign designs.³⁴ As part of this effort, the UK is also modernising and expanding its facilities at the Atomic Weapons Establishment (AWE).³⁵

This interdependence is also political. Unlike France, which has consistently articulated its nuclear force as an autonomous tool of national and potentially European deterrence, the UK has not positioned its arsenal as a pillar of independent

²⁸ Hans M. Kristensen et al., "United Kingdom Nuclear Weapons, 2024", in *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 80, No. 6 (2024), p. 394-407, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2024.2420550>.

²⁹ UK Government, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age. The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*, March 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/global-britain-in-a-competitive-age-the-integrated-review-of-security-defence-development-and-foreign-policy>.

³⁰ UK Ministry of Defence, *Strategic Defence Review 2025. Making Britain Safer: Secure at Home, Strong Abroad*, June 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-strategic-defence-review-2025-making-britain-safer-secure-at-home-strong-abroad>.

³¹ Royal Air Force (RAF), *RAF F-35A Marks a Significant Step in Delivering a More Lethal Integrated Force and Joining NATO Nuclear Mission*, 25 June 2025, <https://www.raf.mod.uk/news/articles/raf-f-35a-marks-a-significant-step-in-delivering-a-more-lethal-integrated-force-and-joining-nato-nuclear-mission>.

³² Hans M. Kristensen et al., "United Kingdom Nuclear Weapons, 2024", cit.

³³ Nuclear Information Service, *Astraea: New Warhead Named in Defence Command Paper*, 11 April 2024, <https://www.nuclearinfo.org/?p=16828>.

³⁴ Claire Mills, "Replacing the UK's Nuclear Deterrent: The Warhead Programme", in *House of Commons Library Research Briefings*, No. 9777 (1 August 2024), <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9777>.

³⁵ George Allison, "Britain Developing New Sovereign Nuclear Warhead", in *UK Defence Journal*, 25 March 2024, <https://ukdefencejournal.org.uk/?p=48967>.

European defence. While one could argue that UK nuclear forces contribute to European security alongside US forces, this integration within NATO's strategic framework – exemplified by the UK's participation in the US Single Integrated Operational Plan (SIOP) since the 1960s – has fostered a doctrinal reliance on transatlantic deterrence.³⁶

Strategically, this close alignment with Washington may lead London to perceive less urgency in the face of shifting geopolitical threats. Still imbued with the historical 'special partnership' with the United States, British threat perceptions – though broadly aligned with the general European awareness of the 'Trump factor' – diverge slightly from those of continental Europe.³⁷

Another factor shaping UK policy is its continued rhetorical and diplomatic support for nuclear disarmament. This posture, partly aimed at maintaining favourable relations with the Global South – most of which supports the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) – places London in a delicate position. Any effort to assume greater leadership in European nuclear deterrence, particularly if it implies further arsenal expansion, would risk undermining the carefully managed balance between deterrence and disarmament in UK policy.

2.3 Option C: European Multilateral Nuclear Force (EMLF)

The contemporary European security landscape, characterised by escalating geopolitical tensions and evolving perceptions regarding the steadfastness of extended nuclear deterrence, has invigorated discussions surrounding the potential establishment of a European multilateral nuclear force (EMLF) within NATO. Such a force, conceived as a distinct European pillar open to the participation of states beyond France and the United Kingdom, would integrate European nuclear assets into NATO's established sharing structures and operational missions, thereby fundamentally recalibrating the continent's strategic calculus. The historical antecedent of the US-proposed Multilateral Force (MLF) during the Cold War, though ultimately unrealised, offers a pertinent blueprint for potentially integrating French, UK and other European forces into a robust new European deterrent within the Alliance.³⁸ Modern conceptualisations of an EMLF often revisit this precedent, envisioning a European-led nuclear component within NATO that would entail shared responsibilities and collective risk-sharing.

An effective model for European nuclear involvement should include France and the United Kingdom as nuclear warhead providers. At the same time, it should remain open to participation from other European NATO members – such as the

³⁶ Lawrence Freedman, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy*, cit., p. 232.

³⁷ Daniel Fiott, "EU Strategic Autonomy: Towards 'European Sovereignty' in Defence?", in *EUISS Briefs*, No. 12/2018 (November 2018), <https://www.iss.europa.eu/node/2292>.

³⁸ Michael John Williams, "Europe Should Dust Off Multilateral Nuclear Plans", in *Foreign Policy*, 26 March 2025, <https://foreignpolicy.com/?p=1190907>.

Netherlands, Germany, Italy and Poland – as de facto nuclear-sharing states within the framework of the EMLF.³⁹

An EMLF would necessitate a new political consensus on command and control. For Paris and London to extend a nuclear guarantee to their European partners, it would likely require a significant evolution in their doctrine. The most viable model would involve the establishment of a European nuclear planning body. This forum would allow non-nuclear European NATO member states to participate in crucial discussions regarding nuclear doctrine, targeting policies and escalation scenarios.⁴⁰ Such participation would foster a greater sense of shared security and collective ownership of the deterrent without infringing upon the ultimate national control of the nuclear arsenals. Within this framework, France and the United Kingdom could extend more explicit and formalised security assurances to their European partners, potentially codified in a new treaty. This would strengthen the credibility of the European nuclear deterrent in the eyes of both allies and potential adversaries. It would represent a significant evolution of the current posture, moving towards a more collaborative arrangement.

This model offers the most pragmatic approach by acknowledging the significant political and doctrinal obstacles to nuclear sharing, especially given the fiercely independent stances of France and the United Kingdom. Consequently, a framework founded on enhanced planning, dialogue and formalised assurances presents a coherent and attainable route to a more robust European defence identity, without necessitating an immediate and politically divisive relinquishment of national sovereignty.

The establishment of a credible EMLF would inevitably prompt a re-evaluation of the necessity and role of US tactical nuclear weapons in Europe. Two broad options could emerge. The development of a robust European nuclear-sharing arrangement could provide political cover for a phased and coordinated withdrawal of US B61 bombs from the continent. Such a move would be presented as a natural progression towards greater European strategic autonomy and a fairer distribution of responsibilities within the transatlantic alliance. Alternatively, US nuclear weapons could remain in Europe in a complementary capacity, offering a "supreme guarantee" to reinforce the European deterrent. In this scenario, the United States would continue to play a guarantor role in European security, while the day-to-day deterrence posture would be borne by European powers.

³⁹ Polina Sinovets and Adérito Vicente, "How to Deter Russia: More (Nuclear) May Be Better?", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 25|17 (March 2025), p. 4-5, <https://www.iai.it/en/node/19805>. In this case, we follow an inclusive European deterrence arrangement (bringing in states like Germany or Poland) would relieve the two existing European nuclear powers of an outsized share of responsibility and thus foster true burden-sharing across the continent. Astrid Chevreuil and Doreen Horschig, "Can France and the United Kingdom Replace the U.S. Nuclear Umbrella?", in *CSIS Critical Questions*, 4 March 2025), <https://www.csis.org/node/114993>.

⁴⁰ Adérito Vicente, *Why Europe Needs a Nuclear Deterrent: A Critical Appraisal*, Brussels, Martens Centre, October 2024, p. 42-43, <https://www.martenscentre.eu/?p=11471>.

The strategic value of a European multilateral force would be evident in several key areas. First, an EMLF would enhance the credibility and resilience of NATO's deterrence posture by fostering a more autonomous and coordinated European nuclear capability, thereby reducing excessive dependence on the United States' extended nuclear umbrella. While the American nuclear guarantee remains essential, recent geopolitical shifts and growing transatlantic uncertainties have prompted European leaders to consider alternatives that strengthen collective autonomy. By pooling resources and sharing operational control among participating European states, an EMLF would present a unified front against external threats, reinforcing collective defence commitments.

Second, the integration of European nuclear assets into NATO's established sharing mechanisms would support alliance cohesion and promote transparency. This approach avoids the fragmentation of deterrence efforts by embedding European nuclear capabilities within NATO's planning and consultation structures, ensuring that nuclear policy remains a collective and adaptive endeavour. Moreover, this inclusive framework would enable broader participation by European states beyond France and the UK, facilitating a more equitable distribution of nuclear responsibilities and encouraging greater burden-sharing.⁴¹

Finally, establishing a European multilateral force would send a strong political signal of European resolve and solidarity. In a period of shifting global power dynamics and increasing geopolitical assertiveness, such a step would highlight Europe's commitment to greater responsibility for its own security, while remaining firmly anchored within NATO. This dual approach – strengthening European capabilities in a manner that complements, rather than undermines, transatlantic unity – offers a pragmatic and forward-looking path for nuclear deterrence in the 21st century.

Nevertheless, certain challenges persist. There is a prevalent perception that French participation in NATO's nuclear structures, particularly under the current US administration, would require France to subordinate its national interests to those of the United States, which is unlikely given France's longstanding commitment to nuclear independence. Similarly, the United Kingdom's close strategic alignment with the United States and its full participation in the Nuclear Planning Group (NPG) diminish London's incentive to pursue alternatives to existing arrangements, as these already align with UK strategic interests. Any significant changes would likely necessitate adjustments in posture and capabilities, potentially incurring additional and possibly unwelcome costs. One possible solution is to use NATO's current nuclear sharing arrangements as a reference. These offer a practical model for ensuring long-term commitment to European security. A restructured and strengthened new ENPG could serve as the institutional framework for this effort. It would mirror NATO's multilateral existing arrangements in terms of missions,

⁴¹ Ibid.

rules of engagement and command and control.⁴² However, the final authority to use nuclear weapons would remain with the French President and the British Prime Minister.

Conclusions and recommendations

The ongoing shifts in the international system, particularly Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine and the evolving strategic priorities of the United States, necessitate a critical reassessment of NATO's extended nuclear deterrence and the exploration of European deterrent alternatives. The increasing precariousness of European security, coupled with a potential US strategic reorientation towards the Indo-Pacific, underscores the urgency for Europe to assume greater responsibility for its own defence, including in the nuclear domain.

Historically, United States extended nuclear deterrence has been the cornerstone of European security within NATO. However, the credibility of this commitment has faced recurring scepticism, exacerbated by the Trump Administration's consistent rhetoric of diminished American interest in Europe and frustration with Europe's low levels of military spending, clear signs of conventional military withdrawal from Europe and a visible decline in Washington's willingness to invest in European security. These concerns highlight the potential for gradual US disengagement from European defence, prompting the need for Europe to develop its own credible defence and deterrence architecture.

Three potential models for a more self-reliant European security order emerge as plausible foundations: (1) strengthening France's *force de frappe* as a European pillar; (2) developing an Anglo-French nuclear umbrella; and (3) establishing a European multilateral nuclear force within NATO, open to participation beyond France and the United Kingdom. Each of these options offers a compelling alternative for enhancing the European pillar of NATO.

Recommendations for NATO

In light of these considerations, NATO states should:

- *Initiate a comprehensive dialogue on European strategic autonomy and nuclear deterrence:* This dialogue should involve all European NATO members, acknowledging the evolving geopolitical landscape and the need for greater European responsibility in defence.
- *Explore the viability of an enhanced French nuclear role within a broader European deterrence framework:* Discussions should focus on the

⁴² Ibid., p. 18.

circumstances under which France's *force de frappe* could extend its deterrent effect to other European allies, addressing concerns about capabilities, political will, sustainability of this model in the longer term and potential modernisation, diversification or forward deployment.

- *Encourage deeper Franco-British cooperation on nuclear deterrence:* While acknowledging current limitations and dependencies, NATO should foster discussions on how the two European nuclear powers could enhance their collaboration to provide a more robust and credible deterrent for the continent. Furthermore, the UK's commitment and realistic contribution to European security require clarification. Nevertheless, the Lancaster House Treaties between Paris and London offer a solid foundation for defence cooperation.
- *Formally assess the feasibility and benefits of establishing a European Multilateral Nuclear Force within NATO:* This assessment should draw upon historical lessons from the MLF and consider how an EMLF could integrate European nuclear assets, strengthen collective defence and ensure alliance cohesion and transparency. In this context, it is essential to define an optimal model for the involvement of key European nuclear powers, particularly France and the United Kingdom. The model should also consider the potential participation of other European states – such as the Netherlands, Germany, Italy and Poland – in a second layer of NATO's extended nuclear deterrence, possibly within a newly structured ENPG.
- *Reaffirm the indispensable nature of the US nuclear guarantee while simultaneously promoting European self-reliance:* NATO should articulate a dual strategy that strengthens European capabilities in a manner that complements, rather than undermines, transatlantic unity.
- *Address the strategic implications of differing threat perceptions and nuclear postures among European allies:* Open and frank discussions are necessary to bridge any gaps in understanding and ensure a cohesive approach to European security in the nuclear domain.

By proactively addressing these critical questions for NATO, the Alliance can reinforce its deterrence posture, strengthen European security and adapt to the complex challenges of the 21st century.

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