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THE ROLE OF FRENCH NUCLEAR DETERRENCE IN FOSTERING A NEW EUROPEAN STRATEGIC CULTURE FOR GENUINE EUROPEAN STRATEGIC AUTONOMY

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INTRODUCTION

Following the **dual geostrategic shock Europe** has endured — on the one hand, **Russia's** ongoing aggression against Ukraine over the past four years, in the heart of Europe and under the shadow of its nuclear deterrence; and on the other hand, the increasingly visible divergence between **American** and European strategic interests — it has become extremely difficult for many Europeans to fully grasp the nature of the current situation.

The erosion of international law and the return of **Great Power competition** challenge the traditional European pacifism born from the near self-destruction of the first half of the twentieth century. International security institutions, foremost among them the UN, no longer fully perform their role of regulating international relations and peacefully resolving conflicts between states.

In this emerging and increasingly complex strategic environment, Europeans struggle to cope with uncertainty and manage **strategic ambiguity**. They can no longer rely on the comfortable clarity of American strategic leadership, remaining confined to the operational level, where one merely executes what has already been planned. Europeans must regain self-confidence, determine where they wish to position themselves strategically, and therefore learn once again to speak the language of power to shape events rather than endure them.

Thanks to their **nuclear deterrence** and permanent membership of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), France and the United Kingdom are more accustomed to thinking and acting strategically on a global scale in an uncertain and complex environment, including when confronted with threats to their vital national interests.

In this regard, it is particularly interesting to examine how France has developed a **strong culture of strategic autonomy** founded upon its nuclear deterrence, through the following steps:

- A historical perspective on the rationale behind and the implementation of France's decision to become a nuclear power;
- An overview of French nuclear doctrine and its distinctive features;
- An analysis of the latest presidential speech on French nuclear deterrence.

A better understanding of the origins and driving forces behind **France's strategic singularity within Europe** could serve as a source of inspiration for the development of a common European strategic culture, thereby helping Europeans identify the path toward genuine strategic autonomy — one that necessarily includes the nuclear dimension.

HISTORY OF FRENCH NUCLEAR DETERRENCE

World War II

The origins of France's decision to acquire a nuclear deterrent date back to World War II. In 1940, France collapsed within a matter of weeks. This was not merely a military defeat; it was a **major strategic shock**. A harsh reality became clear: the alliances of the time, less formalised and militarily integrated than today, did not guarantee national survival. Although the United Kingdom was an ally of France and the United States was politically close, the latter remained neutral at the start of the conflict, and the initial aid was neither immediate, decisive, nor sufficient.

The liberation of France, particularly in 1944, was carried out under American leadership, without France being considered a major strategic player. France regained its freedom... but **not its full autonomy**.

At the same time, the United States was developing nuclear weapons, but unlike the United Kingdom, France was excluded from the **Manhattan Project**. French leaders discovered that, even among allies, strategic technologies are not automatically shared.

The Dawn of the Nuclear Age

With the first use of atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945, the world was transformed and entered the **nuclear age**. Faced with the advent of this new weapon of mass destruction, France decided three months later to establish the French Atomic Energy Commission (CEA) to master nuclear energy. The goal was to catch up scientifically and technologically, particularly to develop civilian nuclear capabilities... but from the outset with an implicit military purpose.

In 1954, under the Fourth Republic, President René Coty and Prime Minister Pierre Mendès-France made the political **decision to launch a military nuclear program** in the interest of technological sovereignty and strategic autonomy.

National independence must include the **ability to defend one's vital interests** by one's own means. France's deterrence stems less from mistrust of the United States than from a clear-eyed view of the nature of alliances: useful, but never absolute.

The Cold War

During the Cold War, the world was shaped by the rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union. Tensions ran high in **Europe**, as it became a **potential theatre for a nuclear confrontation**.

Faced with the Soviet threat and the need for reconstruction and protection, France firmly aligned itself with the Western camp, becoming a **founding member** of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (**NATO**) and initially hosting NATO's first institutions and main commands on its territory.

Even though France was a NATO Ally, it **doubted the automatic guarantee of American protection** and the United States' willingness to risk its own destruction to defend Europe. These doubts were fuelled by the lack of nuclear sharing and by the American monopoly on decision-making.

The **crises** of the Cold War **reinforced these doubts**. The Korean War (1950–1953) demonstrated that even conflicts involving major powers could remain geographically and strategically limited without escalating into a global war. The Berlin Crisis posed the risk of direct confrontation on European soil.

In 1956, the **Suez Crisis** served as a **wake-up call**. After Egypt nationalised the Suez Canal, France and the United Kingdom intervened militarily and regained control of the canal. However, under pressure from the two nuclear powers, the Soviet Union and the United States, they were forced to withdraw. The message was stark: American interests could diverge from those of France, and Washington could compel its allies to act against their own interests or even against their will.

1958–1966: The Gaullist era

When General de Gaulle returned to power, he was not starting from scratch. He **formalised** the cross-party **consensus** that already existed: that France must decide its own destiny.

He also drafted a new constitution, that of the **Fifth Republic**, to establish an appropriate political and military structure, ensuring the verticality, effectiveness and credibility of decision-making. The President is the commander-in-chief of the armed forces and has sole authority over the use of nuclear deterrence, as his legitimacy derives from his election by direct universal suffrage.

France became a **nuclear power in 1960**, with the first detonation of a French nuclear bomb at Reggane, in Algeria, then a French department. It nevertheless **proposed** new avenues of

cooperation with the Americans. To transition from the status of a protected ally to that of a nuclear partner, it asked the Americans for:

- Genuine **sharing of information** regarding nuclear doctrine, strategic planning, and decision-making procedures in the event of war in Europe;
- Access to American nuclear weapons stationed in France and control over, or at least **joint decision-making** regarding their use;
- **Technological cooperation**, in the form of assistance in the field of delivery systems and nuclear warheads, following a model like the partnership between the United States and the United Kingdom.

However, during the meeting between President Charles de Gaulle and U.S. President John F. Kennedy in 1961, the **U.S.** response was a flat **refusal** for several reasons: the desire to retain exclusive control over nuclear weapons, the fear of proliferation, and the rejection of a co-decision system that would limit U.S. freedom of action. This negative American response confirmed, in the eyes of French leaders, that nuclear decision-making cannot be shared.

Given the strategic urgency and under the political impetus of General de Gaulle, who sought to create a “**nuclear strike force**,” the development in record time of the Dassault Mirage IV, a nuclear bomber represented a national industrial feat in the service of French deterrence. Designed to carry the AN-11 gravity-drop nuclear bomb, fly at Mach 2, and penetrate deep into enemy territory thanks to new in-flight refuelling capability, it enabled the French Air Force to assume permanent nuclear operational alert status starting **October 1, 1964**. The credibility of this nuclear capability also rested on the creation of the Strategic Air Forces (FAS), the definition of an operational doctrine, and nuclear procedures for maintenance and security.

To restore France’s autonomy in decision-making and action, as well as its full sovereignty, General de Gaulle decided in **1966 to withdraw from NATO command structure** and requested the departure of allied military forces stationed on French territory. Furthermore, he disapproved of the US nuclear doctrine of “graduated response”, which also applied to NATO and could potentially lead to a limited nuclear conflict on European soil. He also feared that France might find itself drawn into conflicts that were not its own. For France, this was not a matter of leaving the Atlantic Alliance, but of cooperating without being completely dependent on the American ally, and of developing its nuclear deterrent unhindered and in full autonomy.

A Credible Nuclear Deterrent

Credibility is an absolute requirement, because deterrence exists in the mind of the adversary only if it is credible. Otherwise, it is ignored.

France therefore gradually established a **full nuclear triad** to ensure permanence and survivability. With the first operational patrol of the nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine (SSBN) “Le Redoutable” in 1972, the sea-based nuclear deterrent guaranteed a second-strike capability, even if France was attacked. The triad was completed by a land-based component, with the deployment of land-based strategic ballistic missiles (ICBMs) on the Albion Plateau to establish France as a strategic sanctuary. Finally, France also developed a so-called tactical nuclear component—due to its short range—that was both land-based and airborne, intended to reinforce the overall credibility of its deterrence posture.

This **tremendous** financial, scientific, technological, and industrial **effort** over more than seven decades—regardless of which governments have been in power—has enabled France to establish a strong and comprehensive Defence Technological and Industrial Base” (**DTIB**), in order to build nuclear and conventional weapons, delivery systems, intelligence and command and control systems that are as autonomous as possible for French defence. Moreover, it should be noted that, as with the major nuclear powers, the development of nuclear deterrent and **space capabilities** (missile and rocket propulsion, observation and communication satellites) are closely intertwined.

FRENCH NUCLEAR DOCTRINE

The Core of the Doctrine

The definition of **French nuclear doctrine** provided by President Emmanuel Macron in 2020 remains true to its original spirit and is still entirely relevant today: “ Should any head of state or government ever underestimate France’s visceral attachment to its freedom and contemplate attacking our vital interests, whatever they may be, he must know that our nuclear forces are capable of inflicting absolutely unacceptable damage on his centres of power—that is, on his key political, military, and economic centres. ”

The term “**vital interests**” is deliberately vague, to complicate the adversary’s calculations and preserve the President’s discretion. This strategic ambiguity is a central element of deterrence.

French nuclear deterrence does not exist to defeat or conquer, but to prevent any aggression that would jeopardise the very existence of the Nation. The atomic bomb is not just another weapon in the military arsenal; it is first and foremost a **political weapon** whose objective is to preserve peace by making war an irrational option.

However, deterrence works when it exists in the mind of the adversary. As Henry Kissinger observed, “deterrence depends not only on the existence of power, but on the perception of the will to use it.” The **credibility of deterrence** is therefore the product of three factors: political will (regular presidential addresses), technological and industrial capability (ongoing scientific research and a comprehensive DTIB), operational capability (sustained readiness and successful demonstrations). If any one of these factors is lacking, deterrence is no longer credible and therefore fails to fulfil its mission.

Adaptation and Continuity

At the end of the Cold War, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the question of the relevance of nuclear deterrence naturally arose. France made the clear decision to continue relying on it while **adapting** its approach.

Despite changes in the strategic context, **French nuclear deterrence** has remained structured around five key characteristics that have allowed it to retain its full relevance, without ever being escalatory:

- powerful and responsible,
- independent and a guarantee of sovereignty,
- credible,
- strictly defensive, supported by conventional forces,
- with a European dimension.

Adhering to a principle of **strict sufficiency**, France reduced its arsenals, abandoned the land-based nuclear deterrent, and has maintained two credible, permanent, and complementary components of nuclear deterrence to guard against any technological disruption that would nullify the advantages of one of the components:

- on the one hand, the visible and reversible **airborne nuclear deterrent**, establishing France as a strategic sanctuary, enabling the management of escalation, and the delivery of a nuclear warning strike (up to 20 times Hiroshima), with 40 Rafale multiple fighter jets, ASMP-A missiles (near-hypersonic, highly manoeuvrable, complex trajectories, 300 kT) and 15 Multi-Role Tanker Transport (MRTT),

- on the other hand, the invisible, autonomous, and survivable **sea-based nuclear deterrent**, enabling a second-strike capability while guaranteeing unacceptable damage to the attacker (1,000 times Hiroshima), 4 SSBNs (Triomphant, Téméraire, Vigilant, Terrible),
- both components of a nuclear deterrent are implemented through a **highly secure, redundant, and resilient** command and control (C2) system with global reach, always enabling the secure transmission and execution of the presidential order.

France accompanied this shift with a landmark decision: the end of nuclear testing in **1996**, followed by accession to the **Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty**. This choice led to a transition to a **simulation**, with the development of advanced scientific and technological capabilities to ensure the robustness and reliability of weapons without actual testing. In this context, French deterrence now rests on a demanding balance: fewer weapons, but credibility maintained through the ongoing modernisation of delivery platforms, doctrines, and technologies.

Characteristics of French Nuclear Doctrine

France is a global power, as it possesses the world's second-largest maritime domain, with overseas territories and populations across every major ocean, and is a permanent member of the UNSCR. Yet, it remains a middle power whose demographic, economic and military resources do not allow it to engage in a symmetrical arms race with the major powers.

This is why it developed a “**deterrence from the weak to the strong**,” emphasising penetration rather than saturation. Its capabilities may seem modest compared to the Russian or American arsenals of more than 5,000 warheads, but the miniaturisation of warheads and delivery systems, along with technological excellence maintained at the highest level, ensure the survivability and penetration of French weapons into the heart of the most modern and effective defence systems.

Unlike the Americans and NATO, who plan to use tactical gravity-drop nuclear bombs, such as the B61, deployed notably by dual-capable aircraft (DCA) as part of extended nuclear deterrence and nuclear sharing, French President François Mitterrand decided to abandon the concept of tactical nuclear weapons in 1984. He replaced it with that of an optional, unique and non-renewable “**nuclear warning strike**”, using a highly manoeuvrable, near-hypersonic airborne nuclear missiles. France rejects the notion of continuity between conventional warfare and nuclear warfare, as the objective is not to wage a protracted nuclear battle, but to restore deterrence, which in French doctrine is exclusively nuclear. The use of a nuclear weapon does not merely alter the intensity of the war—it changes its very nature.

Furthermore, the **complete independence** of French planning and command and control in the implementation of nuclear deterrence **complicates the adversary's calculations**, as it introduces an additional factor of uncertainty. It is therefore an advantage for Europeans that French deterrence is not integrated into NATO's Nuclear Planning Group (NPG), as it cannot be the subject of potential negotiations between Russia and the United States for example. By its very existence and France's refusal to resort to tactical nuclear weapons, it helps to protect the European continent.

INSIGHTS INTO THE PRESIDENT'S LATEST SPEECH ON FRENCH NUCLEAR DETERRENCE

Audiences for the message

Following in the tradition of his predecessors, President Emmanuel Macron delivered a **speech on March 2, 2026, from the Île Longue SSBN** base on the western tip of Brittany. Acknowledging the sudden hardening of the geostrategic context and the erosion of international arms control frameworks, his speech aimed both to reaffirm France's determination to defend its vital interests against all threats and to outline the adjustments to its nuclear deterrence doctrine in an environment that is now less stable and less predictable.

His message, which served both domestic and international purposes, was intended for three distinct audiences:

- the French, to reassure them that the nation's sovereignty and ultimate protection would be maintained,
- strategic competitors, to remind them of France's determination to defend its interests against future threats,
- European allies, to clarify the European dimension of French nuclear deterrence.

Preserving strategic autonomy

The President thus strongly reaffirms the inviolable foundations of French nuclear deterrence: a **strictly national decision** on its use, falling exclusively within the purview of the Head of State, with no sharing of planning or vital interests.

Modernisation of deterrence

In a profoundly deteriorated strategic environment, marked by the end of arms control agreements and the return of Great Power competition, France maintains its strategic deterrence doctrine, based on the ability to inflict unacceptable damage. This continuity is accompanied by an **effort to modernise and adapt capabilities**, including the renewal of weapons systems (3rd Gen SSBNs, M51.4 ballistic missiles, ASN4G hypersonic nuclear air-launched missile). It also involves a deliberate increase in the number of nuclear warheads and the end of transparency, with the aim of increasing ambiguity and ensuring the ability to penetrate enemy defences—even in the face of collusion between multiple adversaries—as a means of bolstering credibility.

The European Dimension of French Nuclear Deterrence

At the same time, the presidential statement more clearly articulates the European dimension of French deterrence. The new concept of “**forward deterrence**”, a kind of extended deterrence, is a gradual approach to cooperation with European allies. This will enable their participation, with conventional forces, in nuclear deterrence exercises. If necessary, this could extend to the *ad hoc* deployment of elements of French strategic forces on their territory. The objective is to create European strategic depth by dispersing air capabilities across the continent, to complicate the adversary’s calculations.

This initiative carried out in full transparency with the U.S. and in close coordination with the UK, remains distinct from but complementary to NATO, without calling into question French sovereignty over nuclear decision-making. It is based on **enhanced political dialogue**, intelligence sharing, dedicated communication channels, and a common understanding of escalation mechanisms. Eight countries¹ have already agreed to begin exchanges at the political level, in accordance with the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT).

Furthermore, “forward deterrence” thus establishes a logic of “**mutual strategic support**”: French deterrence strengthens the protection of European allies, while their commitment in turn contributes to bolstering the credibility and effectiveness of Europe’s collective security posture—and thus that of France.

¹ Germany, Belgium, Denmark, Greece, Nederland, Poland, Sweden and United Kingdom.

There are at least three identified areas in which **Europeans can engage to contribute to the conventional support** of French nuclear deterrence: early warning, extended air defence and deep precision strike.

Such cooperation will strengthen mutual trust and **create greater strategic proximity** among allies, serving to enhance continental cohesion.

However, given the very strong interdependencies within Europe, French vital interests have a European dimension, although it is neither relevant nor straightforward to define their geographical scope. This scope is certainly not to be confused with the territories of the eight countries that have committed to conducting high-level political dialogue. There is no two-speed Europe, with one part protected and the other not. As the scope of France's vital interests has deliberately not been defined, it is naturally **the whole of the European continent** that **will benefit from** the establishment of "**forward deterrence**".

French deterrence thus emerges as a structural pillar of European security, complementary to NATO, but without the pooling of nuclear decision-making. This framework — **national sovereignty for effective decision-making, European solidarity in its effects** — reflects an adaptation to a world that is now less regulated, in which credibility rests as much on capabilities as on strategic uncertainty.

CONCLUSION

As highlighted earlier, **France's nuclear deterrent** emerged from the traumatic historical experience of the world wars of the 20th century and from a strong and enduring political will that transcends partisan lines. A central element of French independence, it is first and foremost a political tool rather than a military weapon and has consistently adapted to changes in the geostrategic landscape without ever losing sight of its original purpose: the **protection of France's vital interests**.

Nuclear deterrence has also served to **raise the standards of the French DTIB and conventional military forces**, through the extremely demanding and ongoing nature of the mission.

Weakness is provocative. That is why President Macron rightly said: "To be free, one must be feared. To be feared, one must be powerful. To be powerful, one must be more united."

There can be **no true European strategic autonomy without incorporating the nuclear dimension**. This is why France's initiative to foster political discussions on nuclear deterrence with its European allies is likely to encourage a clearer awareness of their genuine strategic interests. Such a dialogue will also help strengthen their ability to think and act more strategically in an increasingly uncertain and confrontational international environment.

Reflecting on nuclear deterrence also has a profound educational dimension for Europeans, leading them to anticipate the improbable, analyse complexity, make decisions under conditions of uncertainty, and act in the face of adversity. Beyond the nuclear issue itself, this intellectual approach represents a powerful school of strategic thought that teaches us **how to deal with strategic ambiguity**.

It is one of the most effective ways to foster a **shared strategic culture** among European allies and to strengthen cooperation across all domains, thereby contributing to **European strategic autonomy** and to the protection of Europe's common interests in an increasingly unstable and rapidly changing world.

Strategic expertise in complete independance



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