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TO DIE FOR ZILUPE? THE COMING WAR

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May 2026



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“As for the future, it is not a question of predicting, but to make it possible.”,
 Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

PROLOGUE

October 2026, Riga: Ainārs Šlesers’ populist Latvia First (LPV) party comes out on top in the elections and wins twenty of the hundred seats in the *Saeima*, the Latvian parliament. His anti-immigration rhetoric, critical of pro-Ukrainian policy and sanctions against Russia, has won over a significant portion of the electorate. This is particularly the case in the Latgale constituency, which borders Russia and has up to 50% Russian speakers in certain urban areas. His party is unable to join a governing coalition but remains influential and steps up its propaganda.

November 2026, Washington: Donald Trump has lost the midterm elections but refuses to concede defeat. He plunges the United States into a major constitutional and political crisis. Violence erupts across the country and elected representatives and senators are barred from entering the Capitol. Despite this, *impeachment* proceedings are initiated in the House of Representatives.

January 2027, Moscow: the war with Ukraine is bogged down and the front line is no longer shifting. In some places, it has even been retreating since spring 2026. The damage caused by Ukrainian missiles and drones to the Russian oil industry has brought it virtually to a standstill. Vladimir Putin orders a general mobilisation.

April 2027, Taiwan Strait: a Taiwanese fighter jet shoots down a Chinese fighter aircraft that was operating in its airspace. Beijing uses this incident to justify a “proportionate response”. Xi Jinping announces “military exercises”, effectively cutting off all sea and air routes around the island. Global financial markets react violently. The United States deploys two aircraft carriers and nuclear submarines to the region. The crisis could escalate at any moment¹.

2 May 2027, Paris: a new President of the Republic is elected. He accepts the resignation of the incumbent government and announces parliamentary elections for June.

During the night of 7 May 2027, Russian troops enter Latvia and seize the small town of Zilupe, a major road and rail crossing between the two countries located immediately adjacent to the

¹“Taïwan se prépare à une invasion chinoise en 2027”, *Le Grand Continent*, March 20, 2025, <https://legrandcontinent.eu/fr/2025/03/20/taiwan-se-prepare-a-une-invasion-chinoise-en-2027/> – See also, Andreas Fulda, “Si la Chine envahit Taïwan”, *Le Grand Continent*, April 19, 2026, <https://legrandcontinent.eu/fr/2026/04/19/si-la-chine-envahit-taiwan/>.

border. They face the NATO multinational brigade, commanded by Canada and comprising 2,200 men, which includes no French or British troops, nor any German or Polish troops. All NATO troops combined numbers around 4,000 men, supporting the 8,000 Latvian professional soldiers, 10,000 National Guardsmen and 30,000 reservists. Since the summer of 2026, the US president, determined to “punish the Europeans” for failing to assist him in Iran, has withdrawn the few American soldiers who were stationed there. Following their doctrine, the Russians are amassing considerable firepower, but it remains on their own territory, forcing the Europeans to bear the political cost of a strike against Russia².

On the morning of 8 May 2027, Vladimir Putin issues an ultimatum to the Europeans to cease all financial and military aid to Ukraine, failing which he would continue his invasion of the Baltic territories, whose historical ties with Russia he highlighted. At the same time, he orders the Minister of Defence and the Chief of the General Staff to “place the Russian army’s deterrent forces on special combat alert³.”

8 May 2027: the Latvian coalition government invokes Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty and calls on NATO allies for assistance.

What will Donald Trump, still in office, do, given his obsession with the blockade of the Strait of Hormuz – which continues to weigh on the global economy – and now with that of Taiwan, as well as with his re-election, which he plans to celebrate in the new White House ballroom he has just inaugurated? And what will the newly elected French president, who has yet to appoint a prime minister, do?

This is not about predicting the future, but about trying to understand how, in the event of a perfect storm, and given the lessons of the war in Ukraine, the evolution of French nuclear doctrine might help to shape the future.

² On the choice of Zilupe, see the study by Stéphane Audrand, “Par où Poutine attaquera-t-il l’Europe ?”, *Le Grand Continent*, 12 December 2025, <https://legrandcontinent.eu/fr/2025/12/12/par-ou-poutine-attaquera-t-il-leurope/> – See also the interview with Céline Bayou, “Poutine pourrait lancer une offensive conventionnelle contre les pays Baltes”, *Le Figaro*, 17 April 2026, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/international/celine-bayou-vladimir-poutine-pourrait-lancer-une-offensive-de-grande-ampleur-contre-les-pays-baltes-20260416>.

³ A phrase used by Vladimir Putin on Sunday 27 February 2022, the fourth day of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, which in reality consists of a simple increase in the number of personnel responsible for operating nuclear weapons at the headquarters of the strategic forces.

A STRATEGIC VOID HAS OPENED ON THE FRINGES OF THE EU

Zilupe: a bold gamble to halt European aid to Ukraine

What could drive the Russian president to invade a European country, despite repeatedly claiming he had no such intention⁴ ?

First, Putin may realise that time is not on his side. The longer the conflict drags on, the more European states rearm. Not only are they investing heavily in military personnel and equipment, but moreover, the technologies they are developing risk widening the gap with the weapons Russia currently possesses or will eventually possess⁵ and which its economy struggles to supply on its own.

Paradoxically, the erosion of the transatlantic link could increase the threats facing the Kremlin. Indeed, the fact that European weapons would compensate for the withdrawal of those deployed by the United States would lead to a more complex and unpredictable environment in the absence of a hegemon – the sole guarantor of security, a role played by the United States since the end of the Second World War⁶.

Furthermore, in the long term, the prospect of a nuclear arms race in Europe, with Polish, Swedish or even German nuclear deterrents⁷ joining the French and British nuclear arsenals,

⁴ At an economic forum in Moscow on 2 December 2025, Vladimir Putin stated: “We have no intention of waging war on Europe, but if Europe so wishes and starts it, we are ready right now.” Stanislas Vasak, “Si l’Europe veut ‘la guerre’ avec la Russie, ‘nous sommes prêts’, lance Vladimir Poutine”, *France culture*, 2 December 2025, <https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceculture/podcasts/journal-de-18h/journal-de-18h-emission-du-mardi-02-decembre-2025-4359682>.

⁵ See, for example, on the integration of artificial intelligence into command and control systems: Rudy Ruitenberg, « France readies AI-powered combat data-management similar to US ‘Maven’ » *Defense News*, 17 April 2026, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2026/04/16/france-readies-ai-powered-combat-data-management-similar-to-us-maven/>.

⁶ Eugene Rumer, “Belligerent and Beleaguered: Russia After the War with Ukraine”, *Carnegie*, 19 March 2026, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2026/03/russia-ukraine-postwar-divided-european-security>.

⁷ Naman Karl-Thomas Habtom, “Don’t Normalize the Nordic Nuke”, *Foreign Policy*, 30 January 2026, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2026/01/30/nuclear-weapons-nordic-scandinavia-sweden-finland-norway-denmark-russia-greenland/>. In March 2025, the Polish Prime Minister, Donald Tusk, declared before his Parliament: “Poland must acquire the most advanced capabilities, particularly in the field of nuclear weapons and modern unconventional weapons.” Louise Souverbie “La dissuasion nucléaire vue de la Pologne : au cœur des recompositions stratégiques en Europe”, *Institut de Relations Internationales et Stratégiques (IRIS)*, 24 September 2025, <https://www.iris-france.org/presse/la-dissuasion-nucleaire-vue-de-la-pologne-au-coeur-des-recompositions-strategiques-en-europe/#:~:text=Dans%20le%20contexte%20de%20la%20guerre%20en,pas%20en%20soi%20que%20la%20Pologne%20pourrait>. In February 2026, during a television interview, President Karol Nawrocki expressed his conviction that Poland should “possess its own nuclear capabilities, both energy-related and military”: « Pour son président, la Pologne devrait se doter de l’arme nucléaire face à la menace russe », *L’Opinion*, 16 February 2026, <https://www.lopinion.fr/international/pour-son-president-la-pologne-devrait-se-doter-de-larme-nucleaire-face-a-la-menace-russe>. In July 2025, the leader of the CDU group in the German Bundestag, Jens Spahn, stated: “American nuclear bombs are also stationed in Germany for this purpose. But in the long term, this is not enough. We must discuss German or European participation in the nuclear arsenals of France and the United Kingdom, and possibly our own participation alongside other European states. This will be costly. But those who want protection must also finance it.”: Amaury Coutansais-Pervinquière, “Parapluie nucléaire européen: ‘Cela ne fonctionnera qu’avec le leadership allemand’, assure un élu du Bundestag”, *Le Figaro*, 8 July 2025,

would undoubtedly cause deep concern in the Kremlin⁸, as would the likelihood that Poland, Germany and several other European countries might acquire ballistic missiles equipped with conventional warheads⁹.

Putin has shown himself to be a bold and opportunistic strategist, willing to exploit even the slightest window of opportunity to pounce on his prey. The fact that the US is preoccupied both domestically and abroad, and that a newly elected French president – without his own government – leads the only autonomous European nuclear power, could present a unique opportunity, a kind of cosmic alignment. Not so much to seize European territories, but to halt aid to Ukraine and, with it, this protracted war.

It is a bold gamble, but it could be worth taking. Here are the reasons why.

Putin could replicate the nuclear blackmail that worked so well in Ukraine to intimidate the United States and the Europeans

The term "nuclear blackmail," used by the French president in his speech at *Île Longue* on 2 March 2026¹⁰, is similar to, though not an exact equivalent of, the more familiar concept of "aggressive sanctuarisation", coined by the French expert Jean-Louis Gergorin in the early 1990s. This refers to a nuclear-armed country taking advantage of its freedom of action to carry out limited provocations or territorial seizures in neighbouring, non-nuclear-armed countries¹¹.

<https://www.lefigaro.fr/international/parapluie-nucleaire-europeen-cela-ne-fonctionnera-qu-avec-le-leadership-allemand-assure-un-elu-du-bundestag-20250703>.

⁸Ulrich Kühn, "Is Europe Moving to an Independent Nuclear Deterrent?", *Arms Control Association*, May 2025, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2025-05/features/europe-moving-independent-nuclear-deterrent>.

⁹ See, for example, Sebastian Sprenger, "Lockheed Vows Quick Action on German Typhon Missile Launcher Request", *Defense News*, 28 July 2025, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2025/07/28/lockheed-vows-quick-action-on-german-typhon-missile-launcher-request/>. 28 2025

¹⁰ "I owe it to the Nation, for today but also for the future, to provide the absolute assurance that our deterrent will remain credible and that, in times of extreme circumstances, it will spare us from any blackmail or capitulation.": "Déplacement sur la base opérationnelle de l'Île Longue", *Élysée*, 2 March 2026, <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2026/03/02/deplacement-sur-la-base-operationnelle-de-lile-longue>.

¹¹ Bruno Tertrais, "Quel avenir pour la dissuasion nucléaire", *Fondation pour l'innovation politique*, p. 25, October 2022, <https://www.fondapol.org/app/uploads/2022/10/211-dissuasion-nucleaire-fr-2022-10-03-w-1.pdf> and Bruno Tertrais, "Nucléaire : face à Poutine, une dissuasion à l'europpéenne, conversation avec Bruno Tertrais.", *Le Grand Continent*, 11 March 2024, <https://legrandcontinent.eu/fr/2024/03/11/nucleaire-face-a-poutine-une-dissuasion-a-leuropeenne-conversation-avec-bruno-tertrais/>.

Yet it is a fact that Russia's possession of nuclear weapons, along with the numerous threats from the Russian authorities creating a sort of "nuclear noise", have inhibited, to say the least, Western countries since 24 February 2022¹².

Not only have the US and European states refrained from direct military intervention – such as enforcing a no-fly zone over Ukraine – but they only very gradually and cautiously provided weapons to the Ukrainians, and only to the extent that such weapons would not be used to strike the Russian territory.

So why wouldn't what worked in Ukraine work in Latvia? Because of Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty? "A mere paper tiger," to quote Donald Trump. Especially since Putin amended Russia's nuclear doctrine in 2024¹³. This change was presented as a response to the reality of the war in Ukraine and as a signal to the West, particularly following Ukraine's use of American long-range missiles on Russian territory. This can be seen as Russia's desire to restore the full deterrent potential of its aggressive sanctuary: "I attack you, but don't think retaliating beyond the threshold of my vital interests without risking a nuclear response."

Until now, the Russian doctrine (2020 version) provided for the use of nuclear weapons only in the event of a nuclear attack or a conventional attack, "threatening the very existence of the Russian state". The new doctrine considerably broadens the scope of application: a massive conventional attack, even if carried out by a non-nuclear state but supported by a nuclear power (such as the US, the UK or France in the case of Ukraine), is now considered a joint attack against the Russian Federation and its allies.

This makes the Zilupe scenario all the more plausible.

NATO and French nuclear deterrents have seen their credibility eroded in the face of a strengthened Russian nuclear threat

The only way to counter nuclear blackmail is with another credible nuclear threat. However, as Alexander Mattelaer points out¹⁴, the hybrid war waged by Russia against European

¹² Claire Mills, "Russia's use of nuclear threats during the Ukraine conflict", Research Briefing, *House of Commons Library*, Number 9825, 20 December 2024, <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9825/CBP-9825.pdf> – See also Liviu Horovitz and Michal Smetana, "Russia's Nuclear Signaling in the War Against Ukraine: A Chronology of the Biden Era", working papers, *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP)*, 3 December 2025, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/russias-nuclear-signaling-in-the-war-against-ukraine>.

¹³ Isabelle Falcon, "Officialisation de la nouvelle doctrine nucléaire russe", *Observatoire de la dissuasion nucléaire, Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique*, decree of 19 november 2024, <https://www.frstrategie.org/programmes/observatoire-de-la-dissuasion/officialisation-nouvelle-doctrine-nucleaire-russe-2024>.

¹⁴ Alexander Mattelaer "Making Russia Fear Escalation Again", *The Hague Center for Strategic Studies*, 26 March 2026, <https://hcss.nl/report/making-russia-fear-escalation-again/>.

countries since at least 2016 demonstrates the bitter failure of American and, even more so, European leaders to deter it from doing so.

It is precisely because Russia has been emboldened by the lack of response to its provocations that it has gradually increased both the number and intensity of these actions. As former French Defence Minister, now Prime Minister, Sébastien Lecornu, puts it: “This is no longer peace. It is not yet war. It is a state of permanent alert¹⁵.”

If Russian leaders are so confident that they can carry out their hybrid operations with impunity, spread fear amongst the peoples of Europe and increase pressure on their governments, it is precisely because they are convinced of their ability to manage escalation – whether nuclear or conventional – better than NATO.

In the Zilupe scenario, the real question is not what Trump, and the French president will do, but rather what Putin thinks they will do, before launching his attack. As Thomas Schelling, the leading theorist of “diplomacy of violence” and Nobel laureate in economics, stated: “deterrence rests on what the other believes you will do, not on what you will actually do”¹⁶.

From this perspective, several factual elements may inform our thinking.

Firstly, it is hard to imagine the US president, after two years of criticising NATO and denigrating the Europeans for failing to support him in his war against Iran, would embark on a nuclear escalation against Putin’s Russia – with whom he has always claimed to have “excellent relations”.

Furthermore, it seems equally unlikely that this president would risk American lives in ground or air combat to defend Zilupe in Latvia, a region and a country, the vast majority of Americans would struggle to locate on a map.

Under these circumstances, the most likely crisis scenario is that Trump would avoid direct war with Russia and, at best, offer limited support to NATO under pressure from the American deep state. He might even exploit the crisis to weaken the Europeans, demanding increased purchases of US military equipment, and conducting one-on-one negotiations with Putin to

¹⁵ Sébastien Lecornu, “Towards War – France Facing Global Rearmament”, Plon 2024, revised and expanded edition by the author 2025, p. 18.

¹⁶ Schelling, Thomas C. *Strategy of Conflict*, Oxford University Press, 1960 (French translation, Cairn Editions) p. 166: “For a threat to be effective, it does not depend on the fact that the one making it has less to lose, should it be carried out, than the one being threatened, but on the credibility the other attributes to it.”

find a way out of the crisis. This scenario is even more tempting for Putin as if the US abandons the Europeans, it would be the final nail in NATO's coffin¹⁷.

As for France, can we imagine the newly elected president telling his fellow citizens that France's vital interests are threatened by an invasion of part of Latvia? Perhaps this is what Donald Trump meant when he added to his remark that NATO is a "paper tiger"... "and Putin knows it". On the contrary, a newly elected president would likely opt for extreme caution, especially since a conventional strike against Russia could trigger a tactical or strategic nuclear response under Russia's revised nuclear doctrine. Unfortunately, the concept of "vital interests" is highly intellectual and distinctly French, difficult for other Europeans to grasp except in contrast to the "positive American guarantee." This could open a credibility gap that Putin might exploit.

As for the UK, would it really embark on a policy of deterrence on its own, without the backing of its American ally even if in coordination with its French partner?

European States' Conventional Defence Remains Weak

Without the support of American conventional forces, their command-and-control capabilities within NATO *via* Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) and all the American officers at Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE), and above all their intelligence and communications capabilities, the forces of European states would be hard pressed to resist a Russian *armed aggression* such as that described in the Zilupe scenario.

Technologically and operationally, European air forces are superior to their Russian counterparts, at least in theory and if one disregards aerial drones, an area in which the Russians now outclass us. But vastly outnumbered¹⁸, do these European forces have sufficient ammunition to sustain a conflict over the long term? Would they be prepared to take on the Russian air forces and the integrated Russian air defence system, both of which have suffered significant losses but remain operational and still formidable¹⁹? Would the Europeans even be capable of using NATO command structures, such as Ramstein Air Base, to conduct air operations without the active assistance of American officers?

¹⁷ David Ignatius, "What would Trump do if Putin struck Europe?", *Washington Post*, 16 April 2026: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2026/04/16/russia-putin-threat-europe-nato-raises-questions-about-trump/>.

¹⁸ Despite significant losses, the Russian air force remains numerically substantial, with around 4,290 active aircraft in 2026, including 1,524 fighters. Furthermore, Russia continues to produce and modernise its aircraft, notably the Su-35 and Su-30SM, which remain pillars of its regional air superiority: "Russian Air Force", *Global Military*, https://www.globalmilitary.net/air_forces/rus/.

¹⁹ See on this point the very comprehensive study by Colonels Adrien Goremans and Jean-Christophe Noël, "L'avenir de la supériorité aérienne – maîtriser le ciel en haute intensité", *Institut français des relations internationales (IFRI)*, January 2025, https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/2025-01/ifri_gorremans_avenir_superiorite_aerienne_2025_0.pdf.

As for ground combat, which European country would accept as many casualties as Ukraine or Russia to continue the war?

After four years of war in Ukraine, Russia has demonstrated its ability to bypass NATO air defences in at least three ways.

First, by saturating NATO air defences with low-cost drones, which Russia can now produce *en masse* and are technologically more advanced than early Iranian models. European air defences still lack the "depth" to counter saturating attacks, and their capacity to produce effective anti-missile systems, such as the Aster family, remains limited, despite significant improvements.

Second, using intermediate-range ballistic missiles like the Orechnik, now combat-proven, which is both MIRV-capable (multiple warheads per missile) and dual use (can carry conventional or nuclear warheads). The experience of the war against Iran showed that even advanced ballistic missile defences (like those of Israel and the US) cannot intercept 100% of incoming missiles — something far beyond European capabilities.

Third, through "side" bypasses, such as Russian special forces operating from merchant ships, armed drones, or containers on trucks within Europe. Such operations, similar to Ukraine's *Spiderweb* operation, are entirely feasible deep within European territory. The overflight of strategic sites by unidentified drones — such as the Bergerac explosives factory in France, *Île Longue*, or the Belgian air base at Kleine-Brogel, where US nuclear bombs are stored — should be seen as warnings²⁰.

These various forms of bypasses undermine the assumed European air superiority. One of the pillars of Western military strategy, tied to air superiority, is the ability to maintain a secure rear area, free from enemy threats, where air bases, fuel and munition depots, and complex logistical infrastructure can operate without adversary attacks. This idea, inherited from expeditionary warfare, assumed that bombing others could be done without fear of retaliation. However, the sanctity of European territories — including strategic air bases — can no longer be taken for granted, and insufficient measures appear to have been taken to counter these threats.

Lacking US technological superiority and unwilling to pay the price of blood like Ukraine or Russia, European states, facing the strategic void left by the US withdrawal, might be tempted to capitulate.

²⁰ See Pascal Dupont, "Survols de drones au-dessus de l'Europe : l'espace aérien sous tension", *Revue de la Défense Nationale*, 10 December 2025, <https://www.defnat.com/e-RDN/vue-tribune.php?ctribune=1895>.

In this context, could the evolution of French nuclear doctrine of “advanced deterrence” offer the beginning of an answer?

THE EVOLUTION OF FRENCH NUCLEAR DOCTRINE: A STARTING POINT FOR AN ANSWER?

Acknowledging that “our competitors have evolved, as have our partners”, the President of the Republic announced in his speech on 2 March 2026 that it was necessary to “strengthen our nuclear deterrence in the face of a combination of threats” and to “conceive our deterrence strategy within the depth of European territory”, outlining two main areas of focus.

The “enhancement of France’s posture”

The first axis involves France reinforcing the credibility of its own deterrence. This “enhanced posture” unfolds in three stages.

In the short term, France aims to increase the “conventional support” of its nuclear forces, – i.e., their ability to penetrate Russian air defences and protect European territory. This is the idea put forward by the President of the Republic, who stated that “to be strong in our nuclear deterrence, we must be strong in our conventional capabilities in all their dimensions”. Three types of weapon systems are involved: deep strike, early warning and air defence/anti-drone systems. However, in the President’s words, “recent years have clearly demonstrated the glaring lack of supporting capabilities in Europe”.

This conventional support could be provided to France by European partners (as they do for the American nuclear deterrence within NATO), in exchange for the absence of financial participation in nuclear deterrence which would remain under the exclusive decision of the French president, just as the decision to use nuclear weapons within NATO remains the ultimate decision of the US President.

The key benefit of this development would be to strengthen European nuclear deterrence by enhancing conventional capabilities in synergy among European partners, maintaining costs under control for all involved. France would thus bear little or no cost for the necessary increase in conventional capabilities, and the rest of Europe would not have to pay for French deterrence (not even in being forced to buy French nuclear airplanes).

With each country contributing to the overall success, it is possible to envisage certain countries reinforcing their existing capabilities, such as the Suppression of Enemy Air Defences (SEAD), using weapons such as anti-radar missiles – which France no longer possesses – whilst others would take charge of air defence.

In the medium term, France plans to increase the number of nuclear warheads to develop new capabilities, such as an additional squadron of strategic air forces. This increase, which will necessarily take a long, will be carried out in a non-transparent manner to “cut short any speculation”. This is the purpose of the Tritium programme.

In the long term, that is to say within the next ten to fifteen years, the enhancement of France’s nuclear posture will be achieved through the deployment of new delivery systems such as third-generation ballistic missile submarines and the future air combat system, as well as new warheads such as the M 51.4 missiles for submarines and the future manoeuvrable hypersonic missile ASN4G (4th-generation air-to-surface nuclear missile).

“Advanced deterrence”

The second axis of evolution in French nuclear doctrine is what the President of the Republic has termed “advanced deterrence”. This is a “gradual approach” which, first and foremost, offers partners the opportunity to participate in deterrence exercises, which may “also involve signalling, including beyond our strict borders, or the conventional participation of allied forces in our nuclear activities”.

Secondly, it may provide for the “deployment, as circumstances require, of elements of strategic forces among our allies.” In practical terms, the French strategic air forces will be able to spread out across the European continent “like an archipelago of forces”, “thus complicating our adversaries’ calculations” and reinforcing the value of national deterrence.

This is indeed an evolution rather than a revolution, as French nuclear deterrence remains based on its two traditional principles.

The first is that it remains entirely national, both in the decision-making process – the sole prerogative of the President of the French Republic – and in its implementation and funding.

The second is that it remains based on the notion of strictly national vital interests and does not provide a formal guarantee of protection, as US deterrence theoretically does within NATO. If France were to use nuclear deterrence in a scenario such as Zilupe, it would not be to protect Latvia, or in return for the support that country would provide to France within the framework of strategic support, but rather because the President of the French Republic

would consider this to be an attack on France’s vital interests... “in their European dimension”. The nuance is important.

This evolution in French doctrine would complement, not replace, NATO’s nuclear mission. However, it does represent a step towards a pan-European nuclear component. Indeed, the idea that Europeans could actively participate in the French support role will give them the assurance that they are no longer merely spectators of a guarantee that until now was purely theoretical, and solely in defence of French interests, but that they can become indispensable actors. This could mark the beginning of a genuine “strategic coupling” between willing and capable European powers.

The key idea for the German military, which places great emphasis on planning and predictability—that they could be involved in the overall framework through a “steering group” – is a step in the right direction; as is the idea that, in the event of a crisis, French nuclear weapons could be dispersed on their own soil.

Finally, the increase in the French nuclear arsenal, beyond its specific military value, is psychologically reassuring to all those who count warheads like tanks or combat aircraft.

For once, this development was preceded by in-depth discussions with several European partners, and it was following these discussions that a group of eight countries expressed an interest in engaging in talks with France, namely: Sweden and Denmark, Germany and Poland, Belgium and the Netherlands, Greece and, of course, the United Kingdom. A sort of nine-nation defence Eurogroup is thus taking shape, which could be called the *Nuclear Nine (NN)*.

This pan-European nuclear doctrine will now need to become firmly established. The next French presidential election will be the litmus test of its viability. European political leaders will also need to deliver on promises of industrial cooperation, starting with the thorny Future Combat Air System (FCAS or SCAF) programme, which – since the programme’s launch – has been intended to carry France’s future nuclear missile, as well as on the programmes mentioned in the context of strategic support, namely deep strike capabilities through the ELSA (*European Long-Range Strike Approach*) programme²¹, early warning with JEWEL (*Joint*

²¹ A programme for a conventional ground-to-ground ballistic missile with a range of at least 2,500 km is included in the update to the 2024–2030 Military Programming Law (LPM). It aims to strengthen France’s deep strike capability. An investment of €1 billion is planned from 2026 for this programme, with entry into service envisaged before the end of the next decade. This missile, known as the MBT (Land-Based Ballistic Missile), is reportedly being developed by ArianeGroup and would complement existing strike capabilities (Scalp missiles, MdCN, etc.). It is designed for very long-range conventional strikes, with a warhead suited to strategic targets.

Early Warning for a European Lookout), or the development of projects yet to be defined in the field of ballistic missile defence, and, of course, extended air defence.

CONCLUSION: “IT IS BETTER TO TAKE CHANGE BY THE HAND, BEFORE IT TAKES US BY THE THROAT” (WINSTON CHURCHILL)

The Zilupe scenario illustrates how, between the erosion of the transatlantic link – which undermines the credibility of the US nuclear guarantee – and European states still unable to defend themselves conventionally, we find ourselves in a strategic twilight from which a Vladimir Putin, seeking a way out of the Ukrainian quagmire, could emerge.

Therefore, European defence – in the sense of Europe defending itself, by itself, and for itself – must necessarily include a specifically European nuclear component to prevent any Russian blackmail and any abuse by the American protector.

And because nuclear deterrence does not protect against sub-threshold conventional attacks, nor hybrid attacks, that it is imperative for European states to strengthen their conventional defence. However, this cannot be done in a haphazard manner.

For European defence to be effective, it must be coordinated; and for it to be coordinated, a certain degree of specialisation and therefore integration between European forces – and not between European and American forces – is essential, as envisaged by the Treaty on European Union through permanent structured cooperation.

Unable to defend themselves “like the Americans” (which is neither possible nor desirable) and unwilling to fight like the Russians or the Ukrainians (at the cost of hundreds of thousands of deaths), Europeans must devise their own way of waging war, which will not be a copy of the one unfolding before our eyes in Ukraine.

This is what the evolution of French nuclear doctrine enables. If this evolution were to prove successful, it could mark the beginning of integration from the top down, which European states are clearly seeking, as they feel their way forward and propose all manner of formats such as a “coalition of the willing”, a “European Security Council”, a “European Defence Union” or even an elusive “European pillar of NATO”. For the time being, as Louis Gautier so aptly put

it, this is merely a “horizon of expectation”²². But beyond this horizon, a more secure future is taking shape. It is up to Europeans to make it possible.

EPILOGUE

In the days following the invasion of Latvia, the President of the French Republic dispatched the 2/4 “La Fayette” fighter squadron, based in Istres and equipped with ASMPA-R nuclear missiles, to the Polish base at Lask in central Poland. This base is modern and well-equipped. It was adapted for the deployment of Rafale aircraft in early winter 2026.

The German Defence Minister and the Federal Chancellor secured an emergency vote in the Bundestag on a resolution authorising the deployment of Combat Wing (Kampfgeschwader) 51 KG “Immelmann”, based at Schleswig-Jagel, to the Polish base at Malbork, located some 100 kilometres from the Kaliningrad exclave. Its Tornado ECR aircraft are equipped with AGM-88 HARM anti-radar missiles, and their pilots are specially trained in neutralising enemy defences. These aircraft were due to be withdrawn at the end of 2025, but they have been kept in service pending the delivery of the F-35As ordered from the United States. They were training with the French fighter squadron 1/4 Gascogne in a “Poker” nuclear strike exercise, alongside KC-767 tanker aircraft from the Italian Air Force (*Aeronautica militare italiana*).

The British Prime Minister has announced the immediate deployment of a second nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine, the *Vigilant*, in addition to the one already at sea. Furthermore, he is sending ten F-35B fighter jets from the aircraft carrier Queen Elizabeth to the Polish airbase at Powidz. This base is strategic due to its central location and its capacity to accommodate troops and equipment, notably a US Army Europe depot. They are joined there by two squadrons of the Royal Netherlands Air Force equipped with F-35-As based at Volkel, which was also taking part in the French Poker exercise. The Combined Air Operations Centre (CAOC) in Lyon Mont-Verdun is responsible for planning and conducting air operations.

A Belgian frigate and a Danish frigate, which were on patrol in the Baltic Sea, lay mines off the port of Kaliningrad. Swedish submarines are heading for Saint Petersburg. The Polish army, numbering 250,000 men, sends the 11th Armoured Cavalry Division to Lithuania. Finland and Sweden are mobilising their troops. The Finnish, Norwegian and French air forces are striking

²² Louis Gautier, “Dissuasion nucléaire française : après le discours d’Emmanuel Macron à l’île Longue, ‘la balle est dans le camp de nos alliés européens’”, *Le Monde*, 3 March 2026, https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2026/03/03/dissuasion-nucleaire-francaise-apres-le-discours-d-emmanuel-macron-a-l-ile-longue-la-balle-est-dans-le-camp-de-nos-allies-europeens_6669386_3232.html.

hard at Russian troops on European soil, inflicting heavy losses on them. Canadian and Latvian forces are putting up a valiant resistance outside Riga.

European states issue an ultimatum to Vladimir Putin, ordering him to withdraw his troops from Latvia without delay. The French president, backed by his European allies involved in the strategic support effort, declares himself ready to issue a final warning.

Putin agrees to talks but only with Donald Trump. Donald Trump claims he is the only one capable of striking a good deal and is sending his envoys to Moscow. In addition to an end to European military and financial aid to Ukraine, Putin reiterates his demand that Ukraine cede the entire Donbas region to Russia, become neutral and withdraw its troops from the front line, in return for which he might agree to withdraw from Latvia.

The Europeans affected by the attack reject Trump's mediation and demand direct negotiations with the Russian president and maintain their ultimatum. A new chapter in European history is being written.

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