

THE EUROPEAN DIMENSION OF NUCLEAR DETERRENCE

FRENCH AND BRITISH POLICIES AND FUTURE SCENARIOS

Bruno Tertrais

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While the idea of a “European nuclear deterrent” has a long history, it has recently made a comeback in the light of Russian aggression on the continent, growing tensions in the transatlantic relationship since the election of Donald Trump, as well as the British decision to leave the European Union. Voices are being heard in Germany in particular, arguing for stronger European nuclear autonomy.

This paper analyses how the French and British deterrents could play a broader and stronger role in ensuring the security of the continent. Discarding the idea of a single “European deterrent”, it suggests possible credible pathways to enhance European nuclear cooperation based on French and possibly British forces, preferably outside the EU context. Furthermore, it suggests that future US decisions and policies towards Europe will be a critical factor in defining the range of realistic scenarios and outcomes.



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INTRODUCTION

The idea of a European nuclear deterrent has a long history. In the 1990s, France was at the forefront of this debate – arguing that the creation of the European Union required a new perspective on nuclear deterrence. Today, the intellectual impetus comes from Germany, with renewed interest in a “European option” (albeit with no appetite for a nuclear *Sonderweg* despite a couple of provocative pieces on the subject). While this discussion has taken many shapes and forms over the past decades, it always had a common point: a desire to avoid relying solely on the US nuclear deterrent to ensure Europe’s security.

But the current context is rather new: the brutality of Donald Trump’s rhetoric and policies is unprecedented in transatlantic relations; the European Union is taking major steps to bolster its conventional defence identity and autonomy; and Russia’s behaviour adds urgency to the need for Europe to protect itself against strategic threats.

There is a certain amount of intellectual and political confusion when one reads or hears about a “European deterrent”. This paper seeks to clarify the various meanings this concept could embrace, leaving aside unrealistic pathways for enhancing European nuclear cooperation such as a single European nuclear force controlled by a supranational executive body. Whatever happens in the realm of nuclear deterrence will be nation-state based – that is, France and (possibly) UK based. And its exact shape and form will depend to a large extent on the future of US policies towards Europe.

The aim of this Working Paper is thus to assess the possibility of a significant evolution of the European nuclear deterrence landscape in the coming years. It will first describe and compare UK and French nuclear policies. It will then recount past attempts at “Europeanizing” deterrence policies and envision future scenarios and their likelihood.

UK AND FRENCH NUCLEAR POLICIES¹

Common points and cooperation

Among the nine nuclear-capable states, France and the United Kingdom are those that share the most similarities. Not only are they permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and founding members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) – like the United States – but they are also both medium-sized military powers with significant military projection capabilities, and roughly of similar size in terms of territory, population, economy, and immediate neighbours. It should come as no surprise, then, that their nuclear policies have a lot in common.

For Paris and London, nuclear weapons are a symbol of status, although not of “prestige”. But their main rationale remains that of security or, as many British and French officials put it, of “life insurance” and also of freedom of action in the face of a potential major threat or blackmail by a nuclear power. Their threat perceptions are nearly identical: Russia is by far the most significant state adversary that might be willing and able to threaten their vital interests; China and North Korea do not pose any immediate threat, but are seen as possibly relevant to nuclear deterrence in certain scenarios; and Iran remains a preoccupation.

British and French doctrines are based on similar principles, which once again is no surprise given the factors listed above – although it must be noted that they probably also influence each other. Nuclear use would only be considered in “extreme circumstances of self-defence” if “vital interests” were at stake. To be able to inflict “unacceptable damage” in any circumstances, even after an enemy first strike, both consider that their country needs at least one strategic ballistic missile submarine (SSBN) on patrol at all times (which requires, in turn, a total of four SSBN in each of their respective fleets in order to guarantee such an availability). In addition, London and Paris deem it necessary to maintain an ability to plan for a more limited strike

¹ This section is based on Bruno Tertrais, ‘Entente Nucléaire. Options for UK-French Nuclear Cooperation’, British-American Security Council, June 2012, as well as more recent official national documents including, for the United Kingdom, ‘Strategic and Defence Security Review 2015’, November 2015; for France, ‘Speech by President Hollande on nuclear deterrence’, Istres, 9 February 2015.

if need be, so as not to be self-deterred by an all-or-nothing concept of deterrence.

Russia's new assertiveness, especially since the 2014 annexation of Crimea, gave a boost to UK and French plans to modernize their nuclear forces, including four new (third-generation) SSBNs for each country, planned to enter service in the late 2020s or early 2030s. Likewise, both countries envision a new generation of warheads for the 2030s. Still, both France and the UK claim a concept of "minimum deterrence" ("sufficiency" in France).

In the 1974 "Ottawa Declaration", the Atlantic Alliance as a whole recognized the contribution of the British and French nuclear forces to the security of NATO. In particular, their mere existence is seen as complicating a potential adversary's calculations. This has been the Alliance's view since then.

London and Paris both cooperate with the United States on various technical dimensions of their nuclear deterrents, and each of them has a regular, in-depth nuclear policy dialogue with Washington. Neither has significantly invested in strategic (territorial) missile defence.

During the Cold War, UK and French attempts at establishing bilateral nuclear cooperation failed, including an aborted joint missile project in the late 1980s. Cooperation began in earnest with a new in-depth policy dialogue in the early 1990s ("Joint Nuclear Commission"), which has become more formal and less frequent over the years. This is complemented by military-to-military exchanges ("Nuclear Staff Talks") and laboratory-to-laboratory exchanges. Mutual confidence and interests – including budgetary savings – led to the landmark 2010 nuclear treaty, part of the Lancaster House agreements, a broad framework for technical nuclear cooperation.² In particular, the Treaty established the Teutates programme, which involves the building in France of the Epure X-Ray radiography machine (which is used separately by each country), equipment used to ensure the reliability and safety of nuclear warheads in the absence of nuclear testing. Other technical exchanges exist. While Brexit and Trump have shaken the architecture of European security, at present these two developments do not seem to have led to an intensification of UK-French nuclear cooperation.

² Treaty between the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the French Republic relating to Joint Radiographic/Hydrodynamic Facilities, 2 November 2010.

Divergences

UK and French nuclear policies differ significantly on several points. These differences largely stem from broader foreign policy choices, notably the close UK-US strategic relations that London decided to establish after the 1956 Suez Crisis – a seminal event which, conversely, led the French to a more autonomous stance. Thus, the two countries do not have the same definition of nuclear independence. For London, it means the ability to design and produce the core elements of the weapons, to operate nuclear submarines and, most importantly, to launch nuclear-armed missiles on its own against targets it would select or approve. Submarine design and construction are partly carried out with US assistance. For example, UK and US SSBNs have a "Common Missile Compartment" and share a pool of US-manufactured Trident ballistic missiles, and UK re-entry vehicles are modelled on US ones. For Paris, it means the ability to design, produce and operate the near-totality of the building blocks of a nuclear deterrent.

An important aspect of the French deterrent is its tight connection to the very nature of the political regime: the independent nuclear programme is intrinsically linked to the Fifth Republic. London, by contrast, was always comfortable with assigning its nuclear weapons to the defence of NATO and is a member of the Nuclear Planning Group (NPG).

Due to the close proximity of London and Washington in nuclear policies, including through mutual influence within NATO, both countries share some doctrinal features that Paris does not. One of these has traditionally been France's rejection of graduated response-type concepts, while adopting a "final warning" doctrine (a single, non-renewable limited strike to restore deterrence). The need to enshrine nuclear planning in international law (e.g. through proportionality) has also been a dominant feature of both US and UK doctrines.

Since the mid-2000s, the UK has also emphasized the need to specifically deter nuclear threats, whereas the French are keen to say that the nature of the threat is less important than the scope of the "vital" interests that would be threatened. This has led London to reinforce its negative security assurances (assurances of non-use against non-nuclear countries) after the 2010 US Nuclear Posture Review.

While the French have been keen, for more than twenty years now, to lump all of their nuclear forces

into a single category of “strategic” forces, the UK force is also smaller: UK SSBNs do not carry more than 8 ballistic missiles (against 16 for the French) and 40 warheads. The UK holds a total inventory of up to 180 warheads, of which up to 120 are operationally available. In contrast, France has “less than 300 warheads” in total. This includes about one-fifth for the airborne component composed of two squadrons of aircraft, each armed with a single missile. Such differences are significant and can be explained by a combination of factors: (i) the superior accuracy of the Trident missiles, (ii) possibly different views about the requirements of deterrence (“how much is enough?”) in various scenarios, and (iii) the insertion “by default” of the UK deterrent in the broader NATO context, which may also have affected such requirements.

Such differences account for the gap that seems to exist between the French and the British nuclear budgets. An exact comparison is hard to make because of differences in perimeters, modernization cycles, and the absence of transparency on the UK side but it appears that the French nuclear budget is 50% higher, on average, than the British one.

Finally, the French are generally deemed to be more conservative – some would say “hawkish” – on nuclear disarmament matters, although this might be more a question of optics than substance. In the past decade, the French have made it clear on more than one occasion that they doubted whether the goal of “a world without nuclear weapons” could be achieved anytime soon and should not happen without security conditions permitting. But both countries have significantly reduced their forces since 1990, including getting rid of whole components (the air-based component for the UK, the ground-based systems for France), and giving up nuclear testing as well as the production of fissile material for explosive purposes.

These divergences do not appear to pose a stumbling block on the path towards enhanced cooperation and a stronger European role.

THE EUROPEAN DIMENSION OF THE FRENCH (AND BRITISH) DETERRENT(S)

British and French nuclear deterrents were never designed to exclusively cover strictly national vital interests and always had at least a *de facto* European dimension. As is well known, since the early 1960s, the UK force has been primarily at the service of the

transatlantic alliance. It is less well known that the French have always seen a European dimension to their nuclear deterrent. For de Gaulle, the fate of his country and that of the rest of Europe were closely linked. He privately indicated that the French nuclear force was protecting his immediate neighbours, notably Germany.³ In instructions given to the armed forces in 1964, he specified that France should “feel threatened as soon as the territories of federal Germany and Benelux are violated”.⁴ Similarly, in 1964, Prime Minister Pompidou made it publicly clear that the national deterrent amounted to *de facto* European protection.⁵

The broader nuclear contribution of France and the UK to the security of the Alliance as a whole – something de Gaulle himself believed in⁶ – was officially recognized in the Ottawa Declaration of 1974. Later on (1986) France committed itself to consult with Germany “time and circumstances permitting” in case the use of French short-range nuclear systems – which, on paper, could be used on German soil – was considered.

With the creation of the European Union, France has stressed more clearly the European dimension of deterrence. To the traditional French argument of the intrinsic unreliability of the US deterrent was added a new one: the creation of the European Union.

In January 1992, as several French statesmen mused publicly about the hypothetical transfer, one day, of nuclear weapons to a future common European political authority, President François Mitterrand signalled his acceptance of the need for the member states of the newly-born Union to tackle the nuclear issue together when the time came:

“This embryo of defence raises problems which are not resolved, which we will have to resolve. I am thinking in particular of nuclear weapons. Only two of the Twelve possess an atomic force. For their national policies, they have a clear doctrine. Is it possible to devise a European doctrine? This question will very quickly become one of the major questions in the construction of a common European defence.”⁷

3 “But she will automatically protect them! Much better than the American force! For the simple reason that we are European, while the Americans are not. The interest of the Americans in not allowing Europe to be destroyed is tiny compared to ours. If Europe is invaded, we are toast”, reported by Alain Peyrefitte, *C’était de Gaulle*, Paris, Gallimard, 2002, p. 653.

4 Quoted in Jacques Isnard, ‘Le grand déballage nucléaire’, *Le Monde*, 4 February 1997.

5 “By the mere fact that France is in Europe, its strength fully and automatically plays to Europe’s advantage, whose defence is inseparable physically and geographically from its own”. Speech to the National Assembly, 2 December, 1964.

6 See Peyrefitte, *op. cit.*, p. 710.

7 Speech by François Mitterrand at the Rencontres Nationales pour l’Europe, 10 January 1992.

It was at this point that “concerted deterrence” appeared, an expression proposed by Jacques Mellick, a junior minister for defence, among other possible options, which included a “de facto” European deterrent, an “extended” deterrent and a “shared” one. For Mellick, concerted deterrence meant the establishment of a consultative mechanism about nuclear weapon use.⁸

But Mitterrand quickly dampened the enthusiasm of those who sought an immediate greater European role for French nuclear weapons. In January 1994, answering a journalist’s question, he stated:

“Is it possible to conceive a European doctrine? This particular question will become a major question when building a common European defence. The relevance of the topic will become clearer as the European Union builds up its political identity along with its defence and security identity. However, there will be a European nuclear doctrine, a European deterrent, only when there are vital European interests, considered as such by the Europeans, and understood as such by others. As you can see, we are far away from there. France will not dilute the means of its national defence in this domain under any circumstance. In any case, it is not a question of ‘replacing’, as you put it, the United States.”⁹

The 1994 Defence White Paper adopted the Mitterrand stance but also made it a cornerstone of Europe’s future strategic autonomy: “With nuclear power, Europe’s autonomy in defence matters is possible. Without it, it is excluded”.¹⁰

The issue began to percolate in French political circles.¹¹ In January 1995, Minister of Foreign Affairs Alain Juppé wondered: “After the elaboration of a common Franco-British doctrine, must our generation fear envisioning, not a shared deterrent, but at the minimum a concerted deterrence with our main partners? Could the adoption of a single currency, a new Franco-German contract have no effect on the perception of France by its vital interests?”.¹² However, Mitterrand, in the last weeks of his presidency, expressed his reservations once again and closed the debate.¹³

His successor Jacques Chirac was more open-minded. As it embarked on a final nuclear testing campaign, France reaffirmed its European nuclear openings – eager as it was, in the face of global criticism, to show that it was not pursuing strictly national interests. The French authorities confirmed that Paris was ready to raise issues related to nuclear deterrence with its European partners, and “to introduce the collective dimension as a constituent factor of our doctrine”.¹⁴ In late 1995, French and British leaders recognized the existence of common vital interests and started increasing their nuclear cooperation: “We do not see situations arising in which the vital interests of either France or the United Kingdom could be threatened without the vital interests of the other being also threatened”.¹⁵ Chirac renewed his stance by stating that UK-French nuclear cooperation:

“is part of the prospect of ‘concerted deterrence’ that the Prime Minister has laid out in front of you, in September. This is not about unilaterally extending our deterrence or imposing a new contract on our partners. It is about drawing all consequences of a community of destiny, of a growing intertwining of our vital interests. Because of the different sensibilities that exist in Europe on nuclear weapons, we do not propose a ready-made concept, but a gradual process open to those partners who wish to join.”¹⁶

The 1996 decision to permanently retire the short-range Hades system was taken after consultation with Germany.¹⁷ The Franco-German Common Concept on Security and Defence adopted in December of that same year stated that “our countries are ready to engage in a dialogue on the function of nuclear deterrence in the context of European defence policy”.¹⁸ The Military Programme Law of 1996 confirmed these openings.¹⁹ However, more than twenty years later, this field remains largely fallow.

The French are partly to blame: their main drive for a European discussion of nuclear deterrence issues happened during their testing campaign of 1995–1996,

8 See ‘M. Mellick énumère les différentes formules d’une doctrine nucléaire européenne’, *Le Monde*, 4 February 1992.

9 Agence France-Presse, ‘L’interview du président (version intégrale)’, 9 January 1994.

10 Livre blanc sur la défense, 1994, p. 56.

11 For a more in-depth treatment, see Bruno Tertrais, *Nuclear Policies in Europe*, Adelphi Paper No. 327, Oxford, Oxford University Press/IISS, 1999.

12 Address by Alain Juppé, Minister of Foreign Affairs, on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the CAP, Paris, 30 January 1995.

13 Agence France-Presse, ‘M. Mitterrand réaffirme devant l’état-major français les principes de la stratégie nucléaire’, 5 December 1995.

14 Speech by Alain Juppé, Prime Minister, at the IHEDN, Paris, 7 September 1995.

15 UK-French Joint Statement on Nuclear Cooperation, 30 October 1995.

16 Speech by the President of the Republic, Jacques Chirac, at the École Militaire, Paris, 8 June 1996.

17 Speech by the President of the Republic, Jacques Chirac, at the École Militaire, Paris, 23 February 1996.

18 Common Franco-German concept on security and defence, adopted in Nuremberg on 9 December 1996.

19 “With Germany, an in-depth dialogue will be undertaken, respecting each other’s specificities. With the other European countries, the eventual implementation of a common defence as provided for by the Treaty on European Union calls for consultation”. Rapport annexé à la loi de programmation militaire pour les années 1997 à 2002, 3 July 1996, *Journal officiel de la République française*, no 153, 3 juillet 1996, pp. 9,985–10,002.

which was heavily criticized by several EU partners. Paris learned its lesson and these reactions led France to abandon any appetite for major initiatives in this area.

French abstinence from the NATO Nuclear Planning Group has not helped either: it has often been viewed with suspicion by EU members of the Alliance. Whereas the French 2009 return to NATO's military structure was sometimes seen – as Paris sought – as a gesture of goodwill showing that France did not seek to construct a concurrent European defence system, the same did not happen in the nuclear domain.

As long as the NATO common deterrent appeared solid, no European country was really interested in a common discussion of nuclear deterrence and even less in rocking the boat by devising alternative nuclear arrangements.

Finally, many in Europe (including in Paris) feared that a nuclear debate in the European Union (EU) could complicate the task of building up common conventional capabilities.

This has not prevented France from making it increasingly clear that its deterrent plays a European role. Paris believes that French nuclear deterrence, by its very existence, contributes to Europe's security and that a possible aggressor would do well to take this into account.²⁰ French officials are keen to emphasize, in semi-private conversations, that when the French Air Force participates in the air defence of the Baltic states, it is the air force of a nuclear power – suggesting that Russia understands this. Furthermore, French officials have repeatedly suggested that a major attack against a member country of the European Union could be considered by France as an attack against its own vital interests.²¹

SCENARIOS AND OPTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

A new context

The contemporary political and strategic context changes the terms of the European deterrence question. If one describes the nuclear deterrence question

as a matter of “supply” and “demand”, things have evolved at both ends.

On the demand side, Russia's new assertiveness and territorial aggression has triggered a renewed interest in European countries about the means to safeguard their existence and territorial integrity. This is true in particular for countries that became members of NATO in the 2000s (Poland, the Baltic states, etc.) but also for EU members that are not members of NATO and thus do not rely on a formal US security guarantee. While this applies in particular to Finland and Sweden, one should note that the number of EU countries not belonging to NATO is much higher (25% of EU membership) than was the case in the mid-1990s.

On the supply side, doubts about the reliability of the US guarantee to Europe have rarely been as strong as is the case under Donald Trump.

The time duly seems ripe for thinking about Europe's nuclear role in securing the continent, especially since Germany is now at the forefront of this debate, as reflected in many German op-eds and analyses on nuclear deterrence issues since the election of Donald Trump.²²

Non-starters

But let us first clarify what will not happen any time soon absent a dramatic and completely unexpected change in the European and transatlantic political landscape:

- There will be no “joint nuclear force” controlled by the European Union. There is near-zero interest today on the continent for a federal-type Union with a single executive, and there is equally near-zero appetite in France for transferring its nuclear assets to Europe.
- Another unrealistic proposal is that European partners could partly fund the French force in return for a say in French national policy. While attractive on paper, there is no real political interest in Europe for such a scheme.²³
- A third arrangement that will almost certainly not take place is a pooling of UK and French assets. While it could have appeared attractive a few years ago, it is no longer a serious

20 For instance: “By its existence, it contributes to the security of the Atlantic Alliance and that of Europe” (2017 *Defence and National Security Review*, p. 70).

21 For instance: “We participate in the European project, we have built with our partners a community of destiny, the existence of a French nuclear deterrent brings a strong and essential contribution to Europe. In addition, France has a de facto and heartfelt solidarity with its European partners. Who could believe that an aggression that would jeopardize the survival of Europe would have no consequence?” (François Hollande, 19 February 2015).

22 See Tristan Volpe & Ulrich Kühn, ‘Germany's Nuclear Education: Why a Few Elites Are Testing a Taboo’, *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 40, n° 3, Fall 2017.

23 This idea has sometimes attracted interest in some French quarters. See for instance Manuel Lafont Rapnouil et al., ‘Can Europe become a nuclear power?’, European Council on Foreign Relations, September 2018.

possibility.²⁴ If Brexit happens, Britain will want to cling to its strategic assets – which include an independent nuclear force.

- Paris is unlikely to join the NPG or assign part of the airborne component to the Atlantic Alliance. While there could be merit in doing so, French absence from the NPG and NATO nuclear arrangements is part of the country’s “strategic DNA”, mostly for political and symbolic reasons.

Furthermore, it is unlikely that any serious nuclear discussion will happen in the context of the European Union institutions – for the same reasons that Chirac had already identified in 1996 (see above). Diplomats know how difficult nuclear policy discussions can be in Brussels – as discussions on EU positions every five years to prepare for Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conferences testify. The Nuclear Ban Treaty, on which several EU members (Austria, Ireland and to a certain extent Sweden) have strong positive views, makes a nuclear deterrence debate in formal EU circles almost a non-starter at this point. Any productive discussion about scenarios and options to reinforce deterrence in Europe will have to be muted and discreet, in bilateral formats or informal gatherings of officials and experts. In addition, any discussion in a strictly EU context would preclude the presence or involvement of the UK.

Realistic scenarios

The range of realistic scenarios, on the other hand, heavily depends on one key variable: the continued existence of the current NATO nuclear arrangements. So the discussion needs to take place at two different levels – first in the existing context and, second, when taking into account “what if?” hypotheses.

In the existing context, Paris can provide (i) complementary insurance for European NATO members, and (ii) nuclear reassurance for non-NATO EU members.

It would be consistent with French views of the EU to state more clearly that the French force protects Europe as a whole. At the very least, the same logic that applied to the joint UK–French “Chequers” declaration of October 1995 (see above) could be transposed to the European level: again, it seems compatible with the French view of what the EU is about that aggression

against Finnish, Estonian or Polish “vital” interests would jeopardize the very foundations of what our existence is about in the 21st century. Another way of putting it would be to make it clear that Article 42.7 of the Lisbon Treaty – the mutual defence clause of the EU – could be exercised by any means, thus including nuclear weapons. This would not be an “extended” deterrent in the traditional sense of the term. From the French standpoint, one cannot compare the protection conferred by a distant superpower to the recognition of a de facto reality: the idea is that “dying for Helsinki” is a more credible deterrence proposition for a European nuclear power than “dying for Hamburg” for the United States.

This could possibly be supplemented by rotations of Rafale fighter-bombers (without their nuclear missiles) of the French *Forces Aériennes Stratégiques* (FAS) to allied bases, including on the territory of the most eastern countries of the Alliance in order to demonstrate its solidarity.

The range of possible scenarios would be different in the event of a significant change in the transatlantic relationship, directly affecting its nuclear arrangements. As Oliver Thränert put it, “a decisive Europeanization would only make sense if European governments arrived at the conclusion that the US no longer constituted a reliable Alliance partner in terms of extended nuclear deterrence”.²⁵ Without going that far, dramatic changes in NATO would equally change the perspective, such as a unilateral withdrawal of US nuclear weapons from Europe – an irrational decision for sure, but one which is not beyond the realms of possibility under President Trump. Or an unravelling of the NATO nuclear basing and sharing mechanisms following a unilateral decision by a member country to cease being a part of it (think Turkey in particular). Both are reasonable “what if?” hypotheses.

In such scenarios, it is likely that France would be ready to consider playing a stronger, visible role in ensuring that Europe feels protected by nuclear deterrence. Options would include both “sharing” and “basing”. France could base part of its airborne arsenal (say, in the order of ten missiles) in Germany or in Poland (basing) and/or agree that they could be carried by European fighter-bombers (sharing).²⁶ However,

25 Oliver Thränert, ‘No Shortcut to a European Deterrent’, *CSS Policy Perspectives*, vol. 5, n° 2, February 2017.

26 Any fighter-bomber can carry a nuclear weapon. However, from the point of view of the Nuclear Weapon State, constraints can appear and conditions have to be met regarding avionics, aerodynamics, and nuclear safety/security standards. Note that the future German-French combat aircraft, which is scheduled to enter service around 2040, will almost certainly be nuclear-capable by design.

24 On this concept, see Bruno Tertrais, ‘Entente Nucléaire. Options for UK-French Nuclear Cooperation’, British-American Security Council, June 2012.

for both political and technical reasons (the small size of the French arsenal, about fifty missiles), it is highly unlikely that Paris and its European partners would seek to mirror the scope of current NATO arrangements.²⁷

A less ambitious option would be to replace the NATO SNOWCAT (Support of NATO Operations With Conventional Air Tactics) procedure with an identical European one, where non-nuclear nations commit themselves to participate in a nuclear strike with non-nuclear assets (for suppression of enemy air defences, surveillance, etc.).

Another option, if and when France replaces its nuclear-powered carrier Charles de Gaulle and maintains its ability to embark nuclear missiles, would be to create the possibility of a European nuclear maritime task force, with accompanying European ships and, possibly, a European nuclear squadron based on it.

If such decisions were made, they would need to be accompanied, as is the case today in the NATO context, by an agreement on the conditions for their use. This would include legal and security arrangements (host nation support, etc.) but also, possibly, a common nuclear planning mechanism, based on a common conception of nuclear deployment, which could coexist with national ones.²⁸

An open question would be the role that the UK nuclear force would then play. In the context of Brexit, London is eager to bolster its European security credentials. If we are correct in predicting that the European deterrence question will not be treated within formal EU circles, it is conceivable that the United Kingdom could be part of such arrangements one way or another. It would be an irony of history to see London take a greater part in the security of Finland and Sweden – or Ireland for that matter – after having left the Union.

Counter-arguments and responses

Some would say that a France and/or UK-based nuclear deterrent would not have the necessary credibility.²⁹ This is a debatable question. A smaller arsenal

can deter a major power provided it has the ability to inflict damage seen as unacceptable by the other party. This has always been the premise of “deterrence of the strong by the weak,” and is not connected to the size of the other party’s nuclear arsenal as long as no counterforce strategy is sought.³⁰ Most importantly, again, deterrence exercised by a European power might be seen as more credible than when it is exercised by a distant protector.

In a severe critique, one analyst has put forward other arguments that lead, in her view, to the need to “put an end” to the emerging debate: a European deterrent would raise legal problems (withdrawing from the NPT); it would not free Europeans from dependence on the United States; it diverts attention away from more urgent problems; and it would be unpopular.³¹ These arguments are irrelevant:

- It is simply not true that European nuclear cooperation would require non-nuclear countries to leave the NPT. This would be the case only if any of them wanted to acquire national nuclear weapons – a non-starter.
- A more interesting argument is that a European deterrent would not completely alleviate European dependency on the United States, since London and Paris cooperate with Washington in nuclear defence matters. But while correct for the UK since the British programme is indeed intimately linked to that of the United States, this argument ignores the contemporary nature of such cooperation regarding France: there is no US “technical support” for the French deterrent today.³²
- To claim that the “euro-nukes debate steers attention away from extremely urgent issues such as development of European conventional capabilities” – an argument also heard in European government circles in the 2000s – is rather puzzling. Neither from the point of view of politics nor that of costs can one seriously foresee any “zero-sum gaming” between the conventional and nuclear domains. The same causes producing the same effects, uncertainties about the future of the US protection, should

27 Some French officials had toyed with this idea as early as 1974 at least: French Chief of Defence Staff François Maurin stated that one of the values of having tactical nuclear weapons was to be able, if needed, to succeed (“prendre le relais”) the United States “if not in quantity, at least in quality” if needed. ‘Entretien avec le général François Maurin’, *Défense Nationale*, July 1974, p. 16.

28 A different question is the ability of European fighter-bombers to carry US B61s. It is technically conceivable that a European country would seek to equip a Rafale (or a Typhoon) with B61s. It is essentially a matter of cost which relates to US standards. This raises the question of what would happen if Berlin sought to maintain its nuclear-sharing role but without buying F35.

29 See for instance Thränert, op. cit. as well as Volpe & Kühn, op. cit.

30 In the early days, the French assessed that “sufficiency” required being able to destroy the equivalent of France (in terms of population) but this is no longer the case.

31 Elisabeth Braw, ‘It’s time to put an end to the phantom euro-nukes debate’, Commentary, European Leadership Network, 10 August 2018.

32 See Jeffrey Lewis and Bruno Tertrais, ‘US-French nuclear cooperation: its past, present and future’, *Recherches & Documents* n° 04/2015, Fondation pour la recherche stratégique, 28 October 2015.

logically drive Europeans to seek an increase in defence budgets and consider an enhancement in nuclear cooperation.

- Finally, it is hard to envisage why “any new German or other European nuclear activities would have to be presented to the population” as long as they remain within the bounds of current international law and practice, including the NPT and nuclear sharing-type arrangements as they exist in NATO.

The author is on firmer ground when she expresses doubts that France and Britain would “be prepared to take on the burden sharing their arsenals”. That remains a legitimate question.

CONCLUSION

For the first time in more than twenty years, a serious debate on the role of nuclear weapons in European security is emerging due to the changes in the strategic and political context on the continent and on the transatlantic stage. It is a timely one that now needs shaping: it needs to discard unrealistic (a single European deterrent controlled by a supranational authority) or absurd proposals (a German bomb) and be steered towards discussing realistic scenarios among interested parties, NATO and EU countries, and outside the formal EU context.

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