

A nuclear keystone for the future of European defense?

French President Emmanuel Macron's recent statements on the European dimension of France's "vital interests" and his call for a debate between Europeans have triggered numerous reactions across Europe. His wish, expressed as early as 2020, to enable Europe to benefit as quickly as possible from France's nuclear deterrent is in line with France's uninterrupted recognition, since 1972, of the inextricable link between these interests and those of Europe and with a history of the atom that is specifically European. Three decades after the end of the Cold War, the shock of Russia's aggression against Ukraine has brought the deterrent rhetoric back to the fore and seems to herald a new nuclear age in which nuclear deterrence will play a greater strategic role. This new strategic landscape calls on Europeans to pull together, roll up our sleeves, and lay the foundations for mutual confidence in our assets, the basis for protecting our communal space.

The European project binds our nations together in a shared destiny, forged from our past and embraced in every moment of the present. It's a blend of our triumphs and trials, cherished memories, and a collective willingness to move forward together. Nuclear weapons, as we'll explore, are part of this shared heritage, embodying both our history and our joint strategic interests.

First and foremost, the European legacy of the atom traces back to the vibrant scientific era at the turn of the 20th century. Europe stood as the epicenter of research on radioactivity and the atom during this time. Between 1910 and 1938, breakthroughs were commonplace in European laboratories. A myriad of scientists, including Marie Skłodowska-Curie, Niels Bohr, Ernest Rutherford, James Chadwick, Enrico Fermi, and Leo Szilard, contributed significantly to these advancements. Notable among these was the pivotal moment in 1938 when Otto Hahn, Lise Meitner, and Fritz Strassmann split the atom, laying the groundwork for deriving energy from the reaction. Following this breakthrough, in 1939, Frédéric Joliot, Hans Halban, and Lew Kowarski showcased the potential of a chain reaction, ushering in the era of energy production with both civilian and military applications, patented in the process.

Yet, beyond scientific progress, this legacy embodies a spirit of resistance against imperialism and oppression. It reflects the defiance of powers seeking dominion over others, that arrogate to themselves the right to say, "You belong to me; I will take you." This courage to resist resonates through acts like Hans Halban and Lew Kowarski's safeguarding of the world's heavy water reserves in June 1940, alongside the subsequent efforts of British and Norwegian resistance fighters who thwarted the Norsk Hydro plant. Though one form of imperialism waned with the end of World War II, another loomed over Europe's freedom. During the Cold War, the implementation of nuclear deterrence on the Atlantic side, initially by the United States, then by Britain, and finally by France, acted as a bulwark keeping the USSR at bay on the borders of free Europe. This collective effort underscored nuclear deterrence as a public good, safeguarding the liberty of all European nations, irrespective of their individual roles in its establishment and continuation.

However, this freedom is under attack. Following a three-decade decline in strategic discourse due to the absence of a major threat, the shockwaves of the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine have reverberated throughout Europe. This shock is, of course, the Russian Federation's shameless transgression of the sovereignty of one of its neighbors. It is a breach of faith—an appalling and paradoxical development, given Russia's shared history with Ukraine. It is the relinquishment of its responsibilities as a nuclear-weapon state under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and as a permanent member of the UN Security Council.

Yet, amidst this turmoil, Ukrainians have displayed remarkable courage, resisting a regime that views the "collective West" as its adversary and has descended into a vengeful besiegement mentality. Their resilience serves as a poignant reminder of Europe's foundational principles and the obligation of each European nation to uphold the rule of law in the face of unabashed violence. For over two years, Russia has been violating the territorial sovereignty of a country that handed over its nuclear arsenal

in 1994. Now, with those very weapons turned towards Ukraine, Russia's nuclear deterrent looms large in the background of the conflict, facilitating the concealment of its logistical operations under the nuclear umbrella. Consequently, Russia gains a significant strategic advantage in this misguided and shameful undertaking.

Perhaps the most seismic event of 2022 was the resounding resurgence of nuclear deterrence grammar onto the global stage. The Russian Federation's misuse of nuclear deterrence to aggressively fortify its territory casts Europe into the throes of a new era—the nuclear third age. While the legitimate purpose of nuclear deterrence is to safeguard, as a last resort, the fundamental interests of the nation, i.e., the essential functions of the state and its people, the distortion of Russia's deterrent for aggressive ends—a policy of aggressive sanctuarization, stands as the primary threat to security and peace in Europe. This paradigm shift necessitates comprehensive consideration across all facets of Europe's strategic and defense analyses.

To counter this threat, nuclear deterrence must undoubtedly assume a leading role in maintaining a balance of power that does not tilt in favor of revisionist powers and in reinstating strategic stability. Achieving this necessitates close collaboration between nuclear-weapon states committed to freedom and security in Europe and the people of Europe.

As President Macron has announced, France, with its indissoluble ties to Europe and its membership of continental Europe, NATO, and the EU, is ready to invest in this vital cooperation. So, what goals should it pursue, and what form should it take?

First and foremost, it is essential to instill doubt in the adversary's mind. The aim is to convince them that any violation of our vital interests will inevitably result in unacceptable damage. This core principle of nuclear deterrence hinges on ensuring that the adversary perceives the political, operational, and technical credibility of deterrence at all times. This principle guides the structuring of strategic assets such as the strategic oceanic force (FOST), the strategic air forces (FAS), and the nuclear naval air force (FANu) aboard the Charles de Gaulle aircraft carrier. It is also for this reason that the command-and-control structure is not included in the debate to which we are invited and that the decision-making will remain in the hands of the French President.

Secondly, it is widely acknowledged that delineating a red line can incentivize adversaries to test its boundaries. Hence, defense measures must be continuous, extending to the very threshold of vital interests, even if their outlines are not clearly expressed. To ensure the effectiveness of nuclear deterrence, conventional and nuclear forces should collaborate and reinforce each other. The close coordination between these forces, as exemplified by France's "shoulder-to-shoulder" approach, enhances their operational effectiveness. For instance, this synergy was evident during the April 2018 missile strikes against the Syrian government's chemical weapons facilities.

So, how can Europe make sure that those posing a threat understand the European dimension of France's vital interests and the credibility of French nuclear forces in defending them? To start, laying the foundation for strong and enduring trust is essential. This begins with fostering mutual understanding. One practical step could involve facilitating exchanges at both operational and strategic levels. Opening our doors to European officers, strategists, and academics and inviting them to experience firsthand the operations, e.g., Operations Poker and Belote, at nuclear airbases or aboard aircraft carriers, can provide valuable insights into the workings of strategic air forces (FAS) and the FANu. Similarly, European nations keen on collaboration could reciprocate by hosting temporary or permanent Strategic Air Force detachments, promoting greater interoperability among our armed forces. Looking ahead, considering the potential shifts in American priorities within NATO, it prompts us to ponder: Could we explore the idea of stationing a Strategic Air Force squadron in a European country interested in such cooperation? This forward-thinking approach could further strengthen the collective defense capabilities of Europe, ensuring a united front against emerging threats.

In summary, President Emmanuel Macron's statements underline the crucial importance of strengthening strategic cooperation within Europe in the face of current threats, notably Russian aggression in Ukraine. The rich and complex history of European nuclear research, as well as the Cold War period, illustrate the relevance of a more European nuclear deterrent to guarantee the continent's security and stability. Today, the resurgence of the nuclear threat is forcing European nations to reconsider and strengthen their strategic collaboration.

France, with its robust nuclear capabilities and European commitment, is a key player in this collective defense dynamic. To achieve this, it is imperative to develop solid mutual trust between European states, notably through joint exchanges and training, as well as increased interoperability of military forces. American priorities within NATO could also influence European strategy, making the integration of French nuclear capabilities into the European defense framework even more essential.

The main objective remains to maintain the credibility of nuclear deterrence, thereby dissuading any potential adversary from attacking Europe's most fundamental interests, which France shares. By strengthening this cooperation, Europe can not only protect its sovereignty and territorial integrity but also reaffirm its fundamental values of freedom and resistance in the face of oppression. In this way, a united and prepared Europe can deal effectively with contemporary and future security challenges, guaranteeing a peaceful and stable future for its citizens.

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