

Will Europe Get Its Own Bomb?

The idea of a European nuclear deterrent has been a regular feature of the security debate on the continent for more than 50 years, to the point of sometimes being called an “elephant in the room.”¹ In the early 1960s, as Europeans demanded a greater say in North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) strategy, there were plans for a nuclear multilateral force under European control. Later in the decade, questions were raised by several countries about the possibility that the forthcoming Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) would preserve a European nuclear option. In the early 1970s, Bonn consulted with Paris about a possible trade-off between the two countries—French nuclear protection in return for a German financial contribution. In the 1990s, as the European Union (EU) was created, France declared itself open to consultations among members on nuclear deterrence issues.

The debate revolves around two arguments. One is that the reliability of the U.S. nuclear guarantee to NATO members on the continent should not be taken for granted. Washington provides a nuclear umbrella to Europe, materialized by nuclear “stationing” (there are U.S. bombs in Europe) and nuclear “sharing” (several European air forces are trained to carry those bombs in wartime) in NATO. A separate—though not disconnected—argument is that the EU should be more independent from Washington and build its own separate security identity.

Over 20 years after the last French initiative, this field remains largely fallow. The French are partly to blame: their 1995–1996 drive for a European discussion of nuclear deterrence issues coincided with their final testing campaign, which was

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criticized by several European Union partners. Paris learned the lesson and abandoned any appetite for major initiatives in this area. French abstinence from the NATO Nuclear Planning Group (NPG), seen with suspicion by EU members of the Alliance, has not helped; and as long as the NATO common deterrent appeared solid, no one was really interested in a separate, European discussion of deterrence, even less in rocking the boat by devising alternative arrangements. Some also feared that a nuclear debate in the EU could complicate the task of building up common conventional capabilities.

But the context is now changing. If one describes the nuclear deterrence question as a matter of supply and demand, things have evolved on both ends:

- On the demand side, Russia’s new assertiveness and territorial aggression has triggered a renewed interest in Europe about the means to guarantee their existence and territorial integrity. This is true in particular not only for countries that became members of NATO at the turn of the century (such as Poland and the Baltic States) but also for EU members which are not members of NATO (Finland and Sweden) and thus do not rely on a formal U.S. guarantee, but worry about Russia. The end of the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty, as well as uncertainties about the future of the Iranian program, tensions in South Asia, and North Korean nuclear progress are additional reasons for Europe to reconsider deterrence.
- On the supply side, doubts about the reliability of the American guarantee to Europe have rarely been as strong as under the current U.S. administration.

The brutality of Donald Trump’s tweets, body language and policies is unprecedented in transatlantic relations. This has led many in Europe, notably in Germany, to question the wisdom of relying solely on U.S. protection.

In parallel, the European Union has consolidated its security and defense identity through the Lisbon treaty of 2009, and also taken more recent steps which were made easier by

**Voices in Germany
have been at the
forefront of the
European nuclear
debate this time.**

the prospect of Brexit. Also in 2009, France rejoined NATO’s military structure, a move which alleviated the suspicions of some of its partners about an alleged French intention to build a European security entity that would compete with NATO. Interestingly, while Paris was a leader in the European nuclear debate of the 1990s, this time, voices in Germany have been at the forefront.²

Thus, the time seems ripe for thinking anew about Europe’s nuclear role in securing the continent. This paper seeks to dispel a certain intellectual and political confusion when one reads or hears about a “European deterrent,” a vague

expression which covers a range of scenarios ranging from a declared European role for French (and possibly British) nuclear forces to a full-fledged “common Bomb” in the hands of Europe, and sometimes including a German nuclear program. Not all of them are realistic. This depends heavily on one key variable: will the current NATO nuclear arrangement continue to exist? So this paper will proceed with two sections—first on what could happen assuming the NATO arrangement continues and, second what could happen if it were to break down.

Nuclear Non-Starters

Let us be clear: a number of options and scenarios should be taken off the table of strategic forecasting, given that they have almost zero chance of becoming real in the coming two decades. These include a German bomb, a French-German one, a EU-wide common deterrent, and a British-French deterrent.

A German Bomb

In the past two years, several German officials and experts have publicly toyed with the idea of a national nuclear program. However, they do not include any highly influential figures and are hardly representative of the German debate. Such statements reflect more the current national insecurity about the future of the U.S. guarantee than anything else—as well, perhaps, as a laudable effort to lift thought taboos in German strategic thinking.³

Germany gave up any nuclear option on no less than three different occasions, in different legal forms. In 1954, it promised not to produce nuclear, biological or chemical weapons on its soil. True, up until the late 1960s, a national nuclear option was openly discussed in Bonn’s ruling circles and with allies. But a set of institutions and mechanisms was then set up that killed this option for good. Germany subscribed to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT)—a treaty whose support by the Soviet Union was in no small measure driven by the need to avoid a German bomb. In parallel, NATO set up structures and procedures for nuclear policymaking and nuclear use sharing, including the Nuclear Planning Group (NPG), a body through which Bonn’s influence on NATO strategy would become significant. Finally, Germany gave up its nuclear option for the third time through the “Four Plus Two” treaty of 1990 which led the way to unification. There is zero appetite today in mainstream German policy circles for a national nuclear program—and, indeed, continued skepticism in parts of the left for NATO nuclear sharing.

Furthermore, Germany does not have the required wherewithal for even a rudimentary program. Not that it would have to start from scratch: it has superb scientists and engineers, and the country is a world leader in machine tools. But

There will be no joint nuclear force controlled by the European Union in the foreseeable future.

contrary to Japan, it neither has any strictly indigenous uranium enrichment nor does it have fuel reprocessing capabilities any longer. Germany's two enrichment plants located in Gronau belong to the Urenco international consortium created after the treaty of Almelo (1970).⁴ The German share in Urenco is not government-owned but belongs jointly to two utilities companies, E.On and RWE. And even though their products serve the market and not only German plants, the future of these plants remain uncertain after Berlin's decision to give up nuclear power and phase out its existing reactors by 2022.

There will be no *Nuklear Sonderweg*—or, more precisely, the idea of a German bomb is so far off the reasonable range of future strategic thinking that it is not worth thinking about.

A French-German Bomb

Another unrealistic proposal is that European partners could partly fund the French force in return for a say in French policy. This is a recurring proposition, one tested by Germany for instance in 1973: Bonn sounded out Paris for a joint defense arrangement which would have included reliance on French protection in return for “a substantial financial contribution,” as well as more recently.⁵ This idea has sometimes garnered interest in some French quarters, but not at the political level. While attractive on paper, there is no real interest in either of the two countries for such a scheme (although a parliamentary question led to a 2017 review of its legality by the Bundestag research service, which confirmed that it would not be contrary to international or domestic law⁶). In particular, it is highly dubious that a French president would be ready to discard the political heritage of Charles De Gaulle by placing the country's nuclear budget under the partial control of the Bundestag.

In the longer term (2040 and beyond), the entry into service of the planned French-German combat aircraft will facilitate—though not dictate—operational cooperation (nuclear sharing) between the two countries, given that the plane will be certified for nuclear operations to satisfy French needs, i.e. to make sure that Paris will be able to operate it in a nuclear role as it replaces its *Rafale* fighter-bombers which currently have a nuclear mission.⁷ But it is unlikely that “sharing” would happen in a strictly bilateral framework: if France agreed to have nuclear missiles carried by foreign forces—as the United States does in NATO today—it would certainly open it to other countries as well.

A Single Eurobomb

The idea of European nuclear military cooperation has a long history. The “FIG” (France-Italy-Germany) plan of the 1950s was stopped by General de Gaulle, who wanted a strictly national program. During the transatlantic debates of the 1960s about a Multilateral Nuclear Force (MLF), one option envisioned at some point was to put it under the control of the Western European Union (WEU).⁸ As the NPT negotiations were concluded, Germany and Italy sought to preserve the possibility of a future European deterrent by attaching observations and reservations to their ratification acts in 1975.⁹ Germany stated that “no provision of the Treaty may be interpreted in such a way as to hamper the further development of European unification, especially the creation of a European Union with appropriate competence.”¹⁰ The government assured the Bundestag that it was “still possible to develop a European nuclear power.”¹¹

Likewise, Italy signed the Treaty “in the firm belief that nothing in it is an obstacle to the unification of the countries of Western Europe and to the justified expectations that the peoples of this area have in the developments and progress towards unity with a view to the creation of a European entity.”¹² The case of Italy deserves attention as it encapsulates the recurring European debate. As nuclear historian Leopoldo Nuti put it, “the idea of a European bomb ... was constantly looming in the mental landscape of the Italian foreign policy-making elite: sometimes as an alternative to the Atlantic one, when the United States seemed to backtrack from a policy of nuclear sharing, sometimes as the necessary step to reinforce the European pillar of the Alliance.”¹³

However, there will be no joint nuclear force controlled by the European Union in the foreseeable future. There is near-zero interest today on the continent for establishing a fully federal-type Union with a single executive. And no appetite in France for transferring its nuclear assets to such a hypothetical entity.

A British-French Bomb

A fourth arrangement that will almost certainly not take place is a pooling of UK and French assets. Such a scheme could involve each country retaining full authority to use national nuclear assets, but ensuring that at least one submarine of each is always on patrol, ready to exercise deterrence on behalf of both if need be. While it could have appeared attractive a few years ago, notably for budgetary reasons (it could have facilitated a reduction of both ballistic missile submarine [SSBN] forces from four to three each), it is not a serious possibility at this time.¹⁴ Both countries have now embarked on national SSBN renewal programs. Most importantly, if and when Brexit happens, Britain will want to cling to its strategic assets—which include an independent nuclear force.

While this scenario has more credibility than the previous three, it remains improbable.

Europe's Nuclear Policy Framework

While scenarios of “common” or “joint” nuclear forces are unrealistic in the current context, it is credible to imagine a stronger European role for French, and possibly British, nuclear forces, including through consultations and common policymaking. A number of statements and commitments historically taken by European countries form the context of a possible European deterrence policy.

France's (and Britain's) Historical Commitments

British and French nuclear policies always had at least a *de facto* European dimension. Since the early 1960s, the UK force has been primarily at the service of the transatlantic alliance and, contrary to the French one, is fully available to NATO. But 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 deterrent was protecting his immediate neighbors.¹⁵ 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.”¹⁶ That same year, Prime Minister Georges Pompidou made it clear publicly that the mere existence of the national nuclear force amounted to *de facto* European protection.¹⁷

The broader nuclear contribution of France and the UK to the security of the Alliance as a whole—something De Gaulle himself believed in¹⁸—was recognized in the Ottawa Declaration of 1974.¹⁹ In the next decade, there were in-depth discussions between German Chancellor Helmut Kohl and French President François Mitterrand on a possible French guarantee to Germany. But Mitterrand feared Soviet reactions and believed the French force was insufficient to protect Europe.²⁰ Still, he publicly committed himself in 1986 to consult with Bonn, time and circumstances permitting, in case the use of theater nuclear weapons was considered on German soil.

It is credible to imagine a stronger European role for French, and possibly British, nuclear forces.

Since the creation of the European Union in 1993, France has more clearly stressed the European dimension of deterrence. To the traditional French argument of intrinsic unreliability of the U.S. deterrent was added a new one: the European Union itself. In 1992, as several French statesmen

mused publicly about the hypothetical transfer, one day, of nuclear weapons to a future common European political authority, President Mitterrand signaled his acceptance of the need for the member states of the newly-born Union to tackle the nuclear issue when the time came: “This embryo of defense 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 [EU member states] 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 defense. I will not bring you elements of solution, it would lead me to speak the whole afternoon.”²¹ His point—deliberately or not—recalled one of the German reservations of 1975 (see above).

It was at this point that the concept of “concerted deterrence” appeared, an expression proposed by Jacques Mellick, a junior minister for Defense, among other possible options which included a “de facto” European deterrent, an “extended” deterrent and a “shared” one. Concerted deterrence meant, for him, the establishment of a consultative mechanism about nuclear weapons use (though later French statements using the “concerted deterrence” expression were vaguer).²²

Mitterrand accepted the 1994 Defense White Paper drafted by the conservative government, which included the expression “strategic autonomy” for the first time, and made it clear that, translated at the European level, it would have to include a nuclear dimension. The White Paper stated:

The EU embrace of “strategic autonomy” could herald a new European nuclear debate.

The issue of a European nuclear doctrine is destined to become one of the major issues in the construction of a common European defense. The relevance of the subject will become clearer as the European Union realizes its political identity at the same time as its security and defense identity. Such a perspective remains distant, but must not be lost sight of. With nuclear power, Europe’s autonomy in defense matters is possible. Without it, it is excluded. The dialogue with Great Britain, which has begun to take this dimension into account, must be continued and deepened. This does not exclude exchanges with other partners. However, there will only be a European nuclear doctrine, a European deterrent, when there are vital European interests, considered as such by Europeans and understood as such by others. Until then, France does not intend to dilute its national defense means in such an area under any pretext.²³

Mitterrand, however, made it clear that he was in no hurry to give a greater European role for French nuclear weapons and did not push the issue.²⁴

In 1995, as France embarked on a final nuclear testing campaign under Mitterrand's successor, Jacques Chirac, the country reaffirmed its European nuclear openings—eager to claim that it was not pursuing strictly national interests. It confirmed that it 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.”²⁵ Simultaneously, building on several years of discreet dialogue between their two governments, French and British leaders recognized the existence of common vital interests and increased 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.”²⁶ Chirac stated that UK-French nuclear cooperation “is part of the prospect of ‘concerted deterrence’ ... 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.”²⁷ The decision to retire the short-range Hades ground-launched missile, which had been designed for a conflict with the Warsaw Pact and could barely reach targets beyond East Germany, was taken after consultation with Bonn.²⁸ The Franco-German Common Concept on Security and Defense adopted in December 1996 stated that “our countries are ready to engage in a dialogue on the function of nuclear deterrence in the context of European defense policy.”²⁹

Since then, Paris has suggested at many occasions that its deterrent plays a European role. The French believe that, by its very existence, it contributes to Europe's security and that a possible aggressor would do better to take this into account.³⁰ Officials emphasize, in semi-private conversations, that when the French Air Force participates in the air defense of the Baltic States, it is the air force of a nuclear power—suggesting that Russia understands this. Presidents 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.³¹ Paris has organized visits of its nuclear bases for NATO diplomats. The Aachen bilateral cooperation treaty signed by France and Germany in 2019 included a strong mutual defense commitment. Without mentioning NATO's Article 5, it refers to the “indivisible character” of German and French security interests.³² The text reads: “they [shall] help and assist each other by any available means, including armed force, in case of an armed aggression against their territories.”³³ French officials, including Macron, have reportedly made it clear in private conversations that the expression “any available means” should be understood as including nuclear weapons (though such an indirect reference could hardly be seen as a nuclear deterrence signal to potential adversaries).³⁴

The European Level

Besides these statements, there have been remarkably few common European positions on nuclear deterrence. To be sure, as early as 1987—at a time when several NATO countries worried about the future of the U.S. guarantee—the members of the Western European Union, a defense organization later subsumed into the European Union, declared that, “The independent forces of France and the United Kingdom contribute to overall deterrence and security . . . In the nuclear field also, we shall continue to carry our share: some of us by pursuing appropriate cooperative arrangements with the U.S.; the UK and France by continuing to maintain independent nuclear forces, the credibility of which they are determined to preserve.”³⁵ However, the composition of the European Union—which today includes a number of non-NATO members, some of them with a strong tradition of neutrality or pro-disarmament stance—has precluded any meaningful discussion of nuclear deterrence.

Still, of note is that the language of the Lisbon treaty adopted in 2009 includes a mutual security guarantee that could be understood as potentially including nuclear weapons. Article 42.7 states that:

If a Member State is the victim of armed aggression on its territory, the other Member States shall have towards it an obligation of aid and assistance by all the means in their power, in accordance with Article 51 of the United Nations Charter. This shall not prejudice the specific character of the security and defense policy of certain Member States. Commitments and cooperation in this area shall be consistent with commitments under the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, which, for those States which are members of it, remains the foundation of their collective defense and the forum for its implementation.³⁶

The key wording here is “all the means in their power,” which suggests that this includes nuclear weapons—at the very least, drafters sought an ambiguity in the name of deterrence. This interpretation—that “all the means in their power” may include nuclear weapons—is shared by the Bundestag Research Service.³⁷ Also of note is the fact that the EU has now embraced the principle of “strategic autonomy” in its 2016 Global Strategy—that is, not complete independence, but an increased reliance on its own assets; this could herald a new debate on the nuclear dimension of European defense.³⁸

A Complementary Guarantee?

Based on this framework, are changes in the way European countries view their nuclear security forthcoming? Possibly. But such changes would likely concern the “software” (i.e. political) dimension of deterrence more than its “hardware” (i.e. military) one, and would not alter the fundamental bases of transatlantic deterrence, i.e. the primacy of NATO and its nuclear arrangements.

German leaders are making it increasingly clear that they do not want Europe to rely solely on the United States. Angela Merkel herself has said so repeatedly.³⁹ Poland has a longstanding interest in nuclear deterrence policy: in 2009, it agreed with France on opening “a bilateral dialogue on the role of nuclear deterrence in nowadays [sic] security environment,”⁴⁰ and its defense minister visited the French SSBN base in 2013; since the invasion of Crimea, current and former high-level officials have shown an appetite for a stronger say in nuclear questions, for discussions with France on the subject, and even for the hypothesis of a European deterrent.⁴¹ The Finnish government has funded a study program entitled “New Challenges for Strategic Deterrence in the 21st Century” to bolster knowledge and discussions about nuclear deterrence in the Nordic countries.⁴²

Still, as a study conducted by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) indicates, there is a continued general nuclear apathy in Europe as well as an unwillingness “to face up to the renewed relevance that nuclear deterrence ought to have in their strategic thinking.”⁴³ The time is thus not ripe for grand initiatives that would entail the creation *ex abrupto* of a common deterrent, especially as long as NATO mechanisms are intact. As an EU scholar put it in a recent overview of the concept of “strategic autonomy:” “[T]here appears to be no Europe-wide willingness for a ‘European nuclear deterrent’ at present. In many European countries such a level of autonomy would symbolize the end of the transatlantic relationship as we know it today, pose a strategic liability for their national security, and, for many states, violate their neutrality or constitutions.”⁴⁴

It is thus very unlikely that European-wide nuclear deterrence will be pursued. However, in the existing context, two avenues could be explored.

Nuclear Dialogue

To begin with, interested European countries could embark on a dialogue on nuclear deterrence issues, which could include common visits to nuclear bases and attendance at exercises. This should happen outside the formal EU context. First, diplomats know how difficult nuclear policy discussions can be in Brussels—as discussions on EU positions every five years for NPT conferences testify. As the ECFR study shows, the spectrum of views on nuclear deterrence within the EU remains very large: the group of “True Believers” it identifies comprises only France, the UK, Poland and Romania.⁴⁵ The Nuclear Ban Treaty, on which several non-NATO EU members (Austria, which has ratified the Treaty, as well as Ireland and to a certain extent Sweden) have strong positive views, makes a nuclear deterrence debate in formal EU circles almost a nonstarter at this point.⁴⁶ Second, any productive discussion about scenarios and options to

reinforce deterrence in Europe will have to be quiet and discreet. Third, any nuclear deterrence discussion in a strictly EU context would preclude post-Brexit UK presence or involvement.

The way forward could mirror the European Intervention Initiative (EI2) proposed by France in 2017. This informal grouping, which currently involves 10 countries including the United Kingdom, aims at fostering the emergence of a common European strategic culture. A similar kind of forum could be created for nuclear deterrence issues. Beyond discussions on nuclear policy matters, it could be a cover for the organization of European visits to French (and possibly British) nuclear bases, and attendance as observers to major nuclear exercises such as the annual French Strategic Air Forces (FAS) “Poker” exercises.

Nuclear Insurance

Separately and in addition, Paris could declare a stronger European role for its national deterrent. It would provide a complementary insurance to European NATO members and most importantly a nuclear assurance to non-NATO EU members. Regarding the latter, note that the number of such EU countries is much higher (one fourth of current EU membership) than was the case in the 1990s. While some of the countries concerned (Austria and Ireland) would likely not be interested, others (Finland) might very well be.

It would be consistent with French views of the EU to state publicly and more clearly than in the past that the French force protects Europe as a whole. At the least, the same logic that applied to the joint UK-French declaration of 1995 (see above) could be transposed to the European level: again, it seems fitting with the French view of what the EU is about that an aggression against Finnish, Estonian, Polish (or Portuguese) “vital” interests would jeopardize the very foundations of what Europe is about in the 21st century. Another way to put it would be to make it clearer, publicly, that Article 42.7 of the Lisbon Treaty (see above) does indeed potentially include nuclear weapons. Ultimately, Paris could state that it would consult with its European partners, time and circumstances permitting, if the use of nuclear weapons was considered for the defense of the continent. This could possibly be supplemented by rotations of French *Rafale* fighter-bombers (without their nuclear missiles) of the French Strategic Air Forces to allied bases, including on the territory of the most eastern countries of the Alliance in order to demonstrate its solidarity.

From the French standpoint, such schemes would not amount to a formal extended deterrent in the traditional sense of the term: Paris believes one

It would be consistent to state publicly that the French force protects Europe as a whole.

cannot compare the protection conferred by a distant superpower to the recognition of a *de facto* reality. Also, the context we are describing supposes that the U.S./NATO extended deterrent still exists in its current form. Nevertheless, however one names it, it would be an additional layer of protection, a complementary or supplementary guarantee conferred by France (and possibly Britain)—more of a nuclear safety net, or final line of defense for Europe.

In parallel, it would be appropriate to intensify discussions on nuclear policy in the North Atlantic Council, thus including France as a full-fledged participant. Paris is unlikely to join the NATO Nuclear Planning Group (NPG) or assign part of the airborne component to the Atlantic Alliance.⁴⁷ 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—Paris wants to be seen as maintaining absolute independence in nuclear decision making. But more nuclear policy discussions at the NAC level would reassure allies that Paris is not seeking to duplicate or weaken current NATO nuclear arrangements. It would also make sure that Europeans are not “sending the wrong message” to Washington by discussing nuclear deterrence on their own, as feared by a leading German security expert.⁴⁸ Perhaps the Ottawa language—the recognition of the contribution of UK and French nuclear forces to Alliance security—which has been unchanged since 1974, could also be strengthened by further emphasizing the importance of these forces for the security of Europe.

But What If?

The perspective would change in case of a significant alteration in the transatlantic security relationship, directly affecting its nuclear arrangements. As German expert 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.”⁴⁹

Without going that far, dramatic changes in NATO would indeed affect the range of realistic scenarios. Think, for instance, of a unilateral withdrawal of U.S. nuclear weapons from Europe—an irrational decision for sure, but which is not unthinkable in the current U.S. administration. Or think of an unraveling of the NATO nuclear basing and sharing mechanisms following a unilateral decision of a member country (such as Belgium, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands or Turkey) to cease being a part of it.⁵⁰ 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 continues to feel protected by nuclear

deterrence. In concrete terms, France could base part of its airborne arsenal (say, on the order of 10 missiles) in Germany or in Poland (basing) and/or agree that they could be carried by European fighter-bombers (sharing).⁵¹ For both political and technical reasons (the small size of the French airborne arsenal, about 40-45 missiles), it is unlikely that Paris and its European partners would seek to mirror the exact scope of current NATO arrangements.

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 nonnuclear nations commit themselves to participate in a nuclear strike package with nonnuclear assets (for suppression of enemy air defenses, surveillance, refueling, etc.). The same arrangements could exist at sea: one could envision a European nuclear maritime task force around the French *Charles-de-Gaulle* carrier (which can carry air-launched nuclear missiles), with accompanying European ships and, possibly, a European nuclear squadron based on it.

If such orientations were taken, they would need to be accompanied, just as is today the case 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 employment, which could coexist with national ones.

An open question would be the role the UK nuclear force would then play. In the context of Brexit, London is eager to bolster its European security credentials. If the European deterrence question stays out of formal EU circles, it is conceivable that the United Kingdom could be part of such arrangements one way or another—unless the cost of maintaining a modernized deterrent proved excessive in post-Brexit circumstances, for instance in case a secession of Scotland forced the relocation of UK nuclear assets somewhere else in Britain.

In sum, this would be a form of Europeanization of the Alliance's nuclear arrangements (or a European nuclear pillar), though not a complete substitute for U.S. nuclear protection—the latter could only happen in the (improbable, even in the era of Trump) case of a complete breakdown of the transatlantic military bond.

If it stays out of formal EU circles, it is conceivable that the UK could be part of such arrangements.

Objections and Rebuttals

A number of objections have been raised by experts over the years about the viability of a European deterrence mechanism.⁵² Most of them are easily rebutted.

Would it be credible?

Some claim that a France and/or UK-based nuclear deterrent would not have the necessary credibility.⁵³ But it is widely considered that a smaller arsenal *can* deter a major power provided it has the ability to inflict damage seen as unacceptable by

Deterrence by a European power might be seen as more credible than by a distant protector.

the other party. This has always been the premise of “deterrence of the strong by the weak”—and is not connected with the size of the other party’s nuclear arsenal as long as deterrence does not rely on a “counterforce” strategy, or on the ability to destroy the equivalent territory or population of the defender. It is also not connected with the size of the other party’s conventional military capabilities as long as one does not rely on any war-fighting or nuclear defense strategy—concepts that even NATO no longer applies. Most impor-

tantly, again, deterrence exercised by a European power might be seen as more credible than when it is exercised by a distant protector; the idea is that “be ready to die for Helsinki” could be a more credible proposition for a European nuclear power than for the United States.

Would it be legal?

It has been claimed that a European nuclear deterrent would meet legal obstacles since nonnuclear EU countries would have to “leave the NPT.”⁵⁴ But such countries would need to do so only to build national nuclear weapons—something that is not on the agenda. A NATO-like European nuclear deterrent would no more violate the NPT than the current NATO arrangements do. Also, the argument ignores the German and Italian reservations they made when they ratified the NPT (see above).

Would it make Europe more independent?

It is also claimed that a European deterrent would not completely alleviate European dependency on the United States, since London and Paris cooperate with Washington in nuclear defense matters. While correct for the UK, given that the British program is indeed intimately linked with that of the United States (for example, the SSBN’s Common Missile Compartment, nuclear propulsion, Trident-II missile, re-entry vehicle), this argument ignores the contemporary nature of such cooperation regarding France: there is no U.S. “technical support”⁵⁵ to the French deterrent today.

Would it not be counterproductive?

To claim that the “euro-nukes debate steers attention away from extremely urgent issues such as development of European conventional capabilities”⁵⁶—an argument also heard in European government circles in the 2000s—is rather puzzling. Neither from the point of view of politics or 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 U.S. protection—should logically drive the Europeans to seek an increase in defense budgets *and* consider an enhancement in nuclear cooperation.

Would Paris (and London) be ready to do it?

It is legitimate to wonder whether France and Britain would “be prepared to take on the burden sharing their arsenals.”⁵⁷ But there is no reason that they could not, provided that they retain national control (as the United States does in NATO), and no reason to believe they would not be ready to go beyond if forced to do so by a U.S. retreat or an unraveling of current arrangements.

Would the public support it?

One hardly sees why “any new German or other European nuclear activities would have to be presented to the population”⁵⁸ as long as it remains within the bounds of current international law and practice, including the NPT and nuclear sharing-type arrangements as they exist in NATO.

A bigger question—and one that has always existed—is that of leadership: the coming to power of political forces with anti-nuclear sympathies in several European capitals would be an obstacle to any meaningful multilateral discussion about deterrence.

Think Again

The question of a European deterrent has been a fixture of the continental security debate for decades. There is no reason to believe that this debate will lead to any kind of “European Bomb” in the foreseeable future. However, a persistent feeling of insecurity and uncertainty vis-à-vis the future of the U.S. security guarantee is likely to foster a new debate among interested European countries on nuclear deterrence and may lead to a stronger French role in guaranteeing the security of its partners—provided that Paris finds sympathetic ears in Berlin and elsewhere.

A severe U.S.-originated crisis in transatlantic security arrangements would change the perspective. As the ECFR study suggests, “Europeans must ... give serious consideration to whether a Franco-British ‘nuclear umbrella’ would be a possible complement to, or substitute for, the current US nuclear guarantee to

Europe.”⁵⁹ It rightly adds that the continent “is not devoting enough intellectual energy to the subject” and “has not adapted its thinking on nuclear issues in the post-cold war era, let alone to the new age of Russian revanchism and potential regional proliferation.”⁶⁰ Indeed, whatever the future holds, now would be a good time for all Europeans to reengage in nuclear policy brainstorming and think on their own—as well as among themselves—about deterrence.

Notes

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2. See Tristan Volpe & Ulrich Kühn, “Germany’s Nuclear Education: Why a Few Elites Are Testing a Taboo,” *The Washington Quarterly* 40, no. 3, Fall 2017, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0163660X.2017.1370317>.
3. *Ibid.*, 9.
4. Agreement between the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the Federal Republic of Germany and the Kingdom of the Netherlands on Collaboration in the Development and Exploitation of the Gas Centrifuge Process for producing Enriched Uranium, Almelo, March 4, 1970, <http://fissilematerials.org/library/urenc070.pdf>.
5. See Marc Trachtenberg, *The Cold War and After: History, Theory, and the Logic of International Politics* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2012): 335–336. For a more recent example, see Volpe & Kühn, 16; and Manuel Lafont Rapnouil et al., “Can Europe Become a Nuclear Power?” European Council on Foreign Relations, September 2018, https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_can_europe_become_a_nuclear_power.
6. Deutscher Bundestag, Wissenschaftliche Dienste, Sachstand: Völkerrechtliche Verpflichtungen Deutschlands beim Umgang mit Kernwaffen. Deutsche und europäische Ko-Finanzierung ausländischer Nuklearwaffenpotentiale [German Parliament, Scientific Services, State of Play: Germany’s Obligations under International Law in Dealing with Nuclear Weapons. German and European Co-financing of Foreign Nuclear Weapons Potentials], WD2–3000 –013/17, 2017, <https://www.bundestag.de/resource/blob/513080/c9a903735d5ea334181c2f946d2cf8a2/wd-2-013-17-pdf-data.pdf>; See also Max Fischer, “European Nuclear Weapons Program Would be Legal, German Review Finds,” *New York Times*, July 6, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/05/world/europe/germany-nuclear-weapons.html>.
7. Sebastian Sprenger, “With Nukes in Mind, French Officials Stake out Must-Haves for Franco-German Warplane,” *Defense News*, November 15, 2018, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2018/11/15/french-officials-stake-out-sovereign-bits-in-franco-german-warplane-bid/>.
8. See Ralph Dietl, “Towards a European ‘Third Force’? Reflections on the European Political and Security Cooperation, 1948-1964,” in Christian Nuenlist & Ana Locher (eds.), *Transatlantic Relations at Stake. Aspects of NATO, 1956-1972*, Zürcher Beiträge zur Sicherheitspolitik, no. 78, ETH Zürich, <http://www.css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/ZB-78.pdf>.

9. Leopoldo Nuti, "Italy as a Hedging State? The Problematic Ratification of the Non-Proliferation Treaty," Elisabetta Bini and Igor Londero, editors, *Nuclear Italy: An International History of Italian Nuclear Policies during the Cold War* (Trieste, EUT Edizioni Università di Trieste, 2017), 119–139, https://www.openstarts.units.it/bitstream/10077/15331/1/Nuclear_Italy-08-Nuti.pdf; and Leopoldo Nuti, "Italy's Nuclear Choices," UNSCI Discussion Papers, no. 25, January 2011, <https://revistas.ucm.es/index.php/UNIS/article/viewFile/UNIS111130167A/26876>.
10. UK Depository Status List, Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons; London, Moscow and Washington, July 1, 1968, Declarations and Reservations, last updated June 2016, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/601041/08_Non_Proliferation_Treaty_1968_Status_list.pdf, 17.
11. Quoted in Spiegel staff, "Elephant in the Room."
12. UK Depository Status List, 23.
13. Nuti, "Italy as a Hedging State?" 120.
14. See Bruno Tertrais, "Entente Nucléaire: Options for UK-French Nuclear Cooperation", British-American Security Council, June 2012, https://www.basicint.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/entente_nucleaire_basic_trident_commission.pdf.
15. In private, de Gaulle said: "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), 653.
16. Quoted in Jacques Isnard, "Le Grand Déballage Nucléaire," *Le Monde*, February 4, 1997.
17. "By taking this attitude, we are at the same time helping to guarantee Europe to a large extent ... By the mere fact that France is in Europe, its strength fully and automatically plays to Europe's advantage, whose defense is inseparable physically and geographically from its own." Georges Pompidou, Speech to the National Assembly, Paris, December 2, 1964.
18. See Peyrefitte, 710.
19. "The European members ... two of whom possess nuclear forces capable of playing a deterrent role of their own contributing to the overall strengthening of the deterrence of the Alliance." Declaration on Atlantic Relations, issued by the North Atlantic Council, June 19, 1974, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_26901.htm?selectedLocale=en.
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21. François Mitterrand, Allocution à l'ouverture des Rencontres nationales pour l'Europe [Speech at the Opening of the National Meetings on Europe], Paris, January 10, 1992, <http://discours.vie-publique.fr/notices/927001600.html>. See also Jacques Amalric, "La France suggère à ses partenaires d'étudier une 'doctrine' nucléaire pour l'Europe" [France Suggests to Its Partners to Study a Nuclear 'Doctrine' for Europe], *Le Monde*, January 13, 1992.
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23. Livre blanc sur la défense [White Paper on Defense], Paris, French Ministry of Defense, 1994, <http://www.livreblancdefenseetsecurite.gouv.fr/pdf/le-livre-blanc-sur-la-defense-1994.pdf>, 56.

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25. Alain Juppé, speech, National Institute for Higher Defense Studies, Paris, September 7, 1995.
26. UK-French Joint Statement on Nuclear Cooperation, London, October 30, 1995.
27. Jacques Chirac, speech, Ecole Militaire, Paris, June 8, 1996 (author’s translation).
28. Jacques Chirac, speech, École Militaire, Paris, February 23, 1996 (author’s translation).
29. Common Franco-German concept on security, security and defense, adopted in Nuremberg on December 9, 1996.
30. See, for example, Jacques Chirac, speech during his visit to the strategic air and ocean-based forces, Landivisiau – L’Île Longue (Brest), January 19, 2006; 2008 White Paper on Defense and National Security, http://archives.livreblancdefenseetsecurite.gouv.fr/2008/information/les_dossiers_actualites_19/livre_blanc_sur_defense_875/index.html, 70; Nicolas Sarkozy, Speech at the presentation of SNLE Le Terrible, Cherbourg March 21, 2008; 2013 White Paper on Defense and National Security, <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/portail/enjeux2/politique-de-defense/le-livre-blanc-sur-la-defense-et-la-securite-nationale-2013/livre-blanc-2013>, 69; François Hollande, speech on nuclear deterrence, visit to the Strategic air forces, Istres, February 19, 2015; and 2017 Defense and National Security Strategic Review, <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/dgris/presentation/evenements/revue-strategique-de-defense-et-de-securite-nationale-2017>, 70.
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32. Elie Perot, “The Aachen Mutual Defence Clause: A Closer Look at the French-German Treaty,” Royal Institute for International Relations, no. 105, February 2019, <http://www.egmontinstitute.be/content/uploads/2019/02/SPB105.pdf?type=pdf>.
33. Traité entre la République française et la République fédérale d’Allemagne sur la coopération et l’intégration franco-allemandes [Treaty between the French Republic and the Federal Republic of Germany on Franco-German Cooperation and Integration], French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, January 22, 2019, <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/dossiers-pays/allemande/rerelations-bilaterales/traites-de-cooperation-franco-allemand-d-aix-la-chapelle>.
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43. Manuel Lafont Rapnouil et al., “Eyes Tight Shut: European Attitudes Towards Nuclear Deterrence,” European Council on Foreign Relations, December 2018, https://www.ecfr.eu/specials/scorecard/eyes_tight_shut_european_attitudes_towards_nuclear_deterrence.
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45. Lafont Rapnouil et al., 4.
46. In addition, one NATO/EU member, Latvia, forbids the presence of nuclear weapons on its soil even in wartime. See Stein-Ivar Lothe Eide, “A Ban on Nuclear Weapons: What’s in It for NATO? Why NATO States Should Not Be Worried about a Ban on Nuclear Weapons,” Policy Paper no. 5, International Law and Policy Institute (2014), <https://ilpi.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/PP05-14-NATO-and-a-BAN.pdf>.
47. The hypothesis had nevertheless been imagined in French government circles in 1996 (one Strategic Air Forces squadron out of three would have been made available for NATO planning), when France was planning to resume its place in the NATO military structure.
48. Wolfgang Ischinger quoted in Spiegel staff, “Elephant in the Room.”
49. Oliver Thränert, “No Shortcut to a European Deterrent,” CSS Policy Perspectives 5, no. 2, February 2017, <http://www.css.ethz.ch/en/services/digital-library/articles/article.html/2c895258-a579-48f8-a4db-2c5a47566557/pdf>.
50. Belgium, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands participate in the nuclear sharing mechanisms (as well as Greece and Turkey, though their pilots are not currently trained to do so). Their nuclear-certified aircraft (PA-200 Tornado and F-16A/B) will remain in service until around 2025. While most of them (Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands, Turkey) have

already announced their intention to buy nuclear-capable F-35, none of them has explicitly confirmed its intention to have their future aircraft certified for NATO's nuclear mission.

51. From a technical standpoint, any fighter-bomber can carry a nuclear weapon. However, from the point of view of the Nuclear Weapon State (that is, the country which designed and produced the bomb or missile), some constraints can appear and conditions have to be met regarding avionics, aerodynamics (in the case of a missile, as opposed to a gravity bomb), 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.
52. Elisabeth Braw, "It's Time to Put an End to the Phantom Euro-Nukes Debate," Commentary, European Leadership Network, August 10, 2018, <https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/commentary/its-time-to-put-an-end-to-the-phantom-euro-nukes-debate/>.
53. See for instance Thränert, as well as Volpe & Kühn.
54. Braw.
55. Braw. See Jeffrey Lewis and Bruno Tertrais, "US-French Nuclear Cooperation: Its Past, Present and Future," Recherches & Documents, no. 4, *Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique*, October 28, 2015, <https://www.frstrategie.org/en/publications/recherches-et-documents/us-french-nuclear-cooperation-its-past-present-and-future-04-2015>.
56. Braw.
57. Ibid.
58. Ibid.
59. Lafont Rapnouil et al., 2.
60. Ibid, 9–10.