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FRANCE'S NUCLEAR DEFENCE STRATEGY TOWARDS THE PROSPECTS FOR EUROPEAN NUCLEAR DETERRENCE

ABSTRACT

The crisis of multilateralism and the growing strategic and military rivalry between superpowers is changing the stability and balance of forces in the world. The war in Ukraine has put nuclear weapons and their role in Europe's defence back at the centre of the security debate. To maintain its international position and effectively protect its interests, France cannot afford to weaken its main asset – nuclear deterrence forces. That is why President Emmanuel Macron has announced the maintenance of strategic autonomy and has also offered dialogue for a greater role and participation of Europeans in common defence. The article focuses on France as a case study and examines the motivations of the French authorities to formulate a strong push for the Europeanisation of nuclear deterrence based on French capabilities. The employment of historical and comparative methodology, comprising the analysis of document content, statements and official reports, augmented by interviews with experts and key policymakers, has permitted the tracing of the evolution of the French nuclear deterrent. This provides a research context for President Emmanuel Macron's current policy and his proposals relating to the role of French nuclear deterrence in Europe. The aim of this study is to analyse and explain the role of French nuclear deterrence forces in creating a nuclear deterrent at a European level and promoting a nuclear culture among European allies. This article, which explores how the French nuclear strategy is shaped by historical circumstances and current geopolitical needs, makes a threefold contribution to the literature: firstly, it discusses the historical background to the development of the French doctrine of nuclear deterrence; secondly, it presents the main principles of the French nuclear deterrent; and thirdly, it demonstrates that France is not in a position to rapidly provide an

extended nuclear deterrent for Europe but can make a significant contribution to the collective security of European Union states.

Keywords: France, defence strategy, nuclear deterrence, European strategic autonomy, nuclear umbrella to protect Europe

INTRODUCTION

Since the creation of the standing army during the reign of Charles VII (1445), the military has been an essential foundation of French power and continues to be so today.¹ Since the late 1960s, France has maintained an independent nuclear force, which has become one of the cornerstones of the country's defence policy and the embodiment of France's freedom of action vis-à-vis the outside world.² Today, France is the only nuclear power on the European continent that is a member of both the European Union and the Atlantic Alliance.

France's defence policy is based on the foundations of a policy of nuclear deterrence and sufficiency, pursued and developed by all successive presidents of the Fifth Republic, taking into account the evolving international context. The key principle of France's strategy has become the principle of autonomy of decision (*liberté d'action*), which has completely changed France's position in the world.³ Having independent nuclear power forces provided France with an asset to become more autonomous from the United States in terms of defence, as well as an important instrument to pursue its aspirations for leadership in Europe, ahead of Great Britain and Germany.

For two decades, France has been systematically upgrading and adapting its nuclear capability to retain the ability to deter whatever the nature and location of the threat. Russia's aggression against Ukraine has completely changed the security situation for European states. The escalation of Russian nuclear threats has been met with a finely tuned French deterrence policy of nuclear restraint.

President Emmanuel Macron believes that France – as the only nuclear power in the EU – can play a particularly important role in Europe's nuclear deterrence. This premise serves to reinforce France's image as a promoter of European integration in the realm of security and defence and to advance the French vision of EU 'strategic autonomy' advocated by the French president.

This study aims to assess France's nuclear policy and its contribution to deterrence on the European continent. The objective is to reflect on the role and relevance of

¹ M. Lefebvre, *La politique étrangère de la France*, Paris 2019, p. 73.

² B. Tertrais, *Quel avenir pour la dissuasion nucléaire?*, Paris 2022, at <https://www.fondapol.org/etude/quel-avenir-pour-la-dissuasion-nucleaire>, 13 January 2024.

³ A. Ciupiński, *Rola Francji w kształtowaniu europejskiej autonomii strategicznej*, Warszawa 2001, p. 23; M. Kuczyński, *Polityka bezpieczeństwa i siły zbrojne Francji*, Warszawa 1995, p. 20.

French deterrence in establishing an extended European nuclear deterrent and promoting a nuclear culture among European allies. The study seeks to answer the following research questions: What are the assumptions of the French nuclear doctrine, and what nuclear capabilities does France possess? As the only nuclear state in the European Union, can France play a greater role in protecting its partners and allies? Additionally, what is the relationship between the French nuclear deterrent and the concept of European strategic autonomy?

In relation to the above questions, the following research hypothesis is proposed: France has not defined vital interests concerning the European security architecture and is not positioned to rapidly provide an extended nuclear deterrent within the framework of 'European strategic autonomy'; however, its nuclear arsenal can make a significant contribution to the collective security of European states.

The first part of this study presents the historical background for the development of France's nuclear forces and their capabilities. The analysis shows that, since the time of General De Gaulle, ensuring the credibility of the country's deterrence and defence forces has been a condition for enabling France to play the role of 'balancing power' in the game of superpowers. After exploring this context, the second part of the analysis focuses on examining the assumptions of the nuclear deterrence doctrine during E. Macron's presidency. The third part presents the offer to 'Europeanise' nuclear deterrence in light of the French concept of EU 'strategic autonomy'.

Studies of French nuclear deterrence policy have focused on showing the historical conditions of its development, including the role of General Charles de Gaulle – who established an independent nuclear capability that was never integrated into NATO policies and plans,⁴ albeit abstracted from an analysis of the European context. Other authors have examined the organisation of French nuclear forces⁵ and the evolution of French military nuclear policy.⁶ Analyses of the specificities of French nuclear doctrine and the future of French nuclear deterrence have also been extremely valuable.⁷ The article presented here enriches and extends these studies by exploring the European

⁴ C. Barbier, "The French Decision to Develop a Military Nuclear Programme in the 1950s," *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, vol. 4, no. 1 (1993), pp. 103-113; P. Boniface, *French Nuclear Weapons Policy after the Cold War*, Washington D.C. 1998, at https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/43863/1998_08_French_Nuclear_Weapons_Policy_after_the_Cold_War.pdf, 13 January 2024; F. Charillon, *La politique étrangère de la France de la fin de la guerre froide au printemps arabe*, Paris 2011; M. Lefebvre, *La politique...*; D. Mongin, "Genèse de l'armement nucléaire français," *Revue historique des armées*, vol. 262 (2011), pp. 9-19, at <https://journals.openedition.org/rha/7187>, 16 February 2024; S. Parzymies, *Czynnik wojskowy w polityce zagranicznej Francji 1958-1982*, Warszawa 1984.

⁵ H.M. Kristensen, M. Korda, E. Johns, "French Nuclear Weapons, 2023," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, vol. 79, no. 4 (2023), pp. 272-281.

⁶ J. Guisnel, B. Tertrais, "Jacques Chirac, l'aggiornamento de la dissuasion," in J. Guisnel, B. Tertrais (eds) *Le Président et la Bombe*, Paris 2016, pp. 130-144, at <https://www.cairn.info/le-president-et-la-bombe--9782738133878-page-130.htm>, 13 January 2024.

⁷ B. Tertrais, *French Nuclear Deterrence Policy, Forces, and Future: A Handbook*, Paris 2020; B. Tertrais, *Quel avenir pour...*

context of deterrence forces, analysing whether France would be prepared to provide a formal nuclear guarantee to those of its neighbours and allies who would want it. The article presents answers to the research questions and draws the general conclusion that France's nuclear deterrence enhances its power and prestige on the international stage but could also be an important contribution to European security (*reassurance*).

The analysis draws on the historical-comparative method, the factorial method and the interpretation of legal sources, while participant observation was also employed. The study presents the results of a content analysis of source materials, including speeches and declarations by the President of the Fifth Republic, government documents and legal regulations, as well as the security and defence strategy of the French authorities, complemented by a search of the available academic literature on the subject of the study.

I. ORIGINS, EVOLUTION AND POTENTIAL OF THE FRENCH NUCLEAR DETERRENCE

Historical background of the French nuclear programme

After the Second World War, France lost its status as a colonial empire; nevertheless, ambitions of 'world stature' (*la grandeur*) remained firmly entrenched in national doctrine. Restoring France to its former world role and position was a key foreign policy objective of General Charles de Gaulle, who returned to power in 1958. General de Gaulle saw nuclear power as an instrument for the realisation of France's global and European objectives, recognising that his homeland would maintain its superiority over other states by using it.⁸ The need for its own military force was reaffirmed by General de Gaulle during a meeting of senior army officers in Strasbourg on 23 November 1961: *A great state that does not possess them while others do is not the master of its destiny*.⁹ De Gaulle, in fact, believed that a great power could be a state which not only possesses nuclear weaponry, but also decides independently on its use.¹⁰ Underlying the logic of building an independent nuclear force was, therefore, the view that France would not rely on anyone (*de facto* the U.S.) in a situation where its survival would be threatened by an adversary.

The development of its own capabilities and the aspiration to create a defence system that is autonomous from NATO – both in decision-making and military capabilities – became the foundation of French security doctrine and a defining feature of French foreign policy.¹¹ This reflected France's aspiration to assume a prominent role

⁸ T. Młynarski, *Energetyka jądrowa wobec globalnych wyzwań bezpieczeństwa energetycznego i reżimu nieprolifracji w erze zmian klimatu*, Kraków 2016, p. 155.

⁹ J. Dalloz, *La France et le monde depuis 1945*, Paris 2017, p. 164.

¹⁰ S. Parzymies, *Czynnik wojskowy...*, pp. 28-30.

¹¹ One of the main principal motivations for France's pursuit of nuclear capabilities was its perception of a lack of reliability in the United States' assurances to utilise nuclear weapons in the defence of its allies.

on the global stage and emerge as a leading power in Western Europe. Furthermore, General de Gaulle held the view that the establishment of a French nuclear capability would create the possibility of developing principles for the collective defence of Western European states. He made this assertion at a press conference on 15 May 1962, wherein he stated that a French deterrent force would not only alter the terms of France's defence and external military operations, but also the terms of the assistance it could provide to its allies.¹² The objective of the national deterrent capability was intended to guarantee France's capacity to act in the event of nuclear threats, thereby enabling it to provide conventional support to allies threatened by conventional aggression from a nuclear power.

The military imperative has been a pivotal element in the advancement of the nuclear programme, with the military factor serving as a significant driving force behind the growth of the nuclear industry in France.¹³ The decision to create a nuclear-based military force was made in the mid-1950s, when the *Bureau d'Études Générales* (1954), a covert organisation within the Atomic Energy Commission (CEA), was established to design and build the atomic bomb.¹⁴ On 26 October 1956, the secret Committee for the Military Applications of Atomic Energy (*Comité des applications militaires de l'énergie atomique* – CAMEA) was created within the structures of the Ministry of Defence, tasked with coordinating the future military nuclear programme. On 4 November, by secret order, the Committee on Explosives (a secret plan to build a reactor specifically designed for military use) was established.¹⁵ Between 1956 and 1957, the government of Guy Mollet made the initial decisions to carry out a test explosion and equip the French army with nuclear weapons in the future.¹⁶ In Villeneuve-Saint-Georges (the French *Los Alamos*), near Paris, work began on France's first nuclear bomb – code-named *Gerboise Bleue* (60-70 kt TNT). The government also began building a nuclear weapons test facility in the Reggan area (Algeria) in the northern French Sahara. This resulted in the detonation of the *Gerboise Bleue* device in Algeria on 13 February 1960.

¹² Ibid., p. 36.

¹³ T. Młynarski, *Energetyka jądrowa...*, p. 157.

¹⁴ By a decree of the Provisional Government headed by Charles de Gaulle of 18 October 1945, the Atomic Energy Commission (*Commissariat à l'Energie Atomique* – CEA) was established, which, bringing together a strong group of scientists, gradually mastered various aspects of peacetime and military nuclear technology.

¹⁵ D. Mongin, "Le rôle des militaires dans le choix de l'arme atomique avant 1958," in O. Forcade, É. Duhamel, Ph. Vial (eds), *Militaires en République, 1870-1962: Les officiers, le pouvoir et la vie publique en France*, Paris 1999, p. 95. By a decree of the Provisional Government headed by Charles de Gaulle of 18 October 1945, the Atomic Energy Commission (*Commissariat à l'Energie Atomique* – CEA) was established, which, bringing together a strong group of scientists, gradually mastered various aspects of peace and military nuclear technology. Between 1956 and 1957, the government of Guy Mollet took the initial decisions to carry out a test explosion and, in the future, to equip the French army with nuclear weapons.

¹⁶ D. Mongin, "Genèse de l'armement..."

The detonation of the first nuclear bomb and the creation of a nuclear deterrence force (*la force de dissuasion*) provided the rationale for a policy of independence (*l'exception française*) and the strategic autonomy of France as an independent nuclear power.¹⁷ From 1960 onwards, further testing was conducted – with the objective of reducing the size of the bomb. In August 1968, the first French H-bomb exploded on the Mururoa Atoll in the Pacific Ocean.¹⁸

The 1965-1970 Military Programme Act consolidated the budgetary effort (in 1967, nuclear weapons and systems accounted for 51.4% of the armed forces' equipment budget)¹⁹, providing for the implementation of the French strategic triad. In accordance with de Gaulle's decision, the French firepower (*force de frappe*) consisted of three components: air, ground and sea. The first, the French Strategic Air Forces (FAS – *Les forces aériennes stratégiques*), which consisted of the Mirage IV aircraft, became operational in 1964.²⁰ The second consisted of missiles housed in 18 silos on the *Plateau d'Albion* in the Southern Alps between Lyon and Marseille (the structures were specially reinforced to withstand a nuclear strike), with its mission to enable an immediate response to an unexpected nuclear attack. In 1968, the first French strategic surface-to-surface missile (SSBS) armed with nuclear warheads was created. Additionally, the construction of three nuclear-powered submarines (SNLEs) with ballistic missiles was accelerated. The first of these, *Redoutable*, entered service in 1971.²¹ The entry into active service of the second and third vessels in 1973 and 1974 provided France with a permanent second-strike capability.²² In 1980, the entry into service of a fifth nuclear-powered submarine enabled the French authorities to maintain up to four ships at sea, with at least two of them permanently present. In 1986, the submarines were equipped with M4 missiles, which had a range of 4,000 km.²³ The deployment of the strategic triad (Mirage IV, SSBS Albion, SNLE) created a system of strategic forces to deter aggression by threatening the vital centres of a potential enemy.

The creation of an independent nuclear deterrent became a foreign policy instrument, allowing France to play a greater role on the international stage than its actual importance would suggest. Nuclear weapons were perceived, in addition to the security guarantee, as a means of maintaining France's power position in the world and as the only valued criterion of sovereignty.²⁴

¹⁷ R. Frank, "La France et son rapport au monde au XXième siècle", *Politique étrangère*, vol. 3-4 (2000), p. 836.

¹⁸ *L'INA éclaire l'actu*, at <https://www.ina.fr/ina-eclaire-actu>, 19 February 2024.

¹⁹ B. Tertrais, *French Nuclear Deterrence...*, p. 10. Testing in Algeria continued until 1966, after the country's independence, and then the testing grounds were moved to the islands of French Polynesia in the Pacific.

²⁰ C. Barbier, "The French Decision...", p. 103.

²¹ J. Dalloz, *La France et le monde...*, p. 165.

²² B. Tertrais, *French Nuclear Deterrence...*, p. 10.

²³ J. Dalloz, *La France et le monde...*, p. 177.

²⁴ S. Parzymies, *Czynnik wojskowy...*, pp. 27-28.

Since General de Gaulle, all successive French presidents have affirmed the continuance of nuclear deterrence. Key elements of 'Gaullism' were permanently visible in French foreign policy during the 1980s and 1990s. These were expressed, among other things, in retaining autonomy of decision-making, maintaining an independent nuclear force, rejecting automatism in French operational engagement, refusing to participate in any integrated military command structure, preserving France's unique status and special world role and refusing to grant automatic access to French territory or space in peacetime and in times of crisis, as well as in an arms procurement policy based predominantly on national companies.²⁵

During the presidency of François Mitterrand (1981-1995), the French nuclear deterrence system reached maturity with a well-defined doctrine based on three key assumptions:²⁶

- *protection of exclusively vital national interests* – the definition of which is somewhat vague and left to the discretion of the President of the Republic, although it is generally considered that the territory, people and sovereignty of France form the core of these interests;
- *possibility of nuclear warning* – i.e., a one-time strike (air force) against a massive retaliation (against a military target) aimed at persuading an adversary to cease aggression (to withdraw from boundaries of vital interests), thus restoring deterrence;
- *ability to inflict unacceptable damage on an adversary on its territory under all circumstances* – i.e., even after a first nuclear strike by an adversary on French territory (at least equivalent to, if not greater than, what would be at stake in a conflict).

President Mitterrand's successor, Jacques Chirac (President from 1995 to 2007), undertook to adapt the army to the circumstances resulting from the end of the Cold War.²⁷ The collapse of the Soviet empire and the threat it posed enabled France to close its ground-based deterrent component in 1996 by removing surface-to-surface missiles from the Albion Plateau.²⁸ Nuclear power funding was halved over the decade 1990-2000.²⁹ Jacques Chirac also changed French nuclear doctrine by targeting the final warning at the adversary's political, economic and military power centres, expanding the scope of the final warning targets to paralyse the state.³⁰ Henceforth, any use of nuclear weapons would be strategic (not tactical) as it would profoundly change

²⁵ F. Charillon, *La politique étrangère...*, pp. 25-26.

²⁶ B. Tertrais, *Quel avenir pour...*

²⁷ J. Guisnel, B. Tertrais, "Jacques Chirac..."

²⁸ M. Lefebvre, *La politique...*, pp. 73-74.

²⁹ J. Dalloz, *La France et le monde...*, p. 216.

³⁰ B. Tertrais, *Quel avenir pour...*, pp. 32-33. France assumes two types of nuclear strikes. The first final warning (e.g., against a military target). The second is a massive strike on cities as a target at the next level, should the first fail to achieve its objective. During the Cold War, French deterrence was linked to the task of inflicting unacceptable losses by attacking major urban centres. The change in doctrine resulted from new geopolitical circumstances and threats, among others, including an attempt to exert a pressure on Iran and its nuclear programme.

the nature of the conflict. In January 1996, President Chirac announced that France was definitively abandoning nuclear tests and dismantling the Mururoa site, moving to simulations instead of tests.³¹ France also signed the *Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty* (CTBT) in 1996, along with the treaties on the denuclearisation of Africa and the establishment of a nuclear-free zone in the South Pacific.

Another contribution to French nuclear doctrine was made by the subsequent president, Nicolas Sarkozy (2007-2012), who, in a speech in Cherbourg on 21 March 2008, dropped the *final nuclear warning* as a condition before deciding on a massive strategic strike, although he did not rule it out in the event of an adversary's misunderstanding of the boundaries of France's *vital interests*.³² He also sought to ensure the compliance of deterrence with international law by announcing that nuclear fire could only be initiated in *extreme circumstances of self-defence*.³³ In contrast, his successor President François Hollande (2012-2017) specified that henceforth only the adversary's centres of power (i.e., political, economic and military nerve centres) would be targeted by nuclear attacks.³⁴ He also supported the production of a new version of the M-51 missile for the SNLE, the modernisation of the ASMPA missile and the funding of the third-generation SSBN upgrade, which would replace four *Triomphant*-class vessels around 2035-2040.

Drafted to the order of President Macron (2017-) and published on 13 October 2017, the *Strategic Review of France's Defence and National Security* (updated 2021) redraws the main tasks and directions of the French armed forces in the context of the changes and threats in the international environment facing France and Europe. The document reaffirmed the role of nuclear deterrence and, together with the *National Strategic Review* (*Revue nationale stratégique* 2022), became the basis for the programming of military reform until 2025-2030. Under President Macron, France has embarked on a comprehensive upgrade of its atomic weapons, allocating €37 billion (Military Programming Law [LPM] 2019-2025), which is approximately 12% of the Republic's total defence budget over seven years. The investment planned for 2025 to 2027 aims to ensure the long-term reliability of nuclear deterrence, particularly by completing the construction of four submarines, building a nuclear aircraft carrier to replace the *Charles de Gaulle* and upgrading missiles and nuclear warheads. Additionally, the LPM for 2024-2030, enacted on 1 August 2023, provides for a 40% increase in budgetary expenditure on the armed forces compared to 2019-2025, amounting to

³¹ Initially conducted in the air, and since 1974 only underground (in the subsoil and lagoons of atolls), tests were carried out in French Polynesia, prompting protests from South Pacific countries.

³² „Déclaration de M. Nicolas Sarkozy, Président de la République, sur le Livre blanc sur la défense et la sécurité nationale, la dissuasion nucléaire et sur la non prolifération des armes nucléaires, à Cherbourg le 21 mars 2008,” *Élysée*, 21 March 2008, at <https://www.elysee.fr/nicolas-sarkozy/2008/03/21/declaration-de-m-nicolas-sarkozy-president-de-la-republique-sur-le-livre-blanc-sur-la-defense-et-la-securite-nationale-la-dissuasion-nucleaire-et-sur-la-non-proliferation-des-armes-nucleaires-a-cherbourg-le-21-mars-2008>, 15 December 2023.

³³ B. Tertrais, *Quel avenir pour...*

³⁴ B. Tertrais, *French Nuclear Deterrence...*, p. 34.

€413.3 billion.³⁵ President Macron singled out the strengthening of deterrence forces as one of the key objectives of the new LPM, as *deterrence is something that distinguishes France from other countries in Europe and is the essence of sovereignty*.³⁶

Deterrence potential

France is a medium-sized nuclear power (it has less than 300 warheads), and the French nuclear arsenal is kept to a minimum level sufficient for certain tasks.³⁷ Nuclear deterrence capabilities are maintained through two components – sea and air. France has four *Le Triomphant* nuclear-powered submarines (SNLEs) – taken into service between 1997 and 2010 and part of the Strategic Ocean Force (FOST) based in the port of Brest on the *Île Longue* peninsula – each of which can be armed with 16 missiles (M51)³⁸ with a range of approximately 9,000 km, carrying up to 10 nuclear warheads.³⁹ Operational continuity is achieved through regular patrols by the submarines (*Le Triomphant*, *Le Téméraire*, *Le Vigilant* and *Le Terrible*), with one unit on patrol (the patrol lasts about 60 days on average), one preparing for patrol and one returning to port (one under repair).⁴⁰ In addition, *Rafale*⁴¹ multirole combat fighters of the Strategic Air

³⁵ “Loi n° 2023-703 du 1er août 2023 relative à la programmation militaire pour les années 2024 à 2030 et portant diverses dispositions intéressant la défense,” *Journal Officiel de la République Française*, no. 171, 2 August 2023, at https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/download/pdf?id=8-zHNA9qOMD7YH_auHwAmJzKY6oT0Ac8uyatwTORrks=, 13 November 2023.

³⁶ “Transformer nos armées: le Président de la République présente le nouveau projet de loi de programmation militaire,” *Élysée*, 20 January 2023, at <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2023/01/20/transformer-nos-armees-le-president-de-la-republique-presente-le-nouveau-projet-de-loi-de-programmation-militaire>, 15 December 2023.

³⁷ According to estimates, French warhead stock peaked in 1992 at around 550 warheads. The decision to maintain a limited nuclear deterrent in France was influenced by a number of factors. (1) It was deemed necessary to retain the capability to ensure the protection of national security and sovereignty through the maintenance of a credible nuclear deterrent. In practice, this capability provides a second-strike capability, whereby even in the event of an initial nuclear attack on France, a powerful nuclear counterattack could still be mounted. France is able to achieve its strategic objectives with a reduced number of warheads while maintaining a second-strike capability, thereby enabling it to respond to any nuclear attack with a significant force. (2) A limited nuclear arsenal enables the optimisation of maintenance costs. (3) The decision to maintain the arsenal at a reduced level is aligned with the commitment to reduce the number of nuclear weapons.

³⁸ The M51 missiles are more than 12 metres long and weigh more than 50 tonnes, and their third generation M51.3 will come into service in 2025.

³⁹ Compared to 14 submarines of the United States.

⁴⁰ “Les sous-marins nucléaires lanceurs d’engins (SNLE),” *Ministère des Armées*, at <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/marine/marins/marins-nucleaires-lanceurs-dengins-snle>, 16 February 2024.

⁴¹ France deploys the *Rafale* fighter aircraft with ASMPA-R (Renové) missiles in order to ensure strategic flexibility in the context of its defence operations. The sophisticated avionics of this fighter, coupled with the integration of missiles with contemporary weapons systems and the capacity to deploy in diverse locations, render it an efficacious nuclear deterrence platform. This enables a robust response to any threat with a credible second-strike capability.

Force (FAS), with two nuclear squadrons, can carry improved air-to-ground medium-range cruise missiles (ASMPA).⁴² These forces are highly complementary in technical, operational and strategic terms. Furthermore, the Nuclear Naval Air Force (FANu) can be deployed and embarked on an aircraft carrier if necessary, thereby enhancing France's power projection capabilities.

Spending on deterrence has been increasing since 2010, when a new cycle of upgrading France's nuclear forces began, including the construction of the third generation of SNLEs. This area has received special treatment, as all decisions are directly controlled by the President of the Republic and are protected from budget cuts, unlike conventional forces. President Macron also announced the modernisation of the industrial infrastructure for the construction and decommissioning of nuclear submarines.⁴³

Deterrence aims to promote the freedom of France's military actions; that is, conventional forces are supported by a deterrent strategy that is strictly defensive and organised on a continuous basis. There is always at least one submarine at sea capable of carrying out a 'second strike' against an aggressor. This has been the situation since 20 January 1972.⁴⁴ Their undetectability in the depths of the ocean makes them resilient, allowing them to be used as a tool to retaliate against a potential aggressor while simultaneously deterring such action. This ability to inflict *unacceptable damage* on any potential aggressor threatening France's *vital interests* (territory, people and freedom to exercise sovereignty) is referred to as a form of *life insurance policy* for the nation against the potential threat of another nuclear power.⁴⁵

France typically conducts four nuclear air exercises each year, known as 'Poker'. These exercises involve *Rafale* aircraft carrying simulated cruise missiles in the skies of France to demonstrate the operational reliability of the strategic nuclear force as a whole.⁴⁶

France is vigorously pursuing a plan to renew both components of its nuclear deterrent (sea and air) to maintain the credibility of its strategic independence. By 2050,

⁴² Ł. Kulesa, "Odstraszanie jądrowe w polityce bezpieczeństwa Francji," *Biuletyn PISM*, vol. 26 (1958), pp. 1-2, at https://www.pism.pl/publikacje/Odstraszanie_jadrowe_w_polityce_bezpieczenstwa_Francji, 16 December 2023; G. Lagane, *Question internationales en fiches*, Paris 2021, pp. 320-321. France has abandoned free-fall nuclear bombs in favour of cruise missiles with a nuclear warhead. On 23 March 2022, a new version of the ASMPA nuclear missile (5.5 metres long, about 40 cm in diameter and with a range of about 500 km) was tested. A nuclear hypersonic missile with a range of more than 1,000 km is under development.

⁴³ "Vœux aux armées du Président Emmanuel Macron," *Élysée*, 19 January 2024, at <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2024/01/19/voeux-aux-armees-du-president-emmanuel-macron-1>, 3 November 2023.

⁴⁴ R. Labévière, *Reconquérir par la mer: La France face à la nouvelle géopolitique des océans*, Paris 2020, p. 49.

⁴⁵ M. Lefebvre, *La politique...*, pp. 74-75.

⁴⁶ "Opération Poker: les Fas et toute l'armée de l'air et de l'espace au combat!," *Ministère des Armées*, 23 September 2021, at https://air.defense.gouv.fr/armee-de-lair-et-de-l'espace/actualite/Poker_FAS_et_AAE_a_combat, 5 November 2023.

France will have four new third-generation nuclear submarines, the SNLE 3G (replacing the *Triomphant*-class ones being decommissioned after 2035), which will have better detection and defence capabilities while being very quiet.⁴⁷ Their construction began in 2023 in Cherbourg and are set to enter service between 2035 and 2050 every five years, remaining in service until 2090. France is also developing next-generation fighters (*Rafale F5*) with undetectable and hyper-fast missiles for 2030-2040.

II. DEFENCE AND NUCLEAR DETERRENCE POLICY UNDER THE PRESIDENCY OF EMMANUEL MACRON.

General framework for deterrence policy

According to the Strategic Review of Defence and National Security of France (2017), long-term nuclear deterrence based on two complementary components responds to four main challenges:⁴⁸ 1) to protect vital interests including the national territory; 2) to maintain the capacity to respond to neighbourhood crises directly affecting the national territory; 3) to maintain superiority over non-state adversaries under any conditions; 4) to be responsible in the event of a military confrontation with states – the probability of which has increased significantly. The French Ministry of the Armed Forces has published an update of its strategic threat assessment (2021), which draws attention to the need to prepare the armed forces for involvement in high-intensity conflict, which seems increasingly likely in the face of rising superpower rivalry and the ongoing degradation of the global order.⁴⁹

On 7 February 2020, at the Military School *École de Guerre* in Paris, French President E. Macron presented the French strategic doctrine based on a deterrence strategy.⁵⁰ This is the moment when the President of the Republic set out, in his well-defined and detail-oriented speech, a comprehensive vision of French nuclear policy and nucle-

⁴⁷ “En 2035, la France comptera quatre nouveaux sous-marins nucléaires, discrets ‘comme un banc de crevettes,’” *Capital*, 19 February 2021, at <https://www.capital.fr/economie-politique/en-2035-la-france-comptera-quatre-nouveaux-sous-marins-nucleaires-discrets-comme-un-banc-de-crevettes-1394669>, 16 December 2023.

⁴⁸ République Française, *Revue stratégique de défense et de sécurité nationale 2017*, Octobre 2017, p. 53, at https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/2017-revue_strategique_dsn_cle4b3beb.pdf, 16 December 2024.

⁴⁹ Ministère des Armées, *Actualisation Stratégique 2021*, January 2021, pp. 27, 45-47, at <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/sites/default/files/dgris/REVUE%20STRAT%202021%2004%2002%202021%20FR.pdf>, 16 October 2023.

⁵⁰ “Discours du Président Emmanuel Macron sur la stratégie de défense et de dissuasion devant les stagiaires de la 27ème promotion de l'école de guerre,” *Élysée*, 7 February 2020, at <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2020/02/07/discours-du-president-emmanuel-macron-sur-la-strategie-de-defense-et-de-dissuasion-devant-les-stagiaires-de-la-27eme-promotion-de-lecole-de-guerre>, 26 October 2023.

ar deterrence.⁵¹ François Hollande did this in Istres in 2015, Nicolas Sarkozy in Cherbourg in 2008 and Jacques Chirac (twice) in 2001 and 2006 at the *Institut des hautes études de défense nationale*.

The President's speech covered a wide range of topics on global and European security and aspects of arms control, although the most important part concerned the reaffirmation of the basis of French doctrine (i.e., nuclear deterrence [*la dissuasion*]) as the foundation for the defence of sovereignty. President Macron pointed out that while the fight against terrorism remained a priority for ensuring France's security, other important matters also affected the country's safety. The first is the rivalry between the superpowers, particularly between China and the U.S., which is changing the balance of power in the world. There is also an unprecedented acceleration of armaments, with the superpowers increasingly resorting to nuclear forces in their security strategies, causing greater instability. The second factor of change is the crisis of multilateralism and the deconstruction of the rules of international law, a result of which was the collapse of the INF.⁵² France's response to these threats is a strategy based on four components: 1) the promotion of multilateralism (law and arms control); 2) the development of strategic partnerships (counter-threat coalitions); 3) the creation of Europe's 'strategic autonomy' (capacity to act and provide security); and 4) the assurance of national sovereignty (through nuclear deterrence).

French nuclear doctrine

Referring to France's nuclear policy, President Macron stressed that the possession of nuclear weapons by a state entailed unprecedented political and moral responsibility, in addition to the notion that nuclear weapons, must not be a tool for pressure or destabilisation or for the exploitation of a privileged position by their possessor. Nuclear deterrence still plays a fundamental role in peacekeeping and providing international stability, although France has always considered nuclear weapons a political instrument rather than a battlefield instrument. In this sense, French deterrence is governed by three main principles:⁵³ 1) **permanence** – which means that deterrence is applied continuously, including in peacetime, as reflected in the presence of at least one, if not two, SNLE ships patrolling the oceans (capable of nuclear launch at any time); 2) **sufficiency** – which means limiting French nuclear assets to what is absolutely necessary (France has never equipped itself with means designed to destroy an adversary's nuclear forces); and 3) **flexibility** – the adaptation of deterrence to the geostrategic context (targets can be military as well as economic).

⁵¹ J.-D. Merchet, "Défense: Macron dans l'étau nucléaire," *L'Opinion*, 7 February 2020, at <https://www.lopinion.fr/politique/defense-macron-dans-letau-nucleaire>, 15 December 2023.

⁵² President Macron rejected what he considered unrealistic calls for immediate nuclear disarmament, which would deprive it of this tool while leaving it in the hands of other nuclear powers.

⁵³ B. Tertrais, "La politique de dissuasion nucléaire française," *Vie publique*, 27 July 2022, at <https://www.vie-publique.fr/parole-dexpert/285856-la-politique-de-dissuasion-nucleaire-francaise-defense-budget>, 22 January 2024.

French doctrine dictates that nuclear weapons are to be used only in self-defence: *Our deterrence is strictly defensive. The use of nuclear weapons is only possible in extreme circumstances of self-defence...* in the event of a threat to France's 'vital interests', although these remain unclear.⁵⁴ This is an ongoing component in the evolution of French doctrine on the use of nuclear weapons while reserving the right to launch a one-time nuclear attack in advance as a warning. If its 'vital interests' are threatened, Paris is ready to launch a warning strike ('final warning') against a single target (military, economic or centre of power) of a potential aggressor – especially through the air component: medium-range air-to-ground missiles carried by *Rafale* aircraft.⁵⁵ The right of first use of nuclear weapons has invariably remained part of French doctrine since 2006, when President Jacques Chirac announced that French nuclear units were prepared for use against a country or those who might consider using weapons of mass destruction against France.⁵⁶

This was further elaborated by President Macron: *Should there be any misunderstanding about France's determination to protect its vital interests, a unique and one-time-only nuclear warning could be issued to the aggressor State to clearly demonstrate that the nature of the conflict has changed and to re-establish deterrence.*⁵⁷ Should this deterrence strategy fail, the next phase would be a total nuclear attack. Such a strike would inflict losses that are unacceptable to any potential adversary.

The main assumption of French nuclear doctrine is, therefore, to use nuclear deterrence forces only in self-defence in the event of a threat to 'vital interests' (citizens, territory and sovereignty rights). It has only strategic nuclear weapons at its disposal and does not foresee the use of nuclear weapons at the tactical level or identify potential adversary states. The doctrine leaves, in the hands of the president, the freedom and flexibility to strike the most important components of the aggressor's centres of power and command infrastructure.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ République Française, *Revue stratégique...*, p. 72.

⁵⁵ M. Lefebvre, *La politique...*, pp. 74-75.

⁵⁶ "Déclaration de M. Jacques Chirac, Président de la République, sur la politique de défense de la France, notamment la dissuasion nucléaire, à Brest le 19 janvier 2006," *Élysée*, 19 January 2006, at <https://www.elysee.fr/jacques-chirac/2006/01/19/declaration-de-m-jacques-chirac-president-de-la-republique-sur-la-politique-de-defense-de-la-france-notamment-la-dissuasion-nucleaire-a-brest-le-19-janvier-2006>, 16 January 2024. The possibility of using nuclear weapons not only in response to a nuclear attack (*first use*) is a fixed part of French doctrine (as is the case with the USA, the UK and the NATO).

⁵⁷ "Discours du Président Emmanuel Macron..."

⁵⁸ J. Guisnel, "Les présidents et le discours nucléaire: 'La dissuasion, c'est moi!'" *Le Point*, 7 February 2020, at https://www.lepoint.fr/editos-du-point/jean-guisnel/les-presidents-et-le-discours-nucleaire-la-dissuasion-c-est-moi-07-02-2020-2361667_53.php, 14 January 2024.

III. AN ATTEMPT TO 'EUROPEANISE' NUCLEAR DETERRENCE IN LIGHT OF THE FRENCH CONCEPT OF 'EUROPEAN STRATEGIC AUTONOMY'

The Europeanisation of the French 'nuclear umbrella'?

Speaking at the *École de Guerre*, President Macron proposed (to willing partners) that they broaden the European dialogue on nuclear deterrence and the role of the French nuclear deterrent forces in collective security. He also invited them to participate in French nuclear exercises to support the development of a common strategic culture: *European partners that are willing to walk that road can be associated with the exercises of French deterrence forces*.⁵⁹ He pointed out that France's vital interests are inextricably linked to those of its neighbours and have a European dimension.

During the Cold War, President V. Giscard d'Estaing announced the concept of so-called *extended sanctuarisation* (i.e., the use of French nuclear weapons to defend France's neighbours – its allies).⁶⁰ From the moment it acquired nuclear weapons in 1963, France was interested in creating a Western European deterrent force – the seedbed of which would be a French nuclear capability.⁶¹ In pursuit of this, it sought to engage London, which would, on one hand, ensure that European defence structures were based on a credible Franco-British capability and, on the other, lead to a 'loosening' of British ties with the United States.⁶² In 1992, François Mitterrand spoke of the need to cooperate with the UK: *Only two countries of the Community possess nuclear weapons. Is it possible to develop a European doctrine? This question will soon become one of the main issues in the construction of a common European defence*.⁶³ The 1994 White Paper also stated that: *The question of a European nuclear doctrine is about to become one of the main matters in the construction of a common European defence*.⁶⁴ President Chirac, too, has repeatedly made declarations aimed at transforming French nuclear forces into a means of European deterrence to underpin an independent European defence policy, albeit leaving the right of 'final' decision on their use to

⁵⁹ "Discours du Président Emmanuel Macron..."

⁶⁰ S. Parzymies, *Czynnik wojskowy...*, p. 44. D'Estaing proposed 'to extend the French strategic nuclear guarantee to all or part of Western Europe'. However, he ultimately relinquished this idea in the face of considerable criticism, particularly from the Gaullist party, per C. Jurgensen, "L'Europe, la France et la dissuasion nucléaire," *Revue Défense Nationale*, vol. 6, no. 821 (2019), p. 63.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 44.

⁶² Ibid., p. 45.

⁶³ B. Tertrais, *French Nuclear Deterrence...*, p. 42. Cooperation between France and the UK in the area of nuclear deterrence is based on the Lancaster House Treaty of 2 November 2010 (renewed in 2020), and both countries cannot imagine any circumstance in which a threat to the "vital interests" of one side would not constitute a threat to the vital interests of the other.

⁶⁴ Ministère de la défense, *Livre Blanc sur la Défense 1994, 1994*, p. 56.

himself.⁶⁵ In a speech in Brest in 2006, he widened the concept of 'vital interests' to include 'strategic resources' and 'protection of allies': *Guaranteeing our strategic supplies and defending allied states are just some of the interests to be protected.*⁶⁶ In 2015, President F. Hollande also pointed out that France's vital interests are linked to European interests.

French deterrence has been part of the Atlantic Alliance's defence framework since 1974. The NATO communiqué at the Ottawa conference recognises that the independent strategic nuclear forces of the United Kingdom and France contribute significantly to the overall security of the Alliance.⁶⁷ Although France does not participate in NATO's nuclear planning, its forces will remain an important contribution to the deterrence of the North Atlantic Alliance. According to President Macron: *Our nuclear forces have a deterrent effect in themselves, particularly in Europe...by their very existence and they have, in this sense, a truly European dimension...they significantly contribute to the overall strengthening of the Atlantic Alliance's overall deterrence, alongside the British and American forces.*⁶⁸ France's aim, therefore, is not to replace NATO deterrence with similar European solutions; rather, it is to foster among Europeans the awareness that French nuclear capabilities (deterrence) can serve as an important political tool at the disposal of Europe, strengthening the sense of security among allies. The French President's initiative for a strategic dialogue was, however, received without much success among European partners, except for Poland.⁶⁹

Nuclear deterrence versus EU 'strategic autonomy'

President Macron has identified the promotion of the concept of European sovereignty (i.e., the strengthening of the EU's autonomous defence) as one of his priorities. The key to European sovereignty would be to provide Europe with autonomous operational capabilities. This demand first appeared in a speech Macron gave at the Sorbonne on 26 September 2017. France is aware that European 'strategic autonomy' is not the same as self-sufficiency, so, as Macron put it: *Our goal must be to provide Europe with the capacity to act autonomously, as a complement to NATO.*⁷⁰

⁶⁵ T. Młynarski, *Francja wobec głównych problemów reformy instytucjonalnej Unii Europejskiej w XXI w.*, Kraków 2006, p. 52; R. Zięba, *Instytucjonalizacja bezpieczeństwa europejskiego. Koncepcje, struktury, funkcjonowanie*, Warszawa 1999, p. 183.

⁶⁶ "Déclaration de M. Jacques Chirac..."

⁶⁷ North Atlantic Council, *Declaration on Atlantic Relations*, Ottawa 1974, at <https://www.nato.int/docu/comm/49-95/c740618b.htm>, 16 December 2023; B. Pelopidas, S. Philippe, "Unfit for Purpose: Reassessing the Development and Deployment of French Nuclear Weapons (1956-1974)," *Cold War History*, vol. 21, no. 3 (2021), pp. 243-244.

⁶⁸ "Discours du Président Emmanuel Macron..."

⁶⁹ B. Tertrais, *French Nuclear Deterrence...*, p. 43.

⁷⁰ "Initiative pour l'Europe – Discours d'Emmanuel Macron pour une Europe souveraine, unie, démocratique," *Élysée*, 26 September 2017, at <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2017/09/26/initiative-pour-l-europe-discours-d-emmanuel-macron-pour-une-europe-souveraine-unie-democratie>, 16 January 2024.

According to the Élysée Palace, deterrence plays a European role and protects the common interests of the Union, especially when France is tied to its partners by a common defence clause (Article 42.7 of the EU Treaty).⁷¹ France declares that, in the process of building a 'Europe of defence', it is ready to share its sovereignty in various areas. President Macron reiterated the offer of dialogue with European partners on the role of France's deterrence capabilities at the annual security conference in Munich on 15 February 2020: *We need NATO very much. However, we need to build...our own capabilities that will give us credibility in the eyes of our American partner...and also freedom of action.*⁷² He also reiterated his readiness to conduct joint exercises to develop a 'common strategic culture' to define common interests. In this context, France's nuclear *deterrence* would, within the framework of European defence autonomy, play a role as a stabilising factor for European security, providing *reassurance* and complementing NATO's extended *deterrence*. It would also offer additional security guarantees for regional allies in the context of common defence at the European level.

However, the French authorities' attempt to reconcile an exclusively national territory deterrence strategy with an allied defence strategy is, in practice, very difficult (if not impossible) for at least several reasons: 1) France does not use 'extended' deterrence and has never officially specified what exactly such a strategy would consist of.⁷³ The lack of operationalisation of the offer to extend the 'nuclear umbrella' over EU states makes it impossible for European partners to respond; 2) France has not defined common 'European vital interests' either in political or geographical terms that even roughly describe the extent of French nuclear guarantees. The absence of a precise definition of the EU's common strategic (vital) foreign policy interests, including a shared strategic vision vis-à-vis Russia, China and the United States, may lead to ambiguity in the assessment of specific threat situations among allied states; 3) While accepting the U.S. nuclear umbrella, Germany has so far avoided discussing a European (i.e., French) nuclear capability. Germany – for which the role of the primary guarantor of the security of Europeans is held by NATO – cannot imagine basing German security on French nuclear deterrence forces (even if the Treaty of Aachen [2019] theoretically implies a readiness to use French nuclear deterrence forces in the event of an armed attack on German territory based on an allied assistance clause going beyond Article 5 of the Washington Treaty and Article 42.7 TEU); 4) The legislative framework of the Constitution of the Fifth French Republic (Articles 5 and 15) clearly states that it is *the President...who ensures the proper functioning of the public authorities as well as the continuity of the State through his arbitration and is the Commander in Chief of the armed*

⁷¹ B. Tertrais, *French Nuclear Deterrence...*, p. 43.

⁷² "Conférence sur la sécurité de Munich : faire revivre l'Europe comme une puissance politique stratégique," *Élysée*, 15 February 2020, at <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2020/02/15/conference-sur-la-securite-de-munich-faire-revivre-leurope-comme-une-puissance-politique-strategique>, 22 January 2024.

⁷³ Unlike the United States and the United Kingdom, France does not formally extend its nuclear deterrent in defence of allies.

forces, and, under the Decree of 14 January 1964 (amended by Decree No. 96-520 of 12 June 1996 and then codified in 2004 in Article R1411-5 of the French Defence Code⁷⁴), the Head of State decides on the possible use of French nuclear forces: *The Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces is responsible for carrying out the operations required for the deployment of nuclear forces. He ensures the execution of the engagement order issued by the President of the Republic.* This means that the 'nuclear button' is part of the reserved powers (*domaines réservés*) of the Head of State. As President Mitterrand figuratively put it: *The focal point of the French deterrence strategy is the head of state – me, – thus likening the French model to a 'nuclear monarchy.'*⁷⁵ The issue of the disposition of nuclear weapons, along with the pre-eminent and exclusive role of the French President in deciding on their use, stationing and control, means that France does not propose any sharing of control over its nuclear arsenal. This poses a significant problem of state dependence in situations of emergency and the expectation of their actual use, especially as France's nuclear capabilities remain outside the NATO framework (France did not join the Nuclear Planning Group/NPG in 2009 and its nuclear forces are not part of the Alliance's integrated military command structure);⁷⁶ 5) The credibility of French nuclear forces in providing security to allies is constrained by their inherent capabilities. France possess a limited number (300)⁷⁷ of warheads designed for self-defence. This significantly limits the country's capacity to defend its allies in the event of a confrontation with a hostile superpower.⁷⁸

Given the above conditions, the French concept of European nuclear deterrence based on French nuclear capabilities (*nuclear sharing*) is highly illusory. Corresponding with this assessment is President Macron's statement for the *France2* television channel on 12 October 2022, in which he rejected the possibility of a nuclear strike as a response to Russian use of nuclear weapons in Ukraine or the region: *France has a nuclear doctrine that is based on the vital interests of the state, and which are clearly defined. These*

⁷⁴ Décret n°64-46 du 14 janvier 1964 *relatif aux forces aériennes stratégiques*, JORF du 19 janvier 1964; Décret n° 96-520 du 12 juin 1996 *portant détermination des responsabilités concernant les forces nucléaires*, JORF du 15 VI 1996; *Code de la défense*, at https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/codes/texte_lc/LEGITEXT000006071307, 13 February 2024.

⁷⁵ J. Dalloz, *La France et le monde...*, p. 177 ; M. Lefebvre, *La politique...*, p. 75.

⁷⁶ T. Młynarski, "Francja wobec partnerstwa transatlantyckiego w drugiej dekadzie XXI w.," *Krakowskie Studia Międzynarodowe*, vol. 11, no. 4 (2014), p. 197. France withdrew from NATO's military structures in 1966 and but subsequently rejoined in 2009, as decreed by President Nicolas Sarkozy. However, France did not participate in the Nuclear Planning Group (NPG), which indicates that it maintains a degree of autonomy within the alliance.

⁷⁷ Notwithstanding the absence of a one-to-one correlation between the number of weapons and the reliability of nuclear protection, the USA and the Russian Federation possess 4,000 and 5,500 nuclear warheads respectively.

⁷⁸ This gives a rise to questions concerning the extent to which France could utilise some of these weapons in response to attacks on its allies without depleting the forces necessary to deter strikes on its own territory. Larger forces offer the possibility of greater flexibility in making extended deterrence credible.

would not be at risk if there were a nuclear ballistic attack in Ukraine or the region.⁷⁹ President Macron admittedly ordered (March 2022) a third *Triumphant*-class SNLE to be put to sea at the start of the war in Ukraine (whereas normally no more than two are at sea), which has not happened since the end of the Cold War.⁸⁰ This was a result of Russia's declaration that it was putting its nuclear forces on a higher level of readiness and demonstrated France's heightened state of readiness for self-defence, which was intended to reassure French citizens. President Macron was apparently trying to avoid being seen as extending French nuclear doctrine, and the explicit exclusion of the nuclear factor in the event of a Russian nuclear escalation in Ukraine seemed to contradict France's statement at the *Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons* (NPT) Review Conference in August 2022, where it was explained that: *For deterrence to be successful, the circumstances under which nuclear weapons would [or would not] be used are not and should not be precisely defined so as not to allow a potential aggressor to calculate the risks associated with a potential attack.*⁸¹ The French president's statement also raised serious doubts among some members of the defence community, particularly NATO's European partners in Central and Eastern Europe, and *de facto* undermined the credibility of France's 2020 'nuclear umbrella' offer for Europe among the allies. (Macron's statement was seen as a sign of weakness and raised doubts about France's commitment to defend Central and Eastern European countries that are more directly threatened by Russia's actions).⁸²

CONCLUSIONS

Over the decades, strategic autonomy has enabled France to pursue an independent foreign policy and play the role of a world superpower. This has influenced a specificity of French foreign policy, distinguished by independence, the idea of greatness (*la grandeur*) and 'world stature'. Nuclear deterrence has become the main asset of France's armed forces, neutralising the military superiority of other nuclear superpowers. Nuclear deterrence is also a matter of France's international prestige, enhancing its image as an independent 'superpower of balance'. Therefore, France is intensively upgrading its

⁷⁹ P. Philippe, T. Le Meneec, "Retrouvez l'interview d'Emmanuel Macron, invité de l'émission politique 'L'Événement', sur France 2," *France Info*, 12 October 2022, at https://www.francetvinfo.fr/politique/emmanuel-macron/direct-emmanuel-macron-est-l-invite-special-de-la-nouvelle-emission-politique-de-france-2-l-evenement-a-20h30_5413327.html, 13 February 2024; C. Caulcutt, "Macron under Fire for Saying France Wouldn't Respond in Kind if Russia Launched Nuclear Attack on Ukraine," *Politico*, 13 October 2022, at <https://www.politico.eu/article/france-emmanuel-macron-nuclear-attack-russia-ukraine>, 13 February 2024.

⁸⁰ E. Maitre, "Nucléaire: dialogues croisés depuis le début de la guerre en Ukraine," *Revue Défense Nationale*, vol. HS11 (2023), p. 27.

⁸¹ H.M. Kristensen, M. Korda, E. Johns, "French Nuclear Weapons..."

⁸² Moreover, it undermined the deterrence effect, which is based on the assumption of uncertainty of retaliation.

nuclear capabilities and considering its nuclear forces not only as a fundamental component of independence, but also as an important contribution to European security.

France competently embeds national interests and aspirations into the framework of European cooperation, as demonstrated by its February 2020 offer of a European nuclear deterrent based on French nuclear capabilities. On January 30 2024, the French president, on a state visit to Sweden, recalled: *What we define as our vital interest clearly has a European dimension*. However, the lack of operationalisation of the offer (regarding what nuclear guarantees we are discussing, how decisions will be made for their deployment and what the nuclear capability will be) to extend the 'nuclear umbrella' over EU states, the lack of defined vital European interests (politically and geographically), the limitation of the doctrine of deterrence to self-defence and the protection of national territory and the absence of integration of the French nuclear arsenal into NATO's NPG command structure (it is not involved in the detailed planning and policy discussions related to nuclear forces), along with the lack of co-control of the French nuclear arsenal, makes the French offer to share (*communautarisation*) the French *Force de frappe* still illusory.

France's nuclear capability reinforces NATO's nuclear deterrent. This is achieved through the potential for strategic flexibility afforded by additional strategic options and strong bilateral cooperation with other nuclear-armed NATO members (such as the United Kingdom), including technical consultations and joint exercises. However, it should be noted that this does not replace the aforementioned deterrent. Although the national security doctrine of the state is defined by the president, Macron never specified how NATO European states within the European 'strategic autonomy' would benefit from the French 'nuclear umbrella' currently provided by the United States. Given that France reserves its nuclear capability exclusively for its own defence and deterrence, this offer is a 'multiplier of France's leadership aspirations' to be Europe's political leader and promoter of a 'Europe of defence'. Indeed, France feels predisposed to lead Europeans in geopolitical competition, and national strategic autonomy in the face of a growing number of geopolitical challenges is no longer sufficient to secure its interests.

It appears that only radical circumstances, such as a reduction of U.S. capabilities in Europe (e.g., withdrawal of the United States from NATO, withdrawal of nuclear weapons from Europe and/or a reduction of the U.S. conventional military presence), could provide the impetus for discussions on a European nuclear deterrence based on French extended deterrence. Such a French capability could then act as a catalyst for European collective defence. The victory and return to office of U.S. President D. Trump have created circumstances that have eroded the transatlantic context of trust. This leads to a greater need for vigilance in assessing the non-threatening nature of maintaining U.S. capabilities in Europe. Therefore, it would be prudent to respond favourably to Macron's 2020 offer to use French nuclear forces as a 'nuclear umbrella' for Europe. An essential element in the evolution of a strategic European culture would be to guarantee the involvement of allied conventional troops in French exercises in support of the nuclear mission (*reassurance*). A more frequent presence of French nuclear-capable

aircraft on NATO's eastern flank should also be considered. It can be argued that France has an important role to play in the development of European nuclear deterrence, particularly in the context of extreme conditions. This can be achieved not only by increasing France's contribution to NATO's nuclear sharing, but also by reinforcing the collective political and military security perception in situations where the use of nuclear weapons is a threat.

France rightly seeks to consolidate the efforts of European states to develop the EU's strategic autonomy from the conventional perspective, including the arms industries of the most advanced member states, thereby boosting the European defence industry. In this sense, the development of European strategic autonomy, through joint training exercises, joint defence projects and research and development efforts, is the right direction, as it leads to an increase in collective power through the strengthening of the national defence capabilities of EU member states.

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