

BRIEF

THE NUCLEAR DIMENSION

EUROPEANISING NATO NO. 11

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The European nuclear policy community has often underestimated itself in its relationship with the US, retaining a lingering intellectual dependency on American nuclear thinkers. But concepts such as damage limitation, flexible response, and integrated deterrence, developed in uniquely American environments for uniquely American scenarios, are illogical for smaller European governments focused on territorial defence. European states have nuclear arsenals and growing conventional forces. What is missing is a European centre of gravity for managing the nuclear relationship with Moscow.

European governments are asking themselves how they can achieve deterrence effects with a weakened US extended deterrent, but two underlying questions are not being addressed. First, does US extended deterrence work now? While it is likely that the possession of nuclear weapons by the US, France, UK, and Russia have created a general sense of caution, this is not equivalent to saying that US extended nuclear deterrence is stopping Russia from doing something specific at this moment. For researchers to make such a sweeping assumption is analytically fraught at best.¹

Second, what is deterrence stability? It is not "we are so powerful that they will try nothing"; it is "we are both armed with deadly weapons so both of us are cautious". Stability requires Russia's leaders to feel sufficiently safe that they will not consider a first strike against Europe. This is a charged notion, as the prospect of Europeans taking steps to reassure Russia after its invasion of Ukraine is politically toxic. Yet, any serious engagement with deterrence as a topic

has to address that stability cannot rely on "detering the other side until they fall apart."²

Relying largely on nuclear deterrence for security is like walking across thin ice. The fact that we have done it for so long without falling through does not mean that the ice will hold forever.³ There are too many variables at play to be confident that deterrence failure and eventual weapons use can be avoided in perpetuity. That said, there is still a role for European arsenals to play so long as other states are intent on maintaining and expanding theirs. As Europeans look to reshape their defence architectures, the role of European deterrents has become ever more discussed.

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WHY EUROPEAN NUCLEAR ARSENALS?

The British and French nuclear arsenals underpin the two European nuclear deterrents. Though managed and controlled solely by London and Paris, both have consistently connected their postures to wider Europe—often referred to in France as the European dimension. The British and French programmes are predicated on a very different logic from that of the US—one of minimum sufficiency, a concept that is now at the core of European discussions on continued nuclear cooperation.

There is, however, no single definition of this concept. Some refer to a minimum sufficient deterrent as the minimum amount of nuclear force needed to cause unacceptable or catastrophic damage to an opponent.⁴ This minimum deterrence and the possibly unacceptable damage are often associated with countervalue strikes, where urban population centres and key infrastructure nodes would be targeted to maximise damage with 'just enough' nuclear weapons.⁵ Others describe minimal deterrence as the lowest amount needed to have a credible retaliatory capability, meaning that the arsenal can survive an initial nuclear strike from an enemy.⁶

France and the UK continue to use the concept of minimum deterrence in their nuclear doctrines

What constitutes a sufficient number of nuclear weapons is also contested. Many have tried to pinpoint a figure with findings ranging from two—one an enemy can take out in a first strike and one it cannot—to 1 000 for the US, Russian and Chinese arsenals.⁷ However, the number itself is not the point of minimum deterrence theory as it can differ per actor based on, for example, doctrine, practicalities, and domestic politics. The delivery vehicle is also important. States that pursue a minimum deterrence posture mostly prefer submarines to air- or ground-launched systems, as they can hide better and approach an enemy's coastline, decreasing warning time.⁸

Criticism of minimum deterrence does not accept the assumption that an opponent will act rationally and reasonably, and that 'unacceptable damage', i.e., losing a city or major industrial centre is equally feared.⁹ Additionally, some argue that 'extended deterrence' for the European dimension requires more weapons and is therefore incompatible with minimum deterrence, an argument rooted in the American logic of deterrence gaps.¹⁰ Cimbala and Korb claim that the framework will also not stop further states from acquiring nuclear weapons, as European states such as Poland will not be reassured by smaller arsenals.¹¹ Alexei Arbatov adds a moral dimension, stating that aiming at critical points, such as urban areas, to maximise

destruction and deterrence is both politically and morally unacceptable.¹²

Despite the critique, both France and the UK continue to use the concept of minimum deterrence in their nuclear doctrines. In the 2025 Strategic Defence Review the UK reiterated its commitment to "a minimum, credible, independent nuclear deterrent, assigned to the defence of NATO."¹³ It is likely the UK still follows the 'Moscow criterion' in its doctrine, an example of countervalue targeting requiring the British nuclear arsenal to have sufficient warheads to destroy Moscow and several other key cities such as St Petersburg or Murmansk.¹⁴

Unlike the UK, France is not part of the NATO Nuclear Planning Group but in March 2026, introduced its own framework, 'Forward Deterrence', to extend "France's strategic thinking beyond the defence of its national territory alone."¹⁵ Like British minimum deterrence, French nuclear doctrine is based on 'strict sufficiency'. This means French nuclear weapons have the sole purpose of preventing war, through keeping a minimal arsenal that has the ability to do unacceptable harm to what an enemy values most, namely cities.¹⁶ The core of its deterrence is not the number of weapons it holds, but the possibility that France might use nuclear weapons to retaliate after an attack.¹⁷ The country does not want to "achieve parity with the other nuclear-weapon states."¹⁸ France does, though, consider the possibility of limited nuclear use through what is called the 'warning shot'. A lower-yield nuclear weapon (likely air-delivered) would be used in the event of war with Russia to signal willingness to escalate to countervalue strikes.¹⁹

THE VIEW FROM RUSSIA

Analysts are divided over how Russia views the French and British arsenals. RAND Europe analysts have argued that "...while Russia perceives the UK's deterrent as a credible threat able to impose unacceptable damage on Russia, it is considered relatively weaker than the French deterrent due to the UK's perceived reliance on the U.S. both technically and politically..." and "...while French nuclear capabilities are considered highly credible, they have not been perceived as a direct threat to Russia."²⁰ The

same analysts, along with other Russia experts, stress that it is strategic conventional capabilities (mainly precision guided munitions and now drones), and their entanglement with nuclear escalation dynamics, that worry Russian thinkers more than nuclear capabilities.²¹

Russian expert Nikolai Sokov has written on and exposed Moscow's propaganda on the "radical deepening of coordination [among European nuclear states], including the planning of nuclear weapons use and joint [nuclear] operations against the background of... development of the issue of creating a 'pan-European joint nuclear capability' in addition to the American nuclear 'umbrella'."²² Further from the centre of power, Alexey Chikhachev has written that, "Despite its nuclear status, in today's reality, France is no longer a sufficiently large military power, comparable in potential to the US, Russia, or China."²³ Taken at face value, it seems that Russia continues to consider the French and British deterrents as second rate and a mere augmentation of American systems. As one Europe-based Russian scholar has noted, "Russian strategic thinkers believe that, despite the proclamations, the French nuclear doctrine does not allow for meaningful nuclear sharing... This is why the well-known formula 'risking Paris/Washington, DC for Riga/Warsaw' remains in place."

REASSURANCE, DETERRENCE AND DE-ESCALATION

Difficult though it might be to accept in the present circumstances, stability does not come only from deterring adversaries' activities. It requires a simultaneous effort at risk reduction and crisis communications. Every well-documented nuclear crisis was defused not by one side simply backing down, but through intense crisis communications. History warns that instability is not resolved through posturing and threats, but through a mutual recognition that a nuclear spiral is the worst option for everyone.

France and the UK have minimum deterrence, and discussions are ongoing at a technical level about what the extension of their deterrents might mean. Europe is also spending heavily to strengthen itself conventionally. What European states lack is a centre of gravity for signalling and

crisis communications with Moscow. While this would ideally be based around either the Paris-Moscow or London-Paris direct crisis communications hotlines, these would not be sufficient on their own in a wider European crisis. Other existing hotlines in Norway, Finland, NATO, and the OSCE will also likely be operating in the event of a major crisis, as well as any number of bilateral embassy and UN connections.²⁴

Establishing a multilateral mechanism for European-Russian crisis communication and backchannel discussions on risk reduction should be considered in the process of intra-European coordination. The Institute for Security and Technology has already proposed a tool called CATALINK, with the support of the Swiss and German foreign ministries.²⁵ A wider initiative could centre around the Anglo-French Nuclear Steering Group, take advantage of CATALINK and

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feature liaison staff from states with existing hotline connections as well as adding states from the eastern flank of NATO. The aim would be to create a singular centre of gravity which speaks to Moscow, in order to avoid disparate messaging or confusion.

The challenge for Europe is to build a new understanding of the deterrence, de-escalation and reassurance triangle within a European context. While deterrence messaging can reassure, it is unlikely to contribute to de-escalation or risk reduction. While de-escalation may reduce bilateral risk, it may cause an Ally to feel abandoned and act recklessly. None of this can be solved permanently. This balancing act is the result of continuous, well-informed discussion amongst states allied with the UK and France, with a special emphasis on states most in need of reassurance such as Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Romania. Clarifying doctrine, making the case for minimum sufficiency and crisis communications, and agreeing on a crisis communicator will be arduous, but crucial discussions. The alternative is inter-Allied dissension and confusion in any future crises.

ENDNOTES

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