Analysis

Insuring against Uncertainty
A European Nuclear Deterrent?

| Peter Watkins |

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Introduction

While proposals for a European nuclear deterrent are not new, the idea has attracted renewed political interest prompted by concerns about the future reliability of US extended nuclear deterrence coinciding with a growing risk of Russian aggression. The theoretically purest model would be a multilateral force under the auspices of the EU – or a hybrid construct as part of the European pillar of NATO. But both these options face significant political, legal and practical obstacles. Two major European states have independent strategic nuclear forces – the UK's is assigned to NATO and thus already has an extended deterrence role, while France's has a less defined 'European dimension'. Options to strengthen the potential of these forces to provide extended deterrence for Europe look more pragmatic than pursuing the multilateral model – and should be explored as a prudent response to a deteriorating security environment.

Options for the UK and French forces to provide extended deterrence for Europe should be explored as a prudent response to a deteriorating security environment

Proposals for a European or, at least, a European-based nuclear deterrent force – beyond the national deterrent forces of France and the UK – have been around for a long time. The idea of what became known as the Multilateral Force (MLF) dates to the late 1950s. This concept was advanced by successive US administrations until the mid-1960s. Public debate about the merits of a European deterrent re-emerged in the late 2010s, prompted by concerns about the reliability of US extended nuclear deterrence under former President Trump. In the last few months, the debate has re-ignited – prompted by a combination of the possibility of Donald Trump's re-election as US President in November 2024, his recent comments about NATO, and growing fears of wider Russian aggression beyond Ukraine (and its recurrent recourse to threatening nuclear rhetoric). This analysis does not start from the premise that a European deterrent is a non-starter or a "bad idea" but examines the concept from a number of perspectives.[1] These include:

- the existing capabilities
- the antecedent concepts
- the arguments made for a 'European' nuclear deterrent
- the models proposed
- options for political ownership, financing, command and control, etc
- the challenges thereto – legal, financial, political
- possible alternative approaches.

This analysis also does not assume that a diminution or withdrawal of US extended nuclear deterrence is inevitable or even likely – but uses that hypothetical scenario as a starting point for examining the concept and its variants since it is only in such a scenario that they would be likely to receive any serious collective political attention.

1. Existing and Planned Capabilities in Europe

Successive NATO Summit communiques have noted that "the strategic nuclear forces of the Alliance, particularly those of the United States, are the supreme guarantee of the security of the Alliance."[2] The US has a triad of nuclear forces – ground-based ballistic missiles, submarine-launched ballistic missiles, and air-launched

[1] For a counterview, see Stephen J Cimbala and Laurence J Korb, "Even in the face of Russian aggression, a nuclear 'Eurodeterrent' is still a bad idea," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 12 February 2024.

[2] NATO, "Vilnius Summit Communiqué. Issued by NATO Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Vilnius 11 July 2023," press release (2023) 001, 11 July 2023, para. 44.

weapons. The latter include *B61* gravity bombs stored in bases in continental Europe, which are available for participating European air forces under NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements. Neither the UK nor France contribute aircraft to NATO's nuclear sharing mission (the UK no longer operates dual-capable aircraft). However, UK conventional forces contribute to NATO's routine nuclear exercises such as *Steadfast Noon*.[3]

In addition, two European powers – France and the UK – have independent strategic nuclear deterrent forces. Successive NATO communiques and other documents have said that these forces

> have a deterrent role of their own and contribute significantly to the overall security of the Alliance. These Allies' separate centres of decision-making contribute to deterrence by complicating the calculations of potential adversaries.[4]

France has a dyad of submarine-launched ballistic missiles and air-launched cruise missiles, all developed and produced in France. The UK has submarine-launched missiles sourced from the US but with British designed and built warheads. The UK is currently in the process of producing a new generation of submarines to enter service in the 2030s – they will continue to carry the US-supplied *Trident II D5* missiles with a replacement UK warhead.

There is some limited cooperation between the two countries with respect to their nuclear forces. Most significantly, they have established a joint research facility in France.[5] There has also been, since the early 1990s, a Joint Nuclear Commission for deliberations over policy and doctrinal matters.[6]

There is, though, a significant difference. France's nuclear declaratory policy states that it exists to protect France's "vital interests" which President Macron has stated "now have a European dimension", offering a "strategic dialogue" with allies.[7] It is not, however, assigned to NATO and France is not a member of NATO's Nuclear Planning Group (NPG). By contrast, the UK's declaratory policy states: "We would consider using our nuclear weapons only in extreme circumstances of self-defence, including the defence of our NATO allies".[8] The UK force is assigned to NATO and therefore part of NATO's nuclear planning – unless the "supreme national interests" of the UK are at stake. The UK is a member of the NPG and updates it regularly on the status of its nuclear force.

2. Antecedents

Various proposals for a more broadly-based European (or European-based) nuclear deterrent force have been floated over the decades. Perhaps the most developed was the MLF. Its original stimulus under the Eisenhower Administration was the hundreds of medium-range Soviet missiles and aircraft facing western Europe. US officials felt that the Europeans would want to ensure that these Soviet assets were being targeted and that this could be done with a European-based force in which all Allies could participate.[9] The proposal which eventually emerged was for a fleet of 25 surface vessels, each carrying eight *Polaris* missiles and having a crew taken from at least three of the participating nations, all of whom would finance the force. Few European nations – not least France and the UK – were keen on this idea. It was cumbersome and would not resolve the basic problem of control over nuclear weapons. Although not a significant

Various proposals for a more broadly-based European (or European-based) nuclear deterrent force have been floated over the decades

[3] NATO, "NATO's annual nuclear exercise gets underway," 7 November 2022 .

[4] NATO, "NATO 2022 Strategic Concept," 29 June 2022, 8.

[5] "Treaty between the UK and the French Republic relating to Joint Radiographic / Hydrodynamics Facilities," 2 November 2010.

[6] Bruno Tertrais, "Entente Nucleaire: Options for UK-French Nuclear Cooperation," discussion paper, British American Security Information Council, June 2012, 10.

[7] "Speech of the President of the Republic on the Defense and Deterrence Strategy," *Elysee*, 7 February 2020.

[8] HM Government, "Integrated Review Refresh 2023: Responding to a more contested and volatile world," CP 811, March 2023, 33, 13.

[9] This and the next paragraph draw heavily on Lawrence Freedman, *Britain and Nuclear Weapons* (London: Macmillan for the Royal Institute for International Affairs, 1980), 21-23.

consideration at the time – the rationale of the scheme was to broaden participation not to reduce reliance on the US – the missiles were to be produced by the US.

Subsequently, in December 1963, the UK put forward its own proposal for a MLF drawn from existing medium- and intermediate-range missiles and aircraft owned by NATO states, including the UK's V-bomber aircraft but not its *Polaris* missiles then on order. The US Administration was not impressed – and, in December 1964, the UK made a new proposal for an Atlantic Nuclear Force. This involved most of the existing and planned UK nuclear force, an equal amount of US forces and a separate multilateral component. The system would be under international command, but with national vetoes. This had a similarly lukewarm reception – talks continued during 1965 until the matter was dropped.

In the 1970s, even though both countries were struggling with the costs of sustaining and updating their nuclear forces, there was little interest in closer collaboration between the French and UK nuclear enterprises. This was in part because the UK force was assigned to NATO and the French one was not.[10] However, there were limited indications of French interest in sharing some of the nuclear burden with European partners. In August 1979, two leading Gaullists published an article suggesting a Franco-German nuclear force. And, in January 1980, a close associate of then President Giscard d'Estaing floated the idea of a joint French and British force acting for Europe.[11] With the decision later in 1980 to purchase the *Trident* missile to replace *Polaris*, however, the UK reinforced its alignment with the US.

3. The Current Debate

After a long period of relative silence on this issue, the debate reignited in 2017-18 centred in Germany.[12] It then returned in the second half of 2023 and early 2024, prompted by Russia's intensifying war on Ukraine and concerns that the US might be increasingly distracted by contingencies in the Indo-Pacific (and specifically Taiwan). The most recent flurry took place around the time of the 2024 Munich Security Conference following remarks by Donald Trump that he would say to a NATO ally that had not met the 2% GDP expenditure target and faced an invasion:

The debate returned in 2023, prompted by Russia's intensifying war on Ukraine and concerns that the US might be increasingly distracted by contingencies in the Indo-Pacific

"You're delinquent. No, I would not protect you. In fact, I would encourage them [the invaders] to do whatever the hell they want."[13] Public comments by senior politicians, again mainly German, were fairly broad-brush. For example, Manfred Weber, a senior figure in the European People's Party, said:

> Europe must build deterrence, we must be able to deter and defend ourselves… We all know that when push comes to shove, the nuclear option is the really decisive one… I would like to see the European dimension of nuclear defence as a long-term goal… But as long as this is not realistic, we should take up Macron's offer and think about how France's nuclear armament can also be embedded in European structures."[14]

A few weeks later, Germany's Finance Minister, Christian Lindner, asked in a piece in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and widely reported elsewhere, "Under what political and financial conditions would Paris and London be prepared to maintain or expand their own strategic capabilities for collective security?"[15] Neither provided more detail on how any such arrangements would take shape. However, an earlier intervention by a quartet of senior commentators – French former Chief of Defence, Jacques Lanxade, and fellow authors from Germany and the UK – provided more detail:

[10] Freedman, *Britain and Nuclear Weapons*, 64.

[11] Freedman, *Britain and Nuclear Weapons*, 65.

[12] Elisabeth Braw, "It's time to put an end to the phantom Euro-nukes debate," *ELN*, 10 August 2018; Bruno Tertrais, "The European Dimension of Nuclear Deterrence: French and British Policies and Future Scenarios," *FIIA*, Working Paper 106, November 2018.

[13] "Can Europe defence itself without America?" *The Economist*, 24 February 2024.

[14] "As Trump looms, top EU politician calls for European nuclear deterrent," *Politico*, 25 January 2024.

[15] "Can Europe defence itself without America?"

> Europe needs a credible nuclear deterrent of its own under NATO command. Only a trilateral British, French and German nuclear umbrella, combined with a US umbrella, all under the command and control of the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) will be a credible deterrent for Russia. This would require that France and Germany find a solution for equipping their Future Combat Air System… and German F-35 dual capable aircraft with French nuclear weapons. Germany would not have its own nuclear weapons, so this arrangement would not violate the Non-Proliferation Treaty. The NATO command structure must be tailored in such a way that Europe can fight a conflict in which neither America nor Canada may wish to get involved, while taking advantage of NATO commands and systems. To this end the deputy SACEUR has to be European, and a headquarters-based Combined Joint Task Force must serve as his or her operational command.[16]

3.1. A (Multilateral) European Nuclear Force?

This is the most ambitious concept on the table. Although not being presented as a near-term solution, it has a certain political logic to it: were the US to roll-up its strategic nuclear umbrella over Europe, falling back on France and/or the UK to provide extended nuclear deterrence for the other European countries in NATO and/or the EU could leave similar worries about their commitment in a crisis which might not directly affect them as those that have lingered for decades with respect to the US nuclear guarantee. So, there would be a logic to 'Europe' – the EU along with certain closely aligned non-EU states – having its own nuclear deterrent force. What might such a force look like?

In terms of hardware, the force could comprise a number of jointly owned nuclear submarines armed with ballistic missiles and/or a jointly owned fleet of dual capable aircraft armed with cruise missiles or gravity bombs and/or a ground-based ballistic missile system. The last-mentioned element would be vulnerable to a Russian pre-emptive strike and so would probably not be worth pursuing. In the wider hypothetical geopolitical circumstances in question (withdrawal of US extended nuclear deterrence), this hardware would have to be provided mainly by France.

There would be a multilateral military command centre with representatives from all the countries engaged – and a commander drawn by rotation from the principal countries. The commander would report to a political decision-making entity. In theory, this could be the President of the European Council: this is not completely implausible – after all, the European states of NATO effectively entrust that authority to the President of the US in the longstanding construct of the Alliance – but it is hard to imagine European countries being prepared to entrust such an awesome authority *ab initio* to the representative of another. So, it seems more likely that the political decision-making entity would be collective, perhaps the entire European Council augmented by non-EU participants.

If that is the theory, what about the practice? There are several challenges – many already identified by think-tank and academic commentators on past and present iterations of the debate. First, setting up a European force would take considerable time in what could be a very unsettled – and possibly rapidly deteriorating – geopolitical environment. It is conceivable that France might donate its nuclear force to the EU-plus construct described above, and Europeanise its command chain, and be content to become just one decision-making party among many. But this seems implausible given France's longstanding doctrinal position. Slightly more plausible is that France might donate some equipment – but not enough to create another fully-functioning nuclear force. Procurement of the additional submarines or aircraft and missiles required would likely take years. And, in any event, drafting and agreeing the oversight, reporting and decision-making protocols governing the new force would take significant time in itself.

Setting up a European force would take considerable time in what could be a very unsettled geopolitical environment

Secondly, the ownership of nuclear weapons by a new entity representing over two-dozen

[16] Jacques Lanxade, Denis MacShane, Margarita Mathiopoulos and Klaus Naumann, "Europe needs a nuclear deterrent of its own," *Atlantic Council*, 11 July 2023.

currently non-nuclear weapons states would be contrary to the provisions of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) – as would the transfer of such weapons from an existing nuclear weapons state (France). At present at least, all EU and European NATO states are firm adherents of the NPT.

At present at least, all EU and European NATO states are firm adherents of the Non-Proliferation Treaty

Thirdly, the (most politically plausible) collective decision-making body would be far from ideal operationally. In an evolving crisis in which an adversary had, say, used tactical nuclear weapons on the soil of a member state, rapid decisions would be required on whether and how to respond to deter further nuclear use by that adversary. Any collective body working on the basis of unanimity or consensus could be paralysed by absences or obstruction. Any potential adversary would be aware of that distinct possibility – thus weakening the deterrent value of the force. Unlike NATO, the European entity – in its pure form at least – would not have the benefit of separate centres of decision making to complicate the calculations of potential adversaries.

So, like the antecedent MLF concept in the 1960s, a multilateral 'European' nuclear force as outlined above would be unwieldy and, to all intents and purposes, futile.

But there is the possible hybrid variant advanced by Jacques Lanxade and colleagues. This would be a trilateral Franco-British-German construct under the command of the DSACEUR (a post currently allocated to the UK). Presumably, the DSACEUR would seek political authority for nuclear use from the leaders of the three countries. The risk of paralysis would be less than in a much larger forum – but could still be significant. And other major European countries are unlikely to be enthusiastic about such a nuclear *directoire*. The concept evades the NPT issue by proposing that the air-launched weapons (and warheads) would remain in French ownership, but modifying the F-35A aircraft on order for Germany to carry these weapons would likely be technically challenging and expensive (and dependent on US cooperation which, in the circumstances of US distancing from NATO, may be grudging at best). So, this concept too faces significant hurdles.

3.2. NATO Nuclear-Sharing Reconfigured?

Another hybrid possibility would be a reconfiguration of NATO's nuclear sharing arrangement. This currently depends on US-provided bombs located in Europe and, increasingly, on F-35A aircraft of US origin to deliver them. In a hypothetical situation where US strategic nuclear forces no longer provided extended deterrence in Europe, it would seem strange for the US to continue to provide the bombs and to be prepared to facilitate a desire by European allies to employ them. Under the NPT, ownership of the US bombs could not be legally transferred to the European states providing the aircraft. So, either France or the UK would need to develop compatible ordnance and make weapons available for the other states' aircraft on a basis analogous to the current arrangement. Given the interface with a US aircraft not operated by France (and seen by France as a rival to its own industrial ambitions), this obligation would be more likely to fall on the UK. However, the UK would struggle to find the capacity to develop such a weapon (as discussed below).

3.3. A European Dimension for the French and UK Nuclear Deterrents?

Given that two major European powers already have nuclear forces, it would seem more pragmatic to try to reinforce or augment their role(s) and capabilities to hedge against the risk of the non-availability of (or *in extremis* compensate for) the US nuclear umbrella than try to establish a new 'European' multilateral nuclear force in pure or hybrid form. How might this be done?

While President Macron's reference to France's vital interests having a "European dimension" attracted widespread attention, he was restating more explicitly what had been said more obliquely before: President Hollande said in 2015 that the

> French nuclear deterrent brings to Europe a strong and essential contribution. France also has, with her European partners, a solidarity of fact and of heart. Who would then imagine that an aggression jeopardising the survival of Europe would have no consequences?"[17]

While President Macron offered a "strategic dialogue" with allies on the matter, there are few signs that any have taken this up

But, while President Macron offered a "strategic dialogue" with allies on the matter, there are few signs that any have taken this up. This may partly be because there is an intrinsic internal tension in the stated French policy position. Jean-Louis Lozier has explained this thus:

> in case of aggression against European countries, some have suggested, France would benefit from its independent deterrent to protect itself, show restraint, and avoid an escalation. To put it differently, the freedom of action granted by an independent nuclear deterrent force is sometimes seen as potentially leading to a possible lack of solidarity.[18]

Since the French have put such emphasis on their nuclear deterrent being beholden to nobody else, it is perhaps understandable that allies might doubt the strength of any reference – explicit or implicit – to its having an extended deterrence role.

This tension is less apparent in UK policy. The UK's deterrent force has been assigned to NATO since 1962 and – in terms of stated policy – it exists to deter the "most extreme acts of aggression against us and our NATO allies."[19] So it already seeks to provide extended deterrence. However, the UK's declaratory policy is deliberately ambiguous about when, how and at what scale it would employ its nuclear weapons with respect to the territory and interests of the UK itself let alone those of Allies. This has been a source of mild discomfort to some individual Allies. Nonetheless, potential adversaries must take into account the UK's nuclear capabilities when facing UK conventional forces deployed as part of NATO's forward deterrence and defence posture.

The reassuring simplicity of the British policy position must, of course, be calibrated against messy political realities. Many continental European politicians see the UK as having distanced itself from Europe by its departure from the EU. But successive official policy statements since the Brexit referendum have underlined that NATO is the cornerstone of the UK's national security and that the UK is fully committed to Euro-Atlantic security; official language to this effect has become even stronger since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.[20]

The main question mark about the extended deterrence value of the UK's nuclear force lies more in its scale and character. The US has a large enough nuclear arsenal that it is plausible that it could employ some weapons in response to a nuclear (or overwhelming conventional) attack on an Ally while still having plenty in reserve – at sea or in continental US – to deter an attack on the US homeland. Of the recognised nuclear powers, the UK is unique in having a 'minimum credible deterrent' with only one platform type (the four *Vanguard* class submarines) and only one delivery system type (the *Trident* missile) as well as the smallest stockpile of warheads.[21] Current policy is for one nuclear-armed submarine to be on patrol at all times. Unless the UK had managed to deploy a second (and ideally a third) submarine in an evolving crisis, there is the risk that the use of a UK *Trident* missile could compromise the location of the sole deployed submarine.

This risk could, of course, be mitigated – so no adversary could blithely assume that the UK would not employ a weapon in defence of an Ally. However, the credibility of UK-provided extended deterrence would be greater with either a larger SSBN fleet – procurement of a fifth submarine would enable the routine

[17] Francois Hollande, "Speech on Nuclear Deterrence," 19 February 2015 [unofficial translation, *ACDN*, 4.

[18] Jean-Louis Lozier, "French Nuclear Policy," *ICDS*, 19 January 2023.

[19] Ministry of Defence (UK), "Guidance The UK's nuclear deterrent: what you need to know," *gov.uk*, 28 March 2024.

[20] HM Government, "Integrated Review Refresh," 20.

[21] This will remain the case despite the intent to "move to an overall nuclear weapon stockpile of no more than 260 warheads" announced in the Integrated Review of March 2021. HM Government, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age: the Integrated Review*, CP403, March 2021, 76.

operational deployment of two submarines – or the acquisition of a sub-strategic air-launched capability. Either measure would be very expensive and put further pressure on an already stretched UK nuclear enterprise. But, in the hypothetical geopolitical circumstances discussed here, such measures could be a prudent investment.

The credibility of UK-provided extended deterrence would be greater with either a larger SSBN fleet or the acquisition of a sub-strategic air-launched capability

As is widely known, deterrence exists primarily in the mind of the party which the deterrence posture seeks to deter (the deterree) rather than in the mind of the party maintaining that posture (the deterrer). On the basis of currently stated French and British policy positions, any potential aggressor against a NATO or EU state could not exclude the possibility that France or the UK would be prepared to employ their nuclear weapons in response to such aggression. Even if a potential aggressor heavily discounted this possibility for the reasons set out above, they could not discount it to zero – and the costs that could be inflicted by France's and/or the UK's relatively small nuclear arsenals would be significant. The question now is how such perceptions could be reinforced.

In his examination of this question in November 2018, Bruno Tertrais dismissed a number of "non-starters" in the debate, including a European nuclear force controlled by the EU, and European partners' partly funding the French nuclear force in return for a say in French policy.[22] Another of his non-starters was the pooling of French and British assets. Over five years later, this looks no more plausible. But, if the harsh reality is that extended nuclear deterrence by French and British forces is the only realistic alternative to the US nuclear umbrella, then steps to improve their effectiveness through further mutual support – building on the joint hydrodynamic facility – would be worth pursuing. The final non-starter was Paris joining the NPG or assigning part of its airborne component to NATO. These too still look implausible – but would the compromise of France having observer status at the NPG be unthinkable?

At a more modest level, there are a number of steps that both countries could consider. One would be bilateral or minilateral consultations on nuclear policy and posture issues with major allies – in the UK's case, to a deeper extent than might be possible in the NPG or High Level Group. Another might be rotating the Rafale aircraft from France's airborne component (without their armament) through bases in allied countries.[23] Were the UK eventually to reinstate its sub-strategic capability, the aircraft concerned could be similarly rotated. And, in circumstances in which the current NATO nuclear sharing arrangements had effectively collapsed, France could lead a European version of *Steadfast Noon* with participation by other countries' non-nuclear assets – including from the UK.

Conclusion

Whatever may come after the US presidential election, the growing risk of direct military confrontation with Russia and the concomitant risk that the US will be increasingly stretched between the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific theatres mean that European countries must do more for their own defence as part of a more balanced and more effective NATO. These suggestions (or variants upon them) and other ideas for greater European cooperation on nuclear deterrence therefore warrant closer attention.

[22] Tertrais, "The European Dimension of Nuclear Deterrence," 8-9.

[23] Tertrais, "The European Dimension of Nuclear Deterrence," 9.

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