



Nuclear Deterrence in French Security Policy

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On 7 February, President Emmanuel Macron delivered a major speech on the French defence and deterrence strategy. His proposals to commence a strategic dialogue on the role of France's nuclear deterrence in the collective security of Europe and on the potential "association" of partners with the French deterrence exercises deserve close attention. Due to its potential of causing a transatlantic rift, his call for developing an independent European approach to arms control will be difficult to accept.

In line with the French tradition of major policy speeches by the head of state devoted to the issue of nuclear deterrence, President Macron delivered remarks at the École de Guerre in Paris on 7 February. His speech was broader in scope than those of his immediate predecessors (such as François Hollande's in 2015). It covered not only nuclear themes, including some new proposals, but also more general pronouncements on the state of international relations and defence strategy.

The Strategic Context. According to Macron, France and Europe must react to fundamental changes ("paradigm shifts") of the international system caused primarily by the crisis of the liberal order. Beyond the threats of terrorism and state collapse, for example, in North Africa and the Sahel, the new international environment involves a growing rivalry between nuclear powers with the danger of war or inadvertent escalation of crises. Macron mentioned in this context the potential use of a nuclear weapon as blackmail or to ensure *fait accompli*. This may point to Russia as the focus of concern. At the same time, the French leader robustly defended his efforts to seek engagement with Russia.

Macron stated that European states need to jointly assume more responsibility for their own security, not only in the military dimension but also in the economic sphere and in the protection of critical infrastructure. According to the president, strengthening the European capability to act is not directed against transatlantic cooperation but is welcomed by the U.S. and is aimed at creating a European pillar within NATO, not replacing it.

The French Nuclear Doctrine. Traditionally, France perceives its nuclear weapons as crucial to protecting its sovereignty and maintaining the freedom to act. The Macron speech emphasized, however, that credible deterrence of threats requires also the development of other elements of defence potential, including conventional forces and the capacity to conduct operations in the cyber domain and in space.

The French president confirmed the main tenets of French nuclear doctrine: the use of nuclear weapons only in self-defence when its vital interests are under threat, the rejection of their tactical (battlefield) use, refraining from the designation of potential opponents, and maintaining the ability to inflict unacceptable damage on the political, economic, and military centres of an aggressor. France maintains the option of conducting a one-time nuclear warning against such an aggressor.

The speech also reaffirmed that the French nuclear arsenal will be kept at the level of "strict sufficiency" to fulfil those tasks. In the current strategic environment, this means maintaining under 300 nuclear warheads

deployed on M51 sea-launched ballistic missiles and on ASMPA cruise missiles delivered by Rafale aircraft. President Macron pledged to maintain sufficient financing of the French nuclear deterrent and its support elements (it is assessed that nuclear-related spending constitutes about 12% of the French defence budget).

The European and Transatlantic Dimensions. Before Macron's speech, there was media and expert speculation that the president would use the opportunity to announce an initiative on the "Europeanisation" of French nuclear deterrence, understood as the inclusion of other countries in the financing, development, or decision-making of nuclear weapons. This was not the case. The president stressed that France's nuclear deterrence and its understanding of vital interests have a "European dimension", an ambiguous line similar to that used by his predecessors. With regards to the North Atlantic Alliance, Macron only confirmed the known position: France will not join the Nuclear Planning Group but will continue to participate in the political discussions on deterrence, and that the French nuclear potential contributes to overall deterrence.

There were two new elements. First, France proposed to interested European partners (not the whole EU) the development of a strategic dialogue on the role of French nuclear forces in collective security in Europe. The second, related suggestion envisioned an "association" of interested European countries with French nuclear exercises.

Arms Control and Disarmament. Citing the [crisis in the bilateral U.S.-Russian strategic arms control system](#), Macron suggested the development of an autonomous European position on arms control. He argued that European countries should not be spectators in developments detrimental to their security, especially given the collapse of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, but should take a part in the negotiations of new arms control instruments. He also noted that the security interests of Northern and Central European countries should be considered, which can be seen as pre-empting criticism that his proposal would lead to France engaging in arms control dialogue with Russia without broader consultations.

Notably, Macron discussed also the ethical dimension of nuclear deterrence. In response to the [adoption of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons](#) and the calls for nuclear disarmament, the French president rejected any unilateral moves. He portrayed the French nuclear potential as a stabilising factor, given the possession of nuclear weapons by other countries, some of them dictatorships.

Assessment and Recommendations. The main points of the École de Guerre speech reiterated, with some additional clarifications, the known position of France with regards to nuclear issues and European and international security. Macron repeated most of these themes at the Munich Security Conference on 15 February. Under the current leadership, France will continue to strive to lead and shape the European strategic agenda.

The new proposals concerning cooperation in the field of nuclear deterrence and arms control should be thoroughly discussed at the bilateral French-Polish level, within the group of interested states and at NATO. So far, Germany has expressed publicly its interest in a strategic dialogue on nuclear deterrence issues. As regards Poland, the value of such a dialogue would primarily depend on its content: it could be less interesting if it focuses only on the partners familiarising themselves with the French "strategic culture" but more valuable if it provides a forum for discussing the role of French nuclear deterrence in crises and potential conflicts linked to the activities of Russia. It should be in any case treated as a dialogue complementary to, and not replacing activities within NATO. The same goes for the potential association with the French exercises (which initially can amount to observing them). In parallel, however, it may be worth considering non-nuclear avenues of strengthening bilateral military cooperation, such as joint air force exercises involving the deployment on Polish territory of Rafale aircraft from squadrons with both conventional and nuclear missions.

The proposal to develop an independent European position on arms control issues can raise a number of questions. On the one hand, France's willingness to include in the discussion issues that have been outside the scope of U.S.-Russian arms control (e.g., ground-based missiles with a range of less than 500 km, such as the Russian Iskander system, which are of concern for the NATO Eastern flank countries) can be seen as positive. On the other hand, if any such European proposals were to be promoted with disregard to the U.S. position and without proper coordination within NATO, this could lead to a crisis in transatlantic relations that can be exploited by Russia. Another point of concern is a scenario in which the potential European approach diverges from the positions already adopted at NATO, for example, concerning Russia's so-called [missile deployment moratorium proposal](#). While the questions posed by Macron regarding the crisis of arms control are valid, the details of any proposals should be developed together with France's most important European partners, consulted with the U.S., and—as pledged by Macron—take into consideration the security interests of Central Europe.