

EGMONT POLICY BRIEF 403

– MARCH 2026 –

Dissuasion avancée: Macron's Realistic Complement to NATO Nuclear Deterrence

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*On 2 March 2026, French President Emmanuel Macron delivered a speech on nuclear deterrence at the Ile Longue nuclear submarine base. The [speech](#) was made in a vastly different geopolitical and nuclear landscape compared to his previous nuclear deterrence speech from February 2020. As Macron said, “The weight of the last six years is that of decades for France and Europe. And the last few months have had the weight of years.” While multiple aspects of French nuclear doctrine remain the same, there were two noteworthy adjustments: (1) the new concept of *dissuasion avancée* or “forward deterrence” to make cooperation with European allies possible, and (2) an increase in the number of nuclear warheads. Importantly, Macron stressed that these efforts were complementary to NATO’s nuclear deterrence.*

French nuclear arsenal for European security, but did not reinvoke European countries for a dialogue due to a lack of interest by potential partners.

On 7 February 2020, President Macron gave a [speech](#) on French defence and deterrence strategy at the *École de guerre*. Macron declared that “France’s vital interests now have a European dimension” and invited European partners for a “strategic dialogue” on “the role played by France’s nuclear deterrence in our collective security”. Furthermore, Macron also invited willing European partners to be “associated with the exercises of French deterrence forces”. Nonetheless, no (public) response came from potential European partners despite the already deteriorating security environment after Russia’s illegal annexation of the Crimea, its support of separatists in Eastern Ukraine and rising anxieties amongst European NATO allies during the first Trump administration.

ANTECEDENTS

French presidents have stressed several times that their nuclear doctrine includes some form of a European [dimension](#). After the end of the Cold War, former French President Mitterrand said that the “compatibility between the French nuclear forces and European defence would have to be addressed”. Subsequently, then Deputy Defence Minister Mellick proposed the concept of *dissuasion concertée* or “concerted deterrence”. President Chirac and Prime Minister Juppé reiterated the “concerted deterrence” proposal. Sarkozy wanted to start a dialogue with European partners, and Hollande also stressed the security benefits of the

After three years of war between Russia and Ukraine, numerous Russian nuclear threats, and the return of Trump as President of the United States, France and the United Kingdom released a joint nuclear [statement](#) called the Northwood Declaration on 10 July 2025. Both nuclear powers declared that “France and the United Kingdom agree that there is no extreme threat to Europe that would not prompt a response by our two nations”, and they established a UK-France Nuclear Steering Group. The first [meeting](#) of this steering group occurred on 10 December 2025. Furthermore, in June 2025, the United Kingdom [announced](#) that it would buy dual-capable F-35A and rejoin the NATO nuclear sharing mission.

MACRON'S 2026 SPEECH

In the March 2026 [speech](#), most of the sacred convictions in French nuclear thinking remain intact. The decision to use nuclear weapons remains firmly in the hands of the French president. The exact meaning of the French “vital interests” remains undisclosed and continues to be a “sovereign assessment”. Subsequently, Macron did not articulate a concrete extended nuclear deterrence commitment like the US does in the context of NATO: “A rigid guarantee would not be wise. It would lower the nuclear threshold and reduce the uncertainty of our adversaries in equal proportion.”

Moreover, France continues to reject the idea of a “flexible nuclear response”. Nuclear weapons are thus solely strategic weapons and not warfighting tools. France continues to refuse “any nuclear battle”. The nuclear warning shot, which is “unique and non-renewable”, remains the “ultimate chance to restore deterrence”. Therefore, Macron emphasised the importance of building up strong conventional capabilities in Europe to “shoulder” the nuclear side of the deterrence equation.

The new concept of *dissuasion avancée* or “forward deterrence” makes increased cooperation with willing European allies possible. The following allies are mentioned: the United Kingdom, Germany, Poland, the Netherlands, Belgium, Greece, Sweden and Denmark. However, as Macron emphasised, “forward deterrence” is not about “sharing of the ultimate decision, nor of its planification, nor of its conduct.”

The concept makes the participation of European conventional capabilities in French nuclear exercises possible and, if necessary, allows them to participate in wartime nuclear operations. Within the NATO-framework, several non-nuclear European allies also provide ‘Conventional Support to Nuclear Operations’ (CSNO). “Forward deterrence” thus also broadens the participation of European allies in the French nuclear mission.

Dissuasion avancée also entails the forward-deployment of French nuclear forces on allied territory, if necessary.

This dispersal would result in “a sort of archipelago of forces”. Such a decision could provide the French nuclear forces with new opportunities to signal. Dispersal makes the fleet of dual-capable Rafale aircraft more survivable, will “complicate the calculations of our adversaries”, and gives France “new strategic depth” or room to manoeuvre. This is, nonetheless, somewhat remarkable. It falls short of the existing nuclear sharing arrangements whereby the United States permanently forward-deploys nuclear weapons in Europe, and several non-nuclear NATO allies provide dual-capable aircraft for the nuclear mission. At the same time, dispersal of dual-capable aircraft in the context of the NATO nuclear mission remains a [proposal](#) that is being debated.

Another element in Macron’s speech is the strategic dialogue that France plans to have with European allies. Currently, this will happen only on a bilateral basis, such as the UK-France nuclear steering group created in July 2025 and the newly established Franco-German nuclear steering group. Subsequently, Macron mentioned that “exchange bodies at [the] political level will be created with each of these countries [listed above] in the next few days.” While these groups could evolve towards a multilateral forum, this would entail a duplication on the European level of the Nuclear Planning Group (NPG), where all NATO allies are represented but not France. Macron also emphasised that France would remain outside the NPG, another sacred conviction.

Furthermore, Macron announced an increase in the number of nuclear warheads. This decision strengthens the credibility, survivability, and effectiveness of France’s nuclear forces. The speech thus indicated that more nuclear capabilities are necessary to balance against the heightened Russian nuclear threat. Macron did, however, add that France will be less transparent on warhead counts. Subsequently, the scope of the warhead increases, and how the warheads will be divided between the air and submarine legs of the nuclear forces remains unclear. This is, on the one hand, understandable from a strategic ambiguity perspective. On the other hand, such a decision is also unfortunate given the international criticism of the opaque Chinese nuclear buildup.

Consequently, Macron made feasible adjustments to France's nuclear doctrine that can be swiftly implemented. Including European NATO allies in exercises or deploying nuclear-capable Rafales to allied bases has already been explored. In 2022, an Italian air-to-air refuelling aircraft was involved in the French Poker nuclear exercise. In April 2025, French dual-capable Rafale fighter jets were deployed to Sweden. Nonetheless, it will be crucial to move quickly from the political-strategic level to the military-strategic level and make the necessary decisions, such as establishing a Nuclear Command and Control system that links the group of interested allies with the *Forces Aériennes Stratégiques* (FAS) or the Strategic Air Forces of France.

Crucial, however, is Macron's emphasis that "forward deterrence" does not aim to replace the US nuclear umbrella over NATO. "The forward deterrence we are proposing is a distinct effort which has its own value and is perfectly complementary to NATO's at both strategic and technical level", stated Macron. It is thus a complement to the already decade-old NATO nuclear deterrence architecture. In other words, "forward deterrence" strengthens the secondary centre of decision-making in the Alliance.

Documents and officials from the Trump administration have stressed on numerous occasions that European NATO allies need to take the primary responsibility for their conventional deterrence and defence, while at the same time reaffirming the US nuclear umbrella. Under Secretary of War for Policy Elbridge Colby, for example, stated in February 2026 that "We will continue to provide the U.S. extended nuclear deterrent."

Subsequently, the United States' nuclear umbrella over NATO remains in place. Nonetheless, the recent changes in French and British policy can be seen as welcome augmentations of the credibility of NATO's nuclear deterrence by the two European nuclear powers. It will, however, be crucial that all involved allies develop and continue to use the same language. NATO unity on nuclear deterrence cannot be perceived as weakened by potential adversaries. At the same time, the speech

aims also to alleviate any nuclear proliferation pressures on the European continent. Both France and the United Kingdom have signalled to their European allies that they are willing and capable of changing their national nuclear policies and postures for the benefit of European security.

EUROPEAN ALLIED REACTIONS & THE POTENTIAL CHALLENGE OF A FRENCH POPULIST PRESIDENT

On the same day of the speech, the Élysée released a joint [declaration](#) by President Macron and Chancellor Merz, which further developed the nuclear dimension of the Franco-German relationship. The declaration stated that "France and Germany have established a high-ranking nuclear steering group that will act as a bilateral framework for doctrinal dialogue and the coordination of strategic cooperation". Moreover, Germany will participate with conventional support in French nuclear exercises. The declaration emphasised that "This Franco-German cooperation will add to, not substitute for, NATO's nuclear deterrence and NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements, to which Germany contributes and will continue to contribute". Continued compliance with the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) was also reaffirmed.

Belgian Prime Minister Bart De Wever [welcomed](#) Macron's initiative and saw it as "an important step towards a stronger European Defence policy". In a [letter](#) to parliament, Dutch Ministers of Defence, Dilan Yeşilgöz-Zegerius, and Foreign Affairs, Tom Berendsen, said that the Netherlands accepts Macron's offer. They also stressed that the cooperation with France is a complement to and not a replacement of NATO's nuclear deterrence. Consequently, the Netherlands "continues to carry out in the framework of the alliance the nuclear task from Volkel Air Base".

The key question is whether the next President of France will continue to uphold Macron's vision. Marine Le Pen [said](#) in March 2025 that "The French nuclear deterrent must remain a French nuclear deterrent", and opposed any form of sharing. Jordan Bardella seems to be more open and [said](#) that France's vital interests do not stop at

the national border, but argued that “there can be no sharing, no co-financing, and no co-decision-making on the nuclear button”. Given Macron’s limited adjustments of France’s doctrine that keeps the core of French thinking intact, a potential populist president might maintain the course set by Macron.

In conclusion, together with the 2025 Northwood Declaration and the United Kingdom’s decision to rejoin NATO’s nuclear mission, Macron’s adjustment of French nuclear doctrine provides an immediate stopgap regarding European nuclear deterrence to face the new nuclear age. However, the debate will undoubtedly return in Europe if populists take over in France and the United Kingdom. Finally, while Macron made the case to strengthen nuclear deterrence and several European allies responded positively, the question is whether US extended nuclear deterrence will also be enhanced in the near future.

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The author would like to thank Prof. Dr Alexander Mattelaer, Prof. Dr Sven Biscop, and an anonymous defence official for their comments on an earlier version of the brief. The views expressed in this Egmont Policy Brief are those of the author alone, and any errors are the sole responsibility of the author.





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