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POLICY BRIEF

EUROPE'S NUCLEAR TURN:

Assessing France's Forward Deterrence Initiative

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Strategic autonomy, extended deterrence, and the evolving dynamics of European nuclear security

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Weeks before the 11th NPT Review Conference, President Emmanuel Macron announced the French forward deterrence doctrine. Following this announcement, several European countries have joined this policy of European defense and strategic security. This constitutes a calibrated, sovereignty-focused contribution to European security and defense efforts, with France maintaining the final decision-making role within the alliance of nine European states.¹ Yet, the deterrence gap still exists since the forward deterrence neither replaces the U.S.-led extended deterrence nor provides formal guarantees (such as treaty or other legal obligations).

Overall, this development within the security and defense agenda signals the following:

- The Forward deterrence policy is intended to be operationalized in a way in which it does not cross existing obligations.
- The policy has gained wider European support, demonstrating a political commitment visible to both allies and adversaries.
- It is likely to further strengthen European integration through nuclear steering groups (France – United Kingdom, Germany, Poland) and remaining states within the alliance.
- Concerns regarding credibility, transparency, and durability of the

initiative persist, with the upcoming 2027 French presidential elections may challenge the policy implementation.

Central to this matter is the continuity of cooperation on regional security which transcends the borders and shall be used as a valuable but insufficient hedging tool as France intends to temporarily deploy its strategic air (and sea) forces.

Rethinking Nuclear Deterrence

Recent geopolitical developments have driven states to reconsider their national and regional defense measures. This reassessment has been driven in part by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, followed by its fluctuating nuclear signaling, the U.S. reports on China's alleged increased nuclear triad, alongside developments involving North Korea, India, Pakistan, and the evolving U.S. nuclear doctrine.² This combination of threats posed against European security has led France to expand its nuclear arsenal and engage multiple European allies in a unified forward deterrence posture. This becomes a deliberate signal, reaching allies and adversaries, regarding modernization and development efforts and transforming the nuclear deterrence framework within the region.

The French doctrine can be traced back to Gaullist deterrence practices, in which its ambiguous language and flexibility of

¹ Sebastian Clapp, "Nuclear Deterrence in Europe and the French 'Forward Deterrence' Initiative," European Parliamentary Research Service, 2026, 2, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI\(2026\)791446](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI(2026)791446).

² Jean-Louis Lozier, "How Does France's Nuclear Deterrent Contribute to the Defense of Europe?," French Institute of International Relations, 10 July 2026, <https://www.ifri.org/en/external-articles/external-publications/how-does-frances-nuclear-deterrent-contribute-defense>.

the policy were intentional.³ In 2020, Macron revisited the doctrine reaffirming security commitments and that nuclear deterrence remained as a last resort.⁴ Six years later, his speech proved that France now operationalizes the formerly Gaullist notion under forward deterrence.

This brief will examine the new policy through the lens of international security and try to answer the following: whether the policy strengthens security commitments in Europe with nine allied member states, or does it further introduce ambiguity, risks of arms race and security? Second, how does this move affect or challenge international security in the midst of instabilities? This paper will thus argue that the notion of forward deterrence represents a means of security and defense policy for Europe, which strengthens European integration and cooperation on the subject. However, this may incentivize other nuclear-capable states to either further develop autonomously and/or engage in strategic partnerships.

Anatomy of the Doctrine

As previously outlined, the forward deterrence policy relies on strategic cooperation among European states, while overall decision-making remains

under the French influence. As of now, considering the number of allied states within the deterrence framework, no multilateral committee or body exists, except for the nuclear steering groups, which refer to bilateral institutional frameworks. Therefore, the policy remains strictly of strategic character. By June 2026, nine European states had already agreed to engage within the policy framework: the UK, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Poland, Denmark, Sweden, Greece, and Norway. The France-UK nuclear relations were already established and later strengthened through the 2025 Northwood Declaration, announcing the creation of a nuclear steering group. The Franco-German relations have also been solidified “based on the shared understanding that the nuclear dimension of deterrence remains a cornerstone of European security,”⁵ in which NATO's nuclear umbrella is not being substituted by the French forward deterrence, as parties claim. However, some believe that such extended support for the adjusted nuclear policy came from not only concerns over “European sovereignty” but also from the possibility of “forward deployment” of arsenal on their territory.⁶

³ Roos, Grégoire. “Macron's Nuclear Weapons Offer to Europe: Gaullist Policy, Updated for a More Unstable World,” Chatham House, 29 January 2026, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2026/03/macrons-nuclear-weapons-offer-europe-gaullist-policy-updated-more-unstable-world>.

⁴ Bruno Tertrais, *French Nuclear Deterrence Policy, Forces, And Future: A Handbook* (Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique, 2020), 17, <https://frstrategie.org/sites/default/files/documents/publications/recherches-et-documents/2020/202004.pdf>.

⁵ Oliver Meier, “Forward Deterrence: What's (Not) in It for France's Partners,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 21 July 2026, <https://thebulletin.org/2026/07/forward-deterrence-whats-not-in-it-for-frances-partners/>.

⁶ Emmanuelle Maitre and Miguel Ángel Garcia Carrasco, “Forward Deterrence From a European Perspective: Political Opportunities and Practical Questions,” (Fondation pour la recherche stratégique, 2026), September 2026, <https://www.frstrategie.org/web/documents/publication/s/recherches-et-documents/2026/RD072026.pdf>.

A significant angle within this doctrine is the “archipelago of forces,” which is likely to have a dual effect of either adding broader security and transparency concerns (and a security dilemma) or temporarily allocating arsenal for long-term, vital commitments. Experts claim that France, even with this policy, is still being outnumbered by the Russian nuclear arsenal; while others suggest matters beyond numbers, translating this into financial strains and further political considerations.⁷ Yet, adjustments within the European defense and security, specifically on nuclear policy were not unforeseen and thus timely. From the perspective of the European integration project, as regional security and defense sit at its core, France has taken the lead as an EU and NATO member state with its nuclear capabilities. The effects of this development are worth closely observing as it concerns not only European security and cooperation efforts but transcends beyond those borders.

Nevertheless, France has announced its commitment to increasing its nuclear warheads. However, this could introduce another wave of concerns in regard to transparency of the total stockpile size. The forward deterrence policy, in fact, meets the legal obligations that France agreed to be part of. This includes temporary deployment of French nuclear-capable aircraft to allied states, joint exercises among partner states and

their involvement in developing early-warning capabilities.⁸ The Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) does not, however, directly or formally prohibit such temporary stationing. As of now, some European states are hosts of the U.S. nuclear weapons through NATO's nuclear sharing program.⁹ This allows state parties of the treaty to interpret and follow the law while ensuring security and sovereignty, without transferring materials or forming new nuclear-armed states or transforming decision-making authority to them.

Given that regional security and defense lay at the core of the European integration project, France's move to lead on this front – as both an EU and NATO member state holding independent nuclear capability – presents it as a natural, if not uncontested, standard-bearer for this transition. What was once treated as a matter of domestic policy and at most bilateral, has now moved into a larger domain, where nuclear deterrence becomes a wider European partnership under forward deterrence. To a great extent, the forward deterrence policy strengthens security, political, and even economic commitments in Europe, through contribution of a framework that complies with legal requirements, set out by fundamental nuclear treaties the states are bound by. While this is a significant, ambitious step forward,

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Jonathan Rosenstein and Emily Cheesman, “What Macron's Changes to French Nuclear Policy Mean for European Security,” Atlantic Council, 4 March 2026, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/dispatches/what-macrons-changes-to-french-nuclear-policy-mean-for-european-security/>.

⁹ Jonathan Masters and Will Merrow, “Nuclear Weapons in Europe: Mapping U.S. And Russian Deployments,” Council on Foreign Relations, 30 March 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/articles/nuclear-weapons-europe-mapping-us-and-russian-deployments>.

deterrence alone also has its limits, thus, the framework may be intended for a long-term consolidation of security, but in reality, offer a temporary solution with heightened security dilemmas. In this context, if the European defense partnership is strengthened, it may be at the expense of an offensive interpretation by its adversaries.

Strategic Rationale Behind Forward Deterrence

The implementation of this policy provides a framework to examine its implications on three distinct levels: clarifying national interests, reviewing European partnership concepts, and evaluating broader global nuclear dynamics.

National Considerations

Forward deterrence marks significant policy changes, which shapes the security environment, rather than merely responds to rising threats. What deterrence was once considered as the means of preventing aggression with the possession of nuclear weapons, has shifted this lens through potential threats of use of weapons and escalated conflicts. It is worth noting that France is able to advance airborne and oceanic capabilities without testing, complying with international law.¹⁰ This way, France has the advantage of developing nuclear technology and ensuring strategic defence, while maintaining and adhering to nuclear governance. For France,

increasing its stockpile and carrying out other pillars of the policy are essential for national and European sovereignty. However, such high reliance on deterrence policies could further marginalize diplomatic channels and avenues available for arms control agreements. Crucially, this policy is not a unilateral French initiative. Instead, its integration into a broader European framework bolsters France's influence and credibility on the international stage. France, as noted before, revisits the Gaullist legacy, in which "the survival of a nation cannot be delegated."¹¹ Thus, the qualitative modernization of its nuclear forces bolsters the credibility and reliability of France's second-strike capability in a high-threat environment. While the policy essentially serves as a tool to guarantee national security, the core tenets of French nuclear strategy remain fundamentally unchanged.

European Context

Participation in the French nuclear deterrence enables partner states to actively contribute to European security. In a period of strategic instability, such political signalling has its value, in which states demonstrate willingness to share responsibility for deterrence. This would initially disregard any critique regarding divided European politics. However, it has been suggested that the temporary deployment in case of a crisis could act as a "trigger" for the adversary, although the allied states would have to invest and advance their conventional capabilities

¹⁰ Ministère des Armées et des Anciens combattants, "Forward Deterrence: For a Nuclear 21st Century," 17

June 2026, <http://www.defense.gouv.fr/en/forward-deterrence-nuclear-21st-century>.

¹¹ Ministère des Armées, "Forward Deterrence."

regardless.¹² Considering that all partner states are NATO members, this could strengthen the link between EU and NATO with shared goals on security. However, NATO's nuclear-sharing agreement is based on the U.S. planning, as several European states host its nuclear arsenal, the participating states in the European framework would be required to comply with both of the nuclear initiatives.¹³ If coordinated carefully, both on the NATO and French terms, the dual involvement in deterrence practices could consolidate and strengthen the overall security policy in Europe. Alternatively, if poorly managed, it risks legitimacy and durability, especially in a volatile environment.

This angle of partnership institutionalizes strategic, bilateral, and multilateral cooperation. Although some European states hold reservations, allied efforts in consultations and exercises provide a valuable trade-off, one that could potentially grow as more European states express their support for the project.¹⁴ Ultimately, forward deterrence and the French leadership offers partner states a greater security responsibility to be maintained in Europe. However, the way in which the policy is being carried out, it may pose questions on its sustainability and credibility in a period of increased armed conflicts.

Global Context

It is tricky to assess to what extent the French nuclear doctrine is likely to trigger

a major shift in the doctrines of other nuclear-armed states, although it does contribute to a trend of modernization and potential competition. Rather, the French initiative can be interpreted as a response to the above. As the states commit (or at least voice their commitments) to developing and increasing their arsenal, these practices yet again complicate overall public opinion on states' foreign policy.

The absence of consensus at the three consecutive NPT Review Conferences has been a recurring signal that the existing arms-control framework is strained. Notably, these states (nuclear or non-nuclear) may justify their national policy change on security and defense, linking it to these developments. In this context, the revised French policy reinforces competition among states on modernization and increased deterrence efforts. The policy could also suggest that the trust in the existing larger nuclear cooperation is insufficient and the European region requires its own security and defense tool. This is an effort to be regarded as a credible actor against the state(s) this deterrence occurs. By implementing an upgraded French nuclear agenda, where both France and Europe as a whole, it is not the question of use of nuclear weapons, but the matter of strengthening second-strike capability and the deter adversary. This proves to be increasingly relevant as the European security measures and their effectiveness are challenged by regional

¹² Maitre and Carrasco, "Forward Deterrence From a European Perspective."

¹³ Clapp, "Nuclear Deterrence in Europe and the French 'Forward Deterrence' Initiative."

¹⁴ Ibid.

conflicts and hybrid threats. Thus, although not inherently direct, forward deterrence influences maintaining security and acts as a byproduct of the same issue.

Legal Limits and Strategic Durability

Legality

Although certain legal risks exist, they are yet manageable and not triggered. Following the framework of forward deterrence, the temporary deployment of the French deployment platforms, capable of carrying nuclear weapons, does not violate the NPT. Article 51 of the United Nations Charter guarantees the right of the state to individual or collective self-defense. Forward deterrence logic, thus, could stretch interpretation of its “vital interests,” possessing a wider European dimension. Moreover, the nuclear policy does not signal revival of tests or any other activity that would be strictly prohibited by the international legal frameworks France, and its European allied states adhere to. Alternatively, from the deployment/hosting standpoint, NATO's nuclear sharing stands as a politically binding, voluntary commitment. Therefore, although the greater risks may lie within political rather than in strictly legal framing, the two should be closely assessed.

Transparency requirements in this context for the nuclear-weapons states

are not explicitly mentioned within the NPT framework.¹⁵ Rather, transparency on states' nuclear arsenal requires strict verification efforts, monitoring, and clarity, which are managed through voluntary reporting mechanisms, tracking systems. Notably, a number of France's European allies on forward deterrence, such as Germany, Poland, and the Netherlands, have underlined the importance of information transparency, calling upon nuclear weapons states.¹⁶ However, Macron's speech suggests the opposite, as this divergence is not merely rhetorical. The decision exposes a structural strain within the nuclear policy cooperation whose domestic accountability depends on their visibility and a lead state (France) whose deterrence logic depends on withholding it. This could diminish the role of verification and safeguard mechanisms which are foundational to the NPT regime. As of now, France has an estimate of 290 operational nuclear warheads. In a way, lacking transparency on the numbers could benefit the state against its adversaries, especially considering the France-UK commitments. Opacity in numbers could therefore be interpreted as a deliberate, strategic trade-off. Previous threats and nuclear signaling by Russia and concerns over the U.S.-led extended nuclear deterrence leaves Europe, and namely France in a position, in which some may suggest that a European nuclear weapon is needed.¹⁷

¹⁵ Tim Caughley, *Transparency in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Regime* (United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, 2012), 1–2, <https://undir.org/files/publication/pdfs/transparency-in-the-nuclear-non-proliferation-regime-385.pdf>.

¹⁶ Meier, 'Forward Deterrence: What's (Not) in It for France's Partners.'

¹⁷ Janina Dill et al., *Report of the European Nuclear Study Group Mind the Deterrence Gap: Assessing Europe's Nuclear Options* Institute of Political Science

Credibility

As of now, long-term credibility forward deterrence rests less on the number of nuclear-capable aircraft and submarines, rather on whether the cooperation will hold under pressures of national Presidential change and geopolitics. On one hand, the more actors get involved in the European nuclear deterrence policy, the more the credibility may be diluted, where durability of the doctrine could be a concern in the long-term assessment of policy development. On a positive note, the French doctrine is ambitious enough to deter growing powers considering the alliance build and NATO nuclear umbrella coexisting within the nuclear agenda. Thus, forward deterrence currently rests on political will and credibility, in which the French arsenal is modernizing, warhead numbers are projected to increase in a cooperative environment. However, there is no formal or informal guarantee that a new French presidency will not affect execution of forward deterrence, which now has become a European policy by nature. Although a future thought, it is still crucial to ensure preparedness with the upcoming elections as the future leadership from diverging political background and policy aims may alter the deterrence project for France, as a nuclear-weapons state and European mobilization efforts. Changes within the French presidency will be a matter for national as well as European interests, in which the ten partners (assuming Latvia may formally join the partnership) would have to weigh in their future

commitments to the policy, considering that France has the final decision-making authority. With the credibility and durability nexus, comes the problem of asymmetry. In this context, the nuclear policy may fuel future fallback on the initiative, in case the partner European states see no benefit, other than temporarily deployed aircraft or submarines. It could be argued that either the policy structure is deliberately unequal or the states have no further capacity to create a separate nuclear coalition, without diminishing the existing NATO nuclear-sharing agreement with another nuclear-weapon state. Certainly, the doctrine keeps French sovereignty in check; yet if partners eventually separate themselves from the policy cooperation, this would affect the future of the policy. As the European partnership grows, influencing its integration and strengthening the security and defense sector through deterrence politics, it will be crucial to assess to what extent partners will have the ability to renegotiate terms. However, as the policy is being implemented by the states, it should not become a guise of arms race, in competition with the U.S. and at the cost of regional security.

Concluding Remarks

A coherent policy on the European security and defence strategy is essential. As the contemporary international relations endures in a volatile environment, it is as expected that states will advance their policies to deter any rising threats nationally or

(European Nuclear Security Group, 2024), 36–37,
https://securityconference.org/assets/02_Dokumente/

[01 Publikationen/2026/ENSG/Mind_the_Deterrence_Gap%E2%80%93Report_of_the_ENSG.pdf](https://publikationen/2026/ENSG/Mind_the_Deterrence_Gap%E2%80%93Report_of_the_ENSG.pdf).

regionally. Core principles of the earlier deterrence methods persist, while forward deterrence is carefully adjusted to what France and Europe as a whole needs for security. There is no intention to replace existing frameworks. The implementation of the French policy merely offers a political commitment to its partners, instead of offering a binding, formal nuclear guarantee. It is also difficult to assess to what extent the policy will change the existing dynamics. However, the forward deterrence notion does add to the competitiveness of modernization, in a period of weak arms control mechanisms and political uncertainty.

A notable caveat is the durability in the long term, following government or

alliance changes. Credibility, thus, depends on its resilience. The doctrine is legally manageable, within its limits that France and its partner states adhere to. A greater risk, however, lies in the transparency of the policy implementation, development and numbers in regard to how the French and NATO commitments will fit together.

In order to maintain the goals, partners may need to be able to influence the terms of the policy, as it is within their interest to strengthen security and defense measures. This would include continued partnership, clear consultations, and negotiation efforts. Overall, the policy provides a tool for ensuring security and promoting dialogue on the European scale.



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