Macron's European Nuclear Umbrella

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Following the start of Donald Trump's presidency in January and the third anniversary of the outbreak of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February, the talks about security, peace negotiations in Ukraine and the influence of the new administration in the White House on both of those matters were in the limelight of political discussions. Especially after Donald Trump's criticism over burden-sharing costs in NATO, Europe started to consider existential questions about Washington's commitment, summarised in Art.5 of NATO, to help Europe in a military conflict and the transatlantic relationship in general (Reuters, 2025).

One of the reactions came from Paris in March. French President Emmanuel Macron declared the launch of a strategic nuclear dialogue that would entail extending the French nuclear arsenal to European partners, working as a deterrent against Russia (Reuters, 2025). He stressed, at the same time, that the nuclear deterrent would remain under the command of the French government and would not be placed under EU or NATO supervision (Irish, 2025).

However, the matter is not that simple, both theoretically and practically. First, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, i.e international treaty aiming to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons, is binding and second, not all EU member states (MS) seem equally enthusiastic about Macron's proposal.

Thus, this article will be divided into two big sections focused on normative and practical questions regarding Macron's nuclear plan. The first part will focus on the current perspective on theoretical discussions about the Nuclear Taboo and the degree of uncertainty surrounding nuclear weapons in general. Subsequently, Macron's proposal will be analysed through the principles of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. For the practical part, the analysis of Macron's speech will follow, along with an examination of the reactions of European Countries. Lastly, possible implications of the European Nuclear Umbrella and the realisability of Macron's idea will be discussed.

Theory – Has the Nuclear Taboo come to an end?

Even though nowadays the term 'Nuclear Taboo' is increasingly contested (Bell, 2023), its two founding arguments, according to Bell (2023), prevail. First, nuclear weapons "have not been used in anger since 1945" (Bell, 2023, p. 169). Second, normative considerations have influenced the non-use of nuclear weapons (p. 169). These reflections are without a doubt present in society, and as he argues, remain an important theoretical benchmark for the study of the nuclear age.

Many scholars point out the inevitability of a degree of uncertainty regarding the crucial questions of the nuclear age (Bell, 2023, p. 167). Since people nowadays have thankfully rather limited or close to no experience with nuclear weapons and sometimes inaccessible historical records, this uncertainty increases (Bell, 2023, p. 171). According to scholars, one cannot escape uncertainty about the nuclear age and thus should embrace and communicate it.

According to Dill et al. (2022), who studied the attitude towards nuclear weapons in the US, Israel, UK and France, an important factor is the extent of internalisation of the nuclear taboo (p. 2). When it comes to norms and the nuclear taboo, the authors concluded that the consequentialist logic (a logic that identifies certain outcomes as morally bad but asks for balancing out those negative consequences with the positive implications) (Dill et al., 2022, p. 3) prevails, especially when it comes to public opinion. Such a consequentialist approach to nuclear weapons shows that a nuclear deterrent is seen by many as a "necessary evil" to ensure the security of the state.

Despite the generally consequentialist approach to nuclear weapons, one can observe considerable differences between different countries when it comes to the acceptance of nuclear weapons. The special perception of nuclear weapons in France is reflected by the open and confident approach of the French government when it comes to nuclear deterrence.

Macron's Proposal vs. Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty

Macron's proposal for an extended French nuclear deterrent also sparked the debate about its compatibility with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, to which France has been complying since 1968 and which it ratified in 1992. The idea of an extension of the French nuclear arsenal, according to critics, might result in undermining the treaty.

In February 2025, the newly elected chancellor of Germany, Friedrich Merz, highlighted the need to consider both the French nuclear arsenal as well as the British nuclear deterrence force. If one were to consider Merz's proposal about the alliance of nuclear forces of both the UK and France, this would mean the establishment of an agreement and joint decision-making structures (Messmer & Cournoyer, 2025). At the same time, the UK's nuclear arsenal is very dependent on US technology; the aeroshells and the warheads, as well as the Trident missiles, are imported

from the US (Messmer & Cournoyer, 2025). Additionally, the UK also provides its nuclear weapons to other NATO members within the NATO Nuclear Planning Group (NPG). Messmer (2025) notes that France always reserved its nuclear programme for its own protection. In her opinion, if France were to join the NPG, this would allow for a better alignment of policies, whereas placing nuclear missiles in neighbouring countries, as Macron has suggested, "would be highly risky and impractical" (Messmer & Cournoyer, 2025). Additionally, this would weaken control and undermine global non-proliferation efforts (Messmer & Cournoyer, 2025). Thus, given all those suggestions, there is a risk that Macron's proposal, if realised, might undermine the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, since France would share nuclear protection with other European states, leading to a possible undermining of non-proliferation efforts set by the treaty.

Analysis of Macron's speech on the 'European Nuclear Umbrella'

President Macron is generally rather outspoken about France's nuclear potential and its possible use for Europe. One example of this outspoken approach is his televised address to the French People on the 5th of March 2025, which provoked a heated debate about the extension of the French nuclear deterrent to European allies, which is the main subject of this article.

The speech revolves around the new administration in the White House, the war in Ukraine and the EU Defence Strategy. Referring to the US administration, the president of France explicitly mentions "the change of positioning on the war (in Ukraine), lessening its support for Ukraine and raising doubts about what is to come" (Élysée, 2025). In line with the position of other European allies, France highlights that the peace deal between Russia and Ukraine cannot be signed at any price. It must not be equal to Ukraine's capitulation (Élysée, 2025). Macron restated France's commitment to NATO and the partnership with the US, yet he emphasised the importance of increasing Europe's independence in security and defence (Élysée, 2025). Macron highlighted that "Europe's future cannot be decided in Washington or Moscow" (Élysée, 2025).

Given France's possession of nuclear deterrence capabilities, Macron not only restated its importance for France since its installation in 1964, but also for Europe (Élysée, 2025). For the scope of this article, the key message of his speech is the previously stated launch of debate on using France's nuclear deterrent tools to protect its allies in Europe. The idea attracted considerable attention, given the heavy reliance on US-nuclear deterrence since World War II, and showcased Macron's determination to build a stronger security front within the EU. In the following part of this article, I will compare the varying positions of different EU member states

to analyse the political context in which the French nuclear proposal would have to be realised.

European Reactions to Macron's proposals

Macron's proposal was met with differing reactions across the continent. This section will present a brief account of reactions from European capitals.

Since Macron called Russia a danger to both France and Europe (Élysée, 2025), the reaction from the Russian side was rather predictable (Antonov & Papachristou, 2025). Indeed, a strongly negative reaction came from Moscow, where the French proposal was summed up as "very, very confrontational" (Moscow Times, 2025). The spokesperson of the Kremlin told the news that the nuclear extension makes it seem like "France indeed wants the war in Ukraine to continue" (Moscow Times, 2025). Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova deemed Macron's proposals as "detached from reality" (Moscow Times, 2025). This is not surprising given the current geopolitical confrontation.

Polish prime minister Donald Tusk, in his early March speech to the lower house of parliament, mentioned the importance of looking into the future of weapons technology and the serious talks with France about the nuclear umbrella" (Lewis, 2025). Poland, as part of the eastern flank of NATO and the EU, is mostly concerned about the proximity of the conflict in Ukraine just across the border and strengthening Polish defence capabilities. Despite Poland's historical full dependence on US defence capabilities, in the last months, Warsaw has focused on advocating for the need for Europe's defence capabilities.

Initially, Germany was hesitant about nuclear talks. However, in late February, the German chancellor, Friedrich Merz, also acknowledged the fears about the transformation of "the NATO form that we knew" (Irish, 2025; Werkhäuser, 2025). Werkhäuser (2025) in his article highlights a small change in public opinion regarding nuclear weapons in Germany. Yet as he points out, Germany's possible role in developing nuclear weapons is still limited to external assistance, due to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty of which Germany is a member. However, Merz only mentioned the will to discuss nuclear deterrence within the scope of nuclear deterrence with the French and British arsenals (Werkhäuser, 2025). Chevreuil and Horschig (2025) note that Merz made that comment during a live broadcast interview, which naturally does not include carefully designed policy statements. More importantly, however, they also emphasise that, as a new chancellor, he wanted to highlight his approach as being more active than the cautious stance on defence policy advocated by the former chancellor, Olaf Scholz. Thus, with the coming of Merz, German policymaking style might see a significant change.

French nuclear arsenal size vs. Russian nuclear arsenal size

"France maintains the fourth largest nuclear weapons arsenal, and as of July 2023, it has 290 nuclear warheads, most of which are designed for delivery by submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) with the remainder affixed to air-launched cruise missiles (ALCMs) carried by strategic bombers", reports the Arms Control Association (2024), Kristensen et al. (2023). This stockpile is only half of the nuclear weapons that France possessed during the Cold War, yet as mentioned, all French presidents, along with Macron, restated the importance of French nuclear potential (Arms Control Association, 2024b). From the data of the French Ministry of Defence (MoD), the nuclear deterrence budget in 2023 was 5.6 billion EUR. Between 2019-2023, the government announced it would invest 25 billion euros in the nuclear forces. Kristensen and co-authors (2023) analyse the French nuclear potential in numbers, which is summarised in the table below.

Figure 1: Kristensen et al. (2023)

According to Kristensen and co-authors (2025), Russia's nuclear potential looks much more impressive. As opposed to 290 French nuclear warheads, Russia is said to have approximately a stock of 4309 nuclear warheads. Russia's nuclear modernisation programme continuously upgrades the arsenal, and even during the war in Ukraine, it deployed air-launched missiles, ballistic missiles and ground-launched missiles (Kristensen et al., 2025, p. 208). Even though the numbers look overwhelming (see table below), scholars highlight that since Russia's military performance during the war in Ukraine has been overestimated, this could also affect the performance of Russian nuclear forces. Thus, considering the recent statements of Friedrich Merz, the UK's nuclear arsenal should also be taken into account when talking about European nuclear deterrence. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (2024) shows the following overview to compare the nuclear arsenals of the US, France, the UK and Russia.

The numbers clearly show that Russia and the US possess almost 90% of all nuclear potential. However, despite heightened geopolitical tensions, overall nuclear stockpiles have declined since the start of the war in Ukraine.

France and the UK, being placed in 3rd and 4th place, would mean a need to combine their potential. In the eyes of Messmer and Cournoyer (2025), this would mean the establishment of a formal agreement between French and British Nuclear Forces.

Yet they note that the matter is more complicated than it seems if the plan were to also include British support in deploying a nuclear arsenal. In her opinion, an independent plan would destroy the established 'nuclear architecture' that would lead to chaos and the erosion of the non-proliferation attempts of the past 57 years of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Also, when comparing the nuclear potentials, the difference is quite

considerable, even when one would add the British potential, US support would be indispensable to offer credible deterrence against Russia.

Conclusion

As this article has shown, even as the rhetoric surrounding nuclear weapons intensified, the commonly known 'nuclear taboo' still prevails and cannot be fully disregarded. The research by Dill et al. (2022) emphasised France's rather open attitude to nuclear weapons when compared with the fully anti-nuclear stance of other Western democracies.

Given the war in Ukraine, Russian adamance in attacks on Ukraine and the volatile policymaking happening in the White House under the Trump administration and its relation to the Ukrainian president, Macron's idea seems to be a move of adaptation to the current security situation. The nuclear weapons installed in the Baltic or Poland would serve as a deterrent to Russia, thus treating Europe as a united security actor, also without the US's guarantees. However, an independent plan would destroy the established 'nuclear architecture', which would lead to chaos and the erosion of the non-proliferation attempts of the past 57 years of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Also, as pointed out, the difference between the French and British arsenals and the Russian nuclear forces is quite considerable, even when one would combine the French and British arsenals, US support would be indispensable to deter Russia.

I would like the tables (the visualisations) to be placed in the publication as they are in this text

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