

**DETERRENCE CAPACITY - ESSENTIAL IN EUROPE**

## Sleepwalkers Are Once Again at the Helm of Europe!

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It should be noted that in 2026, the maintenance of peace through international law is even more illusory than in 1914. In 2002, the United States of America terminated the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty<sup>1</sup>, which had maintained the stability of nuclear deterrence since 1972. They, together with Russia, abrogated the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty in 2019. The Nuclear Test Ban Treaty was denounced by Russia in 2023. The New START treaty<sup>2</sup>, limiting nuclear arsenals, ended on 5 February 2026. China, India, Pakistan, North Korea and Israel, which have nuclear weapons, are not bound by any treaty.

### Only the Ability to Deter Can Maintain peace

Having a deterrent capability is therefore essential to maintain peace. Deterrence means knowing how to persuade potential aggressors that we will be ready to use weapons of mass



Source: <https://defense.info/global-dynamics/2025/02/what-future-for-the-eu-in-the-post-ukraine-international-order/>

<sup>1</sup>An Anti-Ballistic Missile is a missile that can be launched to counter a nuclear or non-nuclear ICBM. ICBMs can be intercepted in three phases of their trajectory: the launch phase, the intermediate phase, or the terminal phase. An Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) is a ballistic missile with a range greater than 5,500 kilometers, designed primarily for the delivery of nuclear weapons (the delivery of one or more thermonuclear warheads). Conventional, chemical, and biological weapons can also be launched with varying effectiveness, but have never been deployed on ICBMs.

<sup>2</sup>New START was a nuclear arms reduction treaty between the United States and Russia, officially known as the Measures for Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms. It was signed on April 8, 2010 in Prague, and, after ratification, entered into force on February 5, 2011. New START replaced the Moscow Treaty (SORT), which was due to expire in December 2012. It followed START I, which expired in December 2009; the proposed START II, which never entered into force; and START III, for which negotiations were never concluded. The treaty called for a halving of the number of strategic nuclear missile launchers. It also called for a new inspection and verification regime to replace the SORT mechanism. It did not limit the number of operationally inactive nuclear warheads that could be stored, which was in the thousands. On February 21, 2023, Russia suspended its participation in New START. However, it did not withdraw from the treaty and clarified that it would continue to adhere to the numerical limits set out in the treaty. On February 5, 2026, the treaty officially expired.

destruction in the event of an attack on our vital interests. This is to affirm that we will make use of the right of self-defence.

France is the only European country to have an autonomous deterrence, because on the one hand, the constitution of the Fifth Republic of 4 October 1958 established a chain of command that went from the head of State, commander-in-chief of the armed forces, to the lowest military echelons; on the other hand, thanks to the efforts of Pierre Mendès-France, then Charles de Gaulle and his successors. France has a strike force, effective since 1964 for the air component, and since 1972 for the submarine component<sup>3</sup>.

Unlike NATO, which follows the nuclear doctrine of graduated response, adopted in 1962 by the United States of America, so that thousands of American nuclear weapons can be used according to the level of threat present, France deters from the weak to the strong, on the basis of its 290 nuclear warheads<sup>4</sup>. Its 4 nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines each carry 16 ballistic missiles with a range of about 10,000 kilometres, each carrying 6 warheads of 100 kt<sup>5</sup>. Each head is equivalent to 7 times Hiroshima. Its two Rafale squadrons armed with 54 cruise missiles, which carry a warhead of 250 to 300 kt (20 times Hiroshima) up to about 500 kilometres, would serve to issue a final warning and open a strategic dialogue. Being, if necessary, ready to respond without delay to an attack on its vital interests, France can deter.

If my calculation is correct, France's strike capacity is equivalent to 3,768 times Hiroshima. It is understandable why Putin told Chirac that France and its 70 million inhabitants are sanctuaried, but that French deterrence does not extend to Europe. I will come back to this.

The strategic thinking of successive presidents of the French Republic has evolved since de Gaulle. In his 2020 speech at the École Militaire, Macron spoke in general terms about the European dimension of France's vital interests. On March 2, 2026, on Île Longue<sup>6</sup>, near Brest, which is the base for nuclear ballistic missile submarines, Macron began by noting that the Russian threat has increased: Iskander ballistic missiles have been deployed in Königsberg-Kaliningrad for several years; hypersonic Orechnik have been deployed in Belarus since the end of 2025. He added that Russia is developing nuclear-powered missiles that are supposed to fly without a time limit, and nuclear torpedoes, that it intends to send nuclear weapons into space. He also said that Xi's China wants to have as many weapons as the United States of America, that India, Pakistan, North Korea are increasing their strategic forces and that armed conflicts, below the nuclear threshold, have taken place between India and China, and then between India and Pakistan.

For Macron, Trump's return to power on 20 January 2025 has made NATO's protection less certain for Europe, and prompted France and the United Kingdom to sign, on July 10, 2025, the Northwood Declaration on the coordination of their nuclear forces<sup>7</sup>. On 2 March 2026, Macron also recalled the efforts made since 2017 to replace its submarines<sup>8</sup>, renew its missiles and nuclear warheads, and increase the number of them. He recalled the weakness of conventional forces in Europe, particularly for satellites and radars that detect and track threatening missiles, for defence against aircraft, missiles and drones, as well as for striking in the great depths, which avoids crossing the nuclear threshold too quickly.

The problem is that the cost of French deterrence amounts to more than 7 billion € per year, i.e. a third of the expenditure on equipping its armed forces. The disastrous state of French public finances makes it impossible to drastically increase the defence budget: according to Mathieu Pigasse, in two five-year terms of Mr. Macron, the public debt will have increased by 1,000 billion € and a million additional French people will have fallen below the poverty line.

### **The Resurgence of Sleepwalking?**

Mr. Macron is aware that he does not have the means to carry out his defence policy and that his conventional forces will remain anaemic. That is why, in exchange for an increased effort by partners in these areas, he offered, on 2 March, to extend to Europe the protection that its strike force gives to France, in particular by dispersing strategic air forces deep into the European continent, by allowing visits to strategic sites and by organising joint exercises. According to him, this would allow Europeans to regain

<sup>3</sup>It no longer has a terrestrial component.

<sup>4</sup>Mr. Macron said on 2 March 2026, that he wants to increase this number.

<sup>5</sup>100 kt (Knots) = 185.2 Kilometers/hour.

<sup>6</sup>See Louis Gautier, "La dissuasion avancée: Emmanuel Macron a-t-il européanisé la doctrine nucléaire française ?" (Advanced deterrence: Has Emmanuel Macron Europeanized the French nuclear doctrine?) and Macron's full speech at Île Longue in Le Grand Continent, March 2, 2026, Jean Marsia Archives.

<sup>7</sup>Britain decided in 2021 to increase its nuclear arsenal by 40% to have 260 warheads deployed.

<sup>8</sup>The Invincible, under construction in Cherbourg, will sail in 2036.

control of their own destiny, while contributing to NATO's deterrence, according to him, in accordance with the Ottawa Declaration of the Atlantic Council of 1974 and the communiqué of the Atlantic Council meeting in Warsaw in 2016. I don't have the same reading of it.

On the one hand, this extension is contradictory to the fact that there will be no sharing on the part of France of the definition of vital interests, the ultimate decision, nor its planning, nor its implementation. On the other hand, Macron pretends not to know that Putin told Chirac that he is convinced that a French president will not risk the destruction of Lyon to protect Tallinn, that of Marseille to preserve Riga, and that of Bordeaux to guarantee Vilnius. Putin is still in power, and, as far as I know, he hasn't changed his mind.

Mr. Macron denies this reality, he seems to prefer to be sleepwalking, according to Professor Clark's expression. His book published a dozen years ago<sup>9</sup>, showed how, in five weeks, after the Sarajevo assassination on June 28, 1914, the world plunged into a war that killed millions, put an end to three empires, and began the decline of Europe, because its rulers of the time walked towards danger like sleepwalkers.

Other sleepwalkers, including Chamberlain and Daladier, made the Second World War inevitable, from the negotiation of the Treaty of Versailles in 1919 to Pearl Harbor in 1941, via Munich in 1938. Still others, notably Stalin, Roosevelt, Truman and Churchill, at Yalta and Potsdam in 1945, created the conditions for the outbreak of the Cold War in 1946, which was cold only in Europe: it claimed countless victims in Asia, Africa and Latin America. When the implosion of the USSR put an end to it in 1991, other sleepwalkers, Americans, Russians, Chinese and Europeans, instead of setting up a world governance more effective than that of the United Nations to ensure peacekeeping, began the return to war, initially hybrid, that Putin, invited to the Munich Security Conference, initiated on February 9, 2007. Since then, the world has gone from bad to worse.

### **Sleepwalking seems contagious**

On 2 March 2026, Macron and Merz announced the establishment of a high-level steering group, although the French president remains the only one to decide. This reduces France's deterrent capacity, as potential aggressors begin to doubt that the French president will be ready without delay to use weapons of mass destruction in the event of an attack on his country's vital interests. He risks wasting time consulting with the Chancellor, as well as with the heads of government of Poland, the Netherlands, Belgium, Greece, Sweden, Norway and Denmark, who said they were joining the dialogue with France, after it allowed its partners to participate in exercises, and announced that planes of the strategic forces could be stationed at the allies. The latter no doubt hope, like the Danish prime minister, "to have better access to information and strategic decisions", which risks further weakening French deterrence. The head of the Belgian government therefore wrongly believes that the approach "is part of the strengthening of European security and defence".

Not only are sleepwalkers in the European Council not doing enough to implement the recommendations of the 2024 Letta, Draghi and Niinistö reports, in order to halt Europe's economic and scientific decline, and its growing dependence, but they are proving dangerous for peacekeeping. It is high time for European leaders to make a U-turn and convert to Gaullism<sup>10</sup>. De Gaulle did the right thing, the other European leaders have so far refrained from doing so. However, what is valid for France is also valid for Europe. In his speech of 27 April 1965, General de Gaulle stressed that: "From the point of view of security, our independence requires, in the atomic age in which we live, that we have the means to deter a possible aggressor ourselves, without prejudice to our alliances, but without our allies holding our destiny in their hands."

### **What Conclusion Can Be Drawn from This?**

It is urgent that European citizens concerned about peacekeeping wake their sleepwalking leaders from their sleepwalks, otherwise we will be increasingly in danger, dependent and poor.

European deterrence requires a common vision of the threats posed by potential adversaries, including Russia, China, Turkey and now the United States of America, as well as a common doctrine on

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<sup>9</sup>Christopher M. Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914*, London, Penguin Books, 2013, translated by Marie-Anne de Béru, *Les Somnambules. Summer 1914: How Europe Walked Towards War*, Paris, Flammarion, 2015.

<sup>10</sup>The principles and policies of Charles de Gaulle, characterized by their conservatism, nationalism, and advocacy of centralized government.

how to confront these threats. Vision and doctrine can only be defined by a Europe that is politically united, sovereign, autonomous and independent. The repeated vetoes by Hungary, in particular, because it is no longer the only dissident, show that the European Council is not taking this path at all.

However, without a European State, without a European president elected by direct universal suffrage in two rounds, there will be in Europe no collective security, no common defence, no deterrence. Only such a president could persuade potential aggressors that we will be prepared to use weapons of mass destruction if our vital interests are harmed. The question of how to acquire these will only arise in concrete terms when a European politico-military chain of command has been set up, from the head of State, commander-in-chief of the armed forces, to the lowest military echelons, on the basis of a federal constitution. What France did in the 1960s, Europe could do again.

A federal Europe could put an end to our economic and scientific downgrading and reduce our vulnerabilities, by making the European common good prevail over the particular interests of nation States, so that Europe can live in peace in an increasingly insecure world. The S€D does not despair of obtaining the agreement of a first European government to initiate the federative process and it is committed to supporting its efforts.