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## **French Nuclear Doctrine: Between National Sovereignty and European Security**

**Nicolás Bardio**

**ORCID:** <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-3014-5424>

Nicolás Bardio is a Professor of International Relations at Complutense University of Madrid. Previously, he served as a parliamentary assistant in the Belgian Parliament, working in both the House of Representatives and the Senate. He provided expertise on issues related to the interior, justice, foreign affairs, and military procurement committees. His current research focuses on nuclear deterrence in Europe, with particular emphasis on French nuclear policy and the integration of deterrence strategies within the context of European security.

# **French Nuclear Doctrine: Between National Sovereignty and European Security**

## **Abstract:**

Through a detailed examination of the nuclear doctrine speeches of Presidents François Mitterrand, Jacques Chirac, Nicolas Sarkozy, François Hollande, and Emmanuel Macron, this article analyses the European dimension of the French nuclear doctrine after the end of the Cold War. The text assesses how France has sought to integrate European deterrence into its declared nuclear strategy through a series of possibilities such as consultation and co-decision.. It is argued that the European aspect of France's nuclear strategy has been influenced not only by the geopolitical context of each period but also by the leadership priorities of each president. Paradoxically, a more pro-European rhetoric is observed in the 20th century than in the 21st, despite concrete proposals emerging in the latter. The article concludes that, despite doctrinal differences, practical dynamics have kept France on the sidelines of nuclear consultation structures, raising questions about its future role in European security.

**Keywords:** French nuclear doctrine, French nuclear deterrence, European security, European defence integration, European nuclear deterrence.

## Introduction

Nuclear weapons have been, since their development under the presidency of Charles de Gaulle, one of the fundamental pillars of France's defence and national sovereignty, as well as its independent policy. Its nuclear forces do not participate in NATO's Nuclear Planning Group and are not subordinated to or coordinated with any other country. (Secrétariat Général de la Défense et de la sécurité nationale, 2022).

For de Gaulle, “sovereignty” was not merely a legal notion, but a political expression of national independence, which he viewed as essential for securing an autonomous role on the international stage. This meant that France must “do as it decided,” without subjugating itself to alliances or external influence, embodying an uncompromising stance on national sovereignty (Vaïsse, 2020).

Despite this, France's nuclear doctrine has always had a European dimension that has been regularly present in French doctrinal speeches. Certain analysts believe that at the end of the Cold War, there was a “major doctrinal evolution in France, directly linked to the progress of European integration and with a French desire to establish a genuine European strategic debate on the issue.” (Mongin, 2022a, p. 144).

In any case, following the war in Ukraine, there has been a growing nuclear rhetoric in Europe (European Union External Action, 2022, p. 17) that some analysts believe could open a cycle of nuclear crises with a domino effect (Mongin, 2022b, p. 136), while others highlighted the importance of the United States as the main guarantor of European security (Kuokštytė, 2024, p. 42). This crisis, although it has not altered the posture of French nuclear deterrence, has led Paris to reveal some aspects of its vital interests (Sinovets & Vicente, 2024), in which ambiguity, inherent to nuclear doctrines (Guitard, 2023, p. 23), has

always played a specific role and has been relatively broad; this does not contradict a nuclear policy considered quite transparent (Kristensen, Korda & Johns, 2023).

At the same time, Brexit first and the outbreak of the Ukraine War later have led to greater European integration in defence matters, triggering the establishment of Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) (Hoeffler, Hofmann, & Mérand, 2024). In fact, Brexit has even been described as a “crucial enabler of the renaissance of European security and defense policy” (Puglierin, 2021, p. 25). This is particularly significant concerning the European dimension of French nuclear doctrine, as France has become, after Brexit, the only EU member state to possess nuclear weapons.

This new renaissance of European security and defence policy has largely shifted toward the concept of “Strategic Autonomy,” which has sparked a debate about what it truly entails (Tocci, 2021). The term, already present in the political language of the European Union since the European Council published its conclusions in December 2013 (Damen, 2022, p. 2), has become especially relevant in the European security debate following the invasion of Ukraine. Thus, this “strategic autonomy” is understood as a key part of defence policy but not solely limited to it (Damen, 2022). In this regard, the European Council itself emphasized the need to “strengthen European security and defence to achieve an ambitious geopolitical Union” (European Council, 2023). President Macron expressed similar sentiments during his speech on Europe on April 25, 2024, where he used the concept of “European sovereignty” (Macron, 2024, p. 5). In this speech, the French President reiterated the European aspect of the French nuclear doctrine (Macron, 2024, p. 6). This European dimension, first announced in his doctrinal speech in 2020 (Macron, 2020, p. 11) and reiterated in 2024, represents a significant step in how France understands its nuclear weapons as contributing to the defence of Europe (Fayet, Futter & Kühn, 2024).

In this context, Macron's statements on French nuclear deterrence not only reflect a possible doctrinal evolution but also have the potential to redefine European security as a whole. As Bora and Schramm (2023) point out, France has played a prominent role in shaping EU policy in recent years, successfully leading other member states and EU institutions to adopt traditional French preferences and priorities. Macron's approach to nuclear deterrence can be seen as an extension of this strategy to assert French influence in European defence and security policy.

In his speech, Macron asserts that nuclear deterrence is “an essential element of the defence of the European continent” (Macron, 2024, p. 6). This has been interpreted by the left-wing political opposition as “a very clear break with the French deterrence doctrine” (Lachaud & Saintoul, 2024) and has drawn criticism from the far right (Le Figaro, 2024), generating a genuine debate in France regarding the European dimension of French nuclear deterrence (Maitre, 2024) that has been not only political and electoral but also academic.

Thus, numerous theorists have recently analysed, in light of Macron's positions, the implications of these doctrinal statements. Some propose or study the possibility of French extended deterrence (Colizza, 2023) and argue that European countries should not reject Macron's invitation (Deen, Kruijver, Stoetman, & Zandee, 2020, p. 18)—as Poland has already done (Duda, 2024). Others indicate that this extended deterrence for Europe would involve the acquisition of tactical weapons (Pincé, 2024), while some argue that it is not feasible within the current budgetary framework to do so (Fayet, 2024). The European dimension, as we will see, is not as new as it may seem (despite the debate being reignited), and it is important to consider the analysis by Tertrais (2019) regarding the implications that the participation of European partners in French nuclear deterrence could have.

Over the past few decades, French nuclear doctrine has maintained a European dimension present in doctrinal speeches, albeit without formal integration into multilateral structures as seen with NATO and the Nuclear Planning Group (NPG). While some analysts argue that the European dimension has been progressively incorporated, especially after the Cold War (Mongin, 2022a, p. 144), the recent crisis in Ukraine has reignited the debate on nuclear security in Europe and France's role. This is further supported by the fact that the United States is reconsidering its global role and, more specifically, its Atlantic commitment, as the possibility of a significant reduction of its military presence in Europe has become a topic of strategic debate (Meijer & Brooks, 2021; Böller, 2020). In this context, President Macron's statements have reintroduced the question of how French nuclear doctrine contributes to European defence, generating both political and academic debate.

This paper will first examine the evolution of French nuclear doctrine, exploring how each president has balanced national sovereignty with the need for European security integration. It will then analyse the rhetorical and practical dimensions of France's nuclear policy through its doctrinal *presidential* speeches, emphasizing the inconsistencies and limitations of the Europeanization debate. Finally, the paper will argue that while French leaders have long acknowledged the European dimension of France's deterrence, the pursuit of greater integration into a common European defence framework remains, in practice, an unresolved issue, given the current political context that hinders its realization. By addressing these issues, this article contributes to the ongoing scholarly debates on European strategic autonomy, offering a critical analysis of the European dimension of France's nuclear deterrence, and highlighting the challenges and contradictions that shape the potential for greater integration into a common European defence framework.

### **French Nuclear Doctrine:**

Although the term "nuclear doctrine" is commonly used in the field of foreign policy, and many works utilize this concept (Cartigny, 2006; Rathjens & Ruina, 1981; Elbahtimy, 2020; Wan, 2020), there is a scarcity of concrete definitions of the term "nuclear doctrine" in both the political-military sphere and the academic space.

Thus, in the military realm, it is a concept commonly used by nuclear state actors, clearly differentiating it from strategy (US Department of Defense, 2018, p. 9) and from declaratory policy (US Department of Defense, 2018, p. 11). According to NATO, military doctrine is defined as "the fundamental principles that guide armed forces in the pursuit of an objective" (AAP-06, 2015). Therefore, while there may not be a specific and standardized definition of the term nuclear doctrine for this organization, one could infer that it is a type of military doctrine.

In the academic sphere, one of the few attempts to define the concept of nuclear doctrine comes from Shankar & Paul (2016), who argue that nuclear doctrines are a subcategory of military doctrines. They focus on the strategic realm, where they liken them to a sort of state theory on how the state produces military security for itself through nuclear weapons.

However, none of these definitions are entirely relevant. We believe that nuclear doctrine is not the same as nuclear strategy, nor is it merely another military doctrine or a subcategory of such doctrines. Instead, as Tertrais (2024, p. 31) points out, nuclear doctrine, along with plans and capabilities, is part of a state's nuclear strategy.

Thus, in line with this analysis, we define nuclear doctrine in this article as a discourse on nuclear strategy. We understand that countries that publicly disclose their nuclear strategy or elements of it do so because they believe they are maximizing their possibilities, increasing their security, and ultimately acting in a way that results in more positive outcomes than inaction—that is, remaining silent about the use of their nuclear weapons. Therefore, following Bar-Joseph's (1982) distinction between "declared strategy" and "effective strategy," we define nuclear doctrine as *“the declared nuclear strategy of a country, which may or may not fully correspond to its effective nuclear strategy.”*

Nuclear doctrine, which we understand as declared strategy, serves as the theoretical and communicative framework that a state uses to present and justify the use of its nuclear weapons. This framework not only outlines the principles and concepts that guide nuclear policy but also acts as a means to communicate the state's nuclear posture to other international actors, not necessarily with the intention of contributing to deterrence. In fact, it has recently been shown that the public expression of nuclear strategy may serve more as a communicative (propagandistic) exercise than as an effective component of deterrence, aimed at influencing the decisions of third states (Sinovets & Shultz, 2023).

In the case of France, the effective strategy and the declared strategy, or strategy and doctrine, are particularly linked. France is the only Western nuclear state that regularly dedicates a presidential discourse to nuclear deterrence and the delineation of its doctrine (Tertrais, 2015, p. 23). The French doctrine is not based on the nature of aggression but rather on the assessment made by the President of the Republic regarding attacks against French

vital interests, allowing it to adapt to the variety and evolution of threats (Jurgensen, 2018, p. 32). For this reason, it has been characterized as a strictly defensive deterrence closely tied to the maintenance of national sovereignty and independence (Présidence de la République, 2013, p. 23). However, it has evolved and adapted to new situations, such as non-state actors and so-called "rogue states" (Le Guelte, 2005, p. 24). This evolution, however, is sometimes questioned by certain analysts who see aspects of these innovations as a danger that could change the nature of French nuclear doctrine (Cartigny, 2006).

### **France and Common European Deterrence:**

The idea of common, shared, or concerted deterrence is not a new concept in the context of French nuclear doctrine, especially regarding its European dimension (Tertrais, 2019a, p. 30). Since the creation of the European Union in 1992, this concept has repeatedly emerged in strategic debates. Various analysts have attempted to address how to integrate it into European policy (Bozo, 1992; Turrión, 1996; Jurgensen, 2018; Mongin, 2022a), which is particularly relevant in light of the increasing uncertainties surrounding NATO's nuclear protection and the United Kingdom's departure from the European Union.

Since its origins, French nuclear strategy has been marked by a constant tension between the desire to maintain national independence and sovereignty and the desire to belong to the European Union (Jurgensen, 2019). In fact, the French nuclear program was not initially conceived as strictly national. In its early stages, during the years 1952-1954, it was framed from an Atlantic perspective to enhance France's status within NATO. Even then, it was considered that French deterrence had a European dimension, as reflected in the "FIG" project (France, Italy, Germany) of 1957-1958 (Tertrais, 2019b, p. 29). Moreover, during the

Fifth Republic, France did not limit its deterrence to the defence of its national territory. In fact, General de Gaulle privately expressed that the French nuclear force protected its immediate neighbours, such as Germany (Tertrais, 2019b, p. 44). The 1972 White Paper emphasized that France lived within a framework of interests that extended beyond its borders, thus contributing to European security and, consequently, to that of the Atlantic Alliance (Ministère de la Défense, 1972).

However, it was not until the end of the Cold War and the creation of the European Union that France more clearly emphasized the European dimension of its nuclear deterrence. In 1992, François Mitterrand raised the need for EU member states to jointly address nuclear issues, suggesting the possibility of a European doctrine. Mitterrand believed that this issue would quickly become one of the main topics in constructing a common European defence (Mitterrand, 1992, p. 5).

While it is true that a European nuclear doctrine is a fundamental point in building a common European defence, there does not appear to have been significant momentum to bring this topic to the public agenda. In fact, although the European dimension of French nuclear doctrine has been debated during the 2024 European Parliament elections in France, it has not resonated much beyond French borders. Previous discussions on nuclear issues in France, such as those focused on civil nuclear energy policy (Sconfienza & Durand, 2023), have had a more substantial presence in public debate. However, the shift toward discussing military nuclear doctrines, particularly the French perspective on European nuclear strategy, has yet to gain similar traction.

Under President Mitterrand, the theoretical and practical development of his idea of common European deterrence gradually evolved, to the point where Jacques Mellick, Secretary of State for Defense, later proposed the formula of "concerted deterrence," wherein France would retain its independence in nuclear decision-making while consulting with its partners regarding the measures to be taken for the implementation of nuclear strikes (Tertrais, 2019a, p. 30). This idea, once innovative, has been utilized and adapted by successive French presidents; however, as we will see later, Mitterrand never fully incorporated it into French nuclear doctrine.

### **Methodology:**

The focus on presidential doctrinal speeches responds to the particularity of the French political system, in which the President of the Republic is the sole entity empowered to make the final decision regarding the use of nuclear weapons. It is true that there is a network in which other actors participate in defining nuclear deterrence, such as the Chief of the Defence Staff (CEMA), the Chief of the Presidential Military Staff (CEMP), as well as the Nuclear Forces Division of the Defence Staff (EMA/FN) (Tertrais, 2019b). These authorities are also present in the Nuclear Weapons Council, alongside the General Delegate for Armament and the Director of Military Applications of the CEA (Vie Publique, 2020). However, despite this, the president ultimately holds exclusive decision-making power, as they are the only one authorized to transmit the nuclear codes and acts with full sovereignty and autonomy in this domain (Tertrais, 2019b, p. 25). This concentration of decision-making power in a single political figure, combined with the regularity of such speeches, justifies our choice to analyse the doctrinal speeches on nuclear deterrence made by French presidents

since the end of the Cold War in 1991—a pivotal point marked by the dissolution of the Soviet Union, which radically altered the geopolitical context. This year serves as a natural line of demarcation, as it reshapes the landscape in which French nuclear doctrine and European integration efforts are conceived and articulated.

Given that nuclear deterrence is a matter of utmost state importance, presidents usually address this topic in carefully prepared speeches, as one of the particularities of the French political system is that its heads of state regularly dedicate a specific speech to nuclear deterrence and the delineation of their doctrine (Tertrais, 2015, p. 23), where they outline not only the national defence strategy but also their vision of the relationship between France and its European allies in this area. Throughout the various presidencies and terms, these speeches provide a key window for analysing any potential evolution or stagnation in the European dimension of French nuclear doctrine.

In this article, we conduct a qualitative and comparative analysis of all the doctrinal speeches of French presidents since the end of the Cold War in 1991. We focus specifically on Mitterrand's second term, as it directly follows the end of the Cold War and reflects the strategic recalibrations necessitated by this new international landscape. By analysing Mitterrand's speeches within this context, we underscore how the transformation in the geopolitical environment influenced his approach to nuclear deterrence and European integration.

To enhance understanding, we also draw on other speeches made about nuclear deterrence that do not have that doctrinal character, such as statements to the troops, mentions of deterrence in other speeches, or interviews in the media. In this latter type of discourse, not all doctrinal elements (nature of nuclear weapons, conditions for use, vital interests, etc.) are

necessarily evoked, but some of them may be referenced or provide additional information to complete the understanding of the doctrine and its evolution.

The qualitative analysis will focus on identifying recurring patterns, changes in presidential positions, and possible differences in the articulation of the relationship between national sovereignty and European security in nuclear matters. The comparative analysis will allow for observing how this doctrine has evolved across different presidencies, highlighting both continuities and ruptures. Doctrinal speeches and declarations were accessed via the institutional declaration search engine on the official website of the French Presidency ([www.elysee.fr](http://www.elysee.fr)), filtering by the term "deterrence." This analysis is further complemented by academic studies and official documents to provide additional contextual depth.

### **François Mitterrand**

François Mitterrand's Second Term (1988-1995) takes place during a pivotal period marked by the end of Cold War dynamics and a strong push for European integration with the Maastricht Treaty and a common monetary horizon. The first doctrinal speech delivered by Mitterrand after the Cold War, in 1994, occurs shortly after the formal approval of the Maastricht Treaty, in which Mitterrand had already advocated for the aspiration of a common European doctrine (Mitterrand, 1992, p. 5)

Thus, in the doctrinal speech of 1994, the President reiterates, as has been tradition, the basic principles of French deterrence, such as defining the political and not military use of nuclear weapons, referring to France's vital interests and other constitutive elements of a French doctrinal discourse. Regarding the European dimension, we are interested in the part where he states that French nuclear weapons are not at the disposal of third countries: "The defence of our vital interests [...] means that for now, the French nuclear weapon is not

available to everyone or to others" (Mitterrand, 1994, p. 2). This is a concept he later reiterates, drawing a clear line between reality and his political aspirations:

“In other times, those who will build Europe or who will continue this construction may examine, if political evolution allows, how this armament or its use could be shared. Today, this would seem to me a misunderstanding, and I do not intend to make this misunderstanding” (Mitterrand, 1994, p. 2).

Although it suggests that nuclear weapons could be used on more occasions than just in response to an attack on French territory, since the use of nuclear weapons is to “ensure the integrity of the national territory” (Mitterrand, 1994, p. 2); Mitterrand also considers that “the interest of the homeland, in what is principal, cannot always be linked to the strict, literal notion of the integrity of the national territory. There may be other vital interests that equally engage the future and even the existence of the homeland” (Mitterrand, 1994, p. 2).

One of the most characteristic elements of this speech is a defence of the presidential and solitary decision regarding the use of nuclear weapons, where he dismisses co-decision with other countries: “This indispensable autonomy of decision for the head of state excludes the possibility that this decision be entrusted to international bodies or even to an Alliance, even to our most loyal, closest, and strongest allies” (Mitterrand, 1994, p. 2). He also addresses France's entry into NATO's command: “That is why it was previously decided to withdraw France from the integrated command of the Atlantic Alliance, NATO, and that is why I firmly maintain this decision” (Mitterrand, 1994, p. 2). He further reiterates that “It is the head of state who decides, and he cannot entrust this choice to any authority that would be foreign” (Mitterrand, 1994, p. 2).

A special attention deserves the end of his speech:

“And Europe? For the question is often asked of us. Building the European Union: you already have the embryo and outline of a European force in which a few countries participate. Could French nuclear power guarantee the integrity and security of the European countries with which we have contracted within the European Union? The question is not currently relevant, but it is in people's minds, and sometimes we attempt to gauge the quality of our European commitment by asking: would you refuse or would you accept this? I would simply say that the very conditions for the exercise of nuclear armament, the necessity of a solitary decision, of one or few responsible individuals from a determined country, that the doctrine of defending the integrity of a national territory, and that the definition of vital interests, all of this applies perfectly to France, but does not yet apply to Europe. Let Europe establish clear notions regarding common vital interests, let it go far enough in its political awareness to consider that the territorial integrity of one engages the territorial integrity of others, in short, let immense efforts and progress be made by those who intend to continue building Europe, and France will accept the debate. That day has not yet come. - This is what I can tell you as a convinced European. We must know what we are talking about. Perhaps this moment will come? I would be pleased, as it would only demonstrate that before discussing defence, we will have already achieved the work of the century, and perhaps of two centuries: a united Europe, capable of defining and defending common interests in a single motion.” (Mitterrand, 1994, pp. 11-12).

As we discussed earlier, Mitterrand draws a clear line between reality and desire, placing reality in a kind of resigned isolationism. The President considers that “the very conditions for exercising nuclear weapons [...] apply perfectly to France, but do not yet apply to Europe” (Mitterrand, 1994, p. 11). Mitterrand then outlines what elements would need to

be in place for a European convergence on deterrence to be possible, mentioning again the common vital interests and the political awareness that the integrity of each and every one concerns the others (Mitterrand, 1994, p. 11). If those conditions are met, “France will accept the debate” (Mitterrand, 1994, p. 11).

Not only would France accept the debate, under Mitterrand’s presidency, if those conditions were met, but the leader also expresses his happiness if a level of European integration were reached that would make a community decision on the use of nuclear weapons possible (Mitterrand, 1994). In summary, there is no common European deterrence, nor any concertation or co-decision in Mitterrand's view; however, there is a very clear and stated desire for such a situation to exist one day. The concept of a nuclear-armed Europe appears in Mitterrand's discourse as a utopian horizon to be achieved.

### **Jacques Chirac**

Mitterrand's successor, who was also his Prime Minister during a period of cohabitation, followed in the footsteps of the socialist president and, in June 2001, referred to the European dimension of the French doctrine. In this speech, Chirac asserts that “our nuclear deterrence must also, this is France's wish, contribute to the security of Europe” (Chirac, 2001, p. 7). Furthermore, in the same speech, although Chirac insists that the decision to launch a nuclear strike is a presidential prerogative and that it is his responsibility to determine if there is an attack on vital interests, he adds, “This assessment would naturally take into account the growing solidarity among the countries of the European Union” (Chirac, 2001, p. 7).

Following the 9/11 attacks and the era of the "War on Terror" that this event inaugurated, Chirac once again spoke about nuclear deterrence in 2006. In this instance, he

noted how the interests of the countries in the European Union were increasingly interdependent and argued that the mere existence of French nuclear deterrence was an essential element for continental security (Chirac, 2006, p. 4). Chirac's statements mark a significant milestone for European integration in the context of nuclear deterrence. Despite the changing political landscape and, above all, the increased European integration, the concerns that Mitterrand had remained present in Chirac's discourse.

Chirac's speech is particularly notable for the use of terms like "*incontournable*" and "European continent" which were later echoed by Macron in more recent times. In 2006, with the United Kingdom still a member state of the Union and European integration less advanced, such words seemed a secondary lexical choice. However, in the context of 2024, following Brexit, these same expressions gain greater strategic relevance, reflecting a continuity in the vision of nuclear deterrence as a pillar of European security.

Additionally, Chirac introduces a long-term perspective on European defence by stating: "My conviction remains that we will have to, when the time comes, ask ourselves the question of a common defence that would take into account existing deterrent forces, with a view to a strong Europe responsible for its security." (Chirac, 2006, p. 4). Here, Chirac not only suggests the possibility of a common defence that includes nuclear deterrent forces but also, similar to Mitterrand, envisions a horizon in which Europe takes on greater and more coordinated responsibility for its own security. This vision anticipates an eventual transfer of defence competencies to the European Union or, at the very least, greater coordination among European countries regarding nuclear deterrence.

In summary, Chirac's speech establishes both a foundation for the debate on European integration in nuclear deterrence and prefigures the rhetoric used later by other presidents, highlighting a continuity and evolution in the French nuclear doctrine towards a

greater consideration of collective European security, in line with the direction set by President Mitterrand years earlier. It is less idealistic than Mitterrand's speech, as it does not clearly position itself in favour of the ambition for a European state, but it does express an interest in the defence of Europe, which he perceives as linked to France and as another vital French interest.

### **Nicolas Sarkozy:**

Chirac and Sarkozy, despite belonging to the same political party, had quite different views on French foreign policy. While the former had been a fervent advocate for Europe's political autonomy and had vetoed the Bush administration's project to intervene in Iraq at the UN Security Council, the latter established distances from his predecessor early on in his defence approach. Under his presidency, France returned to the integrated NATO command on April 4, 2009, 43 years after leaving at De Gaulle's decision. This reintegration into the military structure of the Alliance marked a significant change in France's defence policy, although it did not translate into a significant change in its nuclear doctrine nor in France's integration into NATO's Nuclear Planning Group (NPG).

On March 21, 2008, with the decision to reintegrate into NATO command already made and a confidence motion and a censure motion passed by Fillon's government (Le Monde, 2008), Sarkozy spoke about French nuclear doctrine in Cherbourg. In this speech, the President specified the circumstances under which nuclear weapons could be employed, limiting them to a "state-originating aggression against our vital interests—regardless of where it comes from and in whatever form" (Sarkozy, 2008, p. 4). The concept of "vital interests" is an omnipresent theme in the doctrinal speeches of French presidents; no

president fails to mention them, and it is extremely rare to receive hints about what they actually are, as part of the calculated ambiguity characteristic of nuclear doctrines (Guitard, 2023, p. 23). Therefore, it is surprising that on this occasion Sarkozy declared that, among them, in addition to sovereignty, are the “constitutive elements of our identity and our existence as a nation-state” (Sarkozy, 2008, p. 4).

By evoking them, one might think that a nationalist perspective prevails, one of a French national interest rather than a common European one. This perspective might be reinforced by the President stating that “It is neither a matter of prestige nor a question of rank; it is simply the life insurance of the Nation” (Sarkozy, 2008, p. 4). However, later in the same speech, he indicates that French nuclear deterrence takes into account, among other things, European construction, in addition to considering that French forces contribute to NATO's nuclear deterrence (Sarkozy, 2008, p. 4). Furthermore, he asserts that “As for Europe, it is a fact that French nuclear forces, by their mere existence, are a key element of its security” (Sarkozy, 2008, p. 5). Sarkozy goes further—similar to what Macron would do more recently—and proposes to willing European partners: “I propose to engage with those of our European partners who wish to, in an open dialogue on the role of deterrence and its contribution to our common security” (Sarkozy, 2008, p. 5), because “Our commitment to the security of our European partners is the natural expression of our increasingly close union. The Lisbon Treaty marks, in this regard, a historic advance” (Sarkozy, 2008, p. 5)

If we analyze the elements present in it, this speech is quite similar to that of Chirac and the one delivered more recently by Macron. In both cases, it starts from a purely national decision based on autonomy, the decision to acquire nuclear weapons made in its day by De

Gaulle, which has been embraced by all French presidents without exception. From this starting point and as a consequence of this initial national-autonomous political act, it emphasizes that this decision has both a European dimension (which all presidents point out) and an Atlantic dimension (something that seems to be emphasized only by those who, like Sarkozy, have a specific affinity for this organization).

With Sarkozy, as with Chirac, this European dimension does not seem to materialize into anything real or tangible regarding relationships with other European countries, despite the stated possibility of dialogue. Nor is there a vision, as with Mitterrand, of a utopian horizon toward which to strive, in which there is a nuclear-armed European state. One might wonder whether there is really an ambition to have European instruments for nuclear concertation or if, on the contrary, it is merely a rhetorical use of the political leadership role that nuclear weapons assign to France, aligning with what Tertrais (2024, p. 153) describes as nuclear nationalism.

The absence of a clear European dimension becomes even more evident when examining the other two speeches Sarkozy delivered during his term regarding nuclear deterrence. The first was on July 13, 2007, and the second on June 10, 2010. These are not conventional doctrinal speeches, but he does reference French nuclear deterrence in them. In the first, the word Europe is entirely absent, and there are statements that would fit perfectly within Tertrais' definition of nuclear nationalism: "We are permanent members of the Security Council. We are one of the nuclear, military, and civilian powers in the world. This gives us a role, a responsibility, a prominence" (Sarkozy, 2007, p. 1). In the other speech, by contrast, Europe appears only once and merely as a backdrop, while other phrases in this latter speech can also be attributed to nuclear nationalism: "France is, along with the United States, one of

the only two countries in the world capable of achieving such a feat: designing and constructing a nuclear aircraft carrier and its embarked air group. We are therefore part of a very exclusive club” (Sarkozy, 2010, p. 1). He later defines nuclear deterrence as “a life insurance policy for the Nation” (Sarkozy, 2010, p. 2), and goes on to urge soldiers to take pride in their flag and the uniform they wear (Sarkozy, 2010, p. 3).

### **François Hollande:**

François Hollande represents a distinct turning point in the discourse on French deterrence towards Europe, and to a large extent, he is the discordant note in this regard. It is he, not Emmanuel Macron, who marks a substantial difference from the previous discourse regarding deterrence and Europe. His main statements on nuclear doctrine and its European dimension are made on February 19, 2015, at the Istres Air Base. Like his predecessors, François Hollande refers to the fact that “Nuclear deterrence aims to protect our country from any aggression of state origin against its vital interests, no matter where it comes from, and in whatever form” (Hollande, 2015, p. 2) and that he conceives it as a weapon that is part of a defensive strategy and is not intended to gain an advantage in a conflict (Hollande, 2015, p. 2). Hollande also acknowledges that the nuclear weapon would only be used “in extreme circumstances of legitimate defence” (Hollande, 2015, p. 2). For him, the purpose of nuclear deterrence is to protect territorial integrity, safeguard the population, and ensure the nation's capacity to live (Hollande, 2015, p. 3). It is true that later he considers that “The definition of our vital interests cannot be limited to the national scale alone” (Hollande, 2015, p. 3); he also states that:

“We participate in the European project, we have built with our partners a community of destiny, the existence of a French nuclear deterrent provides a strong and essential contribution to Europe. Moreover, France has, along with its European partners, a solidarity of fact and of heart. Who could believe that an aggression that jeopardizes the survival of Europe would have no consequences? This is why our deterrence goes hand in hand with the constant strengthening of European Defence. But our deterrence is our own; it is we who decide, it is we who assess our vital interests” (Hollande, 2014, p. 3).

As we can see, the pattern we observed in Macron, Chirac, and Sarkozy is repeated. Nuclear deterrence serves as a "safeguard of the nation," acting as a last line of defence and as a life insurance policy to maintain the independence and existence of the state. Also, like the other presidents, Hollande acknowledges that French nuclear deterrence inevitably has a European and Atlantic dimension; for him, its mere existence provides a "strong and essential" contribution to Europe (Hollande, 2015, p. 3).

However, the difference between Hollande's nuclear discourse and that of the other French presidents lies in the absence of any dialogue, transfer, or co-governance with the other European countries. While Chirac stated, “My conviction remains that we will have to, when the time comes, consider a common defence that takes into account existing deterrent forces, with a view to a strong Europe, responsible for its security” (Chirac, 2006, p. 4), and Sarkozy called for “an open dialogue on the role of deterrence and its contribution to our common security” (Sarkozy, 2008, p. 5), and Macron expressed his support for developing “a strategic dialogue with our European partners who are ready for it on the role of French nuclear deterrence in our collective security” (Macron, 2020, p. 11), none of this is echoed by

Hollande. In fact, former President François Hollande has not evolved in his thinking and has been quite critical of Macron in a piece published in *Le Journal* (Hollande, 2024). In it, the former Socialist president and political mentor of Macron criticizes the latter for proposing the Europeanization of French nuclear deterrence without consulting the European partners themselves. While he does mention Europe as a “community of destiny” and recognizes the existence of a tested solidarity in Europe, he specifically emphasizes that nuclear deterrence is exclusively France's, that only France decides, and that only France determines what constitutes a vital interest (Hollande, 2024). Additionally, in another non-doctrinal speech on deterrence, Hollande states that “nuclear deterrence is the heritage of the entire nation” (Hollande, 2012, p. 1). Thus, in contrast to the other speeches, based on this interpretation, the potential defence of any European territory would merely be a prerogative of France, something that only France would decide, independent of any concertation or alliance (or so it seems based on his statements) and based on its own interests. The hypothetical “French nuclear umbrella,” in Hollande's eyes, would only be opened if it were in France's interest to do so and under no other circumstances.

### **Macron:**

In his doctrinal speech delivered at the *École de Guerre* on February 7, 2020 (Macron, 2020), President Macron explains that France's often-mentioned "vital interests" have a European dimension. He expresses a desire to develop a strategic dialogue with European partners who wish to discuss the role of French nuclear deterrence in collective security and states that those who wish could associate with France through military exercises with French deterrence forces. However, it seems this would not extend to the dual-key system operated by the United States in countries like Belgium or Germany. Nevertheless,

despite this European dialogue, Macron emphasized France's absolute independence and the rejection of any co-decision or concertation, as he asserted that “our decision-making independence is fully compatible with unwavering solidarity towards our European partners” (Macron, 2020, p. 11).

We see that Macron aligns with Hollande regarding decision-making independence, as both presidents have been very explicit about the fact that the capacity for decision-making belongs solely to France.

The evolution of the strategic situation in Europe, primarily caused by Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine, has not prompted the development of a doctrinal speech as such. However, Macron reiterated his views on French nuclear deterrence in a speech delivered on April 26, 2024, which focused on Europe. He stated regarding the European dimension of the French nuclear doctrine that “it is thanks to this credible defence that we will be able to build the security guarantees expected by all our partners, everywhere in Europe, and which will also aim to construct the common security framework, guaranteeing security for each” (Macron, 2024, p. 6).

In that same vein, he would later express himself before the Ebra media group, where he stated:

“And there is nuclear weaponry: the French doctrine is that it can be used when our vital interests are threatened. I have already said that there is a European dimension to these vital interests, without detailing them, as this deterrence would contribute to the credibility of European defence. I am in favour of opening this debate, which should therefore include missile defence, long-range weaponry, and nuclear weapons for those who have them or who host American nuclear weapons on their soil. Let's put everything on the table and see what

truly protects us in a credible manner. France will maintain its specificity but is ready to contribute more to the defence of European soil.” (Brochet, Mauret & Mitoyen, 2024)

Statements that align with the doctrinal line established in 2020 but insist on the need for some form of European coordination and generated criticism regarding the Europeanization of the nuclear issue (Lachaud & Saintoul, 2024; Le Figaro, 2024), which even led the French Minister of Defence, Sébastien Lecornu, to clarify that the French government had no intention of sharing nuclear decision-making and that it remained sovereign (Lecornu, 2024).

Macron, however, positions his vision regarding Europe in line with Sarkozy, who, like him, saw the need for a European dialogue and believed that French nuclear deterrence should be part of Europe’s common security, without this requiring a common deterrent, as Mitterrand had proposed in the 1990s.

This absence of a collective deterrence as an explicit objective in Macron’s speeches may be due not so much to a lack of political conviction, but rather to the president’s personal difficulty in ensuring that the French sovereigntist conception permeates the vision of European strategic autonomy (Juncos & Vanhoonacker, 2024). Indeed, the French president employs the concept of “European sovereignty” (Macron, 2024, p. 5), a term he has linked to strategic autonomy, while also advocating for the creation of a European *Demos* (Le Grand Continent, 2020).

Macron’s discourse reveals a certain oscillation around the definition of "European sovereignty," which at times appears to shift within a calculated ambiguity between national sovereignty and European strategic autonomy. This ambivalence, which may partly respond to tensions arising from the French electoral debate over the Europeanization of nuclear doctrine, highlights the challenges of articulating a coherent vision in such a sensitive area as

nuclear policy. Although other elements of his discourse suggest a clear Europeanist stance, in terms of nuclear doctrine, Macron seems aligned with Sarkozy's position, defending French nuclear deterrence as a key component of European security without promoting an authentic collective deterrent. Thus, this doctrinal ambiguity reflects not only the complexities of French leadership within the European context but also the internal limitations and resistance facing the construction of a comprehensive European strategic autonomy.

### **The Europeanization of Nuclear Doctrine: A Latent Issue**

Over the past few decades, the evolution of French nuclear doctrine has reflected both the pursuit of strategic autonomy and integration into European and transatlantic defence frameworks (Tertrais, 2007). From the presidency of François Mitterrand to the present day, each leader has contributed their particular vision to France's nuclear policy, especially in relation to Europe.

During this period, we see how French nuclear doctrine has always oscillated between a predominantly nationalist position and a more integrated vision of European security. The exact point on this nationalism/europeanism axis depended more on the personal vision of the sitting President than on a historical evolution from one position to another. This circumstance is not particularly surprising, as French nuclear doctrine rests on

two elements that favor this outcome: on one hand, the fact that the doctrine has not been, until recently, a subject of public debate and, consequently, was not a topic likely to spark large social movements in either direction. On the other hand, the fact that nuclear policy, specifically the formulation of a doctrine and the final decision regarding the use of atomic weapons, is a competence—an aspect emphasized by several leaders—exclusive to the President of the Republic; hence, personal imprint carries much greater importance than in other areas of policy.

**Table 1: Comparison of French Presidents' Views and Decisions on Nuclear**

**Deterrence.**

Aspect	Mitterrand	Chirac	Sarkozy	Hollande	Macron
<b>French Deterrence and Europe</b>	Contributes to European security.	Contributes to European security.	Contributes to European security.	Contributes to European security.	Contributes to European security.
<b>France-Europe Relationship</b>	Walking towards a nuclear-armed European state.	Coordinated deterrence; moving towards common defence.	Dialogue with European partners about deterrence and its contribution to common security.	Does not propose concrete measures.	Dialogue with European partners and participation in deterrence military exercises.
<b>Decision</b>	Absolute independence of the President.	Proposal for a concerted European deterrence.	Proposal for dialogue with European partners on deterrence.	Independent deterrence but supportive of European partners.	Decision independence compatible with solidarity with European partners.

**Sources:** Data extracted from the speeches and official documents of the French presidents Mitterrand, Chirac, Sarkozy, Hollande, and Macron.

While each president has maintained nuclear decision-making sovereignty as a fundamental principle, they have all recognized the strategic importance of French nuclear deterrence for the stability of Europe and acknowledged the inherent European dimension of French deterrence itself. With very similar words, all five presidents emphasize a unified vision of what French deterrence means in Europe. However, despite their similar perspectives, significant differences persist regarding how this European integration in the nuclear realm is conceived, both in terms of relations with European partners and in the decision-making process regarding the use of nuclear weapons.

Thus, while some presidents, like Sarkozy and Macron, have explicitly advocated for a structured dialogue and greater integration in European security, others, like Hollande, have shown reluctance towards any form of nuclear co-decision, positioning themselves far behind options like the dual-key system offered by the United States to its European partners. Undoubtedly, of the five presidents we analyse, those who stand out the most in terms of greater European integration and progress towards a common European deterrence are Mitterrand and Chirac. The former expressed his delight at the prospect of a united Europe capable of defending its common interests (Mitterrand, 1994), while the latter firmly believed that “we must, when the time comes, ask ourselves about a common defence that takes into account the existing deterrent forces, in the perspective of a strong Europe responsible for its security” (Chirac, 2006, p. 4) and recalled the positioning of his Prime Minister, Alain Juppé, in favor of concerted deterrence (Les Echos, 1995).

In fact, the Juppé-Chirac tandem has perhaps been the most vocal in favor of the idea of integrating other European countries into French deterrence, even opening the door to a concerted deterrence where it is not just France that decides on nuclear strikes; something that Mitterrand viewed as a utopia and political horizon, but not yet the right moment. For

Juppé, the concept of concerted deterrence was primarily about dialogue among equals (particularly referring to Germany) and emphasized the necessity of this concertation (Juppé, 1995).

This directly contrasts with the views of Hollande and Macron himself, who express solidarity with their European allies but are unwilling to engage in that dialogue among equals. In fact, unlike Macron, who supports dialogue with his European allies and even the idea of collaborating with them to conduct deterrence military exercises, Hollande did not even consider the possibility of any kind of dialogue at this level.

As we can see, despite the various statements and nuances, the European fit has been a latent issue throughout all the presidencies, one that has only been evoked in a rhetorical manner and a goal toward which no concrete steps have been taken. This could be due to several reasons. First, it could be that the European doctrinal dimension is conceived only as a derivative of what is called nuclear nationalism, through which France attempts to impress allies, adversaries, and its own population (Tertrais, 2024, p. 153), presenting itself as indispensable for the rest of Europe without any real intention to solidify anything; as suggested by the nuclear deterrence speeches of Sarkozy that we have previously discussed.

The other possibility is that the desire to achieve nuclear coordination or dialogue in Europe is indeed genuine, but has encountered several obstacles to its realization. One of the most likely is the lack of interest from most European allies, except for Poland, in this type of agreement (Tertrais, 2019a, p. 31); a disinterest that may stem from the historical perception in other countries that there is no need for nuclear defence due to the absence of imminent threats, or that such threats, whether imminent or potential, are already countered by the nuclear umbrella provided by NATO.

In this context, there have been several proposals in the academic field regarding how French nuclear weapons can fit into a European defence perspective (Turrión, 1996; Jurgensen, 2018; Sauer, 2020; Deen, Kruijver, Stoetman, & Zandee, 2020; Colizza, 2023). This academic (and relatively old) and political (relatively new) debate, combined with concerns about the future of NATO and the Ukraine War as an accelerator and catalyst for European defence integration, undoubtedly evoke the possibility of greater integration of common European deterrence. However, as we have seen, despite the doctrinal differences among various presidents, these differences have never been reflected in practical terms, where France remains absent from any nuclear deterrence coordination structure (such as NATO's NPG) and where there have been no advancements in creating any similar system.

### **Conclusions: An Imminent Issue or a Rhetorical Matter?**

The evolution of French nuclear doctrine from the end of the Cold War to Macron's presidency reveals a complex interrelationship between national sovereignty and European integration in the realm of defence. Throughout these decades, the presidents have consistently argued that nuclear deterrence is fundamental for France's security and, at the same time, for the stability of the European continent. Although all have acknowledged the European dimension of French deterrence, the way they have conceptualized and addressed this interconnection has varied significantly.

Despite the differences in rhetoric and policy, all presidents have emphasized France's sovereignty in nuclear decision-making. This principle has been a constant,

underscoring that the ultimate responsibility for the use of nuclear weapons rests exclusively with the President of the Republic. Decision-making independence has been presented as an unshakeable pillar, allowing France to act based on its own vital interests, although Chirac and Mitterrand expressed a willingness to revisit this aspect once the conditions for a united Europe were met.

Throughout the presidencies, the relationship between nuclear deterrence and European defence has been a recurring theme, but it has often been addressed rhetorically and without concrete steps toward greater integration. From Mitterrand and Chirac, who politically aspired to a more united Europe in terms of defence, to Hollande and Macron, who have been more cautious and emphasized French autonomy, proposals for a common nuclear deterrent have been limited and have not materialized into anything beyond offers to participate in deterrence exercises.

The discussion on the Europeanization of nuclear doctrine has been present, but has faced significant barriers. The lack of interest of many European allies in agreeing a common approach, together with the perception that NATO provides sufficient defence, has hampered progress in this area. Academic and political proposals to integrate the French nuclear deterrent into a European defence structure have existed, but until now they have had little practical impact and have not been implemented.

It is true that the invasion of Ukraine and the changes in the European geopolitical landscape have revived the debate on the need for greater integration in defence, including nuclear deterrence; especially important in the event that a new Trump presidency leads to a further disengagement or a loss of importance of NATO. However, despite the current rhetoric about the need to coordinate efforts and establish a common security framework,

reality shows that France still does not participate in the existing nuclear consultation structures and continues not to propose creating other alternatives, which suggests that Understanding nuclear deterrence as the “life insurance” of the nation is more dominant than the search for a common deterrence.

Furthermore, paradoxically, greater European integration has not meant greater efforts to integrate the French nuclear deterrent into a European collective deterrence. On the contrary, the most Europeanist discourses can be seen in the last decade of the 20th century (Chirac and Mitterrand); while the presidencies of the 21st century, despite having always taken into account the European dimension in rhetoric and having launched concrete proposals, have not gone that far.

In conclusion, the European dimension of the French nuclear doctrine has always been present, with greater or lesser intensity, depending on the greater or lesser pro-European inclination of each president, and not really based on greater or lesser European integration. Furthermore, the discourses have become less utopian, they have stopped announcing or proposing a future of a European State or a union of Europeans in a common deterrence, maintaining a strictly unilateral deterrence while, paradoxically, and still within this unilateral deterrence, Specific proposals for concertation have been presented that did not exist in the first period in which there was this utopian discourse.

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