

Why Europe Needs a Nuclear Deterrent

Adérito Vicente

Summary

This policy brief examines the argument that Europe needs to develop its own nuclear deterrent. The rationale for this reappraisal stems from evolving security dynamics, particularly Russia's war against Ukraine and its nuclear sabre-rattling, concerns regarding US commitment to European defence and China's rapid nuclear expansion, which presents an emerging two-peer challenge for Euro-Atlantic security and extended nuclear deterrence. This brief outlines four potential options for a European nuclear deterrent: a French-led deterrent, pan-European collaboration, a Eurodeterrent and a German indigenous deterrent (as a last resort). Each option presents challenges, including the need for political consensus, credibility and infrastructure development. To address these challenges and establish a European nuclear deterrent that enhances collective security, strategic autonomy and bargaining power, the brief recommends fostering strategic dialogue, conducting feasibility studies, and establishing clear doctrinal criteria and decision-making procedures. It urges EU policymakers to actively reconsider, promote and establish a European nuclear deterrent, emphasising its urgency and strategic importance.

Keywords European Union – Nuclear weapons – Deterrence – European defence – European security

Introduction

Nuclear weapons remain the unquestioned core of European collective defence. Most European countries currently rely on NATO's nuclear umbrella for collective defence, primarily under the leadership of the US.¹ A few, such as France, continue to address nuclear issues on a strictly national basis. While the current arrangement has historically provided security guarantees for most of Europe, the changing security landscape has prompted a re-evaluation of the role of nuclear weapons on the continent. This has led to academic and political discussions on the need for Europe to establish its own nuclear deterrent.²

Two important events are driving this imperative. The first is Russia's war against Ukraine, which has exposed Europe's security vulnerabilities and the potential for a nuclear threat over the Black Sea region.³ The second is that the unpredictable nature of US politics, as witnessed in former President

¹ 'Nuclear umbrella' is a security arrangement under which the participating states consent or acquiesce to the potential use of nuclear weapons in their defence. The related concept of 'extended nuclear deterrence' may be understood as the intended effect of a nuclear umbrella. A 'nuclear umbrella state' is a state without nuclear weapons under the protection of the nuclear weapons of another state. In the case of NATO umbrella states, the US provides extended nuclear deterrence to all member states.

² For a comprehensive exploration of the academic discourse, see A. Mattelaer, *Rethinking Nuclear Deterrence: A European Perspective*, Centre for Security, Diplomacy and Strategy, 13/2022 (2022); M. Terhalle and K. Klompenhouwer, 'Facing Europe's Nuclear Necessities', *Politico*, 22 April 2023; T. Erästö, *More Investment in Nuclear Deterrence Will Not Make Europe Safer*, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (5 December 2023); J. Lanxade et al., 'Europe Needs a Nuclear Deterrent of Its Own', *New Atlanticist*, 11 July 2023; M. Ruhle, *German Musings About a European Nuclear Deterrent*, National Institute for Public Policy, Report no. 571 (Fairfax, VA, 2024); M. Verstraete, 'Anticipating Europe's Nuclear Futures', *The Washington Quarterly* 47/1 (2024); and S. Cimbala and L. Korb, 'Even in the Face of Russian Aggression, a Nuclear "Eurodeterrent" Is Still a Bad Idea', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 14 February 2024. Additionally, insights from the European political debate can be found, for example, in J. Fischer, 'The Great Revision', *Project Syndicate*, 31 March 2023; J. Fischer, 'Ich schäme mich für unser Land', interview by F. Reinbold and G. Löwisch, *Zeit Online*, 3 December 2023; T. Huhtanen, 'The War in Ukraine Is Forcing Europe to Develop Its Own Nuclear Deterrence', *Euractiv.com*, updated 14 October 2022; J. Vela and N. Camut, 'As Trump Looms, Top EU Politician Calls for European Nuclear Deterrent', *Politico*, 25 January 2024; and P. Wintour, 'UK Could Contribute to Nuclear Shield if Trump Wins, Suggests German Minister', *The Guardian*, updated 15 February 2024.

³ L. Horowitz and M. Stolze, *Nuclear Rhetoric and Escalation Management in Russia's War Against Ukraine: A Chronology*, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, Working Paper no. 2/2023 (August 2023).

Trump's rhetoric, is raising doubts about the US's enduring commitment to European security.⁴ In this context, a rigorous political dialogue is essential to explore the potential need for a common European nuclear deterrent while prioritising the preservation of both the North Atlantic Alliance and the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) regime.

As the debate surrounding a European nuclear deterrent re-emerges, this policy brief delves into the complexities of this critical issue. The primary focus is on unravelling a fundamental question: *Why does Europe need a nuclear deterrent?* To address this research question, the brief examines the historical context, the current security environment and the rationale for establishing a European deterrent. It then explores various potential options, ranging from French-led initiatives to a 'Eurodeterrent' proposal. Subsequently, the brief outlines policy recommendations, offering an in-depth analysis of the commonality, credibility and feasibility of a European nuclear deterrent, thereby providing policymakers with information to consider as they navigate this complex decision. The final section summarises the debate and suggests reasons why EU policymakers should reconsider, discuss, promote and establish a European nuclear deterrent.

Historical and political context

The idea of a European nuclear deterrent has a long and complex history. After the Second World War, the European integration movement gained momentum, leading to proposals like the European Defence Community, which aimed to establish a European army. However, challenges, including France's concerns over national sovereignty, led to the rejection of the proposal in 1954. During the Cold War, NATO and the Western European Union oversaw European defence, leaving the idea of an independent European nuclear deterrent unexplored.⁵

Following the failure of the proposed European Defence Community, discussions on European security resurfaced. Events such as the Suez Crisis in 1956 prompted debates on whether Europe should seek an independent nuclear deterrent or continue relying on NATO.⁶ In the late 1950s, discussions among France, Italy and Germany about creating a European nuclear force—commonly referred to as the FIG protocol or agreement—stalled as France focused on a national nuclear programme, while the UK maintained its independent nuclear force and also cultivated a close nuclear relationship with the US.⁷ Despite concerns, most European nations opted for security assurances under the US/NATO 'nuclear umbrella'.

The 1960s and 1970s saw the advent of the nuclear non-proliferation regime and détente, culminating in the NPT in 1968. The treaty acknowledged a potential future nuclear option, contingent on the formation of an EU with full sovereignty over defence and foreign policy.⁸ The 'European clause' appears as the third item in the written declaration of ratification submitted by Germany to the NPT.⁹

The post–Cold War era witnessed a gradual but increasing interest in an EU perspective on nuclear

⁴ A. Laya et al., 'Trump-Proofing Europe', *Foreign Affairs*, 2 February 2024.

⁵ B. Heuser, *NATO, Britain, France and the FRG: Nuclear Strategies and Forces for Europe, 1949–2000* (Basingstoke: St Martin's Press, 1997).

⁶ E. Kustnetsov, *The Multilateral Force Debates*, European University Institute (2004).

⁷ M. Trachtenberg, 'France and NATO, 1949–1991', *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* 9/3 (2011); L. Nuti, 'The F–I–G Story Revisited', in L. Nuti and C. Buffet (eds.), 'Dividing the Atom. Essays on the History of Nuclear Proliferation in Europe', Special Issue, *Journal Storia delle Relazioni Internazionali* 13/1 (1998).

⁸ A. Vicente, 'The EU's Foreign Policy in the Field of Nuclear Disarmament: How Does It Work and Why Does It Often Not Work?', D.Phil. thesis, European University Institute, 2022, 79.

⁹ UN, No. 10485. *Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. Opened for Signature at London, Moscow and Washington on 1 July 1968. Ratifications and Accession. 2 May 1975. Federal Republic of Germany*, UN, Treaty Series, 729/10485 (1976), 414–17.

deterrence.¹⁰ While the Lisbon Treaty established the Common Security and Defence Policy, it did not envisage a nuclear capacity. NATO, for those EU member states which are members, remains the primary instrument for collective defence and deterrence under Article 42(7) of the Treaty on European Union.¹¹

The 2010s brought renewed focus on a European deterrent, triggered by the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and Donald Trump's election in 2016. In Germany, discussions emerged among some prominent politicians, journalists and scholars on the need for a deterrent, either an indigenous national nuclear weapons programme or a Eurodeterrent, to address concerns about a potential US retrenchment of its security guarantees.¹² In February 2020 President Macron proposed a 'strategic dialogue' to explore the role of French nuclear weapons in European defence.¹³

Current status of nuclear deterrence in Europe

At the core of Europe's collective defence and security architecture lies NATO's extended nuclear deterrence strategy, which is heavily reliant on the pivotal role of the US and its security guarantees to European allies. This strategy aims to deter potential aggressors by threatening retaliation with US nuclear weapons in the event of an attack on any NATO member under Article 5 of the Washington Treaty. The effectiveness of NATO's deterrence strategy hinges on the robust capabilities of the US strategic nuclear forces. These comprise approximately 1,770 deployed warheads, including 400 land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles, 970 submarine-launched ballistic missiles and 300 carried by strategic bombers.¹⁴

Moreover, the deployment of US non-strategic nuclear weapons in Europe further strengthens NATO's nuclear deterrence. Approximately 100 US B61 nuclear bombs are strategically stationed in non-nuclear-weapon states (NNWSs), including Belgium, Germany, Italy, The Netherlands, Türkiye and Greece, under NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements.¹⁵ These weapons, remaining under US control, involve the contribution of personnel and infrastructure from participating states for potential delivery. These six 'nuclear sharing states' contribute 'dual-capable aircraft' to the nuclear mission, further enhancing the alliance's nuclear capabilities.¹⁶

Six additional NATO members, including Czechia, Denmark, Hungary and Poland, contribute to the alliance's nuclear posture through the 'SNOWCAT' mission, supporting aircraft operations related to nuclear missions.¹⁷ All members, except France with its own arsenal, participate in the Nuclear Planning Group, shaping collective policy and decisions regarding NATO's nuclear strategy.

Notwithstanding a unified NATO strategy on nuclear deterrence, diverse perspectives and singularities persist among European states.¹⁸ First, while the UK and France maintain independent nuclear arsenals

¹⁰ B. Tertrais, *The European Dimension of Nuclear Deterrence: French and British Policies and Future Scenarios*, Finnish Institute of International Affairs, Working Paper no. 106 (2018), 4; U. Jasper and C. Portela, 'EU Defence Integration and Nuclear Weapons: A Common Deterrent for Europe?', *Security Dialogue* 41/2 (2010).

¹¹ In terms of scope, while art. 5 of the Washington Treaty applies uniformly to all NATO members, affirming that an attack on one member constitutes an attack on all, art. 42(7) of the Treaty on European Union specifies that 'this shall not prejudice the specific character of the security and defence policy of certain Member States.' This provision is commonly interpreted as affording certain member states, such as neutral states Malta, Ireland and Austria, a special status that allows them to opt out of mutual defence assistance. Art. 5 of the Washington Treaty, however, does not contain such an opt-out clause.

¹² U. Kühn, T. Volpe and B. Thompson, 'Tracking the German Nuclear Debate', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (2018).

¹³ E. Macron, 'Speech of the President of the Republic on the Defense and Deterrence Strategy', Paris, 7 February 2020.

¹⁴ H. Kristensen et al., 'United States Nuclear Weapons, 2024', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 80/3 (2024), 182–3.

¹⁵ H. Kristensen et al., 'Nuclear Weapons Sharing, 2023', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 79/6 (2023), 395–6.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ E. Maitre, 'Nuclear Deterrence in Europe: Points of Convergence, Singularities and Prospects for Cooperation', *Fondation pour la recherche stratégique*, 04/2021 (2021).

as recognised Nuclear-Weapon States under the NPT, their non-shared combined forces contribute indirectly to the overall security of the nuclear alliance. Following Brexit, France is the sole EU member with Nuclear-Weapon State status, and neither the UK nor France shares its weapons with allies. The second grouping encompasses most European NNWSs that rely on the US/NATO nuclear umbrella. Conversely, some EU member states, such as Austria, Ireland and Malta, all NNWS parties to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, reject nuclear weapons and NATO's deterrence approach. Finally, the case of Cyprus presents a unique and complex situation.

Although not fully recognised by NATO due to Türkiye's objections concerning the unresolved reunification issue, Cyprus has signed but not ratified the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, leaving its security position potentially vulnerable within the EU bloc.

Russia poses a significant nuclear threat to Europe with its vast arsenal of 1,710 deployed nuclear strategic warheads (intercontinental and submarine-launched ballistic missiles, as well as nuclear-capable bombers) and an estimated 1,558 non-strategic ones.¹⁹ Since the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty ended in 2019, Moscow has upgraded its non-strategic arsenal, solidifying its perceived nuclear superiority over Europe.²⁰ Recently, Russia developed a hypersonic glide missile with a 2,000 km range, challenging existing defences.²¹ The recent deployment of tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus represents a novel development in the post–Cold War European nuclear order.

Rationale

Given the current status of nuclear deterrence in Europe and the political context, renewed interest has emerged in the possibility of a European nuclear deterrent. This interest can be attributed to four key factors. First, uncertainties regarding the future level of US commitment to NATO raise questions about the continued reliability of the US nuclear umbrella, prompted by apprehensions about the potential re-election of Donald Trump in November 2024. Second, recent events such as the war in Ukraine and nuclear signalling by Russian President Vladimir Putin have fuelled anxieties about Moscow's willingness to use nuclear weapons. Third, there are concerns about the asymmetric advantage of Russia's large inventory of 'tactical' nuclear weapons in contrast to NATO's limited deployment of nuclear assets on European territory.²² This setting raises questions about the effectiveness of the US nuclear umbrella in Europe's deterrence strategy.²³ Fourth, China's rapid nuclear expansion, propelling it to be the world's third nuclear superpower, likewise raises fears about the strain placed on the US extended nuclear deterrence strategy for Europe, now tasked with deterring both China and Russia simultaneously.²⁴

Thus, a European nuclear deterrent could bolster European security and regional stability by supplementing NATO and diversifying deterrence options, reducing reliance on the US. This could foster a more balanced 'partnership of equals' in which Europe actively contributes to its security.²⁵

¹⁹ H. Kristensen et al., 'Russian Nuclear Weapons, 2024', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 80/2 (2024b), 118–19.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ K. Saylor, *Hypersonic Weapons: Background and Issues for Congress*, Congressional Research Service, R45811 (Washington, DC, 2024).

²² Cimbala and Korb, 'Even in the Face of Russian Aggression'; J. Bolton, 'Both Parties Can Agree on America's Nuclear Peril', *Wall Street Journal*, 25 October 2023.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ H. Kristensen et al., 'Chinese Nuclear Weapons, 2024', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 80/1 (2024a); Mattelaer, *Rethinking Nuclear Deterrence*; Terhalle and Klompenhouwer, 'Europe's Nuclear Necessities'. The emerging two-peer problem compels significant adaptations to both the hardware (physical components such as nuclear warheads and delivery platforms) and software (planning and consultation between the protector and its protégés) of extended nuclear deterrence. See Center for Global Security Research Study Group, 'China's Emergence as a Second Nuclear Peer: Implications for U.S. Nuclear Deterrence Strategy', *Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory* (Spring 2023), 8.

²⁵ Action Committee for the United States of Europe, *Joint Declaration* (Bonn, 1 June 1964).

Furthermore, a European deterrent could grant greater control over security policy, allowing Europe to make independent decisions aligned with its interests while also enhancing its bargaining power in international negotiations. Additionally, the European clause, uncontested by the three NPT depositary states (the US, the UK and Russia), provides a legal framework within the non-proliferation and disarmament regime for a European nuclear deterrent.

While there are political, military and legal arguments for supporting a European nuclear deterrent, concerns about its credibility and feasibility persist, as does scepticism regarding political will and organisational challenges, such as the chain of command over a multinational nuclear force. Even if the challenges were addressed, the extended development time frame needed to establish a European nuclear deterrent, even under the most optimistic projection of a two-year breakout time, raises concerns about its effectiveness. The swiftly changing geopolitical landscape might make the deterrent obsolete by the time it becomes operational. Addressing these concerns requires analysing the diverse options for such a deterrent as a first step.

Options

As discussions on a European nuclear deterrent evolve, various options are being considered, each with its own approach. One possibility centres around a French-led strategy, given that France is the sole EU member possessing nuclear weapons, currently holding about 290 operational warheads deployed by naval and air forces.²⁶ This option envisages two roles for France: providing complementary insurance for European NATO members and offering reassurance to non-NATO EU members.²⁷ In this context, in an interview with the author on 8 November 2023, a senior official from an EU NATO member state said that ‘France is open to discussing deterrence proposals with any European country.’ Macron expressed this sentiment during a speech at L’École de Guerre in 2020, emphasising the ‘European dimension’ of the French nuclear forces.²⁸ This process could be conducted on a voluntary basis. In this arrangement, European partners could contribute financially to the French nuclear forces in exchange for their nuclear protection.

However, challenges abound, including feasibility, trust issues in identifying beneficiaries, and issues about credibility, particularly against Russia’s larger arsenal. Concerns exist regarding whether expanding France’s deterrent, currently considered minimal compared to Russia’s, would result in a credible enough force, leaving the entire proposal a complex and highly debated issue.²⁹

Another option could entail multiple EU and non-EU states jointly controlling a pan-European deterrent, potentially involving nuclear-armed nations like France and the UK, along with NNWSs. This collaborative approach would entail pooling resources and expertise for a more robust deterrent capability across Europe.³⁰

While the UK’s Trident system carries approximately 225 strategic nuclear warheads in submarines, enhancing both the qualitative and quantitative aspects of the French nuclear deterrent capabilities, concerns persist about the credibility of a France- and/or UK-based deterrent.³¹ However, the UK’s role post-Brexit and the issue of continued reliance on the US (a heavier reliance for the UK than for France)

²⁶ H. Kristensen, M. Korda and E. Johns, ‘French Nuclear Weapons, 2023’, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 79/4 (2023), 272.

²⁷ Tertrais, *European Dimension of Nuclear Deterrence*, 9.

²⁸ E. Macron, ‘Speech of the President of the Republic on the Defense and Deterrence Strategy’, Paris, 7 February 2020.

²⁹ B. Tertrais, *French Nuclear Deterrence Policy, Forces, and Future: A Handbook*, Fondation pour la recherche stratégique, Recherches & Documents, no. 4, (2020), 29.

³⁰ Vela and Camut, ‘As Trump Looms’; Wintour, ‘UK Could Contribute to Nuclear Shield’.

³¹ H. Kristensen and M. Korda, ‘United Kingdom Nuclear Weapons, 2021’, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 77/3 (2021).

also raise concerns, namely about the inclusion of non-NATO European states. Furthermore, coordinating decision-making and transparency among diverse participants poses a significant challenge.

Conversely, a Eurodeterrent option refers to EU member states jointly developing and maintaining a credible nuclear capability to deter adversaries and safeguard security interests, supported by the legal viability of the European clause. This option encompasses two possibilities regarding NATO's existing nuclear umbrella. One variant aligns with NATO, potentially strengthening collective defence through contributions to existing capabilities or separate forces operating under NATO's strategy, exemplified by the Berlin Plus framework.³² Alternatively, a non-aligned Eurodeterrent could be developed as an alternative outside of NATO. This approach would aim to establish strategic autonomy for European security by creating an independent nuclear arsenal.

Both modalities of Eurodeterrent could operate within a security framework allowing EU member states outside of NATO, such as Malta, Ireland and Austria, to opt out of this nuclear deterrent option. Conceptually, an option akin to the Schengen area or the eurozone, in which only select EU countries participate in these arrangements, could be considered. However, only the non-aligned Eurodeterrent model would extend protection to Cyprus. This is because Cyprus remains the sole EU member state that is neither fully recognised by the North Atlantic Alliance nor a member of NATO's Partnership for Peace, a programme of bilateral security cooperation between individual countries and NATO. Nonetheless, both modalities face challenges, including and primarily the necessity of establishing forceful decision-making structures within the EU.

As a fourth and last option, if both the US and France are considered unreliable security guarantors against Russian threats, and if the development of a Eurodeterrent proves unfeasible, Germany could theoretically pursue an indigenous nuclear deterrent.³³ Its intended purpose, whether for national defence or broader EU-wide security, would need to be considered when shaping decisions regarding size, deployment and doctrine. Despite being an NNWS, Germany possesses technical capabilities that could allow for the development of a limited nuclear arsenal within a relatively short time frame.³⁴ However, the advancement of a German nuclear deterrent faces significant technical, legal and political challenges.³⁵ Furthermore, renouncing the NPT as an NNWS could have adverse implications for the security of Germany and Europe. Additionally, it could undermine the global non-proliferation and disarmament regime. In light of these significant barriers and potential costs, a German nuclear deterrent remains largely unfeasible for the foreseeable future. Nonetheless, it could be considered as a last resort if the other three options prove unachievable.

Policy recommendations

Regardless of the chosen option, any European nuclear deterrent must be common, credible and feasible. To achieve these objectives, the following policy recommendations should be considered.

First, achieving commonality among European nations regarding a nuclear deterrent requires addressing political and strategic considerations. On the one hand, fostering political consensus necessitates overcoming the significant divisions within the EU regarding nuclear deterrence. On the other hand,

³² Senior official from the European External Action Service, interview by the author, Brussels, 15 November 2023.

³³ Fischer, 'Great Revision'.

³⁴ B. Kunz and U. Kühn, 'German Musings About a Franco-German or German Bomb', in U. Kühn (ed.), *Germany and Nuclear Weapons in the 21st Century* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 123.

³⁵ Ibid.

strategic collaboration is crucial to ensure the deterrent aligns with the collective security interests of Europe. Therefore, we recommend the following actions:

Recommendation 1. Initiate a systematic and open debate among EU member states on the concept and implications of a shared European nuclear deterrent while building a common understanding of the strategic role of nuclear deterrence in addressing contemporary geopolitical challenges and security vulnerabilities.

Recommendation 2. Conduct, within a year, a comprehensive intergovernmental feasibility study on establishing a European nuclear deterrent.

Recommendation 3. Foster political consensus and determine the most credible and feasible option for establishing a European nuclear deterrent among participating states by mid-2025, following a thorough consideration of the findings and recommendations outlined in the feasibility report.

Second, ensuring the credibility of a European nuclear deterrent is vital for deterring potential threats or attacks on the continent. This credibility can be bolstered through the establishment of a robust and capable arsenal, harmonised doctrine and structure, effective command-and-control mechanisms, and a clear and unambiguous deterrence message. Additionally, any European nuclear deterrent must seamlessly complement, rather than compete with, NATO's existing nuclear deterrence strategy. For this, we propose the following actions:

Recommendation 4. Outline the specific threats to be deterred, the parameters of the deterrence posture and the conditions under which nuclear weapons hypothetically would be used; this step encompasses target selection and communication protocols.

Recommendation 5. Establish clear criteria for the size and composition of the European nuclear arsenal, with specific milestones for the development of a nuclear command-and-control system, technological advancements, nuclear warheads and delivery systems.

Recommendation 6. Align, if possible, the European nuclear deterrent doctrine with NATO's overall collective defence strategy to ensure it reinforces NATO's deterrence position. Include cooperation mechanisms for working with non-NATO European states.

Third, the creation of a feasible European nuclear weapons infrastructure is a pivotal step and requires at least the following policy recommendations:

Recommendation 7. Draw upon existing European capabilities and establish a European-led nuclear deterrent that involves the transfer, acquisition or development of nuclear warheads and delivery systems.

Recommendation 8. Allocate a specified percentage of the member states' defence budgets to the development and implementation of a credible European nuclear command-and-control, including warheads and delivery systems, with annual progress assessments.

Recommendation 9. Develop a clear, swift and unambiguous decision-making procedure for the deployment of nuclear weapons, with a European final decision-maker possessing sole authority to order their use.

Conclusion

The re-emergence of the debate on and the rationale for a European nuclear deterrent is driven by Russia's nuclear sabre-rattling amid its war against Ukraine and China's strategic challenge to the Western-led liberal order with the abrupt expansion of its nuclear arsenal. Concurrently, concerns over US security commitments and the potential for a Trump re-election have brought fresh urgency to the issue.

Despite most member states relying heavily on the US and NATO for collective defence, the EU bloc still faces security vulnerabilities. For example, the absence of a cohesive EU approach to nuclear deterrence leaves many nations exposed, lacking a common nuclear deterrent and contributing unevenly to NATO's Extended Nuclear Deterrence strategy. One potential solution to tackle this issue could involve establishing a flexible European nuclear deterrent within an EU security framework. This setup would allow EU member states outside NATO, like Malta, Ireland and Austria, to opt out of participating in this joint nuclear deterrent initiative.

This policy brief has explored various options, including a French-led approach, a pan-European initiative, a Eurodeterrent complementary to NATO and an indigenous German nuclear deterrent. This complex issue requires a thorough analysis and a concerted effort to address the identified challenges among EU policymakers. Only through such a comprehensive approach can European leaders determine whether, and under what configuration, a joint nuclear deterrent aligns best with the continent's security interests and the existing security architecture.

The proposed policy recommendations underscore the importance of fostering dialogue among European leaders, conducting a feasibility study, securing political consensus, and establishing clear criteria for arsenal size and funding. They offer a structured framework for navigating the intricate decision-making process involved in establishing a European nuclear deterrent. While the path towards a European nuclear deterrent is fraught with challenges, these recommendations serve as an initial guide for policymakers.

	Programme 1	Programme 2	Programme 3
	Promoting political cohesion on the idea of a common European nuclear deterrent	Establishing a credible European nuclear deterrent doctrine (strategy and policy)	Creating a feasible European nuclear weapons infrastructure
Project 1	Initiate a systematic and open debate among EU member states on the concept and implications of a shared European nuclear deterrent, while building a common understanding of the strategic role of nuclear deterrence in addressing contemporary geopolitical challenges and security vulnerabilities.	Outline the specific threats to be deterred, the parameters of the deterrence posture and the conditions under which nuclear weapons hypothetically would be used; this step encompasses target selection and communication protocols.	Draw upon existing European capabilities and establish a European-led nuclear deterrent that involves the transfer, acquisition or development of nuclear warheads and delivery systems.
Project 2	Conduct, within a year, a comprehensive intergovernmental feasibility study on establishing a European nuclear deterrent.	Establish clear criteria for the size and composition of the European nuclear arsenal, with specific milestones for the development of a command-and-control system, technological advancements, nuclear warheads and the establishment of delivery systems.	Allocate a specified percentage of the member states' defence budgets to the development and implementation of a credible European nuclear command-and-control, including warheads and delivery system, with annual progress assessments.
Project 3	Foster political consensus and determine the most credible and feasible option for establishing a European nuclear deterrent among participating states by mid-2025, following a thorough consideration of the findings and recommendations outlined in the feasibility report.	Align, if possible, the European nuclear deterrent doctrine with NATO's overall collective defence strategy to ensure it reinforces NATO's deterrence position. Include cooperation mechanisms for working with non-NATO European states.	Develop a clear, swift and unambiguous decision-making procedure for the deployment of nuclear weapons, with a European final decision-maker possessing sole authority to order their use.

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