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STUDI INTERNAZIONALI

France: new nuclear European role between ambitions and challenges

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On 2nd March 2026, French President Emmanuel Macron delivered an address to the Nation from a ballistic missile submarine base in Brittany, wherein he declared a substantial augmentation in France's nuclear capabilities (Euronews, 2026). The initiative demands an enhancement in nuclear warheads – presently 290 warheads, as reported by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI, 2025) and a consolidation of deterrence collaboration with European allies, without the substitution of NATO. This cooperation is based on the idea of working together to protect each other, as explained in Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. This France's proposition renovated the debate on which role it could play in ameliorating the European defensive system. Although this initiative aims to offer an additional level of defence and deterrence in Europe, it also discloses major political divisions and practical limitation within the member states that could interfere with its implementation.

"An extra level of security": what this means and why it is important

France says that it needs to be careful because of three main problems. First, there is the situation in Ukraine, where Russia launched a full-scale invasion in 2022; alongside the situation in the Middle East, where there is a conflict between Israel and Palestine. A further threat to European security is also seen in the new war in Iran, which is expanding. It was highlighted by Macron that the plan for his country is not for NATO to be replaced, but for a supplementary deterrent stratum to be added through technical and strategic cooperation.

The fundamental principle of the French plan includes the strategic positioning of their nuclear energy to European allies, with concomitant collaborative exercises. A matter of paramount importance pertains to the exclusive control of warheads: host countries are precluded from any form of autonomous utilisation of nuclear warheads. The government in Paris has emphatically and repeatedly stated to be the sole and exclusive authority over firepower. Paris also thinks that putting nuclear warheads in more places in Europe will make it seem more likely that Europe can stop other countries from attacking.

European allies: different levels of involvement

France has pinpointed at least eight European countries that have expressed interest in this *forward deterrence* scheme, including Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Greece, the Netherlands, Poland, Sweden and the United Kingdom. (AP News, 2026; Euronews, 2026) Openness with the United States is essential for the implementation of this plan, as it guarantees cooperation in decision-making, congruence of strategic goals and the prevention of replication or confrontation with current defence frameworks. This initiative is intended to complement NATO's nuclear capability, not to replace it.

As far as Germany is concerned, the idea of implementing this solution starting this year has already been discussed with the two countries. French President Macron and German Chancellor Merz announced the news in a joint statement.

At the same time, in Belgium, Prime Minister De Wever greeted the plan, saying that it is a pivotal move towards a more powerful European defence policy; within the framework of the EU's Common Secuirty and Defence Policy (CSDP). For Belgium, this partnership with France would mean access to additional expertise and better protection under the

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French nuclear umbrella (Centre for European Democracy Studies, 2026). What exactly is meant by the term *nuclear umbrella*? In terms of strategy, this means that a country with nuclear weapons will protect its allies that do not have nuclear weapons. In the event of an armed attack, the armaments can be utilised to repel a threat to existence. In Europe, NATO member States are, in theory, covered, but this coverage is not universal; there are some exceptions, such as Cyprus or Malta to mention a few. France, for the time being, has not officially pledged its armaments to a defence system such as the one presently employed by the USA.

Adversity and opposition: the instances of Spain and Poland

While certain European countries have expressed limited interest, many others are in opposition to France's stance and have not greeted the initiative with enthusiasm. Spain is among those in opposition, with Pedro Sánchez's government having rejected nuclear rearmament, deeming it risky and counterproductive. As per Madrid, the defence of Europe should be founded on political collaboration, diplomatic efforts and conventional capabilities. It has also been stated that pursuing the idea of a common European army would be a more effective collective defence, and that this should be a priority for the European Union (Euroweekly News, 2026).

In Poland, the internal debate is very heated, with strong feelings being expressed by all sides. The nation remains ambivalent about acceding to the French initiative and would prefer to enter negotiations with the USA to remain within the ambit of the US nuclear umbrella within the NATO alliance. The opening of Poland to dialogue with France on this issue has been announced by Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk. Controversy and criticism have been sparked within the country by this statement. Marcin Przydacz, leader of the International Policy Office, stated that President Narowcki had not been informed of these talks. Furthermore, he affirmed that it would be better to negotiate with the United States, as it is perceived as having real and credible nuclear power and capabilities. Members of the opposition who are more conservative in their political beliefs have expressed their support for the statements made by Przydacz. They have asserted that Poland should accord the American sharing programme a higher priority and have made an appeal for more information regarding any agreements that might result in a diminution of the United States' role in Europe. In recent public-opinion surveys conducted throughout the States, approximately 50% of Poles expressed their support for the acquisition of a nuclear deterrent by Poland (Notes from Poland, 2026).

Moreover, an overview of the Russian perspective is presented. Maria Zakharova, the Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman, branded Macron's comments as highly unsettling turns of events. As per the department, these assertions symbolise a notable prospective broadening of NATO's atomic capacity and might be regarded as a genuine menace should a confrontation arise between NATO and Russia. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that Macron's remarks vindicated Moscow's position that France and Britain should include their nuclear weapons in any future negotiations on the global nuclear balance (Reuters, 2026).

Limits and criticisms

The idea of a possible French nuclear umbrella at the European level is part of the debate on Europe's strategic autonomy and its stability to guarantee its own security in an international context that poses new challenges every day. In this scenario, the French arsenal is one of the few autonomous strategic resources within the European Union (EU); France is the only country to possess nuclear weapons within the EU at present. At a time when the debate on the future of security has once again taken centre stage, a possible French deterrent could offer European countries an additional form of strategic guarantee, in accordance with the latest developments within the CSDP. Advancements such as the implementation of the Strategic Compass and endeavours to fortify the EU's defence potential. It would also be useful for France to strengthen its position as a military power within the EU. The launch of the French project could lead to greater nuclear cooperation between states, which would stimulate broader integration in the field of defence, where the Union is known to encounter difficulties.

However, there are also clear limitations, such as the issue of sharing political and operational control of weapons. In addition to the difference in perception

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of the threat among European countries. Some Central and Eastern European countries consider the deterrence provided by NATO and the US to be the main pillar of their national security. (Notes from Poland, 2026) The reservations expressed by some States demonstrate that there is a fear that a European initiative could weaken the transatlantic link rather than strengthen collective security. (Euroweekly News, 2026; Notes from Poland, 2026)

The economic and political dimensions of this proposal must also be considered, as it would require a level of financial, military and strategic cooperation that the EU has not yet demonstrated it can achieve on a stable basis.

Conclusion

The French proposal to expand its nuclear deterrence at the European level represents a strong and significant sign of progress in the debate on the continent's security. However, transforming this proposal into a real shared security system appears, at least in the short term, particularly complex to implement. The differences between States, the role of NATO and the political implications represent major obstacles that are difficult to overcome.

Rather than an immediately achievable project, the discussion raised by Paris could contribute to redefining the strategic balance within Europe in the future.

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