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## Nuclear deterrence in Europe's western area

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### *Nuclear deterrence in Europe's western area*

#### *Abstract:*

*The recent British announcement to increase its nuclear capabilities, due to the future global competitive environment, reveals a debate that has been brewing since transatlantic link's weakening. France's choices, as the only European Union player with its own nuclear capabilities, are intended as a deterrence contribution within the old continent. The possibility for certain European allies to share nuclear resources with the US is a deterrence tool, but it could also be a source of tension. This scenario poses a serious problem for the stability of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Regime, following the INF Treaty collapse has turned European territory into a chessboard with a larger number of pieces. From the outcome of the next Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference will depend whether the game becomes more aggressive.*

#### *Keywords:*

*Nuclear proliferation, strategic autonomy, deterrence, nuclear sharing*

**\*NOTE:** The ideas contained in the **Analysis Papers** are the responsibility of their authors. They do not necessarily reflect the thinking of the IEEE or the Ministry of Defence.

## La disuasión nuclear en el área occidental europea

### Resumen:

El reciente anuncio británico de incrementar sus capacidades nucleares, debido al futuro entorno competitivo global, destapa un debate que viene fraguándose desde la debilitación del vínculo trasatlántico. Las opciones de Francia, como el único actor de la Unión Europea con capacidades nucleares propias, se proponen como una contribución a la disuasión dentro del viejo continente. Las posibilidades de determinados aliados europeos para compartir recursos nucleares con EE. UU. son una herramienta de disuasión, pero también podría ser una fuente de tensión. Este escenario se configura como un serio problema para la estabilidad del régimen de no-proliferación nuclear, después de que el colapso del Tratado INF haya convertido al territorio europeo en un tablero con un mayor número de piezas. De los resultados de la próxima conferencia de revisión del Tratado de No-proliferación Nuclear dependerá si la partida se vuelve más agresiva.

### Palabras clave:

Proliferación nuclear, autonomía estratégica, disuasión, intercambio nuclear

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## Introduction

A paper entitled *Global Britain in a competitive age* has recently been published by the United Kingdom: *The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*<sup>1</sup>. The title of the report is suggestive in itself, as the definition of this new era as “competitive” points to a global and regional environment of even greater instability than the world in which we find ourselves immersed.

In this environment of insecurity, in which events are unfolding at a dizzying pace, the main actors seek to find positions of hegemony and secure their areas of influence, while other figures of lesser international relevance want to ensure their survival.

Looking ahead to 2030, the UK is contemplating the growth of conflict and instability in an uncertain environment of possible weapon of mass destruction proliferation<sup>2</sup>. With regards to these weapons, the paper identifies the threat from major nuclear actors, emerging nuclear states and those who promote nuclear terrorism. All of this takes place within an emerging framework of new technologies and development of disruptive combat or terrorist capabilities, which have been integrated into military doctrines and modes of action, to be used for coercive purposes in the international arena<sup>3</sup>.

The termination of the *Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty* in 2019 has put Europeans in a more insecure position vis-à-vis Russia. However, it must be acknowledged that this has not been further exacerbated by the continuation of the *New START Treaty* on strategic nuclear weapons between the Putin and Biden administrations.

The security of the western area of the European continent is supported by the capabilities of NATO and the European Union (EU), with the US, the UK and France as nuclear players, the latter being the only power with nuclear capability within the current

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<sup>1</sup> HM Government. *Global Britain in a competitive age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*. March 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Op. Cit. p. 29.

<sup>3</sup> Op. Cit. p.76

EU territory. However, other national actors, such as Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands and Italy, host facilities where the Americans can store atomic weapons<sup>4</sup>.

The UK's new view of the nuclear threat is in return for improving its own nuclear capabilities, as it can increase its nuclear weapons ceiling by forty percent<sup>5</sup>. This would have a number of consequences, not least that the British would break away from their previous arms reduction commitment under the *Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty* (NPT).

The new British position on the nuclear issue raises the question of whether the other European nuclear player, France, might have a similar vision and whether the other non-nuclear states might share a similar vision of security on the continent.

If so, a series of paths would open up in old Europe leading to new scenarios in which indigenous proliferation, consent to put national defence in the hands of a nuclear actor, latent nuclear capability, shared resources or continuity with the commitment to arms reduction could coexist.

This article will provide an update on the nuclear posture of Western states in Europe and a glimpse of developments towards the options they have in the face of the nuclear threat posed to them.

### **The European nuclear deterrence framework**

Following the nuclear benefits of the end of the Cold War and the beginning of globalisation, Russia's position in relation to its environment changed the paradigms that had been considered until then. Tension between the Russians and Americans in 2008, due to the conflict in Georgia, put an end to this relationship. Subsequently, the situation in Ukraine and especially the annexation of Crimea in 2014 led both the French and the

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<sup>4</sup> DE BOECK, Ann. "Eindelijk zwart op wit: er liggen Amerikaanse kernwapens in België" / Finally in black and white: there are US nuclear weapons in Belgium. DeMorgen, 16 July 2019.

<https://www.demorgen.be/nieuws/eindelijk-zwart-op-wit-er-liggen-amerikaanse-kernwapens-in-belgie~b051dc18/?referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.washingtonpost.com%2F> (accessed on 26/03/2021)

US nuclear weapons in Turkey are not mentioned because they are located in the Asian region of Turkey.

<sup>5</sup> SABBAGH, Dan. "Cap on Trident nuclear warhead stockpile to rise by more than 40%" The Guardian, Mon 15 Mar 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/mar/15/cap-on-trident-nuclear-warhead-stockpile-to-rise-by-more-than-40> (accessed on 26/03/2021)

British to consider modernising their nuclear forces by the late 1920s, with new warhead models as well as a renewed fleet of nuclear submarines (SSBNs)<sup>6</sup>.

NATO's 2018 summit declaration is significant in terms of the design of Europe's nuclear deterrence architecture, emphasising that its strategic forces, especially those of the US, are the supreme guarantee of allied security. They are joined by French and British forces which, in addition to possessing their own deterrent, contribute to that of the Alliance. The existence of these separate decision-making centres complicates the calculations of a potential hostile actor<sup>7</sup>.

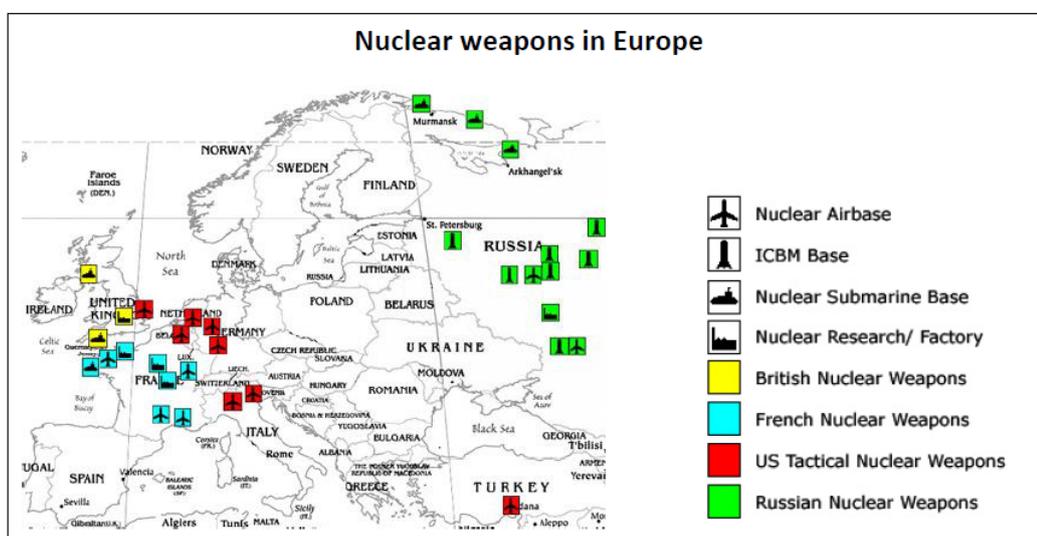


Figure 1: Nuclear weapons in Europe. Source: Basel Peace Office. “Nuclear weapons & Europe: New threats. Emerging solutions”.

<https://www.baselpeaceoffice.org/article/nuclear-weapons-europe-new-threats-emerging-solutions>

(accessed on 29/03/2020)

The UK and France share many common features, as both are permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), as well as founders of NATO, along with the US. They are also middle powers with significant military force projection capabilities. For both, possession of a nuclear weapon constitutes an element of “status” in the global order, while providing them with “life insurance” and freedom of action in the face of pressure from another nuclear power. The perception of this type of threat is equally

<sup>6</sup> GRANHOLM, Niklas; RYDQVIST, John. Nuclear weapons in Europe: British and French deterrence forces. *FOI Swedish Defence Research Agency*, April, 2018. p.10, 20-21.

<sup>7</sup> Brussels Summit Declaration. Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the North Atlantic Council meeting in Brussels on 11-12 July 2018.

[https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_156624.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_156624.htm) (accessed on 29/03/2020)

shared and both identify it with Russia, China to a lesser degree, with the fear of a possible nuclearised Iran further away<sup>8</sup>.

However, the British and French differ in their concept of nuclear independence. For the UK, the manufacture of major components, the possession of a fleet of SSBNs and an autonomous missile launch capability are sufficient. It therefore relies on US support for submarine construction and the supply of *Trident* missiles. In this context, it is logical that the British feel comfortable with their US partners offering their nuclear capabilities to NATO and sitting at the table of the Alliance's *Nuclear Planning Group* (NPG).

For its part, the French view is much more autonomous, seeking to keep its nuclear arsenal at the lowest possible level in relation to the international context, through "strict sufficiency". The French are not part of the NPG and their nuclear forces are not formally assigned to NATO, although the French commitment to the "Alliance's nuclear culture" is considered to contribute to NATO's nuclear deterrent effect<sup>9</sup>.

France's approach to the nuclear dimension is not limited to its strategic autonomy, but within the framework of the EU, it aims to ensure that, following the collapse of the *INF Treaty*, Europe's voice is taken into account in future negotiations, since the disappearance of this treaty directly affects Europeans<sup>10</sup>.

In terms of the nuclear doctrines of both states, the British are closer to the Americans, as they consider a proportional and graduated response in relation to the threat received<sup>11</sup>. For its part, France reserves the right to the first use of nuclear means, especially in the case of a limited "one-off" attack that could demonstrate to an aggressor that "the nature of the conflict has changed and re-establish deterrence"<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> TERTRAIS, Bruno. The European dimension of nuclear deterrence. *Finish Institute on International Affairs*. Working Paper 106. November 2018. p.4.

<sup>9</sup> Elysée. Discours Du Président Emmanuel Macron Sur La Stratégie De Défense Et De Dissuasion Devant Les Stagiaires De La 27ème Promotion De L'école De Guerre. 7 February 2020. <https://www.elysee.fr/front/pdf/elysee-module-15162-fr.pdf> (accessed on 27/03/2021)

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> TERTRAIS, Bruno. The European dimension of nuclear deterrence. Op. Cit. p.5.

<sup>12</sup> MILLS, Claire. The French Nuclear Deterrent. *House of Commons Library*. BRIEFING PAPER Number 4079, 7 October 2020. p.8.

The means the two possess are also different, with the French having “less than 300 warheads”, all of them considered “strategic”, of which 80 percent of the arsenal would correspond to the navy with four *Triomphant-class* SSBNs (each equipped with 16 *M-51* missiles) and a squadron of 10 *Rafale MF3* aircraft, equipped with cruise missiles and capable of operating over the *Charles de Gaulle* aircraft carrier. The French air force has two squadrons, totalling 40 *Rafale F3s*, each equipped with a missile and a nuclear warhead<sup>13</sup>.

For their part, the British media are more modest in terms of head count, with around 120 operational out of the 195 they own. In addition, their only launch vector is their 4 *Vanguard-class* SSBNs, with a capacity of 8 *Trident* missiles and 40 warheads<sup>14</sup>.

At first glance these differences are significant, but they could be explained by the fact that the Trident missile is much more accurate than the *M-51*, so the British would not a priori need airborne platforms to reach their targets<sup>15</sup>. However, in terms of strategic options, the French have a greater number than the UK. This can also be explained by the fact that the British can rely on other options within the NATO framework and their alliance with the Americans. For their part, the French, in order to operate within a framework of independence, need to have at their disposal a wide range of possibilities of an exclusively national character<sup>16</sup>. This gives them a budget that currently exceeds the British budget by 50 percent<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> MILLS, Claire. Nuclear weapons at a glance: France. *House of Commons Library*. Briefing Paper Number 9074, 9 December 2020

<sup>14</sup> MILLS, Claire. Nuclear weapons at a glance: United Kingdom. *House of Commons Library*. Briefing Paper Number 9077, 9 December 2020

<sup>15</sup> TERTRAIS, Bruno; LAWRENCE Freedman. France and the United Kingdom. Edited by Barry Blechman, Stimson Center, 2009. p.11.

<sup>16</sup> TERTRAIS, Bruno. The European dimension of nuclear deterrence. Op. Cit. p.6.

<sup>17</sup> MILLS, Claire. Nuclear weapons at a glance: France. Op. Cit. p. 10; MILLS, Claire. Nuclear weapons at a glance: United Kingdom. Op. Cit. p. 11. France's nuclear deterrence budget is estimated at around 6 billion euros by 2020, constituting 12.5 percent of its defence budget. In contrast, the UK budget was around 2.6 billion - 6 percent of the department's budget.

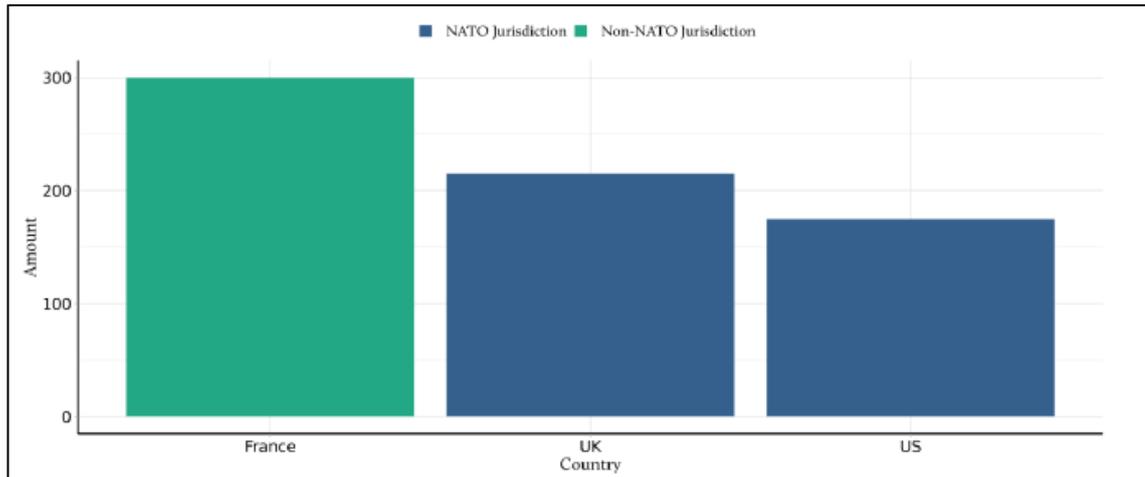


Figure 2: Nuclear weapons in Europe within and outside the framework of NATO's Nuclear Planning Group. Source: ROELEN, Michel; JOVETIC, Mihailo. NATO Nuclear sharing and the future of nuclear deterrence in Europe. *The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies*, 31 October 2018. <https://hcss.nl/report/hcss-snapshot-nato-nuclear-sharing-and-future-nuclear-deterrence-europe> (accessed on 29/03/2020)

## Developments

Two significant developments may have changed the perception of nuclear deterrence on the European continent.

The first came in 2016 when former US President Donald Trump said that the US did not have to be the guarantor of Europe's security and that its European partners should be the ones to contribute significantly to their own security within the NATO framework. This broke with the position of the previous Obama Administration, which had assured that "through thick and thin Europe can count on the United States"<sup>18</sup>.

The second development was the termination in early 2019 of the *INF Treaty* between the Russians and the Americans. The treaty had so far succeeded in eliminating all ground-based systems with ranges between 500 and 5500 kilometres. The termination of the treaty came as a blow to the Europeans, who feared that their territory would once again become a nuclear chessboard with more pieces in the game.

<sup>18</sup> BANDOW, Doug. "Donald Trump Asks: Why Should America Defend Europeans Who Won't Defend Themselves?" *Forbes*, 1 Aug 2016. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/dougbandow/2016/08/01/donald-trump-asks-why-should-america-defend-europeans-who-wont-defend-themselves/?sh=bc3de8471aba> (accessed on 27/03/2020)

So far, NATO has not deployed such capabilities in Europe, but this opens the door to many other measures, including the deployment of conventional forces and anti-missile systems in NATO countries close to Russia. In the meantime, the situation for the Americans is not as uncertain as it is for Europeans, thanks to the fact that one of the Biden Administration's first actions was to extend the *New START Treaty* on strategic nuclear weapons<sup>19</sup>.

Anticipating the future of the US position, President Macron called for the construction of a "real European army" to protect itself from Russia, China and the US. Then-President Trump criticised the French position, insisting that Europeans should pay their fair share in NATO<sup>20</sup>. The rift between the two continued, with the French president declaring that "NATO is brain-dead" during the organisation's 2019 summit on the occasion of its 70th anniversary<sup>21</sup>.

However, despite the change in the White House under the new President Biden, Europeans know that the old liberal order was outdated and that the "Pax Americana" will not happen again. It was clear, after three different US presidencies, that US interests are primarily focused on China, and that Europeans would be supported as long as they shared the US position<sup>22</sup>.

On Russia, the Europeans differ in their approach to the US, as the latter continues to take a hard line, as evidenced by President Biden's declarations towards Russia concerning orchestrated assassinations and intervention in the US elections.<sup>23</sup>. However,

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<sup>19</sup> For more information on the extension of this treaty, please read the following documents: CASTRO TORRES, José Ignacio. El tratado New START: contener al elefante negro.

IEEE Analysis Paper 02/2021.

[http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs\\_analisis/2021/DIEEEA02\\_2021\\_CASTRO\\_NewStart.pdf](http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2021/DIEEEA02_2021_CASTRO_NewStart.pdf) and also CASTRO TORRES, José Ignacio. El tratado New START: Contener al elefante negro (II).

IEEE Briefing Paper 01/2021.

[http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs\\_informativos/2021/DIEEEI01\\_2021\\_JOSCAS\\_NewStart.pdf](http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_informativos/2021/DIEEEI01_2021_JOSCAS_NewStart.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> MORIN, Rebecca "Trump calls Macron's comments on building a European army to defend against US 'insulting'". Politico, 9 November 2018. <https://www.politico.eu/article/trump-calls-macrons-comments-on-building-a-european-army-to-defend-against-u-s-insulting/> (accessed on 28/03/2021)

<sup>21</sup> CHAVEROU, Éric. "L'OTAN en état de "mort cérébrale" ?" France Culture, 03/12/2019.

<https://www.franceculture.fr/geopolitique/lotan-en-etat-de-mort-cerebrale> (accessed on 28/03/2021)

<sup>22</sup>HASTINGS, Max. "What Biden's Win Means for Europe" Bloomberg, 8 November 2020.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2020-11-08/trump-s-gone-but-europe-needs-self-defense-against-russia-china> (accessed on 28/03/2021)

<sup>23</sup> McEVOY, Jemima. "Biden Doesn't Regret Calling Putin A 'Killer,' White House Says" Forbes, 18 Mar 2021. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jemimamcevoy/2021/03/18/biden-doesnt-regret-calling-putin-a-killer-white-house-says/?sh=ac71137a4c29a> (accessed on 28/03/2021)

in the common NATO context the sentiment is one of fear towards Russia, defining its actions as threats and hostilities. In order to reach a final state of understanding, the Allies wish to pursue a dual strategy of deterrence and dialogue. To this end, in addition to remaining open to dialogue, they must maintain adequate conventional and nuclear capabilities<sup>24</sup>.

Against this backdrop of disagreement, at the end of March 2021, Biden met with European leaders by videoconference, expressing his desire to revitalise relations. This wish would be overshadowed by statements by German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who said that the EU should learn to trust itself when referring to EU policies towards China and the US.

### **Europe's path to nuclear deterrence.**

The French reaction in 2020, shortly after Brexit, could be seen in President Macron's words corroborating the distancing from US positions and transcending into the nuclear field.

For Macron, the idea of a French nuclear deterrent would be key to Europe's collective security. To this end, it called for a strategic dialogue with its European partners, with whom it would also engage in a multilateral nuclear disarmament agenda, as this could not be left to the Americans, Russians and Chinese without the Europeans. In this regard, one of the French president's concerns was the termination of the *INF Treaty* and the negotiation of a new one with the signature of the Europeans, as it concerned his territory<sup>25</sup>.

The participation of other EU countries in military exercises conducted by French deterrence forces could be key to such deterrence. However, the French president was unwilling to share any military nuclear assets<sup>26</sup>.

President Macron's choices appear to be the result of the limited room for manoeuvre he has with his partners and allies, since within the EU decisions on common foreign and

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<sup>24</sup> VV. AA. NATO 2030: United for a New Era. Independent Reflection Group, established by the NATO Secretary General following the December 2019 London Leaders meeting. 25 November 2020. pp.25,26.

<sup>25</sup> Elysée. Speech by President Emmanuel Macron on defence and dissuasion strategy in front of the students of the 27th promotion of the war college. Op. Cit.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

security policy are taken by consensus among all EU members. It should also be borne in mind that the EU is compartmentalised into pro- and anti-nuclear weapons states, as well as NATO and non-NATO members. In this conglomeration of views, NATO countries received the reassuring message that both the Alliance and the EU will remain the pillars of Europe's collective defence. For their part, the non-NATO states were equally satisfied with what is specified in Article 42.6 of the Lisbon Treaty, so the French project would not require the participation of all EU members<sup>27</sup>.

Almost a year after President Macron's speech, the publication of the new British document announced by President Johnson has made it clear that for both European countries the strengthening of the nuclear deterrent is of paramount importance. However, the British go even further than maintaining and modernising their nuclear arsenal. The 40 percent increase in the number of nuclear weapons is a milestone because for the first time in thirty years the UK has decided to increase its number of nuclear weapons.

So far the British had gone from the 500 warheads they possessed during the Cold War to a ceiling of 225 in their 2010 *Strategic Defence and Security Review*<sup>28</sup>. The same document envisaged a reduction to 180 by mid-2020, a number corroborated by the 2015 *National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review*<sup>29</sup>.

In light of this significant change in trend, it is worth considering what has happened at the global level to change British perceptions of the threats that could be posed to them. In this respect, they could consider a dystopian future in which they would be involved in a complex and competitive scenario vis-à-vis Russia and China, while emerging powers such as Iran or North Korea could pose significant crises. At the same time, non-state actors are seen as other threats<sup>30</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup> TREZZA, Carlo. "Macron's vision: a European role for the French nuclear deterrent", European Leadership Network, 31 March 2020. <https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/commentary/macrons-vision-a-european-role-for-the-french-nuclear-deterrent/> (accessed on 29/03/2021)

<sup>28</sup> HM Government. *Securing Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The Strategic Defence and Security Review*. Presented to Parliament by the Prime Minister by Command of Her Majesty. October 2010. p. 39.

<sup>29</sup> HM Government. *National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015. A Secure and Prosperous United Kingdom*. Presented to Parliament by the Prime Minister by Command of Her Majesty. November 2015. p. 34.

<sup>30</sup> HM Government. *Global Britain in a competitive age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*. Op. Cit. pp. 28-31.

Because of this depressing future scenario, the British, in addition to increasing their nuclear arsenal, are also considering changing their employment options. The intention a priori is not to use it against any non-nuclear-weapon or *NPT*-compliant state, but this intention could be modified if they suffer an aggression comparable to other weapons of mass destruction, such as biological or chemical weapons or certain emerging technologies<sup>31</sup>.

In the face of this uncertain future, the UK seeks the support of its partners and allies within the NATO framework or its bilateral agreements with the US and France. It therefore recognises the nuclear character of the Atlantic Alliance as long as nuclear weapons exist. It also relies on the 1958 *Mutual Defence Agreement* with the Americans, the next renewal of which is scheduled for 2024. As for France, it is inconceivable that the vital interests of one would not directly affect those of the other. In addition, both States will continue to cooperate on nuclear issues within the framework of the *Teutates Agreement*<sup>32</sup>.

### Dual capacity in non-nuclear states

The case of Germany is significant, as it is a non-nuclear state, but with an important specific weight in the European and global environment. According to former German foreign minister Sigmar Gabriel, Europeans “are too weak when it comes to defining common interests”, given that there are players in the world who are fighting to assert their own interests and that “in a world full of carnivores, vegetarians have a hard time”. In the past, Europe's defence could be entrusted to the US, but if it withdraws that power vacuum will be filled by other powers, so we may be facing a rivalry between democratic and authoritarian countries, which are already trying to divide the EU<sup>33</sup>.

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<sup>31</sup>HM Government. *Global Britain in a competitive age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*. Op. Cit. p. 77.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. For further information on the "Teutates Agreement" we suggest reading the document Accounting Officer Assessment for the TEUTATES Programme [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/778596/20190212\\_Accounting\\_Officer\\_Assessment\\_for\\_the\\_TEUTATES\\_programme\\_MSU\\_4.2.4.6-Min\\_DP-Penny\\_Young.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/778596/20190212_Accounting_Officer_Assessment_for_the_TEUTATES_programme_MSU_4.2.4.6-Min_DP-Penny_Young.pdf) (accessed on 30/03/2021)

<sup>33</sup> Federal Foreign Office News & Service Newsroom. “In a world full of carnivores, vegetarians have a very tough time of it”. <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/gabriel-spiegel/1212494> (accessed on 30/03/2021)

After Donald Trump won the US election, Germans wondered what they would do if their American partners reduced their security guarantees. Three options were discussed in the German intellectual sphere, which were subsequently discarded but could return to the table depending on developments. The first would be to seek a national deterrent of its own; the second would be a pan-European deterrent; and the third would be to maintain a latent nuclear technological capability, without exceeding the military threshold. This debate would be reopened again after President Trump's statements at the 2018 Alliance summit and the high-level meeting in Helsinki between Trump and Putin<sup>34</sup>.

The fact is that both in Germany and in other European Alliance states, on whose territories US nuclear weapons exist, the current debate is the question of nuclear sharing. According to NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, such an exchange is "a multilateral arrangement that ensures that the benefits, responsibilities and risks of nuclear deterrence are shared among allies". This would present an additional deterrent to Russia through the *Tornado IDS* aircraft of the German *JaBoG 33* squadron, which could operate with the 20 *B61* nuclear bombs held by the US *702nd Munitions Support Squadron* at Büchel Air Base<sup>35</sup>.

In mid-2020, dual-capability maintenance (DCA) was put back on the political agenda for the future renewal of Tornado aircraft. However, many experts favoured German continuity, since, among other reasons, this constituted a deterrent to Russia by preventing its "strategic dominance and escalation control". On the other hand, the DCA prevented proliferation, as Germany and other partners would thus not equip themselves with exclusively national capabilities<sup>36</sup>.

Moreover, a German withdrawal could mean a break with the Americans and DCA capabilities could be transferred to other countries, such as Poland, thus dangerously

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<sup>34</sup> KÜHN, Ulrich; VOLPE, Tristan; THOMPSON, Bert. "Tracking the German Nuclear Debate". Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 15 August 2018. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/08/15/tracking-german-nuclear-debate-pub-72884> (accessed on 30/03/2021)

<sup>35</sup> SPRENGER, Sebastian. "NATO chief backs Germany's vow to keep war-ready US nukes". Defense News, 11 May 2020. <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2020/05/11/nato-chief-backs-german-vow-to-keep-war-ready-us-nukes/> (accessed on 30/03/2021)

<sup>36</sup> BECKER, Sophia; MÖLLING, Christian. (Nuclear) Sharing is Caring: European Views on NATO Nuclear Deterrence and the German Nuclear Sharing Debate. *German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP)*. Report No. 10, June 2020. Berlin 2020. p. 10

increasing tension with Russia. If other states such as Belgium or Italy were to follow suit and move tactical nuclear capabilities eastwards, tension with Russia would grow exponentially<sup>37</sup>.

## Conclusions

After studying the French, British and German cases, it is clear that their respective concepts of nuclear deterrence go beyond their vital interests and have a European dimension. However, the British see this dimension within the framework of their commitments to the Atlantic Alliance and their US partners, while France considers that the mere existence of its national nuclear deterrent in itself contributes to Europe's defence. For its part, maintaining dual capabilities in Germany avoids the risk of proliferation while contributing to NATO deterrence without increasing tensions with Russia.

However, all future scenarios point to increased international competition and competition for certain areas of power. Against this backdrop of uncertainty, there are clear and growing fears that certain actors will occupy quotas of power that could not be assumed by those who consider themselves threatened.

It seems that Europe risks having to face its fate without the unconditional support of its US partners, who are increasingly concerned about China's emerging power. The cooling of the transatlantic bond and the disparity of views towards the UK and the EU mean that relations between the allies are not as smooth as before. If this were to continue and the US were to withdraw the US-held tactical nuclear bombs from European Alliance countries, the situation would be one of serious security deterioration for the EU.

Worse still would be the case if other Eastern European allies were to take in US nuclear weapons with dual capability, as Russia could interpret this as increased pressure on its immediate periphery, leading to a foreseeable exponential escalation of tension on the European continent.

The fact that there are different decision-making centres in the field of nuclear deterrence is often interpreted as a factor of strength in the face of an adversary that does not know

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<sup>37</sup> Op. Cit. p.5.

how its potential opponents will react. Despite this, and in an environment where relations between European partners and allies are not as good as they used to be, there is also a risk of taking decisions that are more individual in nature, but which drag others into very dangerous confrontational scenarios.

Uncertainty, lack of agreement and potential security threats could lead to a nuclear proliferation situation unseen since the end of the Cold War. Arguably, the nuclear race in this century had shifted to improving weapons capabilities and delivery vehicles, but the UK's intentions reopen the Pandora's Box of nuclear proliferation. In an environment of discord between non-nuclear and nuclear countries over the Nuclear Weapons Ban Treaty, the next *NPT* review summit, scheduled for August 2021, could end in an even more resounding failure than the last one in 2015. In such a case the nuclear non-proliferation regime would be dangerously shaken.

Faced with this dark and uncertain future, it is becoming increasingly necessary to seek multiple channels of communication between the different actors in order to reduce the growing nuclear tension that is occurring on European territory. It is not too late to do so and this pressure relief could redirect many of the efforts that will be required for other global scenarios, which will also be very demanding. It should be borne in mind that if in much worse circumstances, such as those of the Cold War, this was achieved, it is also possible now to reach spaces for negotiation and agreement.

Nevertheless, in these times it also seems appropriate to align the strategic interests of the most powerful actors with one's own. This is why the presence of US and other Alliance military forces is considered so important in certain countries. Equally, national contributions to common security are a return on national security itself. Likewise, any shared interest through the different tools of power can be a spur for the reinforcement of security measures.

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