

Trump Prompts European Calls for a Homegrown Nuclear Umbrella

The U.S. is the biggest nuclear power in Europe, but doubts about Washington's commitment has leaders questioning their weapons arrangements



A Rafale fighter jet in France prepared to take off for a daily NATO border watch flight over Poland in March 2022. The Rafale can carry nuclear weapons. PHILIPPE LOPEZ/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

By [Daniel Michaels](#), [Noemie Bisserbe](#) and [Michael R. Gordon](#)

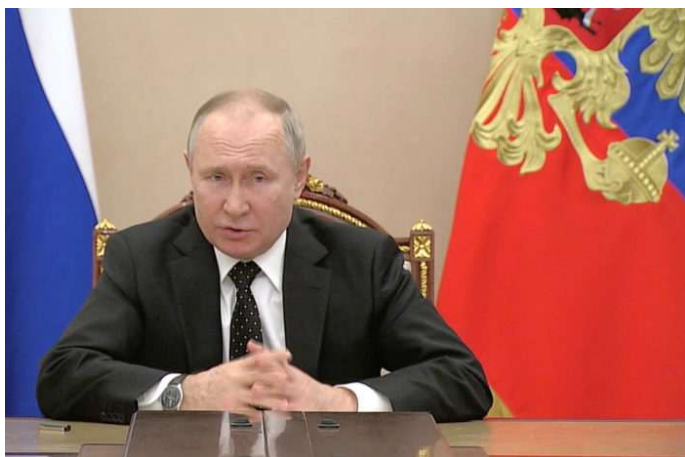
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PARIS—Two weeks after Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine, French President Emmanuel Macron descended 20 stories beneath Paris to send a message to Moscow.

He entered France's nuclear bunker deep under his regal presidential palace to lead an exercise dubbed Poker. Officials had chosen that night, in March 2022, for its clear skies. They wanted to respond to Russian President [Vladimir Putin](#), who days earlier had made a thinly veiled threat to the West by putting [his country's nuclear forces](#) on high alert.

Commanders waited for a Russian spy satellite to pass over their distant airfield and launched drills they were confident the Kremlin would watch, according to French officials. Rafale fighter jets took off carrying dummy weapons to simulate attacks on an unnamed country—part of a high-stakes pantomime that strategists call nuclear signaling.

France is unusual in its ability to send such signals. Of the world's eight declared nuclear powers, France and Britain are the only ones in Europe. The biggest nuclear power in the region is the U.S.—North Atlantic Treaty Organization allies Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium and Turkey host American nuclear weapons on bases within their borders.



Russian President Vladimir Putin spoke about putting nuclear deterrence forces on high alert on Feb. 27, 2022. Photo: RUSSIAN PRESS POOL/REUTERS

Now U.S. protection is looking increasingly shaky after President Trump's diplomatic opening to Russia, temporary halt of aid to Ukraine and antagonism toward Europe. That's led to growing calls for a European nuclear umbrella tapping the arsenals of France and Britain, independent of the U.S.

"Sharing nuclear weapons is an issue that we need to talk about," German Chancellor-designate Friedrich Merz said recently, referring to other European countries. Merz and Macron have met at least three times since Merz won elections in November, though neither side has said if they discussed nuclear weapons.

Creating a European nuclear capability would upend decades-old systems and procedures established by the U.S. within NATO during the Cold War. It would be expensive, technically demanding, take years to fully implement and require a delicate navigation of global nuclear-arms treaties already battered by upstart powers including North Korea and Iran. It would also force European countries to make tough choices about sharing sovereignty.

The Trump administration shows no sign of wanting to relinquish its dominance of Europe's nuclear posture. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth said at NATO headquarters earlier this year that Europe must "take ownership of conventional security on the continent"—with "conventional security" meaning nonnuclear arms.



A U.S. B-1B Lancer and B-52 Stratofortress, escorted by Swedish Jas 39 Gripen, pass over Stockholm in a joint exercise in March 2024. Photo: Leonhard Foeger/Reuters

As Hegseth visited Brussels, two U.S. B-52 Stratofortress heavy bombers—America's most iconic hydrogen-bomb carrier—arrived at a British airfield to conduct training runs with allied fighter jets as far away as Turkey.

"It's nice to see B-52s flying over Stockholm, but that alone isn't nuclear deterrence," said Minna Alander, an associate fellow at British think tank Chatham House. "Deterrence depends on the political commitment of the U.S. president," said Alander, a Finn who lives in Stockholm and noted an upsurge in talk of nuclear deterrence and even the concept of a Nordic atomic bomb.

Years of scorn

At a recent meeting at NATO headquarters, Polish President Andrzej Duda said that "any nuclear umbrella will benefit Polish security." Cooperating with NATO ally France on the issues is "absolutely obvious and natural," he said. Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen also refused to exclude European nuclear-arms cooperation when asked about it by reporters.

Germany since the 1950s has allowed the U.S. to base nuclear weapons on its territory and German officials have said they want to maintain that protection as long as possible, even if similar arrangements were made with France or the U.K.

The American nuclear arms in Europe remain under U.S. control and are carried on U.S. planes by U.S. crews under U.S. command, though they could be provided to non-nuclear allies for use during time of war under NATO oversight.

For Macron and his compatriots, who have long urged Europe to develop security options independent of the U.S., the shift comes as a vindication after years of scorn.

“Until now, French proposals were met with little response, except for the occasional amused sigh that said: There go those French again, feeling indispensable,” said Jean-Louis Lozier, a former French Navy officer who commanded two ballistic missile submarines and headed the army’s nuclear forces division.

Swapping nuclear protector states wouldn’t be easy, even within NATO. Britain can launch nuclear weapons only from submarines. French nuclear arms would need extensive redesigning to be launched from non-French planes or subs, say specialists—if France were to even allow such an arrangement. Macron has said that the decision to strike would always be in the hands of the French president.

To stay compliant with international agreements including the 1970 Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons—through which 191 countries have pledged to prevent the spread of nuclear arms—command and control over French or British nukes would need to remain with Paris or London, even on allies’ territory. It was one thing for Europeans to accept Washington’s nuclear control during the Cold War, but ceding a degree of sovereignty to a neighboring European peer today could prove politically fraught.

And all those complexities presume France and Britain have nuclear weapons to spare—which they don’t.

Failed tests

Britain during World War II helped initiate the Manhattan Project, which invented the atomic bomb in 1945. It later developed its own bomb, becoming the third atomic-weapon state after the U.S. and Soviet Union. Since then, its nuclear-weapons fortunes have faded.

Britain today relies solely on four submarines to carry its nuclear warheads. It has the smallest nuclear arsenal of the major nuclear nations, with around 250 warheads. The British government says its aim is to maintain “a minimum, credible, independent nuclear deterrent.” Yet London struggles to manage its nuclear force.



The HMS Vengeance, a British Royal Navy submarine that carries the Trident ballistic missile. Photo: BRITISH MOD/EPA

Britain’s top military brass last year gathered on a submarine to watch a nuclear-missile test-firing. The Trident was supposed to soar several thousand miles into the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. Instead, it misfired and splashed straight into the sea.

The test before that didn’t go any better. In 2016 an unarmed missile launched off the coast of Florida and programmed to fly toward Africa instead headed toward the U.S., veering so dangerously off course that commanders triggered its self-destruct mechanism.

A close alliance with the U.S. has allowed Britain to run its nuclear deterrent as cheaply as possible. Britain leases from the U.S. the ballistic missiles that carry its nuclear warheads. Those Trident missiles are test-fired from British submarines near Cape Canaveral under American supervision and are serviced at a base in Georgia. Many of the components inside U.K. nuclear submarines carrying its bombs are bought off the shelf from U.S. vendors. Britain's own nuclear warhead is closely based on the design of the U.S. W76 warhead, introduced when Jimmy Carter was president. The U.S. shares nuclear targeting information with the U.K. for all of Russia.

London is now pursuing a costly and delayed upgrade whose pricetag risks weakening the rest of its military. It is replacing its Vanguard-class submarines, which date to the 1990s, and upgrading its nuclear warheads, for which it has allocated around £100 billion (about \$129 billion) between 2023 and 2033. Costs have increased sharply in recent years and politicians now must choose between nuclear and conventional forces.

The debate cuts to the essence of why countries have nuclear weapons.



British Prime Minister Keir Starmer and Defense Secretary John Healey, center left and right, looked at a submarine model on March 20. Photo: Oli Scarff/PRESS POOL

Washington and Moscow in the 1950s stumbled into the Cold War nuclear arms race as each developed weapons that one-upped the other in range, accuracy and number. Both explored options to use nuclear weapons at the outset of a war—particularly in the U.S.'s case to compensate for the perceived Soviet-bloc advantage in conventional forces—and as retribution for an attack. Building systems that could deliver a second strike demanded increasingly resilient and undetectable platforms including rockets, submarines and stealth aircraft.

European countries don't want first-strike capabilities. What they seek from nuclear weapons is the deterrence that comes from the Kremlin knowing that Europeans could inflict horrific damage if Russia launched a nuclear first-strike. When France developed its nuclear weapons in the 1950s—in defiance of the U.S.—President Charles de Gaulle was quoted as saying the bombs only needed to “tear the arm off the Russian bear,” not destroy it.

France has continued to invest billions of dollars annually to maintain a nuclear arsenal estimated at 290 warheads, operated independently of the U.S. France produces all necessary components domestically.

As with the British, only a portion of the French sea-based nuclear force is deployed at any given time as the rest of the submarine fleet undergoes maintenance or training.

President Trump halted Ukraine military aid after a tense meeting with President Zelensky. WSJ's Daniel Michaels explains how Europe is trying to back Kyiv and shore up its defenses without Washington. Photo Illustration: JJ Lin

France reminds Russia of its power by conducting its Poker nuclear exercises every few months, dispatching Rafale jets with dummy hydrogen bombs strapped under their wings.

Britain, though, can't engage in nuclear signaling like France because each time one of its submarines surfaces, its location is disclosed, making it a potential target. Still, Russia knows that French and U.K. subs lurk in the sea, posing a threat.

U.S. backstop

Unlike the vast nuclear arsenals that Washington and Moscow developed, those in France and Britain were supplemental to America's nuclear umbrella over Europe. They provided an extra layer of security and stature for two countries that also have permanent seats on the United Nations Security Council—and uncertainty for Russia.

“The U.K. and France nuclear strategy was always predicated on a U.S. nuclear backstop,” said Pranay Vaddi, who served as the top nuclear expert on former President Joe Biden's National Security Council. “They've built forces with the assumption that the U.S. strategic arsenal is committed to their defense as well, and U.S. conventional and nuclear forces in Europe would be engaged in defense of NATO from Russian attack.”

Some former Pentagon officials say that the French and British nuclear arsenals would need to undergo an extensive multibillion-dollar upgrade if the Europeans' goal was to match the flexibility of the U.S. nuclear arsenal. A particular concern, they say, is that the British and French nuclear forces currently have few, if any, low-yield weapons that could be used to deter or respond to a small Russian nuclear attack in the hope of avoiding further escalation.

Other experts say that their current forces may suffice, especially if France and Britain make explicit that they're being committed to NATO's defense and integrated into the alliance's military planning.

“A couple of hundred nuclear weapons is a greater destructive force than the planet has ever seen,” said Jon Wolfsthal of the Federation of American Scientists, who served as a senior official on former President Barack Obama's National Security Council.

Whether the U.S. would launch nuclear weapons in response to a Russian nuclear strike on Europe has always been an unknown, because it could prompt Moscow to strike America, said James Davis, chair of international relations at the University of St. Gallen in Switzerland.

Would the U.S. risk sacrificing New York as revenge for the nuking of London or Paris? Perhaps not, Europeans have quietly worried.

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With European nuclear sharing, the question becomes: Would France sacrifice Paris as revenge for a Russian strike on Prague?

“In a way it's easier for the Europeans,” said Davis, because a nuclear strike on a European target could irradiate much of the continent.

What a purely European nuclear deterrent might look like is only now coming under discussion. Whether the U.S. would accept it is uncertain. Discussions won't move quickly.

French Senator Cédric Perrin, who heads the chamber's foreign and defense committee, said European countries could help pay for France's nuclear force, which last year cost roughly \$6.6 billion in upkeep.

French nuclear protection, Perrin said, “comes at a cost.”