The Role of French Nuclear Deterrence in Fostering a New European Strategic Culture for Genuine European Strategic Autonomy An executive summary of a paper by General Jean-Marc Vigilant, published by IRIS May 2026. Â

Context and Purpose

Europe has absorbed a dual geostrategic shock: Russia's ongoing aggression against Ukraine, prosecuted under the shadow of nuclear deterrence, and the increasingly visible divergence between American and European strategic interests. Against this backdrop, the erosion of international law and the return of Great Power competition challenge the traditional European pacifism born from the near self-destruction of the first half of the twentieth century, while international security institutions — foremost the UN — no longer fully perform their role of regulating interstate relations and resolving conflicts peacefully.

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Vigilant's central argument is that France's decades-long experience of building strategic autonomy through nuclear deterrence offers a model and an intellectual framework that could help European partners develop a genuine common strategic culture — one that must, in his view, incorporate a nuclear dimension.

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The Historical Origins of French Nuclear Deterrence

The origins of France's decision to acquire a nuclear deterrent date back to World War II. In 1940, France collapsed within weeks — not merely a military defeat but a major strategic shock, revealing that alliances of the time did not guarantee national survival. The liberation of France in 1944 was carried out under American leadership, without France being considered a major strategic player.

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With the first use of atomic bombs in 1945, France decided three months later to establish the French Atomic Energy Commission (CEA) to master nuclear energy. In 1954, the political decision was taken to launch a military nuclear programme in the interest of technological sovereignty and strategic autonomy.

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The Suez Crisis of 1956 proved decisive in confirming French thinking. After Egypt nationalised the Suez Canal, France and the United Kingdom intervened militarily and regained control, but under pressure from the Soviet Union and the United States they were forced to withdraw. The message was stark: American interests could diverge from those of France, and Washington could compel its allies to act against their own will.

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Under de Gaulle, France formalised this cross-party consensus. France became a nuclear power in 1960 with the first detonation of a French nuclear bomb at Reggane in Algeria. However, during the 1961 meeting between de Gaulle and Kennedy, the US flatly refused France's requests for genuine nuclear sharing, reflecting the desire to retain exclusive control and fear of proliferation. This refusal confirmed that nuclear decision-making cannot be shared. In 1966, de Gaulle withdrew France from NATO's command structure, disapproving of the US nuclear doctrine of "graduated response" which could lead to a limited nuclear conflict on European soil — this was not about leaving the Atlantic Alliance, but about cooperating without becoming completely dependent on the American ally.

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French Nuclear Doctrine: Core Principles

The definition of French nuclear doctrine provided by President Macron in 2020 remains true to its original spirit: any adversary contemplating an attack on France's vital interests must know that French nuclear forces are capable of inflicting absolutely unacceptable damage on its key political, military, and economic centres. The term "vital interests" is deliberately vague, complicating the adversary's calculations — strategic ambiguity is a central element of deterrence.

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French nuclear deterrence does not exist to defeat or conquer, but to prevent any aggression that would jeopardise the very existence of the Nation. The atomic bomb is not just another weapon in the military arsenal; it is first and foremost a political weapon whose objective is to preserve peace by making war an irrational option.

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Vigilant identifies three factors whose combination determines deterrence credibility: political will (regular presidential addresses), technological and industrial capability (ongoing scientific research and a comprehensive Defence Technological and Industrial Base), and operational capability (sustained readiness and successful demonstrations). If any one of these factors is lacking, deterrence fails to fulfil its mission.

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France currently maintains two complementary components. The visible and reversible airborne deterrent comprises 40 Rafale fighter jets, ASMP-A near-hypersonic missiles with highly manoeuvrable, complex trajectories, and 15 multi-role tanker transports — capable of delivering a nuclear warning strike equivalent to up to 20 times Hiroshima. The invisible, autonomous, and survivable sea-based component — four SSBNs — guarantees a second-strike capability with unacceptable damage equivalent to 1,000 times Hiroshima.

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A notable doctrinal distinction from NATO is France's rejection of tactical nuclear weapons. President Mitterrand decided in 1984 to abandon the concept of tactical nuclear weapons, replacing it with an optional, unique and non-renewable "nuclear warning strike." France rejects the notion of continuity between conventional and nuclear warfare: the use of a nuclear weapon does not merely alter the intensity of the war — it changes its very nature.

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Macron's March 2026 Speech: Forward Deterrence

President Macron delivered his speech on 2 March 2026 from the Île Longue SSBN base, acknowledging the sudden hardening of the geostrategic context and the erosion of international arms control frameworks. His message was intended for three distinct audiences: the French people, to reassure them of continued protection; strategic competitors, to remind them of France's determination; and European allies, to clarify the European dimension of French nuclear deterrence.

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On modernisation, the speech announced the renewal of weapons systems — including third-generation SSBNs, M51.4 ballistic missiles, and the ASN4G hypersonic nuclear air-launched missile — along with a deliberate increase in the number of nuclear warheads and an end to transparency, with the aim of increasing ambiguity and ensuring the ability to penetrate enemy defences even in the face of collusion between multiple adversaries.

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The most significant new development is the concept of "forward deterrence." This new concept — a kind of extended deterrence — is a gradual approach to cooperation with European allies, enabling their participation with conventional forces in nuclear deterrence exercises and, if necessary, the ad hoc deployment of elements of French strategic forces on their territory. The objective is to create European strategic depth by dispersing air capabilities across the continent to complicate the adversary's calculations.

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Eight countries — Germany, Belgium, Denmark, Greece, the Netherlands, Poland, Sweden and the United Kingdom — have already agreed to begin exchanges at the political level, in accordance with the NPT. Forward deterrence establishes a logic of "mutual strategic support": French deterrence strengthens the protection of European allies, while their commitment bolsters the credibility and effectiveness of Europe's collective security posture.

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Three identified areas in which Europeans can engage to support French nuclear deterrence are: early warning, extended air defence, and deep precision strike.

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Critically, Vigilant stresses that this cooperation does not create a two-speed Europe. As the scope of France's vital interests has deliberately not been defined, it is naturally the whole of the European continent that will benefit from the establishment of forward deterrence — there is no part of Europe that is protected and another part that is not.

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The Broader Case for a European Strategic Culture

Vigilant's deeper argument is that engaging with nuclear deterrence thinking is itself a school of strategic thought. Reflecting on nuclear deterrence has a profound educational dimension for Europeans, leading them to anticipate the improbable, analyse complexity, make decisions under conditions of uncertainty, and act in the face of adversity — this intellectual approach represents a powerful school of strategic thought for dealing with strategic ambiguity.

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There can be no true European strategic autonomy without incorporating the nuclear dimension. France's initiative to foster political discussions on nuclear deterrence with its European allies is likely to encourage a clearer awareness of their genuine strategic interests and strengthen their ability to think and act more strategically in an increasingly uncertain and confrontational international environment.

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The paper closes by echoing Macron's own formulation: "To be free, one must be feared. To be feared, one must be powerful. To be powerful, one must be more united." French deterrence, in Vigilant's framing, emerges as a structural pillar of European security, complementary to NATO, but without the pooling of nuclear decision-making — national sovereignty for effective decision-making, European solidarity in its effects.