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Sovereignty and security require de-risking from America

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Abstract

Since the end of the Cold War, Europe's security has never been more precarious. Europeans find themselves squeezed between an aggressive Russia and a U.S. protector they depend on with unsettling anxiety. The calamity is self-inflicted as collective Europe would have the means to wean itself off a dependency that compromises the sovereignty of Europe's nation-states. Rather than decoupling, the imperative is to de-risk from America and create a revamped Atlantic alliance based on status parity, with both America and Europe capable of both conventional and nuclear self-defence. A French nuclear commitment to Germany ("Nuclear Aachen") would have to be an integral part of European self-defence.

Keywords: Sovereignty; European Self-Defence; De-risking from America; Extended Deterrence à l'européenne; Nuclear Aachen.

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Sovereignty and security require de-risking from America

”But the day may come when it can no longer be seriously believed that an American President would threaten the destruction of his own cities in order to protect some distant outpost; and then Western Europe, which still relies chiefly on the strategic power of the United States to defend its own existence, could find itself in serious danger—unless by that time it has developed a great nuclear arsenal of its own, or more effective means of local defence.”[1]

Some sixty years later, the day may finally have arrived. It is a Janus-faced day. On the one hand, it is a day of rude awakening since the Russian assault on Ukraine has exposed the Achilles' heel of Europe's sovereignty, namely its inability to provide for its own defence. On the other hand, the impetus to heed the wake-up call and create a European self-defence union has never been stronger. Such de-risking from America will take time and money, and in addition to a collective conventional build-up, it requires an extended (nuclear) deterrence *à l'européenne*.

I. Europe's precarious security

Europe's security has become precarious due to two concurrent developments: while Russia poses an acute threat, the reliability of Europe's American protector is waning and the cost of American protection is mounting. The Ukrainian war demonstrates that countering an aggressive Russia still requires American capabilities and its willingness to bring them to bear. NATO remains an alliance of unequal partners: while the United States can defend itself on its own, Europe's security still hinges on America's readiness to underwrite it. In its starkest form of extended (nuclear) deterrence, this dependency rests on America's willingness to put its own survival on the line by resorting to nuclear use to defend an ally against an attacker capable of nuclear retaliation against the U.S. homeland.

America's decreasing reliability is a secular trend. It is not bound to lead to transatlantic decoupling, but the antagonistic politics and socio-cultural divisions of “Trumpism” will not disappear with Trump out of the White House. Furthermore, the 'de-Europeanisation' of the demographic composition of the U.S. is set to continue and, above all, Europe's strategic downgrading in the wake of China's rise and Russia's downslide is irreversible.

Europe must brace itself for an America in retreat and for having to pay an increasing price for being America's security clients. European countries were strong-armed into boosting their defence spending to Trump-imposed levels and into accepting a lopsided trade deal to avoid even more punitive tariffs.

The calamity is self-inflicted. If it mustered the collective will, collective Europe would have the financial and industrial-technological resources needed to stand on its own feet. Failing to do so amounts to sacrificing sovereignty on the altar of dependency on an external protector.

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[1] *Arms and Stability in Europe: A British-French-German Enquiry*, A Report by Alastair Buchan and Philip Windsor (London: Chatto & Windus for The Institute for Strategic Studies, 1963), p. 8.

Sovereignty means being able and willing to take control of one's destiny. Sovereignty is never absolute. No one is fully independent, completely invulnerable or omnipotent. Thus, in the international arena an actor's sovereignty increases or decreases with its ability to assert its interests and promote its values, either in cooperation with or in opposition to others.

The key ingredients of this ability are power, its effective use, and an actor's exposure to external vulnerabilities. Those wielding more power are more sovereign. United Europe is a sovereignty multiplier: In today's world, even Europe's biggest states are global middleweights at best. The collective power forged by united Europe enables European states to advance their national interests far more effectively than by going it alone.

To date, Europe's crucial sovereignty assets have been its common market and common currency, underpinned by competitive and innovative economies. In terms of immaterial power, Europe's sovereignty rests on mutual trust and shared values such as democracy and rule of law. However, significant deficiencies remain: intra-EU mobility of labour, goods, capital, and know-how is hampered by political and bureaucratic hurdles, the currency union lacks a savings and investment union; and Europe is heavily dependent on U.S. digital platforms and AI companies, as well as Chinese products and raw materials.[2]

However, the Achilles heel of European sovereignty is its inability to provide for its own defence. As long as Europe's nation-states need American protection, their sovereignty is critically impaired. With America in retreat and Russia posing a long-term threat, it has become imperative to develop a self-defence capacity. Ideally, such undertaking would complement and reinforce a broader "Agenda for a Secure, Prosperous, and Sovereign Europe" that would involve boosting climate-friendly competitiveness and regulating migration.

II. European Self-Defence: Options and Non-Options

1."Keeping the Americans In"

Before he became NATO's first Secretary General, Lord Ismay had famously said that the Alliance was created to "keep the Soviet Union out, the Americans in, and the Germans down." The democratisation and 'westernisation' of post-war Germany, fortified by its integration into EU and NATO, have rendered obsolete the German part of Ismay's mission statement. The other two parts, however, have regained a relevance unseen since the end of the Cold War. In the face of Russian aggression, American support has been essential for Ukraine, and it remains indispensable for a Europe unable to defend itself on its own.

In the short to medium term, there is no alternative to 'keeping America in' at almost any cost. The challenge is to turn a coercive Trump presidency into a catalyst for de-risking from America, thus reconciling the inevitable with the desirable: the inevitable being a

[2] See European Commission and High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy, Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council on *European Economic Security Strategy*, Brussels, 20 June 2023, eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52023JC0020; and *The future of European competitiveness: Report of Mario Draghi*, https://commission.europa.eu/topics/eu-competitiveness/draghi-report_en.

NATO with much less America, the desirable a transatlantic alliance reinvigorated by a partnership of equals.

The objective of striving for European self-defence would be twofold. Firstly, it would aim at keeping the Americans in by assuming a progressively larger share of NATO defence efforts. At the same time, it would provide a hedge against an America defaulting on its Article-Five commitment or withdrawing from NATO completely.

On both accounts, the pressing task is to beef up European conventional capabilities by spending more and better together. European defence is fragmented due to uncoordinated procurement, a weak defence-industrial base, and an underdeveloped role specialisation and integration of national armies. Europe could significantly enhance its collective combat power by cooperating more efficiently to remedy these deficiencies.

The second way to get more bang for their euros is to spend effectively. This has two overlapping facets. One is "to focus on key capability areas most likely capable of holding Russia's armed forces at risk."[3] The other is reducing Europe's dependency on US strategic enablers such as intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; integrated air and missile defence; long-range precision strike capabilities; and strategic airlift and air-to-air refuelling.

De-risking from America must also address Europe's dependency on US nuclear protection. Nuclear forces are the ultimate backstop for deterring a nuclear-armed adversary, while conventional forces reinforce this backstop by providing deterrent and defence options below the threshold of a potentially devastating nuclear 'exchange'.

In principle, there are three ways of nuclear de-risking from America: nuclear proliferation, collective deterrence, extended deterrence. From a German perspective, a subvariant of the latter would be a French nuclear commitment to Germany ("Nuclear Aachen").

2. Nuclear proliferation

There is an ineradicable hierarchy between homeland deterrence and extended deterrence: when the chips are down, protecting the homeland takes precedence over bailing out an ally or partner. The primacy of homeland protection could dictate abandoning an ally by defaulting on a nuclear commitment or entrap him in a confrontation that spares the homelands of the nuclear-armed opponents but endangers an ally's survival.

The upshot is that extended deterrence offers less protection than relying on a national nuclear deterrent. The Trump administration's animosity towards Europe and its wavering on NATO's mutual assistance commitment have made Europeans painfully aware of their dependency on the United States, in particular Europe's non-nuclear weapons states. The issue has two facets: Could Germany or a state like Poland develop their own nuclear deterrents, and if so, should they do it? Germany would have the requisite financial means and the know-how. It would take time, and the technical hurdles would be formidable, not

[3] The International Institute for Strategic Studies, *Defending Europe Without the United States: Costs and Consequences*, May 2025, https://www.iiss.org/globalassets/media-library---content--migration/files/research-papers/2025/05/defending-europe-without-the-united-states/new/iiss_defending-europe-without-the-united-states_052025.pdf.

least because the country has shut down all its nuclear power plants. But if Germany was convinced that going nuclear was necessary to safeguard its security, it would most likely find a way.

There are no insurmountable legal barriers. Germany is a non-nuclear weapons state under the Non-Proliferation Treaty, and as a party to the 1990 Two plus Four Agreement, formally known as 'The Treaty on the Final Settlement with Respect to Germany', Germany reaffirmed its renunciation of nuclear weapons. However, these legal commitments are predicated on Germany having external nuclear protection. If this were no longer available, the 'full sovereignty' Germany was accorded in the Two Plus Four Agreement would entitle it to provide for its own nuclear protection.

Germany cannot take this option off the table, but it should do its utmost to avoid having to resort to it. A Germany going nuclear because it no longer trusted its nuclear-armed allies, first and foremost the United States, to honour their commitments could trigger or accelerate a proliferation cascade among those dependent on such commitments. For this reason alone, it could meet with strong opposition from the United States and aggressive resistance from Russia. In addition, the inner-European balance of power could be disrupted if Germany were to complement its economic and technological prowess with nuclear self-reliance.

3. Collective Deterrence

Some German politicians and commentators have advocated establishing a genuinely European deterrent force. Jens Spahn, head of the ruling coalition's largest parliamentary group, has suggested a European nuclear capacity, with release authority rotating randomly among member states. The historian Herfried Münkler has championed a collective nuclear deterrent to be controlled on a rotational basis by Europe's larger states.[4]

For the time being, such proposals are illusory. The defining feature of the EU is the predominance of nation-states. A shared European identity and national interests in collective sovereignty have not been strong enough to create a "United States of Europe" composed of subordinate 'national' entities. Perhaps they eventually will be, propelled by the need for collective self-assertion in a power- rather than rules-based international system. However, a European body politic with a common identity comparable to that of a nation-state is not on the horizon. As long as that is the case, a European nuclear command to which member states would entrust their security remains a pipe dream.

4. Extended Deterrence *à l'européenne*

In the absence of a federal Europe, European homeland deterrence is unrealistic. Consequently, a European alternative to the US nuclear umbrella could not offer any nuclear guarantees either, but "only" commitments extended by Europe's nuclear powers. At present, there are two: France and the United Kingdom. Would they be willing to replace US nuclear protection? Even if they were, would they credibly be able do so?

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[4] For Spahn, see https://www.zeit.de/politik/2025-06/jens-spahn-atomwaffen-europa, for Münkler, https://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/plus249280690/Herfried-Muenkler-Europaeische-Atombombe-waere-entscheidender-Schritt.html.

At first glance, extended deterrence by France and the UK may seem virtually impossible. After all, they have their own deterrents because they fear that if push comes to shove, the US could abandon its allies rather than risk its own survival to protect them. Yet, the question can also be posed the other way around: Could France and the UK afford to stand aside in the event of a Russian aggression against their European neighbours? The US is not a European country. Its homeland is an ocean away, the European component of its national identity is weakening, and American interests and outlook are of a global nature. In contrast, geography and the fact of belonging to a European cultural and civilizational space, their medium-sized status and national interests in a secure, prosperous, and cooperative neighbourhood—these circumstances ensure that the well-being of France and the UK is bound up with that of their European neighbours.

In February 2020, President Macron stated that "our nuclear forces have a genuinely European dimension" and that "France's vital interests now have a European dimension." In March 2025, he reaffirmed that "in deciding what constitutes vital interests, the interests of our main partners will be taken into account", and he announced "the opening of a strategic dialogue on the protection of our European allies through French nuclear deterrence." [5]

The UK appears to be moving in the same direction. In July 2025, for the first time London and Paris professed that their nuclear forces "can be coordinated" and that "there is no extreme threat to Europe that would not prompt a response by our two nations." ("Northwood Declaration") That there is no extreme threat *to Europe* which would not elicit a joint response suggests that their nuclear forces have an extended deterrence dimension that they might execute collectively.

The benchmark for extended deterrence *à l'européenne* cannot and need not be America's nuclear posture. When planning for the realm of the unknown, there is no proven method of determining exact capability requirements. Deterrence is in the eye of the beholder, and in extended deterrence situations, there are three: a nuclear commitment must be tolerable to its issuer, reassuring to its recipient, and credible to the adversary. For all three parties of this extended deterrence triangle, what is at stake in terms of their well-being and survival is at least as important as the balance of forces and the range of military options available to them.

Still, deterrent threats are vacuous unless they are backed up by sufficient capabilities. There are two minimum capability criteria that would have to be met. Firstly, France and the UK must possess nuclear forces that are survivable and versatile enough to enable assured retaliation and escalation. Secondly, conventional forces must be robust enough to maximise the risk a conventional attacker must incur and minimise Europe's risk of having to choose between nuclear escalation and political surrender. Inevitably, what sufficiency requires is a judgment call. However, the crucial point is this: while European collective deterrence is a pipe dream, extended deterrence for Europe by Europe's nuclear powers is not. It may require a more muscular nuclear deterrent, and it would certainly require a much more robust conventional deterrent. Europeans have it in their own hands, though. They have the resources; what it takes is a group of the willing to invest in their collective sovereignty.

[5] République Française, *National Strategic Review 2025* https://www.sgdsn.gouv.fr/files/files/Publications/20250713_NP_SGDSN_RNS2025_EN_1_0.pdf.

5. Nuclear Aachen

The litmus test of extended deterrence *à l'européenne* is a French nuclear commitment to Germany. In their 2019 Treaty of Aachen, the two countries, "convinced of the inseparable character of their security interests", vowed to "afford one another any means of assistance or aid within their power, including military force, in the event of an armed attack on their territories." This pledge could be turned into an explicit nuclear commitment by specifying that France's nuclear capabilities are an integral part of the military means of assistance.

Declarations alone do not suffice, however. They would have to be backed up by manifest steps such as a nuclear consultative group, German liaison officers at Force de frappe facilities, and the temporary or permanent stationing of French nuclear systems on German soil. Germany could contribute to financing the French nuclear deterrent, and its planned conventional build-up could bolster the backstop role of the Force de frappe.

A French nuclear commitment to Germany would have a solid foundation. France and Germany are neighbours, they are stakeholders in the European project and share a common space of security and prosperity. Furthermore, while the US is a vastly superior protector, a French nuclear commitment would not disrupt the Franco-German balance of power as Germany would retain its economic and technological edge.

Still, a nuclear commitment is revocable and not immune to the vagaries of domestic politics. Thus, the nationalist *Rassemblement National* rejects any extension of the deterrent perimeter of the Force de frappe beyond France proper. There is a realistic prospect that the party's candidate could win the presidential elections in 2027. As president, however, he or she might find it difficult to ignore French national interests tied to Franco-German interdependencies. Both sides would stand to lose from a neighbourly confrontation, but the damage to France's economy and its fiscal position could be substantial, particularly if the stability of the monetary union was called into question. And with France denying nuclear protection to its neighbour when the US became increasingly unreliable, Germany might have to reconsider its "no" to nuclear weapons—a prospect that French nationalists would hardly relish.

Conclusion

Europe's security is at an inflection point. The Europeans find themselves squeezed between an aggressive Russia and an American protector they depend on with unsettling anxiety. The calamity is self-inflicted as collective Europe would have the means to wean itself off a dependency that compromises its sovereignty.

It is up to the Europeans to create a re-balanced NATO by empowering themselves. Any such effort would be futile if it omitted the nuclear part of Europe's dependency, and it can only succeed if Germany plays its pivotal role. Germany can only do so under a protective nuclear umbrella. To obviate the need to develop one of its own, and because a collective European deterrent is unrealistic, a French nuclear commitment to Germany ('Nuclear Aachen') offers the most viable starting point for creating an 'extended deterrence *à l'européenne*.

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Eckhard Lübkemeier has been a frequent contributor to Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, including *Zeit für ein nukleares Aachen,* 31 March 2025, p. 6.

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