



ODUMUNC 2026 Issue Brief North Atlantic Treaty Organization



Restoring the credibility of NATO's nuclear deterrent

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Introduction: Always a nuclear alliance

How to ensure the security of 32 NATO member states in a world with nuclear weapons?

Managing nuclear weapons is among the most difficult issues facing NATO. Far too important to be avoided, nuclear issues are acute today, as the alliance struggles with the problems of deterring Russian conventional attack and its nuclear threats.



Where nuclear policy is discussed, NATO's North Atlantic Council in Brussels.

The nuclear issue, long NATO's most uncomfortable, suddenly is unavoidable. Its intentions may be unknowable, but Russia has shown it is willing to start full-scale conventional war in Europe. And Russia elevated nuclear threats against Europe and United States.

Meanwhile, the United States made clear it cannot be relied on to guarantee European security against Russia. NATO's European member states—who assumed the biggest role of the alliance was to ensure American nuclear deterrence against Russia—are exposed and frightened.¹

¹ Sophia Besch and Jamie Kwong, 'Unpacking Europe's deterrence dilemmas', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 11 December

2025,
<https://carnegieendowment.org/europe/strategic>

NATO countries without nuclear weapons are debating how best to cope with the new situation. Many non-nuclear states were deeply affected by the example of Ukraine, which gave up its nuclear arsenal in the 1990s, and was invaded by Russia in 2014 and 2022. And all were shocked when President Trump refused to repeat traditional American guarantees to ensure European security from attack.

NATO's most recent highest-level summit meeting, in Hague, Netherlands, in June 2025, left Europe's nuclear dependence unresolved. How to solve it is a major issue facing NATO at ODUMUNC 49. The options are broad:

- Will NATO prefer to remain reliant on American nuclear deterrence, even as America becomes less reliable?
- Will European countries increasingly rely on nuclear guarantees from France and the United Kingdom?
- Should NATO establish its own nuclear force, controlled by all 32 member states?
- Can other European countries, probably German and Poland, acquire their own nuclear forces, without antagonizing Russia and their own people?
- Or will the member states embrace nuclear restraint and press for nuclear disarmament?

At ODUMUNC 49 the North Atlantic Council has a unique opportunity to find consensus on a stronger path forward.

The new problem: Russia's nuclear threats

When Russian President Vladimir Putin first spoke to tell his country about the full-scale invasion of Ukraine that began on 24 February 2022, his official video address was accompanied carefully worded but clear nuclear threats aimed at intimidating Western leaders and their publics. Russian nuclear saber-rattling has remained a prominent feature of the war ever since. While President Putin's threats have been hedged and often implicit, his officials backed him up with threats that are anything but subtle.²

Russia supported its words with actions. In March 2023 Russia began to deploy its tactical nuclear weapons—battlefield range ballistic missiles—in neighboring Belarus. This is the first time that Russia has deployed nuclear weapons outside of the country since the end of the Cold War in 1991.

In November 2024, President Putin approved an update to Russia's nuclear doctrine (the rules governing military use of nuclear weapons) that lowered the threshold for possible nuclear use, with the aim of threatening attack on European countries supporting Ukraine.³

President Putin also has emphasized Russia's development of new nuclear weapons delivery systems designed to threaten all NATO countries, including the United States. 'There is nothing like this', the Russian leader said describing his country's new *Poseidon*, a nuclear-powered, nuclear-capable underwater drone that can be fired like a torpedo to his

[-europe/2025/12/unpacking-europes-deterrence-dilemmas](#)

² Stephen Blank, 'Vladimir Putin's endless nuclear threats are a sign of Russian weakness', *Atlantic Council*, 6 November 2025, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukraineal>

[ert/vladimir-putins-endless-nuclear-threats-are-a-sign-of-russian-weakness/](#)

³ 'Russia's use of nuclear threats during the Ukraine conflict', *House of Commons Library*, 20 December 2024, <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9825/>

targets as distant as the United States from under water. Putin also promoted the 'unlimited-range' *Burevestnik*, a cruise missile with nuclear-power, giving it unlimited range.⁴

The riddle of nuclear deterrence

Deterring nuclear war is one of the most fundamental problems of international security. The stakes for NATO are increasingly high. If deterrence were to fail, the alliance risks not only all out military confrontation but also a collapse in credibility, which would inevitably undermine the European security architecture and transatlantic unity. The challenge becomes compounded by debates over burden-sharing among existing allies, domestic political constraints, and the uncertainty surrounding how NATO would respond to provocations.

Deterrence has been explained as an 'armed inducement'. To persuade an enemy not to attack, it requires more than material strength, it also require credibility, a willingness to go to war.⁵ Mazarr reinforced this logic with his analysis by emphasizing that deterrence is fundamentally about shaping the perception of a potential aggressor rather than solely projecting capabilities. In this view, deterrence is as psychological as material: it succeeds when an

adversary perceives alternative to aggression as more attractive than all-out war.⁶

Combined, these perspectives stress that the concept of deterrence cannot be reduced to force postures or military balances alone. It is both cognitive processes and a strategic interaction, blending material denial, threats of punishment, and the inducement of restraint with reassurances and incentives. A recent milestone illustrates these dynamics in practice: The July 2025 Northwood Declaration, in which France and the United Kingdom committed to unprecedented coordination of their nuclear policies and operations. The agreement strengthens NATO's deterrence posture, reassures European allies, and offers a potential backstop should doubts arise over the credibility of the United States' nuclear umbrella.⁷

While nuclear deterrence remains NATO's foundation, it no longer defines deterrence on its own. Russia's war in Ukraine has underscored not only the salience of nuclear threats but also the importance of conventional forward deployments, credible responses to hybrid operations, and resilience against cyberattacks. For NATO, the credibility of deterrence therefore rests on a multi-domain posture that blends nuclear guarantees with conventional force presence and emerging tools to counter non-traditional aggression. This Issue Brief adapts this broader conception of deterrence,

⁴ Laura Gozzi, 'Russia's new nuclear weapons - real threat or Putin bluster?' *BBC News*, 31 October 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cn40w7g2d2zo>

⁵ Codner, Michael. "Defining Deterrence." *Deterrence in the Twenty-first Century: Proceedings* (2009).

⁶ Mazarr, M. J. (2018). *Understanding deterrence* (Vol. 14). Santa Monica: RAND Corporation.

⁷ 'Northwood Declaration: 10 July 2025 (UK-France joint nuclear statement)', Statement by the United Kingdom and French Republic on Nuclear

Policy and Cooperation - July 2025, *Gov.UK*, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/northwood-declaration-10-july-2025-uk-france-joint-nuclear-statement>; also see the interpretation, IISS, 'The Northwood Declaration: UK-France nuclear cooperation and a new European strategic backstop', *International Institute for Strategic Studies*, 16 September 2025, <https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-comments/2025/09/the-northwood-declaration-uk-france-nuclear-cooperation-and-a-new-european-strategic-backstop/>

while recognizing that nuclear deterrence continues to anchor NATO's overall strategy.

This Issue Brief builds on these theoretical insights and recent developments to examine NATO's deterrence posture in greater depth. It first traces the historical evolution of deterrence, particularly NATO's reliance on nuclear and conventional forces during and after the Cold War. It then assesses contemporary challenges, including Russian aggression, debates over burden-sharing, and the risks posed by new domains such as cyber and hybrid warfare. Finally, it evaluates recent innovations such as the Northwood Declaration and considers their implications for NATO's credibility, European security, and the future of transatlantic defense cooperation.

Nuclear dilemma: Scaring your enemy, versus scaring yourself.

NATO's approach to deterrence has shifted over time in response to changing threats and internal debates. During the Cold War, deterrence was understood primarily in nuclear terms. The United States provided the backbone of NATO's extended deterrence through its nuclear umbrella, with Britain and France maintaining their own national capabilities. As David Yost explained in 2009, the history of NATO can be read as a series of debates over extended deterrence and the credibility of U.S. commitments.⁸

Deterrence in the Cold War was not only about convincing the Soviet Union not attack (credible threats), but also about reassuring allies that Washington would risk escalation on their behalf (reassuring allies). This dual function,

deterrence of adversaries and assurance of allies, became a core feature of NATO strategy. As Denis Healey famously noted, it might take only "five percent" credibility to deter Moscow, but "ninety-five percent" credibility to reassure European allies of U.S. protection. Visible U.S. nuclear deployments in Europe served as coupling mechanisms, linking U.S. strategic forces to European security and reinforcing the transatlantic bond.⁹

The post-Cold War era initially reduced the salience of deterrence. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union and optimism about cooperative security, NATO reduced its forward presence and shifted toward crisis management and out-of-area operations. Yet this downplaying of deterrence proved temporary.

Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 marked a decisive turning point, reviving questions about NATO's ability to credibly deter aggression on its eastern flank. Analysts such as Viljar Veebel highlighted the stark asymmetry in the Baltic region: RAND assessments suggested that Russian forces could reach Tallinn or Riga within 60 hours, raising doubts about NATO's capacity to deny a *fait accompli*.¹⁰

This dilemma exposed the tension between deterrence by denial, which requires robust local defense, and deterrence by punishment, which relies on the threat of retaliation. Veebel underscored that NATO faces not only capability challenges but also dilemmas of cohesion and communication, since reinforcing the Baltics risk being perceived by Moscow as escalation while failing to do so risks signaling weakness.¹¹

Maria Mälksoo notes that NATO's post-Cold War approach to deterrence often remained

⁸ Yost, David S. (2009). Assurance and US extended deterrence in NATO. *International Affairs*, 85 (4), 755-780.

⁹ Yost, David S. (2011). The US debate on NATO nuclear deterrence. *International affairs*, 87 (6), 1401-1438.

¹⁰ Veebel, Viljar, (2018). 'NATO options and dilemmas for deterring Russia in the Baltic States'. *Defence Studies*, 18 (2), 229-251.

¹¹ Veebel, 'NATO options', *ibid*.

more symbolic than substantial. The presence of small “tripwire” forces in Eastern Europe was meant to reassure allies but was not nearly strong enough to deny a Russian advance. This inevitably exposed a persistent tension between reassuring frontline states and avoiding provocation of Moscow. By delaying a more direct military adaptation toward the East, NATO left itself vulnerable to Russia's growing assertiveness.¹²

NATO has since recognized Russia as its most immediate challenge, not only because of its conventional forces but also because of its persistent hybrid operations. Moscow employs cyberattack, disinformation, and proxy forces to undermine NATO cohesion below the threshold of war, where traditional deterrence by denial or punishment is more difficult to apply. Moreover, these dynamics reveal why NATO credibility rests not just on nuclear or conventional capabilities, but also on the ability to respond effectively in the hybrid conflict domain.¹³

By the 2020s, NATO's concept of deterrence had expanded beyond its nuclear and conventional foundations. The Netherlands Annual Review of Military Studies noted that deterrence is now viewed as multidimensional, encompassing cyber defense, hybrid resilience, and strategic communication alongside nuclear and conventional forces. The credibility of NATO's posture therefore depends not only on material capabilities but also on political cohesion among allies and the ability to signal resolve in multiple domains simultaneously. This broader conception reflects the recognition that Russia's strategy operates across the spectrum, from nuclear signaling to disinformation campaigns, and that NATO must

adapt accordingly.

Deterring Russia after Ukraine

The war in Ukraine has also given rise to a new form of deterrence. Amir Lupovici identified NATO's practice of “deterrence by delivery of arms” in which the Alliance signals its resolve by committing to supply Ukraine with weapons.¹⁴ By continuously supplying Ukraine with advanced weaponry and publicly committing to sustaining those transfers, NATO members have sought to convince Moscow that escalation cannot yield victory. This strategy operates by denial, demonstrating that Russia's objectives will remain elusive, rather than by punitive measures. It also projects NATO's resolve while avoiding direct military confrontation, displaying that deterrence today is exercised as much through commitment signaling and material enablement as through traditional force postures.

This strategy has the side effect of blurring the line between direct and extended deterrence. Ukraine must be capable of fighting, but the credibility of its defense depends on NATO's continued supply. By framing arms deliveries as a deterrent message, NATO leaders sought to deny Russia victory and to shape Moscow's perception of the futility of further escalation.

Scholars studying the war in Ukraine show that the idea of deterrence is changing. One perspective argues that sending weapons to Ukraine is itself one form of deterrence. By making sure Ukraine has the required tools to keep defending itself, NATO and its partners are signaling to Russia that it cannot win quickly or easily. This expands the older idea of deterrence,

¹² Mälksoo, Maria, (2024). NATO's new front: deterrence moves eastward. *International Affairs*, 100 (2), 531-547.

¹³ Magula, J., Rouland, M., & Zwack, P. (2022). NATO and Russia: defense and deterrence in a time of conflict. *Defence Studies*, 22 (3), 502-509.

¹⁴ Lupovici, Amir, (2023). Deterrence by delivery of arms: NATO and the war in Ukraine. *Contemporary Security Policy*, 44(4), 624-641.

which argues that threats of punishment are more ideal; military strikes, or denial, like defending a border directly. Instead, supplying arms is a way to deny Russia its goal without NATO having to fight directly.¹⁵

At the same time, other scholars argue that NATO still has to consider the bigger picture. Russia does not rely solely on tanks and ground troops, but also uses unconventional efforts such as cyberattacks, propaganda, and other hybrids that are much harder to respond to. Traditional deterrence strategies don't always work against these methods. Consequently, NATO has been strengthening its defenses with more troops within Eastern Europe, improvements in cyber protection, and faster response teams. Altogether, these two contrasting viewpoints illustrate how the concept of deterrence is both rethinking theory and adapting the practice to confront Russia's different challenges.¹⁶

Following the 2022 invasion, NATO has shifted toward a stronger "forward defense" posture. Maria Mälksoo emphasizes that deterrence today functions not only through military deployments but also as a kind of ritual performance entailing; visible ground troops, exercises, and other symbolic acts of solidarity that reassure allies while signaling resolve toward Russian aggression. In this regard, deterrence operates on both a practical and symbolic basis, complementing strategies such as arms deliveries to Ukraine and expanded hybrid defense measures.¹⁷

The problem of nuclear credibility.

Although the concept of deterrence has broadened beyond nuclear weapons, NATO continues to describe its nuclear forces as the 'supreme guarantee' of allied security. The foundation of this form of nuclear deterrence remains the US strategic arsenal, supplemented by the independent forces of the United Kingdom and France and by NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements. Approximately one hundred American B61 gravity bombs are deployed in five European countries. Modernization is underway to upgrade them for greater safety and security.¹⁸



Test versions of the American B61 tactical nuclear bomb, the kind used in NATO dual-key, nuclear sharing arrangements.

Von Hlatky and Lambert- Deslandes note that nuclear sharing has become deeply entrenched since the Russian invasion, not only

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Magula, J., Rouland, M., & Zwack, P. (2022). NATO and Russia: defense and deterrence in a time of conflict. *Defence Studies*, 22 (3), pp. 502-509.

¹⁷ Mälksoo, Maria, (2024). NATO's new front: deterrence moves eastward. *International Affairs*, 100 (2), pp. 531-547.

¹⁸ Yost, D. S. (2011). The US debate on NATO nuclear deterrence. *International affairs*, 87 (6), 1401-1438; and Russell, J. A. (2010), 'Extended deterrence, security guarantees and nuclear weapons: US strategic and policy conundrums in the Gulf'.

because of Russian aggression but also because it reinforces alliance cohesion and signals transatlantic resolve.¹⁹ Domestic opposition that once constrained nuclear policy in countries such as Germany and the Netherlands has declined in the current high-threat environment, giving NATO an opportunity to re-legitimize extended deterrence.

Nevertheless, uncertainty persists about future U.S. political leadership, particularly isolationist tendencies that can sometimes thrive in domestic politics, reigniting debates about European nuclear autonomy. Fayet, Futter and Kuhn argue that a possible U.S. strategic retrenchment could compel European powers to reconsider their dependence on Washington and explore a European nuclear deterrent centered on Franco-British cooperation.²⁰

The problem of political cohesion.

NATO's deterrence credibility depends as much on political unity as on ornaments. Varying threat perceptions between eastern and western members, debates over defense-spending targets, and public fatigue with long term commitments to Ukraine all risk undermining alliance cohesion.

The United States remains indispensable to the deterrence framework, but disengagement under President Trump has created unprecedented anxiousness about the reliability of historic American guarantees.²¹ This uncertainty pushes European efforts to strengthen autonomous defense capabilities within the broader NATO framework. But can thirty European member states actually find the means?

NATO's nuclear ambivalence

Nuclear weapons concerns are all the more difficult because the alliance does not actually control anything nuclear. Nuclear weapons currently are the sovereign property three member states: France, the United Kingdom and United States. NATO takes positions, but always follows the leadership of its three nuclear-armed members, the countries with actual control.

For the alliance, nuclear weapons are a way of compensating for weakness in conventional weapons. Throughout the Cold War, the United States deployed nuclear weapons in Europe, a last barrier against Soviet attack. The United States helped France and the United Kingdom build their own nuclear forces. The legacy of Cold War nuclear weapons remains, the Alliance's nuclear deterrent today.

Deep ambivalence always characterized alliance nuclear policy. Alliance member states long opposed proliferation of nuclear weapons, which could undermine global stability, but they relied on nuclear deterrence to maintain the peace. Many NATO members fear their territory could become a nuclear battlefield, but also rely on nuclear deterrence to keep the peace. And while their leaders may accept the unavoidable reality of nuclear deterrence, much of their public is pacifist or deeply anti-nuclear.

American nuclear guarantees long were the best solution to NATO's nuclear dilemmas. American pressure persuaded West Germany not to develop its own nuclear weapons capability. German leaders were convinced because they could rely on the United States to ensure their nuclear security. Meanwhile, European publics and leftist political parties long advocated

¹⁹ Von Hlatky, S., & Lambert-Deslandes, É. (2024). The Ukraine War and nuclear sharing in NATO. *International Affairs*, 100(2), pp. 509-530.

²⁰ Fayet, H., Futter, A., & Kühn, U. (2024), 'Towards a European nuclear deterrent', *Survival*, October–November 2024, pp. 67-98.

²¹ Fayet, H., Futter, A., & Kühn, U. (2024). 'Towards a European nuclear deterrent', *Survival*, October–November 2024, pp. 67-98.

nuclear disarmament, often including demands for unilateral disarmament by the US and their own countries.



A German nuclear-capable bomber, part of a dual-key, nuclear-sharing arrangement with the United States.

At NATO's Summit Meeting in The Hague in June 2025, the presidents and prime ministers of all 32 member states struggled to deal with their nuclear weapons problems. Their final declaration did not mention nuclear weapons, a silence revealing their serious discomfort with the issue.

But there are hints. On the eve of the summit, British Prime Minister Keir Starmer announced his country would buy American-made nuclear capable F35A fighter/bombers to support NATO's nuclear mission. This means the UK will be the sixth NATO country to join the so-called nuclear sharing arrangement with the United States, with aircraft capable of dropping American-owned nuclear bombs. This is a major

shift by the UK, which retired the last of its own air-launched nuclear bombs in 1998, doubling down on dependence on nuclear weapons.²²

NATO's nuclear capabilities

The United States does not have a monopoly on NATO nuclear weapons, but it is overwhelming, the only NATO state with a nuclear force equal to Russia's and still superior to China and all other nuclear weapons powers. The American nuclear force is a triad of nuclear armed aircraft, land-based ballistic missiles and sea-based ballistic missiles and cruise missiles. In all it deploys 1,550 strategic nuclear weapons, based on launcher systems able to reach Russia from the territory of the United States.

The US also has roughly 2,500 nuclear warheads in storage or awaiting dismantlement. In Europe, the United States has roughly 100 B61 nuclear bombs, currently deployed at bases in Belgium, Germany, Italy, Netherlands and Turkey. The B61s are America's only tactical nuclear weapons designed to be used in case of war with Russia, against military targets.²³

By comparison, the nuclear forces of France and the United Kingdom are much smaller. France has a small but highly diversified nuclear forces, with ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, nuclear-armed submarines, aircraft, and a nuclear industrial complex, giving it the ability to expand its forces alone. France is estimated to have a nuclear weapons stockpile of approximately 290 warheads. In addition, approximately 80 retired warheads are awaiting

²² ICAN, 'NATO deepens commitment to nuclear weapons and militarisation', *International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons*, 27 June 2025,

<https://www.icanw.org/nato-deepens-commitment-to-nuclear-weapons-and-militarisation>

²³ The bases are Kleine Brogel in Belgium, Büchel Air Base in Germany, Aviano and Ghedi Air Bases

in Italy, Volkel Air Base in the Netherlands, and Incirlik in Turkey. CACNP, 'Fact sheet: U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe', *Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation*, 18 August 2021,

<https://armscontrolcenter.org/fact-sheet-u-s-nuclear-weapons-in-europe/>

dismantlement, giving a total French inventory of approximately 370 nuclear warheads.²⁴



One of four French. *Le Triomphant* class Ballistic Missile Submarines.

For decades, the United Kingdom maintained a stockpile of approximately 225 nuclear warheads. Unlike France and the United States, it's nuclear force currently is dependent on a single delivery system, it's fleet of four Vanguard-class nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines. One of these usually is at sea, with missile able to carry some 120 warheads. Under an agreement with the United States dating to 1962, the United Kingdom buys nuclear weapons and some of its delivery systems from the United States.

The United Kingdom is currently building a new class of Dreadnaught-class submarines and developing a new nuclear warhead of its own. The UK will purchase 12 new F-35A fighter jets and join NATO's dual capable aircraft nuclear mission in a major boost for national security.²⁵

²⁴ Hans M. Kristensen, et al., 'French nuclear weapons, 2025', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 15 July 2025, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00963402.2025.2524251>

²⁵ 'UK to purchase F-35As and join NATO nuclear mission to step up national security and delivers defence dividend', *Gov.UK*, 24 June 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-to-purchase-f-35as-and-join-nato-nuclear-mission>

It is expected that the United Kingdom will eventually increase the size of its arsenal and the Royal Air Force base at Lakenheath will restore its nuclear sharing role with United States Air Force.²⁶



A nuclear-capable Trident II ballistic missiles purchased from the US is launched from one of four British *Vanguard* class submarine.

A major shift for both London and Paris was the 2025 Northwood Declaration, a bi-lateral agreement by the two, affirming their shared interest in deterring an attack on Europe, and their determination to cooperate on military matters, potentially including nuclear strategy and operations. dimension to their vital interests. They announced a new Nuclear Steering Group to deliver on that coordination.²⁷ Whether anything comes of this can only be guessed.

[as-government-steps-up-national-security-and-delivers-defence-dividend](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00963402.2024.2420550)

²⁶ Hans M. Kristensen, et al., 'United Kingdom nuclear weapons, 2024', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 12 November 2024, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00963402.2024.2420550>

²⁷ 'Northwood Declaration: 10 July 2025 Statement by the United Kingdom and the French Republic on Nuclear Policy and Cooperation - July

NATO plays only a marginal role in the nuclear weapons matters of its three nuclear weapons states. The three—France, the UK and US—are jealous of national control over their nuclear arsenals. Only the United States has a history of sharing control—not ownership—over its nuclear weapons in Europe. Under the five base system, countries where the US bases its B61 tactical nuclear weapons, host countries—Belgium, Germany, Italy, Netherlands and Turkey—participate in launch authority. In effect, this gives each of the five countries a veto over the use of nuclear weapons based—under American control—on their territories. They have no authority over the vast majority of American nuclear weapons, those under sole American control.

What other NATO member states might do

In the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, going nuclear was at the back of every European leader's mind. But for most the idea was just too incredible, the barriers insurmountable.

The most visible exception was Poland. While the country lacks the infrastructure to build its own nuclear weapons, and remains a party to the NPT, there are other possibilities. Several Polish politicians proposed that Poland host American nuclear

weapons under the NATO nuclear sharing program.

Poland has discussed the idea with the United States, President Andrzej Duda revealed. The head of the ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party, Jarosław Kaczyński, said he 'fully supports' it. Duda was asked about 'nuclear sharing', like other NATO countries that do not have their own nuclear weapons host those American weapons. 'There is always a potential opportunity to participate in the nuclear sharing programme', he responded. 'We have spoken with American leaders about whether the United States is considering such a possibility. The issue is open.'²⁸

Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk announced that Poland 'is talking seriously' with France about being protected by the French nuclear umbrella. President Emmanuel Macron has opened the possibility of other countries discussing how France's nuclear deterrent can protect Europe.²⁹

'The major issue European countries are facing is that they either don't deploy the civilian nuclear infrastructure to launch a nuclear weapons programme, or, if they have civilian nuclear infrastructure, that it is highly 'proliferation-resistant'', Tusk told Euronews.

'For example, Finland and Sweden only have light-water reactors, which are not

2025, Gov.UK., <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/northwood-declaration-10-july-2025-uk-france-joint-nuclear-statement>

²⁸ Daniel Tilles, 'Poland has discussed hosting nuclear weapons with US, says president', *Notes from Poland*, 5 October 2022, <https://notesfrompoland.com/2022/10/05/pola>

[nd-has-discussed-hosting-nuclear-weapons-with-us-says-president/](https://www.politico.eu/article/donald-tusk-plan-train-poland-men-military-service-russia/)

²⁹ Jan Cieski and Wojciech Kość, 'Poland seeks access to nuclear arms and looks to build half-million-man army', *Politico*, 7 March 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/donald-tusk-plan-train-poland-men-military-service-russia/>

suitable for the production of weapons-grade plutonium. In addition, neither of those countries have chemical reprocessing plants that are needed for separating wanted from unwanted isotopes in fissile material production. So even if they wanted to launch a nuclear program, they couldn't do so with their existing infrastructure, at least in the short-term. That's the case for all non-nuclear weapon states in Europe with a civilian nuclear programme right now."

There is one exception: Germany. While it has closed all its civilian nuclear infrastructure, Germany has a large stockpile of highly-enriched uranium for research purposes. Theoretically, this stockpile could be repurposed under some effort to create weapons-grade fissile material. But even then, it would only be enough for around 5 to 15 nuclear warheads, so it would not be enough to deploy what we call a robust nuclear deterrent. And meanwhile, German public opposition seems insurmountable.³⁰

Barriers against new European nuclear forces

Reliance on American nuclear deterrence always has been something Europeans accepted, not something they loved. However difficult it is dealing with the United States, it is easier than facing their nuclear dependence themselves. Few trust Britain or France to come to their rescue in times of crisis, threatening to risk the survival of London or Paris to ensure the safety of Tallinn or Warsaw. Few politicians are willing

to brave public anti-nuclearism and pacificism. Two legal barriers stand out.

The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty

And all European NATO member states inherit a strong belief in international law and international treaty obligations. These include the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which commits 29 NATO members not to acquire nuclear weapons of their own. Only countries that already had nuclear forces when the treaty was negotiated—China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and United States—are legally entitled to keep them. Strong public opposition in Europe to going nuclear makes this norm almost impossible to change.

The NPT is the primary legal reason non-nuclear members that might be interested in acquiring their own nuclear deterrent, like the three Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania), Finland, Germany and Poland, cannot buy or build nuclear weapons. The NPT commits all parties, which includes all NATO member states, to the goal of preventing the spread of nuclear weapons and working for nuclear disarmament. The prevents all non-nuclear NATO member states (all but France, the UK and US) from acquiring nuclear weapons, and it prevent the three NATO nuclear states from helping them.

In practice, the treaty allows nuclear sharing, allowing non-nuclear weapons states to accept nuclear deterrence and foreign basing of nuclear weapons. This means they cannot be dragged unknowingly into nuclear war, involving weapons based in their territory, by the United States acting without their consent. Nuclear sharing allows host countries to share control over how nuclear weapons based in their countries are used. This is the so-called dual

³⁰ Andrew Naughtie, 'Could another European country develop its own nuclear weapons?' *Euronews*, 21 March 2025,

<https://www.euronews.com/2025/03/21/could-another-european-country-develop-its-own-nuclear-weapons>

key. NATO members draw the line at acquiring actual nuclear weapons of their own, which they agree would violate the treaty.

Russia long criticized NATO's nuclear sharing as a violation of the spirit, if not the letter, of the NPT. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union maintained complete and sole control over its thousands of nuclear weapons based in Eastern Europe. Under the Warsaw Treaty, those countries had no say over Soviet nuclear deployments or possible use. This appears to be true today, now that Russia bases nuclear weapons in neighboring Belarus.³¹

Nuclear sharing does not mean shared ownership. Nor does it mean positive control, granting host countries the ability to undertake nuclear strikes on their own. Rather, it gives host countries a dual key, meaning they can veto the use of American-owned and controlled nuclear weapons based on their territory.

Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons

A new element of international law to stop and reserve the spread of nuclear weapons is the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW, the Nuclear Weapon Ban Treaty, or just the Ban Treaty), completed in 2017. This is the first legally binding international agreement to prohibit all nuclear weapons, with the ultimate goal of total elimination.

The Ban Treaty was adopted the UN General Assembly on 7 July 2017. The vote was 122

countries in favor, 1 opposed (Netherlands), and 1 abstention (Singapore). 69 countries did not participate, including all five Permanent Members of the UN Security Council (China, France, Russia the UK and US), the four other nuclear weapons states (India, Israel, North Korea and Pakistan) and all other NATO member states. Of the three countries to join NATO after, Finland and North Macedonia did not vote.³²

Sweden, then a non-member of NATO, voted in favor of the Ban Treaty. But it refused to sign it, despite strong support from domestic disarmament advocates. Instead, Sweden completely reversed its traditional support for nuclear disarmament, after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. By applying in 2022 to join NATO, Sweden made it clear it believed American nuclear deterrence is essential to Swedish national security.³³

The treaty was widely seen as an initiative by the Non-Aligned Movement and non-governmental organizations. All NATO Member States avoided participating in the Ban Treaty negotiations and refused to vote for the treaty in the UN General Assembly. Netherlands, the only NATO member state present for the negotiations, voted against.

But the Ban Treaty remains very popular with the publics in many European countries. Parliamentary majorities in Germany and Norway voted in non-binding legislation urging their governments to sign the treaty. The

³¹ William Alberque, 'The NPT and the Origins of NATO's Nuclear Sharing Arrangements', *French Institute of International Relations*, 2017, <https://www.ifri.org/en/studies/npt-and-origins-natos-nuclear-sharing-arrangements>

³² UNGA, 'General Assembly – other: United Nations conference to negotiate a legally-binding instrument to prohibit nuclear weapons: Second session', *United Nations*, 7 July 2027, [https://s3.amazonaws.com/unoda-web/wp-](https://s3.amazonaws.com/unoda-web/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/A.Conf_.229.2017.L.3.Rev_.1.pdf)

[content/uploads/2017/07/A.Conf_.229.2017.L.3.Rev_.1.pdf](https://s3.amazonaws.com/unoda-web/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/A.Conf_.229.2017.L.3.Rev_.1.pdf)

³³ Lisbeth Aggestam and Adrian Hyde-Price, 'Crossing the Rubicon': Explaining Sweden's decision to join NATO', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, Volume 27, Issue 4 (November 2025), <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/13691481251341683>

Netherlands parliament also voted in support of the treaty.

NATO maintains a unified position opposed to the new Ban Treaty, 'NATO is a defensive Alliance. The fundamental purpose of NATO's nuclear capability is to preserve peace, prevent coercion, and deter aggression. A world where the states that challenge the international rules-based order have nuclear weapons, but NATO does not, is not a safer world. As long as nuclear weapons exist, NATO will remain a nuclear alliance... The ban treaty will not change the legal obligations of our countries with respect to nuclear weapons.'³⁴

Some possible proposals for action

In the eyes of Europeans, even the U.S. nuclear umbrella, which for decades shielded the continent from outside threats, no longer seems fully dependable. 'I want to believe that the United States will stay by our side', French President Emmanuel Macron said in March 2025, 'but we have to be prepared for that not to be the case.'³⁵

What to do? NATO's nuclear options are as wide as it has member states. Can NATO restore the credibility of its nuclear deterrence? Or should it find non-nuclear alternatives? The way forward, President Macron argued, is to protect the continent from attack with its own nuclear weapons. France might put its own nuclear

arsenal in the service of its European neighbors.³⁶

The credibility of any nuclear deterrent rests on having the right capabilities and the resolve to use them. Judged by those criteria, neither Macron's proposal nor any other option for an independent European nuclear deterrent currently passes muster. But even if the moment for Europe to decouple its security from that of the United States has not yet arrived, the continent's leaders must prepare for the possibility that it may before long. And that means beginning to take serious stock of their nuclear options. In the short term, doing so will signal that Washington needs to take Europe's deterrence concerns seriously. But it would also lay a foundation on which Europe could build should its fears of abandonment by the United States really come true.³⁷

There is wide spectrum of nuclear policy options NATO can consider:

Continue reliance on the United States.

There are strong geopolitical and practical reasons for NATO's European members to continue to rely on America, especially when it comes to matching Russia. But under President Trump, how to best ensure reliability? How to be confident America will not abandon its European allies in time of crisis? Ensuring American reliability requires a plan, requires dealing with President Trump and his advisors to build support. European NATO allies will need

³⁴ NATO, 'North Atlantic Council Statement as the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons Enters Into Force', *North Atlantic Treaty Organization*, 15 December 2020, <https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/2020/12/15/north-atlantic-council-statement-as-the-treaty-on-the-prohibition-of-nuclear-weapons-enters-into-force>

³⁵ Florence Gaub and Stefan Mair, 'Europe's bad nuclear options', *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2025, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/europe/europes-bad-nuclear-options-gaub-mair>

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

to develop plans, offer crucial military and business incentives.

Encourage France and the United Kingdom

to make nuclear guarantees for the rest of Europe, extending their deterrent guarantees to other allies. An extended nuclear deterrent of this type, provided by France but ideally also supplemented by the United Kingdom, would certainly merit closer scrutiny if the United States further diluted or even disavowed its security guarantees. As of today, however, French and British nuclear capabilities raise serious credibility concerns. Some 290 French nuclear warheads are ready for deployment; the United Kingdom can provide another 225. Taken together, that is a mere ten percent of what Russia can field. They would be vulnerable to Russian first strike that potentially could destroy all their nuclear forces, and much of their land and people. Relying on France and the United Kingdom might require them to invest much more.

Withdraw from the NPT

NATO member states could develop nuclear weapons of their own as they see fit. Can other European countries, probably Germany and Poland, acquire their own nuclear forces, without antagonizing Russia and their own people?

Poland is most likely to take this path. Germany and Netherlands also have much of the technical capabilities. Countries like Finland and Sweden also could, but would need much longer to create the required infrastructure.

Two major concerns are the reaction of Russia, and effect on global spread of nuclear weapons. Russia could launch preemptive attacks to destroy a rising new European nuclear

capability. Russia might feel compelled to launch a preemptive conventional invasion while it when it is mostly likely to succeed in conquering NATO territory.

Also relevant is the impact of NATO nuclear proliferation on nuclear policy in other countries, in other regions, where governments are considering nuclear proliferation. Examples of countries that could be encouraged to take the nuclear plunge are Egypt, Iran, Myanmar, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, Taiwan, United Arab Emirates. A NATO switch to widespread nuclearism could greatly worsen its overall security.

Create a NATO nuclear force

In the 1960s, European members of the Alliance considered a nuclear force of their own. Although the proposal died, it remains an option. This could be under the NATO Supreme Commander. Two major issues are nuclear acquisition (where do the weapons come from?) and command authority (who is in control?). Strongest support will come from NATO's eastern-most members, especially the Baltic States and Central Europe, where fear of Russian attack is greatest.

But Member States may not be willing to give the NATO Supreme Military Commander or Secretary-General complete power over such a nuclear force. If they cannot trust Washington, London or Paris, why will they trust Brussels? Hungary, under the pro-Russian leadership of Victor Orban, and the United States, under President Trump's determination to build good commercial relations with Russia, will resist anything that could threaten Russia, anything beyond complete US control. Countries like Germany and Italy, where publics are extremely suspicious of nuclear matters, also will be resistant. Reassuring these countries will be difficult.



Restoring the credibility of NATO's nuclear deterrent



Encourage NATO states to join the Ban Treaty.

Instead of strengthening nuclear deterrence, NATO member states are free, as sovereign actors, to try to eliminate it. This will be popular with much of the public, especially in anti-nuclear countries like Germany and Italy. But it

would horrify other member states, and leave Europe profoundly vulnerable to Russian conquest or domination.

Joining the Ban Treaty, forswearing all nuclear options, would force France, the United Kingdom and United States to begin actual nuclear disarmament, something they would strongly resist without certainty that possible enemies—Russia and China—will do the same.



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