

The need for a European Union nuclear umbrella

Essay

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Abstract

The present study investigates the future of nuclear deterrence in Europe against the backdrop of a rapidly changing security environment. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has exposed Europe's strategic vulnerabilities and its continued dependence on external nuclear guarantees, particularly those provided by the United States through NATO. These developments have revived long-standing debates about Europe's capacity to ensure its own defence and the need for greater strategic autonomy. Historical initiatives such as EURATOM illustrate both the ambition and the persistent challenges of building a collective European nuclear capability, offering valuable insights for current policy discussions.

The research analyses the complex interplay between NATO's collective defence framework, U.S. extended deterrence, and the national nuclear forces of France and the United Kingdom. It explores how these elements jointly shape Europe's defence posture and the credibility of its deterrence strategy in a multipolar world. Furthermore, the study evaluates several possible models for a European nuclear umbrella - ranging from French-led frameworks to shared or fully EU-managed structures - assessing their political feasibility, operational requirements, and strategic implications.

Overall, the findings suggest a gradual but discernible shift in European strategic thinking. While transatlantic ties remain central to continental security, there is growing recognition of the need for a more autonomous, institutionally coordinated approach to nuclear deterrence, one that strengthens Europe's strategic resilience and political cohesion in an increasingly uncertain global environment.

Keywords: European nuclear deterrence, Strategic autonomy, NATO extended deterrence, European defence integration, Transatlantic relations

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2. Preface

This research is motivated by the profound security shifts that Europe has undergone in recent years. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has fundamentally altered the strategic landscape, revealing Europe's vulnerabilities and its reliance on external nuclear protection. The conflict has reintroduced large-scale conventional warfare to the continent while restoring nuclear deterrence to its central role as the ultimate guarantor of balance and stability.¹

My personal interest in this subject arises from the belief that nuclear deterrence, though controversial, remains fundamental to European defence. It is not only a military matter, but also a political, ethical and societal challenge, tied to sovereignty, trust and collective survival. What attracted me to this topic is that it is rarely discussed in depth within our academy, the Military Technical Academy "Ferdinand I" in Romania, which encouraged me to study it more thoroughly in a broader strategic context.

The purpose of this research is to clarify Europe's main choices in a volatile nuclear environment. Should the EU rely on NATO's guarantees, build a stronger independent deterrent or pursue new forms of international cooperation? These questions are examined with reference to key strategic documents and debates on arms control, technological change and nuclear proliferation. All of these factors directly affect the credibility and sustainability of deterrence.

In times of uncertainty, it is essential to move beyond technical debates and foster informed discussions that combine strategic realism with political responsibility. Studying nuclear deterrence is not just about doctrines or war plans, but about the conditions that allow Europe to preserve peace and protect its values. By analysing the past, engaging with the present and anticipating the future, this study addresses one of the defining questions for Europe's stability in the 21st century: the future of nuclear deterrence.²

1 Cf.: Homepage of The Guardian. Russia could be ready to attack NATO within five years, says secretary general. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/jun/09/nato-chief-russia-quantum-leap-defence>. [30-08-2025].

2 Interpretation by the author.

3. Introduction

The future of nuclear deterrence in Europe is shaped by a rapidly changing security environment, marked by a renewed great-power competition, advances in military technology, and uncertainty about U.S. strategic commitments. The central question is no longer whether Europe can rely on NATO's nuclear umbrella, but how it should respond to emerging threats and potential power gaps. Nuclear deterrence remains a fundamental component of European security, serving as both a military instrument and a political tool that affects sovereignty, alliance cohesion, and the credibility of defence commitments.³

The idea of a European nuclear capability is not new. In 1957, the creation of the European Atomic Energy Community (EURATOM) sought to promote nuclear cooperation and, indirectly, to explore a collective deterrent at a time when only the United States, the Soviet Union, and the United Kingdom possessed nuclear weapons. Although abandoned after Charles de Gaulle prioritised an independent French programme, this initiative reflected early ambitions for shared European security.

The lessons of EURATOM - its promise and its failure - remain relevant today, revealing both the opportunities and challenges of coordinating national capabilities within a collective framework.⁴

Recent events have revived these debates. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has exposed Europe's vulnerabilities and questioned the reliability of external nuclear guarantees.⁵ A hypothetical tactical nuclear strike on a NATO member such as Estonia underscores Europe's potential dependence on decisions taken in Washington. Such scenarios highlight the need to reconsider how deterrence operates within Europe's security architecture and whether a European-led capability could provide a credible shield for its allies.⁶

3 Cf.: Majcin, J. (2025). From umbrella to arsenal: boosting Europe's nuclear deterrence. European Policy Center.

4 Cf.: Homepage of VerfBlog. European Nuclear Weapons: Europe's Nuclear Ambitions and the Constraints of International Law. URL: <https://verfassungsblog.de/nuclear-weapons/>. [31-08-2025].

5 Cf.: Homepage of Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service. International Security and Estonia 2025. URL: <https://raport.valisluureamet.ee/2025/en>. [31-08-2025].

6 Cf.: Homepage of EU Made Simple. France's Nuclear Umbrella - Should it be Extended Across the EU?. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SBbOqa-4g0c>. [31-08-2025].

This study situates nuclear deterrence within a broader European and global context. It aims to clarify the strategic, political, and societal dimensions of deterrence while encouraging informed debate among policymakers and citizens. Understanding how deterrence has been framed and what paths toward European strategic autonomy exist is essential for shaping Europe's security in the decades ahead.⁷

7 Cf.: Vicente, A. (2024). Why Europe Needs a Nuclear Deterrent: A Critical Appraisal. Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies. P. 12-16.

4. Current State of Research

Academic research on European nuclear security has expanded in recent years, reflecting Europe's changing geopolitical landscape and debates on strategic autonomy. Analysts focus on how the continent can maintain credible deterrence amid uncertainty about U.S. extended nuclear commitments. While NATO and the United States have traditionally dominated the debate, growing attention is directed towards Europe's own nuclear powers - France and the United Kingdom - and the feasibility of a European nuclear umbrella.

1. NATO and U.S. Extended Deterrence

Much of the literature views NATO as the cornerstone of European nuclear security, underpinned by U.S. capabilities. The American nuclear triad and tactical weapons stationed in Europe remain the main instruments of deterrence against potential adversaries. Conventional military forces also play a crucial role in reassuring frontline states and enhancing the credibility of NATO's collective defence commitments.⁸

2. European Nuclear Powers: France and the United Kingdom

Growing research explores the "Europeanisation" of the French and British arsenals and how these national capabilities could contribute to a wider continental deterrent. Studies assess their credibility, operational flexibility, and scale, while highlighting persistent political constraints such as national sovereignty and the concentration of nuclear authority in the executive. Scholars also note that other European allies could contribute indirectly by strengthening conventional forces or engaging in consultative mechanisms, even without formal control over nuclear weapons.⁹

3. The Concept of a European Nuclear Umbrella

Recent analyses increasingly examine the practical and political feasibility of extending French or British nuclear protection to other European states. Scholars stress the need for coherent consultation frameworks, shared funding, and credible operational structures to make such an

8 Cf.: Quinlivan, J. & Olikier, O. (2011). *Nuclear Deterrence in Europe. Russian Approaches to a New Environment and Implications for the United States*. RAND Corporation.

9 Cf.: *Ibid.* P. 18-22.

umbrella sustainable.¹⁰ Although Europe's nuclear forces are smaller and less flexible than those of the United States, many argue that Europe's geographic proximity, economic interdependence, and demonstrated political resolve could enhance the perceived credibility of a European deterrent.¹¹

Overall, NATO's doctrine and U.S. policy remain the principal reference points for European nuclear security. Yet debates on strategic autonomy, the evolving roles of France and the UK, and the idea of a European nuclear umbrella have become increasingly prominent. Research highlights the interaction between military capabilities, political factors, and alliance dynamics, which together define Europe's nuclear posture.

Romania's Perspective

Romania's approach to nuclear security is shaped by its reliance on NATO's collective defence and the credibility of the U.S. extended deterrent. Although not a nuclear-armed state, Romania has an important role on NATO's eastern flank by hosting allied infrastructure and contributing to deterrence efforts. Its outlook remains firmly transatlantic, viewing U.S. engagement as essential to European stability. At the same time, Romania supports deeper European defence cooperation, provided it complements NATO, and maintains dialogue with France and the United Kingdom on initiatives that could strengthen Europe's overall deterrence posture.

10 Cf.: Homepage of Atlantic Council. Europe needs a nuclear deterrent of its own. URL: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/europe-needs-a-nuclear-deterrent-of-its-own/>. [01-09-2025].

11 Cf.: Ibid. P. 29-31.

5. Research Gap

Despite extensive research on NATO nuclear doctrine and the role of France and the UK in European security, there is still limited analysis of how a fully European nuclear umbrella could work in practice. Most studies focus on theory or high-level policy statements. They rarely explore the concrete institutional, operational, and financial arrangements needed to make such a system **viable**.¹²

There is also little research on intra-European divisions, public opinion and political will. Key questions remain unanswered: Who would control nuclear decision-making? How would resources and costs be shared? How would smaller states be **included**?

Scenarios involving rapid crises, such as a tactical nuclear strike on a NATO member, are seldom examined. Most analyses assume continued U.S. extended deterrence. This leaves a gap in understanding the strategic, political and ethical implications if Europe had to act **independently**.

In summary, future research should address these gaps. It should consider institutional designs, funding mechanisms, crisis management procedures, and the broader political and societal factors that affect the feasibility and **credibility** of a European nuclear umbrella.

12 Interpretation by the author.

6. Research Questions

General research question:

How can Europe ensure **credible** nuclear deterrence while maintaining strategic **autonomy** and adhering to legal and political **constraints**?

This question can be broken down into four sub-questions as follows:

1. What is the current role of nuclear **deterrence** in Europe's security architecture and how do NATO guarantees and national arsenals contribute?
2. What legal, political, financial and operational **constraints** affect the development of a European nuclear umbrella?
3. What potential **models** for a European nuclear deterrent could be developed, and what would be their risks, benefits, and implications for sovereignty and alliance cohesion?
4. How do emerging threats, rapid crisis scenarios, and external developments (e.g., Russia's aggression, technological risks, and climate change) influence Europe's options for nuclear deterrence and its strategic **autonomy**?

7. Methodology

This study explores European nuclear deterrence through a combination of qualitative insights, comparative frameworks, and contextual case studies. An extensive **literature review** is conducted, covering academic works, policy papers and strategic analyses on nuclear deterrence, NATO commitments and European defence, establishing a solid theoretical foundation and highlighting key debates. **Document and content analysis** of primary sources - including NATO's Strategic Concept, the EU Strategic Compass, national defence strategies and official statements - identifies recurring patterns, constraints, and strategic priorities.

To assess practical implications, **comparative analysis** examines different approaches to European nuclear deterrence, evaluating feasibility, risks, benefits and the effects on sovereignty and alliance cohesion. **Case studies** of France and the United Kingdom, alongside NATO nuclear-sharing arrangements, illustrate operational realities and political challenges.

Finally, **contextual analysis** considers the impact of recent geopolitical developments, notably the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, on European nuclear strategy and crisis management.

This integrated methodology, represented in Figure 1, ensures a comprehensive and evidence-based understanding of nuclear deterrence in Europe, linking theory with practical and strategic realities.

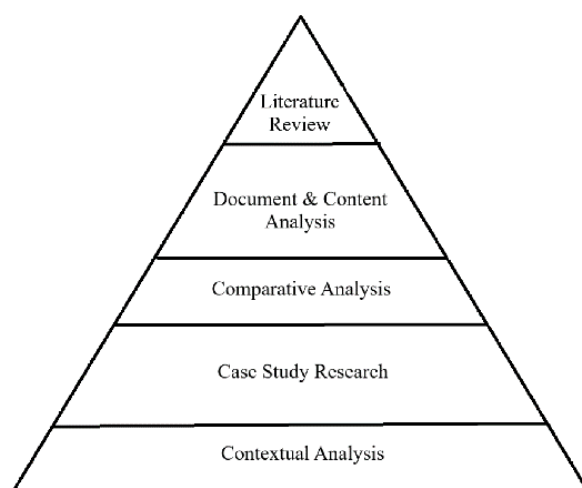


Figure 1: Schematic representation of the methodology ¹³

13 Figure created by the author using Paint [11-09-2025].

8. Research and Results of Research

One of the scenarios often discussed in the literature is a limited nuclear strike against a NATO member. For example, a tactical nuclear detonation in Estonia would cause massive human and material losses. It would also raise questions about NATO's deterrence credibility. The key dilemma is whether the United States would risk retaliation on its own territory to defend a small ally near Russia.¹⁴

Recent political developments increase this uncertainty. Former U.S. President Donald Trump questioned America's commitments to NATO and the EU. He even suggested that allies not meeting the 2% defence spending target might not be defended. In this context, doubts about the reliability of U.S. extended deterrence become more significant.¹⁵

These uncertainties highlight the relevance of a potential European nuclear shield. Important questions include:

- What would be the institutional design of a European nuclear deterrent?
- Who would control decision-making in crises?
- What would be the implications for European sovereignty, alliance cohesion and relations with the United States?

NATO remains the cornerstone of European security, yet a European-led capability could strengthen strategic autonomy. Such a project would, however, demand broad consensus, legitimacy, and substantial investment.

8.1 What is a nuclear umbrella?

The concept of a "nuclear umbrella" refers to a security arrangement. A nuclear-armed state commits to use its arsenal to protect allied nations.¹⁶ In practice, this means that if an ally is

14 Cf.: Homepage of Young Security Conference. The Future of Europe's Nuclear Deterrence: Strategic Necessity or Unmanageable Risk?. URL: <https://www.youngsecurityconference.com/publications-and-media/advancing-autadvancing-autonomy-charting-the-path-towards-more-autonomous-european-defense-ya5wy>. [12-09-2025].

15 Cf.: Ibid.

16 Cf.: Homepage of Council on Foreign Relations. Nuclear Umbrella. URL: https://education.cfr.org/cfr_glossary/840. [12-09-2025].

attacked with nuclear weapons, the protecting state must respond. This response could include nuclear retaliation.

Under NATO's collective defence commitments, an attack on a member state, such as Estonia, would trigger alliance-wide measures. These could include a nuclear response from the United States.¹⁷

Currently, three NATO countries maintain nuclear arsenals: the United States, the United Kingdom and France.¹⁸ Since Brexit, France is the only EU member with nuclear capabilities. Its arsenal indirectly strengthens European security. However, the French nuclear force is primarily national. It is designed to ensure France's survival and strategic independence.¹⁹

In addition to NATO's guarantees, the European Union has also established a collective defence clause:

Article 42(7) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU)

*"If a Member State is the victim of armed aggression on its territory, the other Member States shall have towards it an obligation of aid and assistance by all the means in their power, in accordance with Article 51 of the United Nations Charter."*²⁰

Interestingly, this wording can be considered stronger than NATO's Article 5. While NATO's clause requires a response to an armed attack, the nature of that response is left to each member state's discretion - meaning in theory, assistance could range from medical supplies to direct military intervention. By contrast, the EU clause explicitly requires "aid and assistance by all the means in their power," making the obligation appear more comprehensive.

This legal framework reinforces the principle of solidarity within the Union but leaves open questions about how nuclear deterrence might fit within a distinctly European security architecture.

17 Cf.: Ibid.

18 Cf.: Homepage of Federation of American Scientists. Status of World Nuclear Forces. URL: <https://fas.org/initiative/status-world-nuclear-forces/>. [12-09-2025].

19 Cf.: Tertrais, B. (2020). French Nuclear Deterrence Policy, Forces, And Future: A Handbook. Foundation pour la Recherche Stratégique.

20 Cf.: Homepage of European Parliament. Mutual defence clause. URL: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009_2014/documents/sede/dv/sede200612mutualdefsolidarityclauses_/sede200612mutualdefsolidarityclauses_en.pdf. [12-09-2025].

8.2 Could France's arsenal guarantee Europe's security?

A key question is whether Article 42(7) TEU means that France would automatically defend Estonia or any other EU state in case of a nuclear attack. The answer is uncertain. France's nuclear arsenal is mainly for national survival and strategic autonomy.²¹ No European treaty obliges France to launch a nuclear retaliation for other member states.²² A nuclear strike on Estonia would likely not trigger the same immediate response as an attack on French territory. Russia's unpredictability, shown by its invasion of Ukraine, means future aggression against the Baltic states cannot be ruled out. In response, European leaders are exploring ways to strengthen collective defence. One proposal is a European nuclear umbrella.²³ This could take several forms, each with different operational, political and strategic implications.

8.3 Models for a European nuclear umbrella

The concept of a European nuclear umbrella could be implemented in several ways, each varying in complexity, control and implications for sovereignty and alliance dynamics.²⁴ Based on current literature and historical precedents, three primary models emerge:

1. French Led Umbrella

In the French-led model, France keeps full authority over nuclear launch decisions. This is similar to the United States' role in NATO. The approach has several advantages. It requires minimal political negotiation within the EU. It avoids creating complex multinational command structures and it also relies on a well-tested nuclear framework.²⁵

France's nuclear doctrine focuses on national survival and strategic deterrence. This provides a credible and immediate deterrent.²⁶ Cooperation with the United Kingdom could strengthen

21 Cf.: Ibid.

22 Cf.: Homepage of BBC. France has a nuclear umbrella. Could its European allies fit under it? URL: <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c871e41751yo>. [13-09-2025].

23 Cf.: Homepage of MilitaryAtlas. Will Europe Survive Without a Nuclear Umbrella? URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nEDfNIWLeTI> [13-09-2025].

24 Cf.: Ibid.

25 Cf.: Ibid.

26 Cf.: Homepage of War on the Rocks. Force de l'Europe: How realistic is a French Nuclear Umbrella? URL: <https://warontherocks.com/2025/03/force-de-leurope-how-realistic-is-a-french-nuclear-umbrella/>. [13-09-2025].

European deterrence. The UK's nuclear posture aligns closely with France's strategic interests, in this way decision-making remains centralized.²⁷

Despite its simplicity, this model raises important questions about political legitimacy. Non-nuclear EU members could perceive it as unfair, since their security would rely entirely on France's discretion.

2. Shared Umbrella

A shared nuclear umbrella represents a more integrated approach. France retains ownership of its nuclear assets but distributes them geographically or operationally across selected EU member states, such as Germany or Poland.²⁸ Currently, France's arsenal is concentrated in submarine-launched ballistic missiles and air-delivered platforms.²⁹ Land-based silos were decommissioned in 1996. Relocating or deploying elements abroad could reduce response times. It could also complicate targeting strategies for potential adversaries.

Financially, this model allows participating nations to share costs. This could expand the operational capacity of the French arsenal while reducing France's fiscal burden. Politically, it introduces partial consultation rights for other member states. This enhances perceived legitimacy but requires careful agreements on command, control and decision-making protocols.

3. EU-Led Umbrella

The EU-led model is the most ambitious, envisioning a fully integrated European nuclear command. Decision-making would be transferred to a collective EU body, potentially including senior political leaders such as the President of the European Commission and representatives of key member states.³⁰ Funding, operational deployment, and maintenance would be shared among participating countries. While this model maximizes strategic autonomy, and democratic oversight, it comes at the cost of France's partial loss of sovereignty over its nuclear forces.

27 Cf.: Tertrais, B. (2018). *The European Dimension of Nuclear Deterrence. French and British policies and future scenarios*. Finnish Institute of International Affairs.

28 Cf.: Ibid.

29 Cf.: Homepage of NTI. *France Submarine Capabilities*. URL: <https://www.nti.org/analysis/articles/france-submarine-capabilities/>. [14-09-2025].

30 Cf.: Ibid.

Creating such a structure would require unprecedented legal and political agreements. It could involve modifying EU treaties and harmonizing nuclear doctrines across member states. The EU-led umbrella represents a long-term vision for a more federated European defence. However, its feasibility is limited by domestic politics, alliance considerations and international legal frameworks, such as the NPT, whose objectives include preventing nuclear proliferation, advancing disarmament, and ensuring the non-military use of nuclear energy.

8.4 Empirical Research: Public Perception of European Nuclear Security

To complement the theoretical research, a survey titled “Public Perception of European Nuclear Security”³¹ was conducted in September 2025. The survey gathered responses from 179 participants across several European countries. The sample was predominantly composed of military students (81.6%), alongside civilian students (2.2%), military teaching staff (9.5%), and civilian teaching staff (6.7%). In terms of nationality, the majority of respondents originated from Belgium (59.8%), followed by Romania (20.1%), Bulgaria (9.5%), Poland (3.9%), France (1.7%), and Slovakia (2.2%), with the remainder representing other European states. This demographic distribution provides a relevant snapshot of perceptions within Europe’s defence education community and serves as the foundation for interpreting attitudes toward nuclear deterrence and European security policy.

The responses to the first question (Figure 2) reveal a strong belief in the importance of a European-controlled nuclear deterrent. Nearly 87% of participants see the development of a European nuclear umbrella as a vital component of the continent’s future security. This finding reflects a growing awareness of Europe’s dependency on external actors, particularly the United States, and a corresponding desire for increased strategic autonomy. The high percentage of support among respondents - most of whom are military students or defence professionals - suggests that those directly involved in security and defence education perceive nuclear deterrence not only as a political concept but as an operational necessity. The limited share of neutral responses may indicate that debates on nuclear deterrence are becoming less abstract and more urgent in light of recent geopolitical developments, such as Russia’s aggression in Ukraine and growing uncertainty about U.S. global commitments.

31 Survey created by the author using Google Forms [15-09-2025].

1. How important do you consider it for Europe to have its own nuclear umbrella?

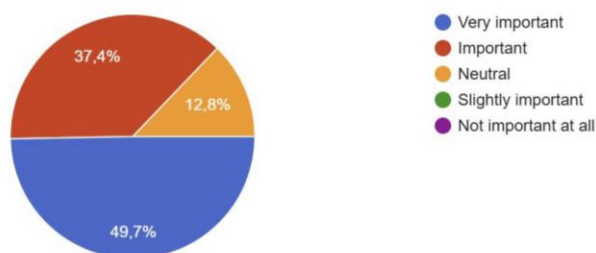


Figure 2: The first question of the survey ³²

The second question (Figure 2) provides important insight into the perceived credibility of NATO's extended nuclear deterrence. Although a majority (57.6%) of respondents remain confident in the alliance's protective guarantees, the relatively small proportion of very confident answers and the noticeable share of slightly confident or not confident at all respondents reveal underlying doubts. This distribution suggests that even within the defence community, faith in the automaticity of U.S. and NATO intervention in a nuclear scenario is not absolute. The neutral category (19.6%) also points to an ambivalence that may stem from recent political discourse questioning burden-sharing and commitment levels within NATO. Overall, these results highlight a cautious but visible shift from unconditional reliance on transatlantic guarantees toward interest in a more autonomous European nuclear posture, reflecting both strategic pragmatism and evolving perceptions of risk.

32 Survey created by the author using Google Forms [15-09-2025].

2. How confident are you that NATO and the United States would come to the defense of a European member state if it were targeted by a nuclear attack?

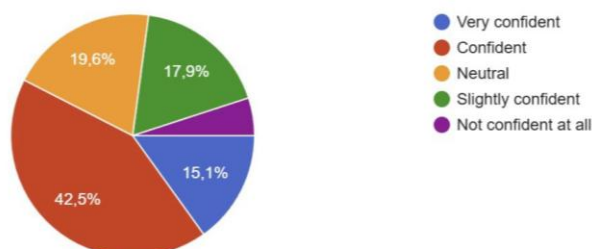


Figure 3: The second question of the survey ³³

The third question (Figure 4) examined perceptions of France's potential role as a nuclear protector within the European Union. While a majority of respondents believed France would probably respond to a nuclear attack against another EU member state, only 11.7% expressed complete confidence. In contrast, 24.6% were unsure, and a combined 24.6% doubted such a response. This distribution suggests a cautious but limited trust in France's willingness to extend its deterrent beyond national borders. The results highlight an underlying ambiguity regarding France's political commitment to collective European defence, despite its status as the EU's only nuclear-armed state.

3. Do you believe that France, as the only nuclear power in the EU, would respond to a nuclear attack against another EU country?

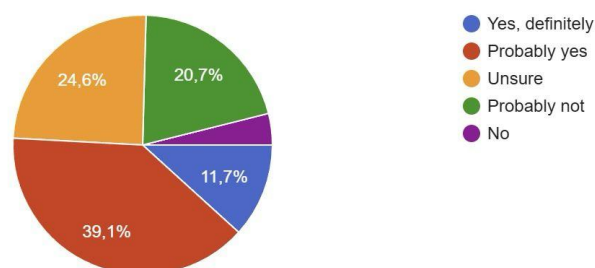


Figure 4: The third question of the survey ³⁴

33 Survey created by the author using Google Forms [15-09-2025].

34 Survey created by the author using Google Forms [15-09-2025].

The fourth question (Figure 5) addressed preferences for the structure of a potential European nuclear umbrella. The majority of participants favoured an EU-led model, indicating strong support for institutionalized European control over nuclear deterrence. A further 27.9% preferred a shared model, which could involve cooperation between the EU, NATO, and national actors. Only 8.9% supported a French-led model, reflecting limited enthusiasm for relying solely on Paris's capabilities. The remaining 18.4% were unsure, perhaps reflecting uncertainty about the political and technical feasibility of each model. Overall, these responses emphasize a growing belief in collective European solutions rather than dependence on a single nation or external actor.

4. Which model of a European nuclear umbrella do you consider the most effective?

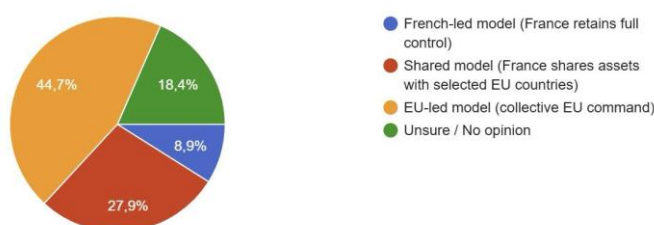


Figure 5: The fourth question of the survey ³⁵

The fifth question (Figure 6) explored respondents' concerns about the potential risks of Europe developing its own nuclear capabilities. A moderate level of concern was observed: 35.2% described themselves as moderately concerned, while 23.5% were concerned and 8.4% very concerned. Conversely, 19.6% were slightly concerned and 13.4% not concerned at all. This balanced distribution indicates that, although many acknowledge the risks - such as escalation, sovereignty issues, or tensions with the United States - these concerns do not outweigh the perceived strategic benefits. The overall pattern suggests pragmatic awareness rather than rejection of nuclear autonomy.

35 Survey created by the author using Google Forms [15-09-2025].

5. How concerned are you about the risks associated with Europe having its own nuclear capabilities (e.g., escalation, loss of sovereignty, tensions with the US)?

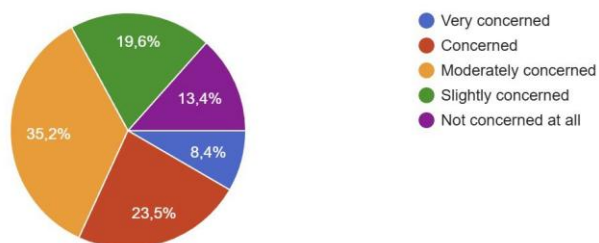


Figure 6: The fifth question of the survey ³⁶

Overall, the survey results show growing support for a more autonomous, institutionally coordinated European approach to nuclear deterrence. Participants acknowledge the continuing relevance of NATO and the U.S. nuclear umbrella, yet express doubts about the long-term reliability of extended deterrence. The data suggest that future European defence professionals view nuclear capability as a key element of strategic sovereignty, best managed through an EU-led or shared framework. The moderate concern about the risks of European nuclearisation indicates a pragmatic awareness of the challenges, without perceiving them as prohibitive. Collectively, these findings highlight a shift in strategic thinking within Europe's defence education community - from dependence to responsibility, and from theory to practical consideration of a distinct European nuclear posture.

36 Survey created by the author using Google Forms [15-09-2025].

9. Discussion of Results and Personal Conclusions

Discussion of Results

The results of the research indicate that Europe's nuclear deterrence is undergoing a significant transformation. Although NATO and the U.S. nuclear umbrella remain the backbone of European defence, political uncertainty and global instability have revived debates on the need for a more autonomous European capability. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has demonstrated that Europe cannot rely indefinitely on external guarantees and must gradually assume greater responsibility for its own protection.

The analysis of the three models - the French-led, shared, and EU-led umbrellas - shows that each offers both advantages and constraints. A French-led model would provide immediate credibility and operational readiness but would limit the participation of other EU members. A shared model could strengthen legitimacy and distribute costs, yet it would complicate command and control structures. The EU-led model embodies the idea of full European sovereignty but remains politically and legally difficult to achieve in the short term.

Supporters of a European nuclear deterrent highlight several key advantages. It would reinforce deterrence against potential aggression, strengthen Europe's strategic autonomy by reducing dependence on the United States, and enable cost sharing among member states, thereby easing the financial burden on individual countries. Nevertheless, important challenges also arise. Establishing such a deterrent could heighten the risk of escalation and make Europe a more prominent target in global conflicts. In addition, France would need to share some of its control over nuclear decisions, a change that could affect alliance relations and lead to possible tensions within NATO and with the United States.

The empirical findings largely support these theoretical considerations. A vast majority of respondents (87% ³⁷) regard a European-controlled nuclear deterrent as essential for future security, indicating growing support for greater autonomy. However, trust in NATO's extended deterrence and in France's readiness to defend other EU members remains limited. The preference for an EU-led model (44.7% ³⁸) demonstrates increasing confidence in institutionalized European cooperation, while the moderate concern about nuclear risks reflects

37 Survey created by the author using Google Forms [15-09-2025].

38 Survey created by the author using Google Forms [15-09-2025].

awareness of the ethical and political complexities involved. Overall, the results point to a cautious but clear trend: Europe should reinforce its deterrence posture through gradual, cooperative, and politically legitimate mechanisms.

Personal Conclusion

This study confirms that nuclear deterrence, despite its risks, remains essential to Europe's stability. The challenge is not whether deterrence should exist, but how it should be organized - under what authority, with what degree of autonomy, and in what relationship to NATO.

From my perspective as a Romanian officer cadet, the future of European security depends on achieving a balance between strategic autonomy and alliance cohesion. Europe should not seek to replace NATO but to reinforce it through stronger European contributions, including in the nuclear domain. A cooperative framework combining France's capabilities, EU coordination and NATO integration appears to be the most realistic and credible option.

Ultimately, the success of European deterrence will depend less on technology and arsenals than on political unity, mutual trust, and shared responsibility. A credible, collective approach - anchored in democratic control and strategic solidarity - will allow Europe to preserve peace while maintaining its sovereignty and moral integrity in an increasingly uncertain world.

10. Annexes

10.1. List of Abbreviations

- CSDP: Common Security and Defence Policy
- EU: European Union
- EURATOM: European Atomic Energy Community
- NATO: North Atlantic Treaty Organization
- NPT: Non-Proliferation Treaty
- TEU: Treaty on European Union
- US: United States
- UK: United Kingdom

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- **Figure 6:** The fifth question of the survey

10.3. List of Literature

10.3.1. Documents

01. Quinlivan, J. & Oliker, O. (2011). Nuclear Deterrence in Europe. Russian Approaches to a New Environment and Implications for the United States. RAND Corporation.

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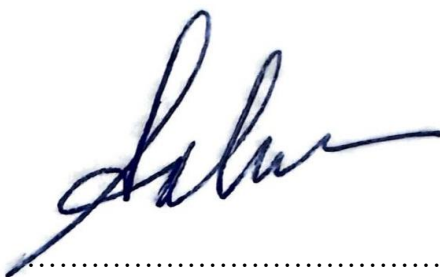
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11. Affidavit

I declare that I have written the present essay independently and on my own. I have clearly marked any language or ideas borrowed from other sources as not my own and documented their sources. The essay does not contain any work that I have handed in or have had graded as a previous scientific paper earlier on.

I am aware that any failure to do so constitutes plagiarism. Plagiarism is the presentation of another person's thoughts or words as if they were my own - even if I summarise, paraphrase, condense, cut, rearrange, or otherwise alter them.

I am aware of the consequences and sanctions plagiarism entails. Among others, consequences may include nullification of the essay, exclusion from participation in the CSDP Olympiad. These consequences also apply retrospectively, i.e. if plagiarism is discovered after the essay has been accepted and graded. I am fully aware of the scope of these consequences.



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Officer Cadet Daria-Andreea Ilie

Bucharest, Romania in November 2025