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A FRENCH EXTENDED NUCLEAR DETERRENT?: AN INTERVIEW WITH EMMANUELLE MAITRE – FOUNDATION FOR STRATEGIC RESEARCH

Emmanuelle Maitre works as a Senior Research Fellow at the Foundation for Strategic Research. A graduate of the Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Paris (Sciences Po), she works on issues of nuclear non-proliferation, deterrence and disarmament. Before joining FRS and after working as a consultant in the private sector, Emmanuelle worked as a Research Assistant at the Centre for Arms Control Studies (CESIM) and the Brookings Institution.

President Macron recently stated that France could extend its nuclear umbrella to protect other European states. What is your assessment of the debate that this declaration has generated in Europe?

President Macron's declaration is not new and aligns with previous statements made by French officials. However, given the recent dramatic changes in the security environment, reactions in Europe have been different this time. Friedrich Merz, who is set to become the next German Chancellor, has expressed openness to France extending its nuclear deterrent in Europe. On the one hand, the Russian threat is acutely perceived, and many European countries view a nuclear umbrella as indispensable for their security and for deterring a potential Russian attack. On the other hand, the credibility of the United States as a security provider has reached an all-time low, following the Trump administration's contemptuous rhetoric on Europe and its stated objective of reducing resources dedicated to European security. In this context, while all European allies, including France, remain committed to NATO's extended deterrence and continue to rely on sustained US involvement in Europe's security, they are increasingly considering alternative or complementary security arrangements.

The French nuclear doctrine is strictly conceived as defensive, designed to protect the country's vital interests, and based on "strict sufficiency". What would be needed to make the French nuclear arsenal a credible deterrent for Europe's defence?

Since the beginning of the year, many observers have raised doubts about France's ability to play a deterrent role in Europe due to the limited size of its nuclear arsenal. In response, Paris has reiterated that its vital interests have a European dimension, meaning that a massive attack against a European state could automatically be perceived as a threat to France's own vital interests.

Given France's close integration and proximity with its European partners, such an attack could therefore involve a nuclear response. The French nuclear strategy remains centred on the principle of inflicting unacceptable damage on an adversary. France has consistently rejected the notion of nuclear warfighting or a counterforce strategy and clearly lacks the capacity to build an arsenal comparable to those of other nuclear powers, such as Russia. Instead, the core of 'strict sufficiency' lies in determining the quantity and technical specifications of the weapons required to inflict unacceptable damage on an adversary, while factoring in its defensive capabilities. In the French system, this determination ultimately rests with the President, who makes the decision based on both political and technical assessments.

France is the only NATO member outside NATO's Nuclear Planning Group. How could nuclear coordination and decision-making evolve in the case of a French extended deterrence?

France's position outside NATO's Nuclear Planning Group reflects the country's willingness to maintain full sovereignty over its nuclear deterrent. Integration into the NPG, by contrast, would signal not only support for NATO's existing mechanisms but also a willingness to consult allies on the role of its own nuclear forces. Current discussions could pave the way for a more structured dialogue on France's nuclear contribution to European security and potentially strengthen its commitment to allies. However, at the moment there are no plans to extend deterrence to allies or involve them in France's nuclear mission or decision-making. French decision-makers have made it clear that the national nuclear deterrent will remain fully independent, making a NATO-style coordination mechanism for the French deterrent unlikely.

TRUMP'S WILD DREAM OF A "GOLDEN DOME" FOR US DEFENCE

Amongst the executive orders issued by US President Donald Trump, one aims at the construction of an "Iron Dome for America" (27 January). The order fulfils what Trump promised at the Republican Party convention: '"We will build an Iron Dome missile defence system to ensure that no enemy can strike our homeland…Why should other countries have this, and we don't?". In his "State of the Union" address on March 5, the American President then renamed the project "Golden Dome".

The order aims to make global missile defence a fundamental component of US national security architecture. Thanks to its geographical location and relations with neighbouring countries, so the argument goes, the US must only fear attacks from the air; therefore, an impenetrable 'dome' would protect the country from military action. Trump has recalled how President Reagan tried to build an effective defence against nuclear attacks, complaining that it was cancelled before its goal could be realized.

The current U.S. anti-ballistic missile (ABM) systems are designed primarily for threats from North Korea and Iran. According to the Missile Defense Agency, developing missile defences against nuclear powers such as China and Russia would present significant technical, financial, and geopolitical challenges.

As the order states, global protection from missile attacks would allow a nuclear power to impose its "peace through strength" by annihilating the ability of other nuclear countries to react. It could use (or threaten to use) its own nuclear weapons coercively. The strategy of mutual deterrence, unpalatable to many, would be abandoned and, as a result, the incentives to agree to reciprocal arms control measures would be strongly diminished. Pursuing this path to 'peace' is clearly unacceptable to other powers, which aim to realize their own version of 'peace'. Russian President Vladimir Putin, in particular, has repeatedly announced the development of new weapons capable of penetrating any defence.

From a strategic perspective, the situation has not changed since the 1970s when it was clear that a global ABM system would create severe strategic instability, both by inducing an arms race aimed at expanding and diversifying offensive nuclear arsenals, and by creating incentives to launch a first strike. In 1972 the USSR and the U.S. signed the ABM treaty, a cornerstone of the complex architecture of arms control agreements until George W. Bush withdrew from it in 2002.

Strategic instability is on the rise, extending the confrontation into space, incentivising the development of anti-satellite weapons and new means to penetrate defensive systems even with cyberweapons and artificial intelligence. Major technical issues that led to the cancellation of Reagan's ambitious plans remain unsolved: the enemy's ability to overwhelm the system by saturating it with offensive missiles; the questionable survivability of space structures; the inability to distinguish between real warheads and decoys; the challenge of designing battle management, command, control, and communication systems that can function in a real wartime scenario; the lack of confidence in the system's ability to function perfectly the first – and possibly the only – time it is used.

In the long term, new technologies, particularly directed-energy weapons and artificial intelligence, may alleviate some of these issues. In the short term, however, there is no reason for the blind technological optimism of the Iron Dome's supporters: the physics of space-based interceptors has not changed.

Alessandro Pascolini, Associate Professor of Theoretical Physics, University of Padua

Latest Publications

Assessing the OSCE Toolbox: Opportunities for a safer Europe. Katia Gold. European Leadership Network. March 2025.

The EU Research Security Initiative: Implications for the Application of Export Controls in Academia and Research Institutes. Lauriane Héau. EU Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Papers No. 94. March 2025.

Europe and the Next World Order. Peter Eitel and Sigmar Gabriel. RUSI. March 2025.

What If the USA Closes Its Nuclear Umbrella Over Europe? Dr. Karl-Heinz Kamp. DGAP. March 2025.

The US and Iran are on the road to escalation. Europe can and should create an off-ramp. Sanam Vakil and Aniseh Bassiri Tabrizi. Chatham House. March 2025.

Network Calls

UK PONI (RUSI) is looking to recruit a highly motivated project officer to assist with the design of project activities and initiatives, planning and organising of events, as well as provide efficient and varied administrative and organisational support.
The closing date for applications is 23:59 BST on 14 April 2025.

More info: here.

RUSI is now accepting proposals for presentations at the 2025 UK PONI Annual Conference which will be held in person at RUSI's headquarters in London on 16 September.

More info: here.

BASIC has three incredible opportunities available, with the roles being at different levels of experience, from early to mid-career.

Vacancy: Policy Intern

Vacancy: Project Manager, Policy Fellow

Vacancy: Project Officer

Edited by Ludovica Castelli and Ettore Greco

EU NEWS

COUNCIL DECISION (EU) 2025/646 OF 27 MARCH 2025 IN SUPPORT OF FACILITATING A SUCCESSFUL OUTCOME OF THE 2026 REVIEW CONFERENCE OF THE PARTIES TO THE TREATY ON THE NON-PROLIFERATION OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS

The objective of the project is to help facilitate a successful outcome of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) 2026 Review Conference through promoting greater inclusivity and diversity, while upholding and preserving the integrity of the NPT through a balanced focus on its three equally important and mutually-reinforcing pillars: disarmament, non-proliferation and the peaceful uses of nuclear energy.

More info: here.

NETWORK NEWS

BASIC LAUNCHES THE NUCLEAR FOR GOOD WEBSITE AND THE NUCLEAR TECHNOLOGY DATABASE

BASIC is excited to announce the launch of the #NuclearForGood website and the #NuclearTechnologyDatabase which is housed on the website. The project was made possible by the generous support and funding of the Government of the United Kingdom. Nuclear for Good is an interdisciplinary movement of policy experts, academics, private sector technologists, nuclear regulators, and international development professionals who share the belief that nuclear science and technologies have a crucial and underutilised role in making progress on the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

More info: here.

UK PONI HOSTED A LAUNCH EVENT FOR "THE GLOBAL THIRD NUCLEAR AGE: CLASHING VISIONS FOR A NEW ERA IN INTERNATIONAL POLITICS"

Hosted by the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) in Whitehall, central London, the official launch event for "The Global Third Nuclear Age: Clashing Visions for a New Era in International Politics" (Routledge, 2025) took place in March, attended by approximately 40 guests, including author contributors, Andrew Futter, Ludovica Castelli, Cameron Hunter, and Olamide Samuel. By adopting an innovative framework for analysis, the book challenges the constrained focus of much of the existing literature by explaining that the pathways to nuclear security for different actors across the globe will vary considerably in the new context of the Third Nuclear Age.

More info: here.

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