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# **President Macron on French Nuclear Deterrence**

by Benjamin Hautecouverture  
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# POLICY PERSPECTIVE

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## **PRESIDENT MACRON ON FRENCH NUCLEAR DETERRENCE**

by Benjamin Hauteouverture

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September 2020

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Translation of quotes from Emmanuel Macron's speech is unofficial.



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**P**resident Emmanuel Macron delivered a speech on Feb. 7, 2020 at the War School in Paris on the subject of deterrence and the French nuclear deterrent.

Macron's address is now the national reference on deterrence policy five years after former president François Hollande's speech in Istres in 2015. The Macron speech places France's nuclear capability in the European strategic environment and its conventional military priorities in the light of international law and the ethical issues related to the possession of nuclear weapons.

The official French doctrine is unchanged. In addition, the president was expected to shed light on the links between French deterrence and European security. The Macron speech in fact reinforces the idea of a European dimension to France's deterrence strategy, in ways that have yet to be specified. Finally, Macron spoke on the moral issues associated with the possession of nuclear weapons.

In the end, Macron's speech distinguished itself from those of his predecessors by going beyond the traditional framework of speeches on French nuclear deterrence. The new French president's aim was to contextualize France's nuclear deterrence and the necessary conditions required to move beyond these weapons. This was unprecedented.

## **A Doctrine with no Surprises**

Macron's speech expands upon the following elements:

Conventional forces and nuclear forces participate in a complementary manner in the national defence strategy: the "conventional military manoeuvre can be part of the exercise of deterrence". In a more conventional tone, it states that "our nuclear deterrent force remains, as a last resort, the cornerstone of our security and the guarantee of our vital interests."

The permanence of the stance on deterrence is reaffirmed. This stance continues to be based on two complementary legs: naval (the Strategic Oceanic Force) and air (the Strategic Air Force). Macron evoked the need to maintain the "operational credibility of [the forces] over time". This was guaranteed by the decisions on equipment upgrades taken under the latest French *Military Planning Act (Loi de programmation militaire, LPM) 2019-2025*, enacted in 2018.

The oceanic and airborne components are responsible for protecting the territory, the population and the country's vital interests, which remain undefined ("whatever they may be"). According to the traditional formula, "any threat of state origin against our vital interests, wherever it comes from and in whatever form" falls to the nuclear deterrent, the ultimate responsibility for which lies with the president of the Republic.

French doctrine is "strictly defensive". Macron has taken care to place it within the framework of the responsibility incumbent on a nuclear-armed state under the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation



of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). He added that the French doctrine was “clear and predictable”, pointing out the special focus on transparency that had accompanied the doctrine for more than 10 years. France’s nuclear strategy aims to “prevent war”, forces “are not directed against any country” and nuclear weapons are not “a weapon of battle”. Macron was careful to distance himself from the controversy that accompanied the creation of the U.S.’s Nuclear Posture Review at the beginning of 2018.

Macron reminded “a state leader” who would “underestimate France’s visceral attachment to its freedom” that “our nuclear forces are capable of inflicting absolutely unacceptable damage on its centres of power, i.e., its political, economic and military nerve centres.” This is now a classic formula. Finally, the discourse on the warning strike (“frappe d’ultime avertissement”) to “restore deterrence” specifies its “unique and non-renewable” nature. This French doctrinal emphasis on deterrence is sometimes subject to debate and Macron was keen to explain it.

Finally, the “level of strict sufficiency” of French nuclear forces was discussed. This level is “required by the international environment”. It is always an assessment made by the president of the Republic. Former president Nicolas Sarkozy indicated the figure of “fewer than 300 nuclear warheads” in his Cherbourg speech (2008) and this level remains unchanged.

## **Deterrence with a European Dimension, Arms Control and Disarmament**

A much-anticipated part of last February’s speech was the role of French deterrence in the European context. Macron followed on his predecessors by taking a further step in opening up to European partners. Thus, “France lives in a web of interests that extends beyond its borders. It is not isolated. Western Europe as a whole cannot therefore fail to benefit indirectly from French strategy, which is a stable and determining factor in European security.” This broader interpretation of France’s vital interests is therefore reaffirmed, Macron stating that “our nuclear forces ... strengthen European security by their very existence and in this respect have a genuinely European dimension.”

Next, Macron proposed to pursue a “strategic dialogue” on the role of nuclear deterrence with those European countries that wish to do so. France’s ambition is to shape a “shared European strategic culture”. Macron suggested that European countries wishing to participate should join “exercises with French deterrent forces”. It should be noted, however, that this option does not mean setting up an integrated structure like the one that exists in NATO.

Finally, the president placed great emphasis on the importance of a common strategic culture in Europe in order to evolve in the field of arms control and disarmament.

Macron recalled the foundations of France’s disarmament policy, French achievements and French priorities in this area: compliance with the NPT, negotiation of a treaty banning the production of fissile material for weapons (“cut-off treaty”) and universalization of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), continuing work on verification and the launch



of work on reducing strategic risks. Macron defended France's logic, according to which disarmament is not an end in itself, but rather makes it possible to increase everyone's security. His speech therefore seeks to rebuild a European disarmament policy on security considerations and not on ideological or strictly humanitarian considerations.

On the subject of arms control, Macron called on his European partners to wake up to "once again understand the dynamics of escalation and seek to prevent or avert them by means of clear, verifiable standards". In particular, he said that any new agreement on nuclear forces in Europe should include Europeans, and that discussions in this area "must not go over our heads". In general, the president argued that Europe needs to develop "a very clear position" that "takes into account ... the evolution of contemporary armaments" and allows it to defend its interests and what it considers favourable to the preservation of strategic stability on the continent.

It will now be a question of monitoring French initiatives. Naturally, the methods to be used by French diplomacy will be decisive in winning the support of France's partners.

## **The Moral Part**

Macron's position on the "ethical debate on nuclear weapons" is a specific feature of the February 2020 speech. This debate picked up momentum during the 2010s, as the global strategic environment deteriorated.

In this respect, Macron's address partly responds to Pope Francis' very assertive stance against any form of nuclear weapons possession, which he articulated in Nagasaki on Nov. 24, 2019. By recalling at the outset the Holy Father's initiative, Macron indicated a willingness to respond to it. This willingness demonstrates the interest – or perhaps concern – that has been generated in Paris following the radicalism of the Nagasaki speech.

Macron wanted to clarify the moral significance of France's strategy of deterrence in today's world. The following arguments are worth noting here:

First, Macron recognized that a nuclear deterrence policy is "fraught with moral dilemmas and paradoxes". He said that the elimination of nuclear weapons is indeed the objective that all states which are parties to the NPT are pursuing "in the context of general and complete disarmament". Further, Macron admitted that the possession of nuclear weapons within the meaning of the NPT "confers on the political leaders of the countries concerned a responsibility of a moral magnitude unprecedented in history". Finally, while affirming that under certain conditions, including "extreme circumstances of self-defence", the strategy of deterrence contributes to the effort to limit violence, Macron recognized "that this deterrent rationale is not sufficient to provide a basis for peace" in the sense that peace is more than an "inhibition of violence".

The logical sequence of this final statement leads to the conclusion of Macron's War School speech, which must be understood literally: "Our goal must be to work toward a different international order, with an effective world government capable of establishing the law and



enforcing it. This goal of transforming the international order is not just an ideal. It is a political and strategic path that we must now follow in order to make concrete progress.” On the strength of this vision, Macron ended his speech by calling on “the leaders of the other nuclear powers ... to renounce any temptation to use this strategy [of deterrence] for coercive or intimidating purposes”. Within this clarified strategic and diplomatic framework, Macron was eager to give a moral justification for France’s nuclear deterrence strategy.

Macron’s speech at the French War School, while aligning with former president Jacques Chirac’s speech in 2001, stands out in several ways: a renewed ambition for arms control, a deepening of the European policy of French nuclear deterrence, a desire to place French deterrence in the framework of European strategic autonomy which has yet to be built and a highly constructed ethical discourse in response to the recent moral attacks against the very principle of nuclear deterrence.

It is now a matter of closely monitoring French political initiatives aimed at implementing Macron’s strategic vision for nuclear deterrence and the reception they will be given in Europe.

## ► About the Author

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