



Our Editorial Director discusses the new French nuclear strategy of “forward deterrence” with the President of the Robert Schuman Foundation in Paris.

The Europeanisation of French nuclear deterrence – a political symbol or a genuine step towards European strategic autonomy?

A conversation between Jean-Dominique Giuliani, President of the Robert Schuman Foundation, and Hartmut Bühl, European News Journal's Editorial Director.

(ENJ, Hartmut Bühl) On 2 March 2026, the French President delivered a speech on France's nuclear deterrence at Île Longue, the operational base for France's ballistic missile submarines in the roadstead of Brest. Emmanuel Macron reaffirmed the robustness and effectiveness of France's deterrence posture in the current international context marked by a profound geopolitical rupture. And he presented a new stage in the French doctrine, referred to as “forward deterrence”. It bears a European dimension as it proposes to European partners to take part in nuclear exercises and may include the situational deployment of elements of France's strategic forces in the territory of allied nations. Furthermore, Macron highlighted the importance of mutual support between nuclear and conventional capabilities.

Jean-Dominique Giuliani, President of the respected Robert Schuman Foundation in Paris, reacted to this speech in an [editorial](#), describing Macron's announcements as a “significant step toward European autonomy”.

However, I was not convinced that there was a genuine shift in the French doctrine, which, in my view, had always de facto possessed a European dimension. I also wondered how this

forward deterrence, involving European partners, might be organised. I therefore invited Mr Giuliani to discuss the matter with me.

Mr Giuliani, I propose that we take as starting point for our conversation Macron's speech on the French nuclear deterrence. You were present when he delivered his speech at Île Longue. The president surprised his audience by announcing the gradual evolution of the French nuclear doctrine towards what he calls “dissuasion avancée” (forward deterrence), which takes into account the security interest of Europe, but – Macron was clear about this point – remains totally in the hands of the French president when it comes to decision-making.

So, Mr Giuliani, what are the new elements in Macron's vision and what are his motivations? Let me recall, that each president since Charles de Gaulle has stressed the European dimension of the French nuclear de-

terrence, which means that France's vital interests are linked to the European territory.

JEAN-DOMINIQUE GIULIANI: Let me first note that French deterrence predates De Gaulle. He formulated the theory within the context of the cold war with its two blocs, NATO and the Warsaw Pact, and France positioned between them, seeking to preserve its independence while standing in solidarity with its allies.

Today, what has changed, first and foremost, are the current geostrategic circumstances. We are no longer in the cold war era; we are in a period characterised by a revisionist, expansionist Russia whose preferred method – the Gerasimov doctrine – is cognitive warfare, societal manipulation, provocations, and so on. I believe this explains the inflection initiated by Macron.

You speak of an “inflection”...

J-D GIULIANI: ...yes, because, as you said, Macron did not announce a radical change of course regarding nuclear deterrence in general; France's nuclear force remains a powerful tool signaling to adversaries that any nuclear strike on their part would result in their own destruction.

Let us agree, then, to call Macron's stance an inflection rather than an abrupt shift, a move aimed at supporting allies among whom the Americans may not remain indefinitely. That, I believe, is the president's reasoning.

There is no doubt that nuclear deterrence remains necessary and that the American nuclear umbrella can no longer be taken for granted.



In this dangerous and uncertain world, you have to be feared if you want to be free.

Emmanuel Macron

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What has changed since the early days of cold war deterrence is that today, our leaders talk to each other all the time.

Jean-Dominique Giuliani



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Macron gives no nuclear guarantee for European partners in the strict sense of the term.

Hartmut Bühl

Jean-Dominique Giuliani (left) and Hartmut Bühl talking in the President's office at the Robert Schuman Foundation, Paris, 29 June 2026 © ENJ

J-D GIULIANI: What struck everybody was Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. Putin sent in his little green men and immediately declared: "If you retaliate, I'll hit you with the bomb!"

And in Europe we haven't budged.

J-D GIULIANI: We did nothing because we were scared, and that deeply concerned military planners, who asked themselves: could this happen again, in Poland for instance, or the Baltic states?

Consequently, when Putin began threatening tactical nuclear strikes in 2022–2023, three French nuclear submarines demonstratively left the roadstead of Brest. That was a clear message to Putin: if you start something, we are ready. Macron emphasised in his speech at Île Longue: "In this dangerous and uncertain world, you have to be feared if you want to be free." And he added "...and to be feared, we must be powerful."

It was an unequivocal stance, and I am firmly convinced that French deterrence works – including for Europe. However, I wonder what Macron's new concept of forward deterrence would mean in practice? He was clear that, regarding the French nuclear force, "there will be no sharing of the

ultimate decision, nor of its planification, nor of its conduct". Consequently, there is no guarantee for the European partners in the strict sense of the term.

J-D GIULIANI: That is true, Macron argues that a rigid guarantee would not be wise as it would reduce the uncertainty of our adversaries.

Forward deterrence means three things: the first point is integrating the protection of European partners and the depth of the continent into the assessment of France's vital interests. The second point is targeted cooperation: allowing allied countries to participate in military exercises or temporarily deploying elements of the strategic nuclear force to partner countries. The third point is, indeed, maintaining French sovereignty over the deployment of the nuclear deterrent.

What the French doctrine expects is a complementarity between the armed forces in Europe. Common enemies should be dissuaded to attack the European territory by the nuclear forces of France and the United Kingdom, but also by strong conventional forces of the other European states.

Macron said: "For our nuclear deterrence to be strong, every dimension of our conventional capabilities must be strong."

That is what Macron calls "épaule-ment" (shouldering), which means mutual support between nuclear and conventional capacities.

J-D GIULIANI: Exactly, because we need both conventional and nuclear deterrence. That is where the real inflexion in the president's stance lies: the recognition of the importance of conventional military forces in Europe. The rearmament of Poland, the German brigade stationed in Lithuania, with a strength of 5,000 people, and the major rearmament effort currently underway across the continent create a conventional deterrent effect. That is what constitutes the "shouldering".

Mr Giuliani, we can agree that effective deterrence requires – in addition to a nuclear component – technologically advanced, deployable conventional forces capable of fighting below the nuclear threshold, thereby forming part of the overall deterrence posture.

However, I am not convinced by the proposal to temporarily deploy elements of the strategic air forces, which constitute one of the three components of French deterrence, to allied countries. Macron calls this an "archipelago of forces". To what end? There is no need to redeploy these

forces to forward positions, given the availability of a fleet of aerial refueling tankers and French airfields.

J-D GIULIANI: Yes, you are right. But I think European partners want to ensure France's involvement in their own security. And, just as with US troops in Europe, the best guarantee lies in stationing troops or assets on EU Member States' territory – bearing in mind that President Macron has deliberately opened the door to this possibility.

Isn't there another reason, cited by some, namely, that sharing nuclear deterrence and stationing forces on European soil outside France would also entail sharing the risk, so as to avoid being the sole target of an enemy strike? In other words, if Europeans wish to be protected by French nuclear deterrence, must they also share that risk?

J-D GIULIANI: No, I really think that idea has been abandoned. I did indeed hear that theory circulating in French military circles for a long time, but it is no longer current.

Forgive my critical stance, but do you think that dialogue and cooperation with European allies in the nuclear sphere, as outlined in Macron's vision, will bear fruit? To my mind, the most important outcome would be the establishment of mutual trust, so as to foster a spirit of joint action.

J-D GIULIANI: Dear friend, it is already working! Nine European countries¹ have so far responded positively to Macron's proposal, among them your country, Germany, which will even participate in a French nuclear exercise before the end of the year! Furthermore, Berlin and Paris have established a high-level Franco-German steering group on nuclear issues, intended to serve as a bilateral framework for doctrinal dialogue and the coordination of strategic cooperation.

This indeed shows that we have come a long way. When we think back to the time of the cold war, we remem-

ber that the United States and France possessed tactical nuclear weapons that were aimed at the territory of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), which means German soil.

J-D GIULIANI: The president was clear on this point: France will not return to tactical weapons.

In this context, I remember the 1984 NATO Wintex exercise, in which I participated as part of the Federal Chancellor's staff; the aim was to simulate a mass concentration of Warsaw Pact tanks in the then-GDR, right along the border with the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and ready to cross the border. NATO was determined to destroy these forces through the use of tactical nuclear weapons.

Chancellor Helmut Kohl flatly rejected the use of nuclear weapons against targets on German soil. This caused a major stir within NATO. Kohl wanted a political decision regarding the future. With President Mitterrand, for example, he reached at least an agreement that the president would inform the chancellor in time if the use of French tactical nuclear weapons on German soil was being considered.

J-D GIULIANI: You see, what has changed since the early days of cold war deterrence is that today, our leaders talk to each other all the time. They meet very frequently, exchange views, and build close relationships.

So, the first step towards European autonomy is getting to know one another and understanding what we are doing. That's happening already, even if it is a bit slow. In the second step, when a crisis arises, such as the current situation involving the war in Ukraine or Trump's erratic behaviour, and so on, we see that European concertation works.

When Europeans deploy troops to Greenland, for, example, we know full well that the Germans might send one type of personnel, the French another, and the Norwegians and Danes yet another. So, if we enter in a confronting

nuclear situation with an enemy, the channels of cooperation between Europeans are already functioning.

However, I would like to emphasise that the British nuclear programme is not independent and relies heavily on American equipment. Under these circumstances, how could effective nuclear cooperation between the UK and France be envisaged?

J-D GIULIANI: Since the Saint-Malo declaration in 1998 and the Lancaster House treaties in 2010, the two nations have increased their cooperation including in nuclear matters. This is good news for European security! Do not forget that the best allies are the closest, because they share more common interests than with geographically distant allies.

Mr Giuliani, to conclude, you seem quite confident that Europe will progress in its strategic autonomy.

J-D GIULIANI: Europeans must reinforce every opportunity to discuss strategic issues in order to be able to react on their own in case of a European security crisis, that's the point for me.

The most important thing in these issues is confidence. We must be convinced we are able to defend ourselves and to protect our European societies against any threat. I am indeed confident we will take on the challenge!



The conversation was edited by ENJ's Senior Editor Nannette Cazaubon.

www.jd-giuliani.eu

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¹ Germany, the United Kingdom, Poland, the Netherlands, Belgium, Greece, Sweden, Denmark and Norway.