

## The Northwood Declaration: UK–France nuclear cooperation and a new European strategic backstop

The Northwood Declaration of July 2025 marks the most far-reaching step yet in UK–France nuclear cooperation, committing both states to coordinating nuclear policy, capabilities and operations.

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On 10 July 2025, France and the United Kingdom announced the Northwood Declaration, a landmark accord that expands the scope of bilateral nuclear cooperation to an unprecedented degree. Building on earlier milestones such as the 1995 Chequers Declaration, Northwood commits both states not only to deepening technical and policy dialogue but also to exploring the coordination of their nuclear forces. While the declaration preserves national decision-making, it signals for the first time that Paris and London are prepared to align their strategic postures in new ways to counter major nuclear and non-nuclear threats to Europe. In effect, Northwood positions the UK–France nuclear relationship as both an additional layer of protection alongside NATO’s collective-defence guarantees and a possible backstop should the United States’ nuclear commitments to Europe be weakened or withdrawn.

### **A milestone for British–French nuclear cooperation**

The Northwood Declaration is significant, particularly given the variable history of UK–France nuclear relations. The 1956 Suez Crisis caused a major rift in British and French strategic policies, and in the 1960s London chose to embrace nuclear cooperation with Washington, whereas Paris sought complete nuclear independence from Washington. From then on, the prominence of nuclear issues in bilateral relations waxed and waned in accordance with the two countries’ perceptions of the reliability of the US nuclear commitment to Europe. In the late 1980s, for example, they considered establishing a joint missile programme amid fears that the US would pursue nuclear disarmament. And in the early 1990s, following then US president Bill Clinton’s cancelling of a British nuclear test in Nevada, France and the UK created a Joint Nuclear Commission to

thoroughly explore divergences and convergences in their nuclear policies. This commission laid the groundwork for the landmark Chequers Declaration in 1995, in which national leaders affirmed that ‘we do not see situations arising in which the vital interests of either France or the United Kingdom could be threatened without the vital interests of the other also being threatened’.

Bilateral nuclear dialogue then expanded to military cooperation, port calls by ballistic-missile submarines and even the examination of nuclear-crisis scenarios. A collision of submarines in 2009 led to the adoption of technical measures designed to minimise such risks. And in 2010, the pivotal Teutates agreement created the joint EPURE facility, an X-ray photography machine, for cost-cutting reasons. (The facility enables safety and reliability testing of nuclear warheads without the need for live nuclear testing.)

The Northwood Declaration is more significant than these previous joint efforts for two reasons. Firstly, it expands upon and deepens the language of the Chequers Declaration, which focused on the use of nuclear responses to counter nuclear threats. Northwood signals that France and the UK will offer a form of joint protection to Europe in addition to NATO’s Article 5, with major non-nuclear threats to be countered by a joint non-nuclear response. Secondly, it states that national nuclear forces, while still ‘independent’, can now be coordinated. This is a significant step for both countries. The UK had never publicly considered such coordination with a country other than the US. And France had never publicly stated that it could coordinate its nuclear forces with any other country. Now, the countries are planning to establish a joint Nuclear Steering Group to ‘provide political direction’ for deepening nuclear ‘cooperation and coordination’. The group will be ‘led by the Presidency of the French Republic and

the Cabinet Office and will coordinate across nuclear policy, capabilities and operations’.

### **Deterrence, reassurance and burden-sharing**

While Brexit has complicated the UK’s defence cooperation with Europe, the Russia–Ukraine war and a change of government in the UK have led to a broad rapprochement between Paris and London on European security matters. The Northwood Declaration came only weeks after London’s announcement that it would resume a nuclear air mission, abandoned in 1998, by acquiring 12 F-35A fighter-bombers able to carry US B61 nuclear bombs. In this context, the UK’s nuclear cooperation with France does not come at the expense of its nuclear relations with either NATO or the US. Conversely, France, which unlike the UK neither makes all its nuclear weapons available for NATO nor coordinates with Washington, appears to have taken a step towards its nuclear allies.

These changes raise the UK’s status on issues related to Western nuclear deterrence, since London can now claim the role of a nuclear bridge between Washington and Paris. In April 2025, John Hill, acting assistant secretary of defense for space policy in the US, noted that some degree of trilateral cooperation had already begun by stating in testimony to Congress that France, the UK and the US ‘have strengthened our commitment to the nuclear mission in NATO while also improving coordination on strategic activities, deterrence messaging, and threat assessments’.

Northwood is the latest agreement in the growing web of intra-European security guarantees. In the past decade, several pairs of countries have signed mutual defence agreements: France and Germany (Aachen Treaty, 2019); France and Greece (Defence Agreement, 2021); France and Poland (Nancy Treaty, 2025); and the UK and Germany (London Treaty, 2025). The declaration also gives shape to statements that French President Emmanuel Macron has made across many years regarding nuclear deterrence and Europe. In a major speech on strategic issues in February 2020, he renewed French offers to develop European nuclear dialogue and invited some European nations to join nuclear exercises hosted by Paris. Going further than his predecessors, Macron affirmed a European role for the country’s nuclear forces, stating that ‘France’s vital interests now have a European dimension’. More recently, in March 2025, he stated that he had ‘decided to launch a strategic debate on using our deterrence to protect our allies on the European continent’, even though Paris had always been hesitant to embrace formally the concept of extended deterrence, seen as the domain of distant major powers (i.e., the US).

Following Macron’s 2020 speech, at least one country – Italy – is known to have participated in a French nuclear exercise through the provision of a tanker aircraft in 2022, but this was reportedly for operational rather than political reasons. There have also been new discussions regarding deterrence in Europe, albeit conducted quietly and only at the bilateral level. Nevertheless, Germany and Poland, in particular, have publicly shown increasing signs of wanting to contribute more to nuclear deterrence.

Northwood is not only about deterrence: it is also about reassurance and burden-sharing. As European allies of the US grow nervous about the future of extended deterrence, a stronger UK–France contribution to deterrence may dampen national nuclear appetites elsewhere. It can also be presented to Washington not only as a reinforcement of NATO deterrence – complicating the Russian calculus as to whether to attack or use nuclear weapons against a European NATO member – but also as a burden-sharing measure.

Finally, Northwood is a backstop against the risk of a dramatic US reorientation of its policies towards Europe. As of August 2025, the Trump administration does not appear willing to terminate the decades-old transatlantic nuclear contract. It would be unwise, however, for Europeans to ignore a scenario in which the US president decides to withdraw US nuclear weapons from Europe or close the nuclear umbrella altogether. Such a development could emerge from either negotiations with Russia – Moscow has long complained about NATO nuclear-sharing and the deployment of US warheads in Europe – or Washington’s disagreement with European domestic or security policies. In such a scenario, the UK and France would have little choice but to seek to fill the gap.

### **European deterrence and credibility**

The credibility of a European-only nuclear force would be determined by two components, one political and the other operational. Politically, a claim by European leaders that they are willing to trade Paris or London for Berlin is not obviously less credible than the American claim that it would trade Washington for Warsaw. Operational considerations are more significant, however, with some arguing that the smaller European-only nuclear forces would be incapable of wartime damage limitation – striking an adversary’s nuclear forces before launch – against Russia. But size is not the only consideration in deterrence. For instance, US strategic planners in 2024 surely felt that China’s then stockpile of 500 nuclear warheads posed a significant planning and deterrence challenge for Washington; thus, a European arsenal of equivalent size is likely viewed in similar terms by Moscow.

**Table 1: Nuclear arsenals of France and the United Kingdom**

Combined	France	UK
515 nuclear warheads • 6 deployable ballistic-missile submarines (SSBNs) / 96 missiles • 2 Air Force squadrons of <i>Rafale</i> fighter-bombers / Air-Sol Moyenne Portée Amélioré (ASMPA) missiles • 1 Navy flotilla of <i>Rafale</i> fighter-bombers / ASMPA missiles	290 nuclear warheads • 3 deployable SSBNs / 48 M51 missiles • 2 Air Force squadrons of <i>Rafale</i> fighter-bombers / ASMPA missiles • 1 Navy flotilla of <i>Rafale</i> fighter-bombers / ASMPA missiles	225 nuclear warheads • 3 deployable SSBNs / 48 <i>Trident</i> II missiles

Note: nuclear warhead figures are approximate  
 Source: Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists

(see Table 1). The sufficiency level of a European nuclear force remains a legitimate question, however, and the answer depends on the conception of deterrence that Europe adopts. If deterrence means the ability to threaten as much of Russia as Russia can threaten of Europe, a force increase would be in order. If deterrence means the ability to inflict unacceptable damage upon Russia, current levels might be sufficient.

There is also the question of flexibility in the context of war plans, delivery platforms and force composition, including ‘non-strategic’ or ‘theatre’ nuclear options. British and French ballistic-missile submarines have variable options in terms

of warhead yields, missile loading and strike plans. Most importantly, France has an air-launched component consisting of two squadrons of ground-based *Rafale* fighter-bombers for its air force and a smaller nuclear-capable flotilla on its nuclear carrier. This pales in comparison with the Russian non-strategic arsenal, widely assumed to be of the order of 2,000 warheads. Yet the NATO dual-capable aircraft arsenal is also relatively small, estimated to be one-tenth that size. As such, neither London nor Paris consider it plausible that they would engage in a full-scale, protracted nuclear war with Moscow.

### Outlook

The operational measures envisaged under the Northwood Declaration could take several forms. The most straightforward would be for each country to join exercises organised by the other or operate under the protection of each other’s ballistic-missile test sorties. In terms of crisis planning, London and Paris could seek to coordinate escalatory signalling against adversaries, alert levels, sorties of ballistic-missile submarines and, potentially, patrol areas – though this would likely exclude the air leg of the nuclear dyad from use in joint exercises, given that the UK’s Royal Air Force will continue to field US-controlled warheads. The highest degree of cooperation would be joint planning to ensure complementary strike plans, supplementing rather than replacing national plans.

As early as 1962, then-prime minister Georges Pompidou told the French National Assembly that once a European political union existed, it would naturally extend to defence and that the possession ‘by France of an atomic armament will then be an essential asset for this common defence. By that time, the question of a nuclear force within a

European framework [*cadre*] could be raised.’ The comment underlines that France has not always viewed its nuclear deterrent in strictly national terms, even if its European dimension has developed slowly. The European Union still has no role in deterrence, however, and Paris has shown no interest in pursuing one for it, given institutional obstacles and the presence of nuclear-sceptical member states such as Austria and Ireland.

Ultimately, the success of deterrence rests on the perceptions of national leaders. It is unclear whether Moscow takes the Northwood Declaration seriously, given its tendency to view the UK’s nuclear forces as an adjunct to those of the US. Political change could also alter the calculus: nationalist governments in either country might downgrade cooperation by the end of this decade. Over the next few years, the durability of the declaration will depend less on formal mechanisms than on whether leaders in London and Paris continue to perceive mutual benefit in coordinating their most sensitive strategic capabilities – and whether potential adversaries come to believe in the declaration’s resilience.

