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A hole in the nuclear umbrella? Rethinking European deterrence and escalation management through conventional counterforce

Linde Desmaele, Austin R Cooper

A hole in the nuclear umbrella?

Rethinking European deterrence and escalation management through conventional counterforce

LINDE DESMAELE AND AUSTIN R. COOPER*

Europe's security architecture is under increasing strain. From the east, the actions of an aggressive and revisionist Russia have increased the demand for security and defence. From the west, those of an increasingly unpredictable United States raise the question of whether it remains wise to entrust European security to Washington.¹ The Trump administration's statements and actions—including threats towards Greenland, the tendency to accommodate Moscow's interests in the Russia–Ukraine war, and military adventures in Latin America and the Middle East—have intensified these doubts.² The prospect of Europe having to deter Russia without dependable US backing has thus moved from theoretical to plausible, reigniting a longstanding debate: can Europe credibly deter Russia on its own and, if so, what will it take?³

In some ways, the growing attention to security and defence in Europe is welcome. It reflects a broader recognition that European countries must engage more deeply with the question of how to safeguard their security in an increasingly unstable moment. As part of this effort, they are freeing up financial resources for defence. In June 2025, NATO members committed themselves to spending 3.5 per cent of their GDP on military personnel, equip-

* Linde Desmæle's research for this article was supported by the Leiden University Fund. Austin R. Cooper's research for this article was supported by the Fulbright NATO Security Studies award in Belgium during late 2025.

¹ David Vergun, 'China remains "pacing challenge" for U.S., Pentagon press secretary says', U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, 17 Nov. 2021; Hugo Meijer and Stephen G. Brooks, 'Illusions of autonomy: why Europe cannot provide for its security if the United States pulls back', *International Security* 45: 4, 2021, pp. 7–43, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00405; Sven Biscop, 'Peace without money, war without Americans: challenges for European strategy', *International Affairs* 89: 5, 2013, pp. 1125–42, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12063>; Doug Bandow, 'Time for a European nuclear deterrent?', *The National Interest*, 14 Jan. 2017.

² Habib Badawi and Mohamad Zreik, 'Counting allies' coins: Trump's NATO strategy and its implications for transatlantic relations', *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* 23: 1, 2025, pp. 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s42738-025-00135-9>; Pete Hegseth, 'Opening remarks by Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth at Ukraine Defense Contact Group (as delivered)', U.S. Department of War, 12 Feb. 2025; Katya Adler, 'Trump's new world order has become real and Europe is having to adjust fast', BBC News, 16 Feb. 2026.

³ Jan Kofroň and Jakub Stauber, 'Don't count on the U.S.: can Russia achieve a rapid breakthrough in central Europe?', *European Security* 35: 1, 2026, pp. 23–48, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2025.2523031>; Barry R. Posen, 'European military autonomy: what comes first?', *Survival* 67: 5, 2025, pp. 7–28, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2025.2561479>; Ben Barry et al., *Defending Europe without the United States: costs and consequences* (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2025); H  lo  se Fayet, Andrew Futter and Ulrich K  hn, 'Forum: Towards a European nuclear deterrent', *Survival* 66: 5, 2024, pp. 67–98, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2024.2403218>.

ment and operations by 2035.⁴ But, while European countries seek to develop a military strategy suited to the changed security landscape, much of the discussion remains anchored in Cold War paradigms, particularly the notion that deterrence requires credible nuclear escalation options. According to this view, effective deterrence of Russia hinges on the ability to use nuclear weapons in a limited way: not just in an all-out nuclear war but also as part of a controllable escalation strategy. This logic has led to calls on Britain and France to invest in tactical nuclear options and plan for limited nuclear contingencies. In this same vein, scholars have started exploring options for an alternative nuclear umbrella that reduces reliance on the US nuclear arsenal, including the option of stationing French air forces on the territory of other European countries.⁵

We argue that this focus on nuclear escalation options is misguided and should be relaxed, if not abandoned altogether, to create space for creative thinking about what credible European deterrence could look like in practice. Theoretically, we question the extent to which nuclear escalation can be controlled, or, more importantly, if protecting Europe requires threatening to fight a limited nuclear war on the continent. Practically, we propose a substitution deterrence model for Europe, centred on conventional denial combined with potential conventional escalation through advanced long-range precision-strike (LRPS) capabilities. Within this framework, existing national nuclear arsenals—maintained in a minimum deterrence posture to provide secure second-strike capabilities—would be a residual hedge against worst-case scenarios, including a pre-emptive strike or large-scale nuclear coercion.

Our core claim is straightforward: if conventional weapons can now achieve strategic effects comparable to those traditionally associated with nuclear use,⁶ then investing scarce resources in new options for limited nuclear escalation—a concept that has been fraught with strategic and political problems since the Cold War—seems increasingly difficult to justify. During the Cold War, maintaining NATO conventional forces that could on their own deter or defeat Soviet aggression seemed too costly in financial and political terms.⁷ Nuclear weapons offered an efficient solution, though one with its own challenges, as US President Dwight D. Eisenhower would already learn in the 1950s.⁸ Today,

⁴ NATO, 'The Hague Summit Declaration', 25 June 2025, <https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/2025/06/25/the-hague-summit-declaration>. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 7 April 2026.)

⁵ Anna Bartoux, 'Lost in translation? France's nuclear policy and European security', *Survival* 67: 5, 2025, pp. 133–50, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2025.2561489>; Pranay Vaddi and Vipin Narang, via Substack, 'Building a Euro deterrent: easier said than done', *Strategic Simplicity*, 15 March 2025, <https://strategicsimplicity.substack.com/p/building-a-euro-deterrent-easier>.

⁶ Andrew Futter and Benjamin Zala, 'Strategic non-nuclear weapons and the onset of a third nuclear age', *European Journal of International Security* 6: 3, 2021, pp. 257–77, <https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2021.2>; Ryan Snyder, 'Assessing the lethality of conventional weapons against strategic missile silos in the United States, Russia and China', *Science and Global Security* 32: 1–3, 2024, pp. 105–73, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08929882.2024.2393537>; Eli Sanchez, 'The counter-silo capabilities of conventional prompt strike weapons', *Science and Global Security* 33: 1–3, 2025, pp. 3–47, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08929882.2025.2545051>.

⁷ John J. Mearsheimer, 'Nuclear weapons and deterrence in Europe', *International Security* 9: 3, 1984–5, pp. 19–46, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2538586>.

⁸ David Alan Rosenberg, 'The origins of overkill: nuclear weapons and American strategy, 1945–1960', *International Security* 7: 4, 1983, pp. 3–71, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2626731>.

advances in conventional capabilities and changes in the European security environment challenge this nuclear-centric framework, warranting a reconsideration of non-nuclear means for strategic deterrence and, if necessary, strategic victory over an adversary incursion into NATO territory.

Reliance on advanced systems like LRPS can replace the approach based on limited nuclear escalation while reducing political and proliferation risks and strengthening NATO cohesion. LRPS capabilities can degrade an adversary's ability to project power, impose substantial costs on it at the operational and strategic levels, and thereby alter its expectations of battlefield success.⁹ On the one hand, they can strengthen local deterrence by denial by targeting adversary military capabilities, including strike assets, thereby contributing to air and missile defence.¹⁰ On the other hand, LRPS capabilities offer options for non-nuclear horizontal escalation beyond the immediate battlefield through selective strategic interdiction against military production sites, logistics hubs and airfields.¹¹ Because these capabilities remain under the nuclear threshold, minimize civilian harm and reduce escalation risks, they seem more usable than tactical nuclear weapons in case of deterrence failure.¹² Relying more heavily on advanced conventional weapons could also improve NATO cohesion by distributing risks and burdens more equitably: non-nuclear NATO members would be able to contribute more meaningfully to deterrence and those on the eastern flank would gain capabilities for their defence, should deterrence fail.¹³ At a more systemic level, a substitution model reduces incentives for nuclear proliferation and helps preserve a global non-proliferation regime under strain.¹⁴

Our substitution model counters three prevailing tendencies in Europe's strategic discourse. First, we caution against the assumption that accumulating capabilities, especially nuclear ones, automatically strengthens deterrence. Credible deterrence depends on having not only the 'right' weapons but also the political will to use them when vital interests are at risk.¹⁵ When it comes to nuclear weapons, crossing the use threshold is fraught with serious moral and political considerations.¹⁶ Second, and relatedly, we highlight how the

⁹ Fabian R. Hoffmann, 'The strategic-level effects of long-range strike weapons: a framework for analysis', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 47: 6–7, 2024, pp. 964–1000, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2024.2351500>.

¹⁰ Tom Sauer, *The potentially revolutionary impact of emerging and disruptive technologies and strategic conventional weapons on the nuclear deterrence debate* (Stockholm: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2024).

¹¹ Hoffmann, 'The strategic-level effects of long-range strike weapons'.

¹² Linde Desmaele, 'Still a useful myth? NATO's theater nuclear weapons as tools of alliance management', *The Nonproliferation Review* 31: 1–3, 2024, pp. 5–28, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10736700.2025.2458355>.

¹³ Joshua H. Pollack, Cristina Varriale and Tom Plant, 'The changing role of allied conventional precision-strike capabilities in nuclear decision making', *The Nonproliferation Review* 27: 1–3, 2020, pp. 21–37, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10736700.2020.2003561>; no NATO eastern flank state currently participates in US nuclear sharing.

¹⁴ Vipin Narang and Pranay Vaddi, 'How to survive the new nuclear age: national security in a world of proliferating risks and eroding constraints', *Foreign Affairs* 104: 4, 2025, pp. 122.

¹⁵ Paul K. Huth, 'Deterrence and international conflict: empirical findings and theoretical debates', *Annual Review of Political Science*, vol. 2, 1999, pp. 25–48, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.2.1.25>; Jesse C. Johnson, Brett Ashley Leeds and Ahra Wu, 'Capability, credibility and extended general deterrence', *International Interactions* 41: 2, 2015, pp. 309–36, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03050629.2015.982115>.

¹⁶ Much of this literature centres on the notion of a 'nuclear taboo'; see Nina Tannenwald, 'Stigmatizing the bomb: origins of the nuclear taboo', *International Security* 29: 4, 2005, pp. 5–49; Stacie E. Goddard and Colleen Larkin, 'Nuclear shibboleths: the logics and future of nuclear nonuse', *International Organization*

continued emphasis on nuclear escalation risks reproducing a logic that has long been plagued by political, operational and strategic dilemmas. It assumes a willingness to fight a nuclear war in Europe and also assumes that such a war would remain limited enough not to destroy the societies that it would ostensibly be fought to defend, a premise that is fortunately untested yet questionable. Third, the current debate often overlooks the possibility of failure of nuclear deterrence.¹⁷ This might happen if one side calls the other's bluff, through inadvertent escalation, or because of accidents, even though improved safety standards make the latter seem less likely today than during the Cold War.¹⁸ Even if such failure has a low likelihood, its likely high impact—including the possibility of limited or general nuclear war—is a good reason to try to avoid it.

These tendencies have helped an old idea to resurface: that the United Kingdom and France should expand their capabilities, or even join forces, for a shared nuclear deterrent that could extend over much of Europe.¹⁹ The 2025 Franco-British Northwood Declaration, which states that there is 'no extreme threat to Europe that would not prompt a response by our two nations' and announces the creation of a bilateral Nuclear Steering Group, could be a move in this direction.²⁰ But, while 'Europeanizing' the nuclear umbrella may offer symbolic reassurance, it is unlikely to solve the problems that proponents of this idea think it should solve.²¹ Attempting to do so risks reproducing the same credibility challenges that have plagued US extended nuclear deterrence in Europe since at least the 1960s, when France's President Charles de Gaulle famously criticized it. If trading New York for Paris still seems implausible, as de Gaulle insisted decades ago, what sounds better about trading Paris or London for Tallinn?²²

Finally, we remain agnostic about US retrenchment and the specific institutional framework through which European military strategy is organized. Our model charts a path towards greater European strategic autonomy that does not rely on the threat of limited nuclear escalation and replaces it with credible

79: 1, 2025, pp. 117–45, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818324000341>; for a contrasting analysis emphasizing the trade-offs facing decision-makers, see Jennifer Erickson, 'Social reputation, public opinion, and US nuclear non-use in the Cold War,' paper presented at the International Studies Association Convention, 5 April 2024 in San Francisco, CA.

¹⁷ For a broader critique of nuclear deterrence as producing 'nuclear vulnerability', see Benoît Pelopidas, 'De la prolifération à la vulnérabilité nucléaire globale', in Pelopidas, *Repenser les choix nucléaires* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2022).

¹⁸ Eric Schlosser, *Command and control: nuclear weapons, the Damascus accident, and the illusion of safety* (London: Penguin, 2014); Scott D. Sagan, *The limits of safety: organizations, accidents, and nuclear weapons* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Barry R. Posen, *Inadvertent escalation: conventional war and nuclear risks* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

¹⁹ Stuart Croft, 'European integration, nuclear deterrence and Franco-British nuclear cooperation', *International Affairs* 72: 4, 1996, pp. 771–88, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2624121>; James Cameron, 'Eurodeterrant: a vision for an Anglo-French nuclear force', *War on the Rocks*, 31 March 2025; Alexander Sorg, 'Force de l'Europe: how realistic is a French nuclear umbrella?', *War on the Rocks*, 24 March 2025.

²⁰ Northwood Declaration, 10 July 2025 (UK–France joint nuclear statement).

²¹ Florence Gaub and Stefan Mair, 'Europe's bad nuclear options and why they may be the only path to security', *Foreign Affairs*, 24 June 2025.

²² 'Memorandum of conversation, Charles de Gaulle and John F. Kennedy, Paris, 31 May 1961' in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961–1963, Volume XIV, Berlin Crisis, 1961–1962* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2010), doc. 30, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v14/d30>.

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conventional options. Even without the United States, NATO could continue to function as the integrated command structure through which European states organize deterrence and defence.²³ If US conventional contributions continue, they could then complement our substitution deterrence model. Overall, however, expanding nuclear options, with or without the United States, is an inefficient and perhaps counterproductive use of scarce resources to tackle today's significant security challenges.

To develop our argument, we proceed in three steps. We begin by briefly outlining Europe's contemporary security environment. Second, we review proposals to replace the US nuclear umbrella (if only in part) with a European one and highlight their limitations. In doing so, we identify a pervasive gap in current European security thinking: the overemphasis on the accumulation of nuclear capabilities divorced from coherent strategy concepts that link means to objectives. Third, we propose a framework for European deterrence and defence that relies on advanced conventional capabilities, mainly in a denial posture. Finally, we acknowledge current limitations and suggest avenues for future research.

Back to the future: Cold War 2.0?

For students of the Cold War, the Russia–Ukraine war has brought a familiar clarity to the European security debate. Any hope of building a cooperative order with Russia now seems gone.²⁴ Instead, the short-term challenge appears to be how to deter and contain a demonstrably revisionist, risk-acceptant Russia.²⁵ The nuclear dimension looms large here. Russia and NATO's three nuclear powers retain arsenals initially developed during the Cold War, though in appreciably lower numbers than at their late twentieth-century peak.²⁶ These arsenals are still destructive and sophisticated, which means that the logic of mutually assured destruction (MAD) would still hold in the event of a strategic nuclear exchange. All four states possess secure second-strike capabilities that enable retaliation following an adversary's nuclear attack.²⁷ Admittedly, recent scholarship has questioned whether technological advancements (e.g., improved remote sensing and surveillance) have started to undermine

²³ Posen, 'European military autonomy'.

²⁴ M. E. Sarotte, *Not one inch: America, Russia, and the making of post-Cold War stalemate* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2022). For an alternative view, see Tom Sauer, *The case for collective security in Europe after the war in Ukraine* (Tokyo: Toda Peace Institute Policy, 2026); this collective security model would require rebuilding trust, especially near the front line.

²⁵ The extent of Russia's territorial ambitions remains uncertain and likely unknowable. See *Informal meeting of the Heads of State or Government, Versailles Declaration*, 10 and 11 March 2022, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/54773/20220311-versailles-declaration-en.pdf>; Roy Allison, 'Averting acute escalation in Russia's war against Ukraine', *International Affairs* 101: 5, 2025, pp. 1769–91, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaaf137>.

²⁶ Hans M. Kristensen, Matt Korda, Eliana Johns and Mackenzie Knight, 'Nuclear weapons sharing, 2023', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 79: 6, 2023, pp. 393–406, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2023.2266944>.

²⁷ Robert Jervis, *The meaning of the nuclear revolution: statecraft and the prospect of Armageddon* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989); Zsófia Wolford et al., *Evolving Russian perceptions of the British and French nuclear deterrents* (Santa Monica, CA and Cambridge, UK: RAND Corporation, 2025).

the survivability of certain retaliatory forces.²⁸ But, while these developments pose challenges, the prevailing view still holds that achieving nuclear disarmament of any of these four states via a first strike is unrealistic. Moreover, some observers emphasize that MAD requires only uncertainty as to whether a first strike would completely eliminate an adversary's nuclear arsenal.²⁹

Even if we accept MAD, policy-makers and scholars must grapple with the stability–instability paradox.³⁰ This helps explain how mature nuclear arsenals can deter outright war among great powers yet also encourage dangerous behaviour on a smaller scale. On the one hand, the mutual vulnerability imposed by secure second-strike forces encourages caution, since adversaries can neither win in their first move nor tolerate the possible costs of an all-out response. On the other hand, revisionist powers may use their nuclear arsenals as a shield for coercive actions,³¹ either through brinkmanship³² or by launching a conventional attack,³³ confident that the spectre of nuclear war will dissuade nuclear-armed adversaries from retaliating and otherwise limit escalation by constraining the extent to which they might fight back.³⁴

Scholars remain divided on whether the stability–instability paradox increases the risk of war.³⁵ Some warn that it does and therefore argue that effective deterrence requires the ability to ‘dominate’ (or control) escalation across the full spectrum of conflict: deterring adversaries not only at the strategic level but at every rung of the proverbial escalation ladder.³⁶ For them, capabilities and willingness to fight a limited nuclear war are key to preventing escalation to the highest rungs of conflict, or to being able to achieve ‘intra-war deterrence’, by threatening progressively greater costs until the other side backs down.³⁷

²⁸ Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, ‘The new era of counterforce: technological change and the future of nuclear deterrence’, *International Security* 41: 4, 2017, pp. 9–49, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00273; Rose Gottemoeller, ‘The standstill conundrum: the advent of second-strike vulnerability and options to address it’, *Texas National Security Review* 4: 4, 2021, pp. 115–24, <http://doi.org/10.26153/tsw/17496>; on the vulnerability of second-strike forces during the Cold War, see Austin Long and Brendan Rittenhouse Green, ‘Stalking the secure second strike: intelligence, counterforce, and nuclear strategy’, *Journal of Strategic Studies* 38: 1–2, 2015, pp. 38–73, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2014.958150>.

²⁹ Riqiang Wu, ‘Living with uncertainty: modeling China’s nuclear survivability’, *International Security* 44: 4, 2020, pp. 84–118, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00376.

³⁰ Glenn Snyder, ‘The balance of terror and the balance of power’, in Paul Seabury, ed., *Balance of power* (San Francisco: Chandler, 1964); Robert Jervis, ‘Arms control, stability and causes of war’, *Daedalus* 120: 1, 1991, pp. 167–81.

³¹ Todd S. Sechser and Matthew Fuhrmann, *Nuclear weapons and coercive diplomacy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

³² Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966).

³³ Jaewook Lee, *A comprehensive analysis of conventional–nuclear integration of the United States* (Livermore, CA: Centre for Global Security Research, Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, 2024).

³⁴ Amir Lupovici, ‘Deterrence by delivery of arms: NATO and the war in Ukraine’, *Contemporary Security Policy* 44: 4, 2023, pp. 624–41, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2023.2256572>.

³⁵ Henrik Stålhane Hiim and Øystein Tunsjø, ‘The US–China stability–instability paradox: limited war in east Asia’, *International Security* 50: 1, 2025, pp. 152–81, <https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC.a.8>.

³⁶ Herman Kahn, *On escalation: metaphors and scenarios* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017, first publ. in 1965); Matthew Kroenig, *The logic of American nuclear strategy: why strategic superiority matters* (Oxford University Press, 2018); Mark S. Bell, ‘Nuclear opportunism: a theory of how states use nuclear weapons in international politics’, *Journal of Strategic Studies* 42: 1, 2019, pp. 3–28, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2017.1389722>.

³⁷ National Institute for Public Policy, *Section VI: minimum deterrence and damage limitation* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute for Public Policy, 2014).

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By contrast, others accept the internal logic of the paradox but emphasize the inherent uncertainty in escalation. According to this view, no leader can be entirely sure that even a seemingly limited conflict would remain contained. The prospect of inadvertent or uncontrollable escalation into an all-out nuclear exchange should, therefore, make policy-makers cautious, even in low-level crises. Seen through this lens, the destructiveness of nuclear war contributes to systemic restraint that reduces the likelihood of aggression at all levels, and especially the highest one.³⁸

Recent research has highlighted how geographic context shapes the dynamics of the stability–instability paradox. Scholars have suggested that the Cold War conditions in Europe—a dense alliance network and short distances—posed significant barriers to keeping any war limited.³⁹ The regional concentration of nuclear forces also meant that even a theatre nuclear war could have caused enormous destruction. The United States had more than 7,000 forward deployed nuclear warheads in Europe at their peak. Notably, the build-up of a diverse arsenal of mainly short-range, battlefield nuclear weapons in West Germany by the 1970s amounted to what contemporary observers called a ‘regional doomsday machine’. Indeed, if nuclear war had broken out, there was plenty of ‘powder’ around to keep it going for a short while. This kind of instability may well have been the point: Soviet leaders would have had to consider that a small tank incursion, for example, might quickly spiral out of control.⁴⁰ Such spiral effects likely enhanced regional deterrence while jeopardizing crisis stability.

Even if dynamics in Europe today echo Cold War patterns, there are important differences. First, as NATO has admitted new members since the collapse of the Soviet Union (USSR), the front line has moved steadily eastward, from the old divide between the two Germanies to the current borders of Russia and its client state Belarus.⁴¹ This change likely increases the strategic importance of the Baltic states and of Poland, which provides the only land bridge to that north-eastern flank, through the narrow gap between Russia’s coastal enclave of Kaliningrad and Belarus.⁴² The Baltic states remain relatively isolated and difficult to supply from the rest of NATO territory, even though Sweden’s and Finland’s accession to the alliance could begin to ameliorate this situation, especially given Swedish air power in terms of both aircraft and airfields.⁴³

Second, Russia does not have the general conventional advantage that persuaded NATO in the 1950s to predicate its defence of western Europe

³⁸ Jervis, *The meaning of the nuclear revolution*.

³⁹ Hiim and Tunsjø, ‘The US–China stability–instability paradox’.

⁴⁰ Benoît Pelopidas and Kjolv Egeland, ‘The false promise of nuclear risk reduction’, *International Affairs* 100: 1, 2024, pp. 345–60 at pp. 350–1, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iad290>.

⁴¹ Scholars continue to debate the strategic implications of this shift. See James M. Goldgeier and Joshua R. I. Shiffrin, eds, *Evaluating NATO enlargement: from Cold War victory to the Russia–Ukraine war* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023).

⁴² Marta Kepe, ‘From forward presence to forward defense: NATO’s defense of the Baltics’, *Real Clear Defense*, 14 Feb. 2024.

⁴³ Matthew Evangelista, ‘A “nuclear umbrella” for Ukraine? Precedents and possibilities for postwar European security’, *International Security* 48: 3, 2024, pp. 7–50, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00476; Posen, ‘European military autonomy’.

on nuclear weapons.⁴⁴ NATO's ongoing practices of nuclear deployment and nuclear sharing emerged to address the challenge of deterring the Red Army from moving westwards through US nuclear threats issued from across the Atlantic, at a time when the USSR already had the bomb and had begun to make clear progress towards delivery systems that could credibly threaten the continental United States (CONUS).⁴⁵ Today, Russia has a local conventional advantage only in some areas, especially in relation to the Baltic states. The Russia–Ukraine war has raised further doubts about Russia's conventional performance.⁴⁶ The war also complicates Europe's security architecture, since Russian and NATO planners must factor Ukraine into their calculations.⁴⁷ Still, all else being equal, we believe that NATO benefits from putting the nuclear threshold high, because the Cold War logic has flipped. Today, Russia possesses a vast arsenal of shorter-range, low-yield nuclear weapons,⁴⁸ which some, including former US president Joe Biden, argue may add to the credibility of its threats of using nuclear weapons first.⁴⁹ Nonetheless, it is a matter of debate whether limited nuclear options or robust conventional denial paired with secure nuclear second-strike forces is the most effective way to deter such first use.⁵⁰

Finally, Atlanticism does not seem to have the same political binding power as it did during the Cold War.⁵¹ At the time, western leaders did debate the extent to which they should accommodate or challenge the USSR and what role the deployment of US nuclear weapons in Europe should play in this.⁵² But, despite the Gaullist challenge, there was broad agreement on the desirability of coupling European security to Washington's leadership through the US (nuclear) presence on the continent.⁵³ In contrast, the extent and very prospect of US commitments to Europe appear to be in question today. Recent US administrations have prioritized the Indo-Pacific, with the Pentagon identi-

⁴⁴ Kristin Ven Bruusgaard, 'Russian nuclear strategy and conventional inferiority', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 44: 1, 2021, pp. 3–35, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2020.1818070>; Leopoldo Nuti, *NATO's role in nuclear non-proliferation and arms control: a (critical) history* (Rome: Istituto Affari Internazionali, 2021); J. Michael Legge, *Theater nuclear weapons and the NATO strategy of flexible response* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1983).

⁴⁵ David Holloway, 'Racing toward Armageddon? Soviet views of strategic nuclear war, 1955–1972', in Michael D. Gordin and John G. Ikenberry, eds, *The age of Hiroshima* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

⁴⁶ Eliot A. Cohen and Phillips O'Brien, *The Russia–Ukraine war: a study in analytic failure* (Washington DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2024); Bradley Martin, D. Sean Barnett and Devin McCarthy, *Russian logistics and sustainment failures in the Ukraine conflict* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2023).

⁴⁷ Ondřej Ditrych and Martin Laryš, 'What can European security architecture look like in the wake of Russia's war on Ukraine?' *European Security* 34: 1, 2025, pp. 44–64, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2024.2347221>.

⁴⁸ Hans M. Kristensen, Matt Korda, Eliana Johns and Mackenzie Knight, 'Russian nuclear weapons, 2024', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 80: 2, 2024, pp. 118–45, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2024.2314437>.

⁴⁹ 'Joe Biden: former US president gives first interview since leaving the White House', BBC News via YouTube, 7 May 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=INuwqHzBFCo>.

⁵⁰ Adam Mount, 'Conventional deterrence of nuclear use', *International Security* 50: 2, 2025, pp. 95–129, <https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC.a.13>.

⁵¹ Andreas Lutsch, 'The case for nuclear consultation with NATO', War on the Rocks, 11 May 2016.

⁵² Susan Colbourn, *Euromissiles: the nuclear weapons that nearly destroyed NATO* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2022).

⁵³ Frédéric Bozo, *Two strategies for Europe: De Gaulle, the United States, and the Atlantic Alliance*, transl. by Susan Emanuel (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000).

fying China as its ‘pacing challenge’.⁵⁴ This shift has fuelled European doubts about Washington’s reliability. These have intensified under the second Trump administration, which has expended military resources in Latin America and the Middle East.⁵⁵ In addition, administration officials have stated that US priorities are changing because Europe has failed to hold up its side of the transatlantic bargain—not only in terms of military spending,⁵⁶ which recently began to increase substantially, but also in terms of ideology and the defence of western civilization as they see it.⁵⁷

Replacing the US nuclear umbrella?

Persistent challenges posed by the stability–instability paradox, coupled with growing uncertainty about Russian and US intentions, drive much of the strategic debate in Europe.⁵⁸ Because NATO deterrence of Russia has held so far, including at the low end of the paradox, European states want to ensure that this continues, even as the US commitment appears to waver.⁵⁹ Is a new nuclear umbrella, owned and operated by European states, the right choice?

The success of (extended) nuclear deterrence is generally understood to rest on a combination of capability and resolve.⁶⁰ While the United States clearly possesses the capability to use nuclear weapons in defence of its allies, it is far less certain whether it would do so, especially when facing a nuclear-armed adversary. This is hardly a novel observation, as de Gaulle’s famous comments from the 1960s show. Still, European anxieties about US reliability are often misattributed to the idiosyncrasies of individual administrations. In reality, these concerns reflect a structural feature of extended deterrence, which inherently introduces uncertainty about whether any nuclear patron would risk nuclear retaliation on behalf of an ally—a ‘cosmic bluff’, as a top adviser to Presidents

⁵⁴ Vergun, ‘China remains “pacing challenge” for U.S.’.

⁵⁵ Richard Fontaine, ‘Trump’s way of war: Iran, Venezuela, and the end of the Powell Doctrine’, *Foreign Affairs*, 2 March 2026.

⁵⁶ Aurélie Pugnet, ‘Trump asks Europe again for more defence cash, leaves NATO strategy elusive’, Euractiv, 13 March 2025.

⁵⁷ Henry Foy, Felicia Schwartz, Anne-Sylvaine Chassany and Laura Pitel, ‘JD Vance hits out at Europe’s “threat from within”’, *Financial Times*, 14 Feb. 2025; Andrew Gawthorpe, ‘Civilizational Wilsonianism from Woodrow Wilson to Donald Trump’, *International Affairs* 101: 1, 2025, pp. 177–94, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaae280>; *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington DC: The White House, 2025).

⁵⁸ Samuel Charap and Miranda Priebe, ‘Will Putin stop at Ukraine? That’s the wrong question’, *Washington Quarterly* 47: 3, 2024, pp. 143–59, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2024.2398319>; Charlie Laderman, ‘With Trump’s return, the transatlantic “great debate” resumes’, *Survival* 66: 6, 2024, pp. 7–16, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2024.2432189>.

⁵⁹ Western policy-makers have accused Russia of fighting a hybrid war against NATO. Tactics of hybrid warfare remain deliberately below the level of open warfare. Even if deterrence of such tactics may have failed in some instances, deterrence of overt aggression—the core function of NATO’s deterrence and defence posture—has held. See Frank Andrews, ‘Lithuania accuses Belarus, Russia of “deliberate escalation of hybrid warfare” as balloons shut down airport’, CBS News, 27 Oct. 2025; Interview LCI, via YouTube, ‘Exclusif: Pour la 1ère fois le patron de la DGSE ouvre les portes de l’institution à une télévision’, 8 July 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qklKOhnWKf4>.

⁶⁰ Paul K. Huth, ‘Extended deterrence and the outbreak of war’, *American Political Science Review* 82: 2, 1988, pp. 423–43, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1957394>.

John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson called it.⁶¹ Unless ballistic missile defence becomes so reliable that the patron's population and territory no longer are hostage to adversary strategic forces—an implausible scenario—allies can expect hesitation when it comes to nuclear use on their behalf.⁶²

The United States has, over the decades, taken steps to address this twin problem of credible deterrence and alliance reassurance. Initially, European allies literally had a key to the US nuclear missiles deployed on their territory. The launch process technically required that key and one kept by US forces, but the allies could likely bypass this process and launch unilaterally—a reality that Eisenhower acknowledged.⁶³ The Kennedy administration deemed this approach to nuclear sharing too risky and too uncoordinated, so it fell out of favour. Rather than sharing control over nuclear hardware, NATO shifted its focus to sharing nuclear policy-making. This led to the creation of the Nuclear Planning Group, a forum within the alliance for collective participation in nuclear policy- and decision-making. In parallel, the United States and NATO devised a strategy called 'flexible response'. It aimed to make extended deterrence more credible by developing the capabilities and posture necessary for a 'limited' nuclear war in Europe.⁶⁴ The concept of limited nuclear war refers to a situation in which adversaries impose and respect restrictions on how they employ their nuclear arsenals, such as restricting the theatre of operations, the types of targets struck and the overall magnitude of attacks.⁶⁵ By this logic, the United States could engage in nuclear brinkmanship or limited nuclear strikes on behalf of its European allies, without necessarily triggering retaliation against CONUS targets or an all-out nuclear exchange.

The logic of flexible response continues to shape European strategic debates, especially when it comes to the question of a European nuclear umbrella. Many observers appear sceptical that the minimal deterrence posture of the UK and French nuclear forces suffices to extend credible deterrence as far east as Poland or Estonia. For these sceptics, inflexibility is the problem: strategic nuclear retaliation seems like neither a proportionate nor credible response to a hypothetical invasion of Estonia, for example. They therefore advocate flexible nuclear options, including the ability to fight a limited nuclear war, which they see as essential to maintaining credible deterrence.⁶⁶ They also see it as crucial

⁶¹ Kjølvi Egeland, 'The "cosmic bluff" revisited: extended nuclear deterrence in the US–Norway alliance', *Cold War History* 25: 1, 2025, pp. 43–66, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2024.2352531>.

⁶² Earl C. Ravenal, 'Counterforce and alliance: the ultimate connection', *International Security* 6: 4, 1982, pp. 26–43, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2538676>.

⁶³ Mark Trachtenberg, *A constructed peace: the making of the European settlement, 1945–1963* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), esp. ch. 6; see also Richard K. Betts, 'Nervous allies and Trump: nuclear lessons from NATO', *The Washington Quarterly* 48: 1, 2025, pp. 7–22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2025.2478780>.

⁶⁴ Legge, *Theater nuclear weapons*; see also Robert S. Ross, 'Navigating the Taiwan Strait: deterrence, escalation dominance, and US–China relations', *International Security* 27: 2, 2002, pp. 48–85, <https://doi.org/10.1162/016228802760987824>.

⁶⁵ Klaus Knorr, 'Controlling nuclear war', *International Security* 9: 4, 1985, pp. 79–98, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2538542>.

⁶⁶ Mark S. Bell and Fabian R. Hoffmann, 'Europe's nuclear trilemma: the difficult and dangerous options for post-American deterrence', *Foreign Affairs*, 31 March 2025.

to alliance cohesion because such options may reassure allies that they will not be abandoned while avoiding an immediate slide into strategic nuclear war. By enabling a contained nuclear response near the conflict zone, this approach, they argue, could prevent escalation to the point where leaders must consider trading Paris or London for Tallinn.⁶⁷

To this end, the United Kingdom and France could invest in larger, more diverse nuclear arsenals. The former's recent decision to purchase a squadron of F-35A jets, which can deliver US tactical nuclear warheads, may be part of an effort to create flexible nuclear options.⁶⁸ In time, perhaps these jets could be equipped with 'indigenous' UK warheads. Even then, the UK nuclear forces would remain 'interdependent' with those of the United States; after all, UK nuclear-armed submarines, the country's only strategic nuclear deterrent, still rely on US missiles and maintenance.⁶⁹ For technological as well as political reasons, this decades-long special nuclear relationship makes the British arsenal a difficult basis for building an autonomous European deterrent. Instead, some analysts look to France, suggesting it could develop low-yield warheads for its air-launched cruise missiles. To enhance deterrence, these weapons could then even be based alongside nuclear-capable aircraft in one of the countries on NATO's eastern flank.⁷⁰

The notion that credible extended deterrence hinges on having flexible nuclear options is far from self-evident. The concept of limited nuclear war remains controversial, as it is unclear to what extent such a conflict could be contained or how escalation could be reliably managed once nuclear weapons—even low-yield ones—are used.⁷¹ Policy-makers have long acknowledged the danger of limited wars spiralling out of control.⁷² During the Cold War, Soviet leaders doubted that nuclear use could be kept limited.⁷³ Although Soviet doctrine after 1965 formally allowed for the possibility of limited war in Europe, historians have argued that the Soviet General Staff believed that any major conflict on the continent would likely lead to mutual nuclear devastation.⁷⁴ This pessimism persists. When US intelligence intercepted communications in October 2022 suggesting that Russian President Vladimir Putin's nuclear threats in Ukraine might be turning into concrete plans, President

⁶⁷ Pranay Vaddi and Vipin Narang, via Substack, 'Extended deterrence in the Indo-Pacific', Strategic Simplicity podcast, 6 May 2025, <https://strategicsimplicity.substack.com/p/extended-deterrence-in-the-indo-pacific>.

⁶⁸ UK Government, Prime Minister's Office, The Rt Hon Sir Keir Starmer KCB KC MP and The Rt Hon John Healey MP, 'UK to purchase F-35As and join NATO nuclear mission as government steps up national security and delivers defence dividend', 24 June 2025.

⁶⁹ Fayet, Futter and Kühn, 'Towards a European nuclear deterrent'.

⁷⁰ Pranay Vaddi and Vipin Narang, via Substack, 'Euro deterrent, part deux: the podcast edition', Strategic Simplicity podcast, 3 April 2025, <https://strategicsimplicity.substack.com/p/euro-deterrent-part-deux-the-podcast>; importantly, this would require a concomitant change in French nuclear doctrine.

⁷¹ Desmond Ball, 'Can nuclear war be controlled?', *Adelphi Papers* 21: 169, 1981, pp. 2–3, <https://doi.org/10.1080/05679328108457384>; Posen, *Inadvertent escalation*; Sagan, *The limits of safety*.

⁷² Francis Gavin, *Nuclear statecraft: history and strategy in America's atomic age* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012).

⁷³ Hiim and Tunsjø, 'The U.S.–China stability–instability paradox'.

⁷⁴ Kimberly Marten Zisk, *Engaging the enemy: organization theory and Soviet military innovation, 1955–1991* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

Biden remarked that ‘I don’t think there’s any such thing as the ability to easily ... [use] ... a tactical nuclear weapon and not end up with Armageddon.’⁷⁵

In the same way that de Gaulle once questioned US nuclear promises, it is worth asking today if France would be willing to use even relatively low-yield nuclear weapons to repel or otherwise respond to an invasion of the Baltic states, for example, given the uncertainty about what might happen next. Some analysts emphasize the ‘European dimension’ of French ‘vital interests’ that, if threatened, could prompt nuclear use.⁷⁶ Seen through this lens, geography gives France a strong stake in the security of its European allies, as its leaders admitted during the 1960s and have done so more explicitly since then.⁷⁷ The Baltic states are relatively far away, however, so French declaratory policy and force posture would likely have to change for reassurance purposes, should France explicitly opt to provide extended deterrence.⁷⁸

To further communicate its commitment, France could send ‘hand-tying’ signals through the establishment of consultation mechanisms (either within NATO’s Nuclear Planning Group or alternative channels), or by deploying nuclear weapons on NATO territory, to be delivered by dual-capable aircraft.⁷⁹ Past efforts, however, to establish bilateral consultation for French systems deployed on West German territory proved challenging.⁸⁰ Even if such systems were now to be deployed in the Baltic states as a trip-wire, it is hardly guaranteed that a conventional attack that threatened them would see a nuclear reprisal. Limited nuclear use could still provoke retaliation in kind against France or trigger escalation into a full-scale nuclear war. In other words, relocating the nuclear trigger to the European continent does not eliminate the credibility questions inherent in nuclear deterrence—which are only exacerbated by the latter’s extended variant.

⁷⁵ David E. Sanger, ‘Biden’s Armageddon moment: when nuclear detonation seemed possible in Ukraine’, *New York Times*, 9 March 2024.

⁷⁶ Paul Cormarie and Florian Galleri, ‘Everything changes but nothing changes: can France overcome its own nuclear doctrine?’, *War on The Rocks*, 28 May 2025.

⁷⁷ Bruno Tertrais, ‘Destruction assurée’, in Henry D. Sokolski, ed., *Getting MAD: nuclear mutual assured destruction, its origins and practice* (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College Press, 2004); Élysée, ‘Déplacement sur la base opérationnelle de l’Île Longue’, 2 March 2026.

⁷⁸ On French scepticism toward extended deterrence, see Céline Jurgensen, ‘Europe, France and nuclear deterrence’, *Revue Défense Nationale*, no. 821, 2019, pp. 56–68, https://geographie.ens.fr/IMG/pdf/europe_france_and_nuclear_deterrence_-jurgensen.pdf.

⁷⁹ Matthew Fuhrmann and Todd S. Sechser, ‘Signaling alliance commitments: hand-tying and sunk costs in extended nuclear deterrence’, *American Journal of Political Science* 58: 4, 2014, pp. 919–35, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12082>. Some of these options were explicitly highlighted by France’s President Emmanuel Macron in, ‘Déplacement sur la base opérationnelle de l’Île Longue’.

⁸⁰ Frédéric Bozo, ‘The sanctuary and the glaci: France, the Federal Republic of Germany, and the nuclear factors in the 1980s (part 1)’, *Journal of Cold War Studies* 22: 3, 2020, pp. 119–79, https://doi.org/10.1162/jcws_a_00929; Frédéric Bozo, ‘The sanctuary and the glaci: France, the Federal Republic of Germany, and the nuclear factors in the 1980s (part 2)’, *Journal of Cold War Studies* 22: 4, 2020, pp. 175–228, https://doi.org/10.1162/jcws_a_00970.

The substitution strategy: conventional deterrence and escalation management

Since there is no reliable way to predict or control how nuclear escalation would unfold, there is no solid basis for believing that a limited nuclear war between NATO and Russia could be safely managed so that it did not severely damage or even destroy European societies. Betting that the other side will back down and de-escalate if NATO escalates is just that—a bet, and a risky one at that. A more prudent approach therefore avoids assuming NATO alone can control nuclear escalation, one rung of the ladder at a time. Instead, the alliance should adopt a substitution strategy in which advanced conventional weapons, backed for now by strategic nuclear arsenals, would provide deterrence and defence.⁸¹ In a second-strike role, the strategic nuclear arsenals could thus maintain a minimum posture (without options for limited use).⁸² To be clear, we are not arguing for unilateral nuclear disarmament. Rather, the point is that substituting advanced conventional weapons for tactical and/or theatre nuclear weapons could reduce NATO's overall warhead requirement. A smaller nuclear stockpile might also open the door for multilateral arms control in the transatlantic context, even if only in the long term. Similarly, the lead US negotiator of the 2011 New START agreement has suggested that proposing to reduce the number of US deployed warheads to about 1,000—well below the New START level of 1,550—could incentivize Russia to re-engage in arms control.⁸³ Such talks may need to include China, which has been expanding its arsenal to near-peer status, as well as the United Kingdom and France, depending on which direction their nuclear policies take.⁸⁴

In a substitution model, NATO would adopt a conventional counterforce posture that relies on the threat of war-winning conventional capabilities, with a central role for LRPS capabilities. Overall, our approach emphasizes deterrence by denial over deterrence by punishment, even if in practice both would likely remain involved and the distinction between them can be blurry.⁸⁵ Sustained investment in NATO's European air and ground forces, intelligence and reinforcement capabilities would be essential to maintain effective operations facing Russian anti-access and area-denial (A2/AD) pressure.⁸⁶ To enable

⁸¹ Futter and Zala, 'Strategic non-nuclear weapons and the onset of a third nuclear age'; for a related argument about strategic substitution, see Fiona S. Cunningham, *Under the nuclear shadow: China's information-age weapons in international security* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2025).

⁸² See, for example, Tytti Erästö, *Revisiting 'minimal nuclear deterrence': laying the ground for multilateral nuclear disarmament* (Stockholm: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.55163/XBNA9025>; Bruce G. Blair, Jessica Sleight and Emma Claire Foley, *The end of nuclear warfighting: moving to a deterrence-only posture* (Princeton and Washington DC: Program on Science and Global Security, Princeton University and Global Zero, 2018).

⁸³ Rose Gottemoeller, 'Rethinking nuclear arms control', *The Washington Quarterly* 43: 3, 2020, pp. 139–59, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2020.1813382>.

⁸⁴ Linde Desmaele, 'US security assurances and nuclear tripolarity', *Survival* 66: 2, 2024, pp. 143–56, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2024.2332066>.

⁸⁵ Yogeshi Joshi and Anit Mukherjee, 'From denial to punishment: the security dilemma and changes in India's military strategy toward China', *Asian Security* 15: 1, 2019, pp. 25–43, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14799855.2019.1539817>.

⁸⁶ Posen, 'European military autonomy'.

NATO's European forces to operate under these conditions, a combination of preventive measures (such as dispersal and hardening for survivability) and defensive capabilities (such as air and missile defence) would be prioritized. Recognizing that a purely localized posture near the ostensible battlefield may be impractical under A2/AD pressure, our approach leverages the ability of LRPS capabilities to enable horizontal escalation by allowing some strikes within Russia, thereby extending such a conflict beyond its immediate site.⁸⁷ These capabilities could also suppress long-range enemy fires and, more broadly, support narrow strategic interdiction missions against Russian military production sites, logistics hubs and airfields.⁸⁸

Although this mission set may straddle the line between denial and punishment, it leans toward the former. It steers well clear of countervalue targeting of population centres and counterforce strikes on strategic nuclear assets, each likely to increase escalation pressure and decrease crisis stability. Nor should NATO rely on LRPS capabilities to target leadership in a 'decapitation' strike.⁸⁹ Our model adopts a targeting logic focused on conventional and related capabilities and systems, not on degrading Russia's strategic nuclear arsenal (and its secure second-strike capability, which contributes to strategic stability). We propose managing that threat through arms control.⁹⁰ The goal is to disentangle nuclear and conventional capabilities with a clear division of labour: nuclear weapons would remain in a minimum deterrent posture and conventional forces would manage escalation and war-fighting.⁹¹ This goal would not require such a large shift in NATO's strategic thinking. The Biden administration reportedly gamed out responding to tactical nuclear use by Russia with only conventional forces.⁹² In other words, a conventional counterforce strategy accepts that nuclear vulnerability cannot be fully escaped and seeks to manage this situation prudently by strengthening non-nuclear fallback options, rather than splitting the investment between conventional defences and limited, non-strategic nuclear assets. Such a split is likely to undermine the former and increase pressure for recourse to the latter in a crisis.

⁸⁷ Michael Fitzsimmons, 'Horizontal escalation: an asymmetric approach to Russian aggression?', *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 13: 1, 2019, pp. 95–133.

⁸⁸ Hoffmann, 'The strategic-level effects of long-range strike weapons'.

⁸⁹ Lukas Mengelkamp and Sam Vincent, 'Beyond manoeuvre theory for European defence', *Global Policy*, publ. online 23 Feb. 2026, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.70130>; for an opposing view, see Fabian Hoffmann, 'Denial won't do: Europe needs a punishment-based conventional counterstrike strategy', *War on the Rocks*, 8 Sept. 2025; see also Ian Bowers and Henrik Stålhane Hiim, 'Conventional counterforce dilemmas: South Korea's deterrence strategy and stability on the Korean peninsula', *International Security* 45: 3, 2021, pp. 7–39, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00399.

⁹⁰ Russian Federation, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Fundamentals of state policy of the Russian Federation on nuclear deterrence', 3 Dec. 2024; Tyler Bowen, 'Threading the needle: the logic of conventional coercion in nuclear crises', *Texas National Security Review* 9: 1, 2026, pp. 28–51, <https://doi.org/10.26153/tsw/62314>.

⁹¹ Samuel Seitz and Lauren Sukin, 'Deemphasizing nuclear weapons in nuclear deterrence: the case for conventional counterforce', *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* 8: 1, 2025, pp. 15–35, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25751654.2025.2513102>.

⁹² Fred Kaplan, 'Why the US might not use a nuke, even if Russia does', *Slate*, 7 Oct. 2022, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2022/10/why-the-us-might-not-use-a-uke-even-if-russia-does.html>; Mount, 'Conventional deterrence of nuclear use'.

Our substitution model strikes a balance between two schools of thought on the stability–instability paradox: the one that holds that escalation can be controlled (through ‘escalate to de-escalate’ doctrines) and the one that relies on the fear of escalation to prevent war. Conventional counterforce would give NATO credible options for escalation in the most extreme circumstances, except strategic nuclear use. It would give the ability to strike important Russian targets without crossing the nuclear threshold. For this reason, it would act as a check in situations where Russia’s leadership might conclude that NATO would not employ nuclear weapons in response to a major provocation for fear of crossing the nuclear threshold.⁹³ So far, scholarship on escalation management by means of advanced conventional weapons has focused largely on east Asia, where air and maritime combat would likely predominate in any war.⁹⁴ Some have advocated a substitution strategy for US and allied forces there.⁹⁵ Following a similar logic, Russia’s A2/AD capabilities could complicate NATO movements in the Baltic area.⁹⁶ The ability of LRPS systems to conduct suppression and destruction of enemy air defence missions, as well as their potential for contributing to theatre missile defence, could become especially valuable in any future European conflicts in which NATO could not assume air superiority.⁹⁷

Substitution has three further advantages regarding burden-sharing, defence and non-proliferation. First, if Europe’s non-nuclear NATO members acquired such non-nuclear strategic capabilities, they could move from being recipients of deterrence to active co-providers of it.⁹⁸ In this way, a substitution strategy supports the development of a more autonomous European deterrence and defence pillar within NATO.⁹⁹ This approach could strengthen the alliance’s credibility and cohesion, while gradually reducing structural dependence on the United States. It would not preclude continued US conventional involvement, but it would ensure that Europe’s security no longer depends on the US nuclear guarantee. Without downplaying the implementation challenges involved, conventional counterforce seems more manageable than accepting the risk for European societies of even limited nuclear escalation on the continent. Even if it might be tolerable for the United States, nuclear war in Europe

⁹³ Robert Jervis, ‘Why nuclear superiority doesn’t matter’, *Political Science Quarterly* 94: 4, 1979, pp. 617–33, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2149629>.

⁹⁴ M. Taylor Fravel and Eric Heginbotham, ‘Envisioning a stable military balance in 2034’, in Christopher Chivvis, ed., *U.S.–China relations for the 2030s: toward a realistic scenario for coexistence* (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2024).

⁹⁵ Seitz and Sukin, ‘Deemphasizing nuclear weapons in nuclear deterrence’.

⁹⁶ Fabrice Pothier, ‘An area-access strategy for NATO’, *Survival* 59: 3, 2017, pp. 73–80, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2017.1325600>.

⁹⁷ John D. Turner, ‘Four roles for the U.S. army in twenty-first century deterrence’, U.S. Army War College Fellows Research Project at the MIT Security Studies Program (March 2023), pp. 11–15.

⁹⁸ Pollack, Varriale and Plant, ‘The changing role of allied conventional precision-strike capabilities’; David Blagden, ‘Strategic stability and the proliferation of conventional precision strike: a (bounded) case for optimism?’, *The Nonproliferation Review* 27: 1–3, 2020, pp. 123–36, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10736700.2020.1799569>.

⁹⁹ *A new transatlantic bargain: the case for building a strong European pillar* (Cambridge, MA: Belfer Center, Harvard Kennedy School, 2025).

makes little strategic or political sense for European countries when comparable strategic effects can be achieved conventionally.¹⁰⁰

Second, in the event of deterrence failure, advanced conventional weapons have more utility for defence than nuclear weapons, especially high-yield ones.¹⁰¹ During the Cold War, this pitfall of flexible response became obvious in particular to West German policy-makers, who remarked about the US nomenclature that a ‘theatre’ nuclear war on the continent would certainly feel ‘strategic’ to them.¹⁰² Critics of the United States’ deployment of new nuclear missiles in Europe during the 1980s famously quipped: ‘The shorter the range, the deader the Germans’.¹⁰³ Again, should deterrence fail today, LRPS capabilities could help repel any Russian attack on NATO’s eastern flank without crossing the nuclear threshold. This approach may actually increase the credibility of the alliance’s strategic deterrence and mitigate the reassurance challenges posed by flexible response. After all, a failure to follow through on US and NATO threats to use nuclear weapons in a limited crisis scenario (e.g., a Russian incursion into NATO territory, especially if alliance conventional forces start losing) could undermine the credibility of nuclear deterrence more broadly (e.g., preventing a full-scale invasion).¹⁰⁴

Third, advanced conventional weapons enable strategic burden-sharing and risk-sharing within NATO without the complexities and limitations of theatre and/or tactical nuclear sharing. Some leaders and analysts on both sides of the Atlantic have proposed expanding current US nuclear-sharing arrangements to include, for example, Poland.¹⁰⁵ Yet doing so would further European dependence on the United States and reinforce existing power and risk asymmetries within NATO. The imbalance would be twofold: the United States would retain exclusive positive control—that is, sole authority to release nuclear weapons and authorize their use—while CONUS remained largely insulated from the risks that European allies bore in a limited nuclear conflict. So long as these weapons remain under US positive control, they offer a mostly symbolic solution to the credibility problem of extended nuclear deterrence, as outlined above.¹⁰⁶ What is more, transferring control to host nations would violate the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and reverse decades of US policy

¹⁰⁰Snyder, ‘Assessing the lethality of conventional weapons’.

¹⁰¹Glenn H. Snyder, *Deterrence and defense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961).

¹⁰²Andreas Lutsch, ‘Merely “docile self-deception”? German experiences with nuclear consultation in NATO’, *Journal of Strategic Studies* 39: 4, 2016, pp. 535–58 at p. 545–50, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2016.1168014>.

¹⁰³Michal Onderco and Michal Smetana, ‘German views on US nuclear weapons in Europe: public and elite perspectives’, *European Security* 30: 4, 2021, pp. 630–48, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2021.1941896>.

¹⁰⁴Evangelista, ‘A “nuclear umbrella” for Ukraine?’

¹⁰⁵Monika Sus and Łukasz Kulesa, ‘Breaking the silence: explaining the dynamics behind Poland’s bid to join NATO nuclear sharing in light of Russian aggression against Ukraine’, *The Nonproliferation Review* 30: 4–6, 2023, pp. 241–63, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10736700.2024.2432807>; Robert Peters, ‘NATO’s nuclear posture needs updating’, The Heritage Foundation, 31 August 2023; Justyna Gotkowska, ‘Moving NATO’s military power centre towards Central and Northeastern Europe. Poland’s political and military goals’, in *Navigating geostrategic challenges: a comprehensive analysis of NATO’s evolving landscape* (Vilnius: Eastern Europe Studies Centre, 2024).

¹⁰⁶Jacklyn Majnemer, ‘A nuclear veto? The credibility-consensus trade-off and NATO nuclear use procedures’, *Texas National Security Review* 8: 4, 2025, pp. 104–12, <https://doi.org/10.1353/tns.00018>.

seeking to prevent this very situation.¹⁰⁷ In addition, official NATO policy states that the use of nuclear weapons requires a consensus decision, a process long recognized as politically fraught and with no clear or agreed upon crisis procedures.¹⁰⁸ By contrast, diffusing advanced conventional capabilities (such as LRPS) would limit these problems. It would give non-nuclear allies a role in NATO strategic deterrence and reduce incentives for them to pursue independent nuclear arsenals.¹⁰⁹

Conclusion: current limitations and future research

European strategic discussions remain overly constrained by nuclear-centric thinking, and especially the assumption that credible deterrence requires nuclear escalation options. In scenarios short of full-scale nuclear exchange, nuclear threats are problematic: they are often inherently incredible, too costly or too dangerous.¹¹⁰ Continuing to hold the view that only nuclear weapons can generate strategic effects entails political and military risks. It also narrows the conceptual space for imagining how Europe's future deterrence architecture, with or without the United States, might look.

Instead, we have outlined a substitution model where LRPS capabilities, backed initially by strategic nuclear arsenals, provide deterrence. This model replaces the current emphasis on theatre nuclear weapons with a denial-oriented approach centred on LRPS capabilities. Conventional denial was once dismissed as politically unrealistic and financially prohibitive. That no longer needs to be the case. Today's advanced conventional weapons are not only more usable than existing tactical nuclear weapons; they also allow for more equitable risk- and burden-sharing across the Euro-Atlantic region, as part of a broader shift towards European strategic autonomy, no matter which direction US policy takes. Finally, they enable this shift without jeopardizing the global non-proliferation regime.

We do not suggest that our substitution model is a silver bullet and we have left several important dimensions underexplored. Sceptics may argue that horizontal escalation, even if by conventional means, creates unacceptable escalation risks when facing a nuclear power.¹¹¹ While a 'new centre of decision' on NATO's eastern flank could strengthen deterrence, it would also add a new potential axis of threat for Russia.¹¹² Horizontal escalation using advanced systems against a nuclear-armed adversary might blur the conven-

¹⁰⁷Rebecca Davis Gibbons, *The hegemon's tool kit: U.S. leadership and the politics of the nuclear nonproliferation regime* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2022).

¹⁰⁸Desmaele, 'Still a useful myth?.'

¹⁰⁹Rebecca D. Gibbons and Stephen Herzog, 'Durable institution under fire? The NPT confronts emerging multipolarity', *Contemporary Security Policy* 43: 1, 2021, pp. 50–79, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2021.1998294>.

¹¹⁰The authors thank one of the reviewers for this framing.

¹¹¹Lukas Mengelkamp, Alexander Graef and Ulrich Kühn, 'A confidence-building defense for NATO', *War on the Rocks*, 27 June 2022.

¹¹²Blagden, 'Strategic stability and the proliferation of conventional precision strike'.

tional–nuclear threshold and could therefore increase rather than decrease the risks of nuclear use. For this reason, we discourage targeting adversary strategic nuclear assets or countervalue sites, including leadership. Along these lines, future research could explore whether horizontal escalation should first target military infrastructure located in Belarus, as Russia’s client state, rather than in Russia itself.¹¹³ Nonetheless, using conventional systems for horizontal escalation seems less escalatory than using nuclear ones.

The diffusion of advanced strike capabilities to non-nuclear NATO members may also introduce new entrapment dynamics. They could choose to use LRPS capabilities without the explicit backing of the United States or the other nuclear-armed members.¹¹⁴ It is difficult to know if the nuclear-armed allies could suffer retaliation for it and how they might respond. This scenario recalls the Cold War decoupling problem, which referred to the likelihood of nuclear war in Europe while secure second-strike capabilities left the United States as a sanctuary. The substitution model seeks to manage this concern by focusing on fighting and winning only a conventional war in Europe rather than attempting to limit and win a nuclear war in-theatre.¹¹⁵ The extent of participation by the United States would depend on its own decision process, since the French and British arsenals each include secure second-strike forces serving to deter adversary nuclear escalation.

These risks associated with LRPS capabilities cannot be ignored. Further research should examine how the dangers of entrapment and nuclear escalation can be mitigated through renewed strategic stability dialogues and confidence building measures. First, this work should explore how substitution could complement an arms control framework that decentres nuclear weapons in NATO’s posture. The alliance will need to be convinced not only that it can use some version of flexible response with advanced conventional forces but also that it should because doing so provides comparable deterrent value with significantly lower risk. Second, decentring nuclear weapons in NATO strategy does not necessarily imply abandoning the nuclear alliance concept.¹¹⁶ Initially, at least, strategic nuclear arsenals would remain, meaning that NATO’s fundamental deterrence posture set out in the 1974 Ottawa Declaration would endure, acknowledging the distinct role played by the US, UK and French arsenals.¹¹⁷ Third, substitution could open the door for NATO to adopt a ‘no first use’ policy in the Euro-Atlantic area.¹¹⁸ Over time, the United States could

¹¹³ Similar debates over targeting the Soviet Union versus non-Soviet Warsaw Pact territory flared inside the Nuclear Planning Group during the Cold War; see Lutsch, ‘Merely “docile self-deception”?’.

¹¹⁴ Blagden, ‘Strategic stability and the proliferation of conventional precision strike’.

¹¹⁵ Some Cold War experts doubted even US military leaders would try to win a nuclear war in Europe. See Michael Quinlan, *Thinking about nuclear weapons*, Whitehall Paper no. 41 (London: Royal United Services Institute, 2005, first publ. in 1997), pp. 16–17.

¹¹⁶ Kjølv Egeland, ‘Spreading the burden: how NATO became a “nuclear” alliance’, *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 31: 1, 2020, pp. 143–67, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592296.2020.1721086>.

¹¹⁷ NATO, ‘Declaration on Atlantic Relations issued by the North Atlantic Council (“the Ottawa Declaration”)', 19 June 1974.

¹¹⁸ Ankit Panda and Vipin Narang, ‘Sole purpose is not no first use; nuclear weapons and declaratory power’, *War on the Rocks*, 22 Feb. 2021.

A hole in the nuclear umbrella?

also withdraw its B61-12 gravity bombs from Europe, possibly in exchange for negotiated limits on Russian tactical nuclear weapons (an approach modelled on the 1979 NATO 'dual-track' decision that facilitated joint superpower removal of intermediate-range systems the following decade).¹¹⁹ Still, advocates of nuclear disarmament may lament that substituting conventional forces for theatre nuclear ones does nothing to reduce strategic nuclear arsenals and may contribute to legitimizing their role in international security.¹²⁰

On the opposite side of the debate, critics may contend that horizontal escalation, if only through conventional counterforce, does not threaten costs high enough to deter a determined adversary.¹²¹ They might warn that European countries will struggle to develop sufficient capabilities quickly due to industrial constraints. LRPS capabilities can realize their purported deterrent effect only if deployed in sufficient numbers with survivable platforms capable of penetrating adversary defences. Calculating the numbers, costs and time-frames is extremely important, but lies outside the scope of this paper. In any case, a symbolic LRPS force could invite greater hostility and instability, while consuming scarce financial and political capital.¹²² This challenge is particularly pronounced in a denial posture, in which large numbers of strikes may be needed to meaningfully disrupt an adversary's offensive campaign.¹²³ For example, planners will likely have to determine if LRPS capabilities could deter, limit or even interdict an adversary's use of non-strategic nuclear weapons, in which Russia enjoys a clear quantitative advantage. Nonetheless, our model does not call for the denuclearization of NATO Europe: sophisticated nuclear forces would remain deployed, keeping the prospect of spiral effects that any adversary would at least have to consider before attacking.

It is difficult to specify the precise cost of a denial-oriented conventional counterforce posture. Yet research by defence economists and the current trend of increasing European defence budgets suggest that our proposed approach could prove feasible.¹²⁴ Strategy ultimately entails prioritization under scarcity. Trade-offs are unavoidable. Our claim is therefore relative: rather than insisting that our proposed approach would be inexpensive, we contend that refraining from investments in new nuclear systems would create space for stronger conventional deterrence and defence, including LRPS capabilities. Moreover, the value of advanced conventional weapons extends beyond their immediate combat performance. Their very presence can generate a competitive dynamic

¹¹⁹ Leopoldo Nuti, 'The origins of the 1979 dual track decision—a survey' in Nuti, ed. *The crisis of détente in Europe: from Helsinki to Gorbachev 1975–1985* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008).

¹²⁰ Pelopidas and Egeland, 'The false promise of nuclear risk reduction'; see also Hassan Elbahtimy, Rebecca Davis Gibbons and Stephen Herzog, 'Getting beyond nuclear deterrence: a research agenda', *The Nonproliferation Review* 31: 4–6, 2024, pp. 147–63, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10736700.2025.2575524>.

¹²¹ Hoffmann, 'Denial won't do'.

¹²² On the need for conventional ground forces, see Posen, 'European military autonomy'.

¹²³ Blagden, 'Strategic stability and the proliferation of conventional precision strike'.

¹²⁴ For example, defence economists have suggested that, under current NATO plans, it might be possible to meet all requirements without the United States at a cost of approximately 3.5 per cent of GDP. Alexandr Burilkov and Guntram B. Wolff, *Defending Europe without the US: first estimates of what is needed* (Brussels: Bruegel, 2025).

by forcing adversaries to divert resources to countermeasures like air and missile defence. For this reason, decisions about the acquisition and deployment of LRPS capabilities should be guided less by narrow metrics of battlefield effectiveness and more by a broader logic of cost imposition: the reciprocal burden each side must bear to offset the other's capabilities.¹²⁵ Finally, these systems should not be viewed in isolation but as an integral component of a wider conventional rearmament effort in Europe, and US forces could still play a role under some conditions.

These concerns merit further research but do not outweigh the limitations of continued reliance on the threat of controlled nuclear escalation. Should deterrence fail, that strategy could lead to a nuclear war in Europe, an old fear recently rekindled in the public imagination by the Russia–Ukraine war. Difficulty or expense alone does not mean that conventional substitution should be rejected outright. Recent discussions about replacing US extended deterrence, at least in part, with similar British and French capabilities have only underscored longstanding doubts about the credibility, utility and possible consequences of theatre nuclear forces in Europe. Rather than attempting to replicate the US nuclear umbrella, Europe should focus on the tools already, at least in part, at its disposal. The advantages and limits of long-range, precise and non-nuclear systems should be seriously studied before tying European security to new nuclear weapons and commitments.

¹²⁵Sidharth Kaushal and Juliana Suess, *Net assessment of Russian and NATO capabilities in a modern strike campaign* (London: Royal United Services Institute, 2025).