

**How Europe is Posturing its Nuclear Forces to Deter Further
Russian Aggression by Christopher Gettel**



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Since the Russian invasions of Ukraine in 2014 and 2024, Europe has renewed its nuclear posture to deter Russian advances that could go beyond Ukraine. In 2008, Russian forces, some of whom had been operating covertly in Georgia for months prior, invaded Georgian territory under the pretext of protecting ethnic Russian speakers who wanted independence from a Georgian government that wanted closer military and economic ties to Europe. In 2014, covert Russian forces backed Russian speaking separatists in Ukraine, as the former Soviet nation started to shift its economic alignment from Russia to Europe, achieving limited territorial gains until a massive conventional Russian invasion in 2024. This seems to outline a policy in which Russian special operations troops provoke separatist forces in Russian speaking regions of former Soviet nations when these nations choose to align themselves closer to the economics and influences of western nations. Driven by Putin's revisionist ideology inspired by the imperialist Soviet Union and the increasing unwillingness of America to prove itself as a reliable military ally, many European nations have begun to wonder if they are the next victim of Russian land grabs and have begun to compensate for America's withdrawal from Europe and their numerically outmatched militaries with a potentially new nuclear weapons posture. This includes a horizontal proliferation in terms of nuclear burden sharing and vertical proliferation from established nuclear powers in Europe.

One of the reasons nations pursue nuclear weapons is to compensate for their outmatched conventional forces. Pakistan is outmatched by India and North Korea is outmatched by South Korea. Since the end of World War II, Russia has been administering eastern European nations as proxies and client states, and Putin longs to return Russia to this era of immense geopolitical influence. In 2008, separatist Georgian forces, long backed by Russia, provoked a war against the Georgian government. Conventional Russian forces publicly backed these separatists, leading to Russian troops becoming stationed in the breakaway provinces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. These two provinces are de jure part of Georgia, but de facto autonomous regions recognized by Russia as independent states. In 2014, Russian speaking regions of the Donbas and Crimea, backed covertly by Moscow, attempted to separate from Ukraine. Russia would later illegally annex Crimea under international law and launch a major invasion of Ukraine in 2022. European nations,

especially the former Warsaw Pact nations who so eagerly joined NATO and the EU after the Cold War, see themselves as the next victims of this kind of Russian aggression. While America has extended its massive nuclear umbrella to cover its allies in this part of Europe, recent rhetoric from Trump has many questioning America's commitment to the defense of these border nations. The recent US National Security Strategy, made public in December of 2025, deals largely with North American security issues and does not adequately put forward a policy of dealing with Russia. Noticing this shift in policy, many European nations no longer trust America to defend Europe, and their smaller populations do not have the economy nor conventional military power to deter or win against Russia. Therefore, these nations are looking elsewhere to deter their territory from becoming Georgia or Ukraine.

Many smaller European nations close to Russian borders fear Russian aggression but lack the military power to deter or fight against Russia's large military and are thus looking to asymmetrically deter Russia with new nuclear postures. Poland, bordering both Belarus and Ukraine, was a member of the Warsaw Pact, but one of the first nations to protest alignment with the ailing Soviet Union in the late 1980s. Dozens of Russian drones have violated Polish airspace, and Russian politicians have routinely called for the invasion of this NATO member. Alluding to the war in Ukraine, prominent Russian politician Dimitri Medvedev is quoted as saying "That is why it is so important to achieve all the goals of the special military operation. To push back the borders that threaten our country as far as possible, even if they are the borders of Poland." Fearing a repeat of the Georgian and Ukrainian invasions, Polish President Karol Nawrocki stated that he was a "a great supporter of Poland joining the nuclear project." Bordering Belarus and Russia are the former Warsaw Pact nations of Latvia. Also subject to frequent drone incursions, Latvian Prime Minister Evika Silina alluded to the benefits of nuclear weapons as well, saying that a "nuclear deterrence can give us new opportunities" to deter Russian land grabs. Latvia's southern neighbor, Lithuania, also discussed changing its policy on nuclear weapons with Defense Minister Dovile Sakaliene promising to "look into the possibility of adjusting Article 137 of the Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania if our allies propose realistic plans for the deployment of nuclear weapons or their components in Lithuania." French President Macron has publicly been in favor of this new European posture, saying that it is time to "consider our deterrence strategy deep within the European continent" by deploying nuclear capable aircraft to nations such as Germany and Poland as it is in the interest of all NATO nations to prevent further Russian land grabs.

Besides notions of nuclear sharing, the established European nuclear powers of France and Britain are preparing to increase the numbers of nuclear warheads in their arsenals. While not mentioning a specific number France will obtain, Macron said this increase is “essential.” Britain plans on expanding as well, publicly outlining its strategy to increase its nuclear arsenal from the current number of 180 to “260” in its Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy. To field this increase in nuclear weapons, Britain plans to launch its new nuclear capable submarine, the Dreadnaught class, which will provide a long-term commitment to modernization. While both France and Britain may not have needed more nuclear warheads due to their longstanding alliance with America, rhetoric from Trump has shaken the alliance and made NATO members question America's commitment to defending Europe. Trump has long standing disagreements with the administration of NATO, ranging from questioning the defense budgets of European NATO members to saying that “If they don’t pay, I’m not going to defend them. No, I’m not going to defend them.” This, combined with Russian aggression against European nations, is driving an increase in not only nuclear weapons sharing, but increases in established nuclear arsenals.

While Russian aggression against previous Soviet-era Warsaw Pact members has alarmed smaller European nations close to Russia’s borders, the shifting American posture from Europe to North America has driven a change in the way European nations view nuclear weapons. Once satisfied with living under the security America's nuclear umbrella provided, many nations in Europe without nuclear weapons are seeking to renew deterrence with nuclear weapons sharing agreements and those with nuclear weapons, France and Britain, are seeking to modernize their arsenal with more warheads and new delivery platforms. Trump's America is taking a starkly different posture to international security concerns, less concerned with potential Russian invasions of Europe and more worried with addressing security concerns closer to America's borders. This increases the burden on European NATO members and forces more self-reliance. With little options to dramatically increase their populations and economies to match the size and expenditure of Russia’s military, many in Europe seek to deter Russia with nuclear weapons, promising nuclear retaliation should Russia try to do with NATO members what it has done to Georgia and Ukraine.

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