

Trump Wants NATO Allies to Step Up—Can France Lead the Way?

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Published: June 9, 2026

President Donald Trump has repeatedly criticized U.S. European allies for their alleged failure to assume a larger share of the responsibility for NATO deterrence and defense. Although most U.S. angst about European burden sharing concerns preparedness for a larger conventional war on the continent, the sharing of risk with respect to nuclear escalation has received less attention. Past practice suggested that the American nuclear umbrella would suffice to deter Russian threats of nuclear escalation. On the other hand, Europe's indigenous nuclear forces may have the potential to serve as a sufficient deterrent against Russian nuclear first use.

French “Forwardism”

In March 2026, French President Emmanuel Macron announced a doctrine of “forward deterrence” regarding the future of French nuclear declaratory and employment policy. His statements amounted to the most important shift in French nuclear posture in decades. The more important components of this policy change are as follows: First, France will increase the size of its nuclear deterrent force (*force de dissuasion*) for the first time since 1992. The assumption behind this move is that the current nuclear force is too small to deter aggression beyond France's borders. Second, France would permit the temporary deployment of nuclear-armed aircraft to allied countries. However, France will not delegate nuclear employment authority to other countries. Stationing nuclear forces outside France will reinforce France's commitment to its European partners. Third, France would work more closely with allies to develop shared understandings of the nature of the Russian threat and to coordinate on the management of escalation control in the context of a conventional war. The first stage of this collaboration [will include](#) visits to strategic sites and/or [joint exercises](#) with Germany, the UK, and other NATO countries.

Trump's Frustrations

The decision taken by Macron reflects a perceived need for upgrading the proficiency of France's nuclear deterrent. It also represents a political statement about his doubts regarding the U.S. commitment to NATO. Despite improvements in European defense readiness and preparedness, President Trump has continued to disparage NATO as weak and “free riding” on the backs of the U.S. military. Trump has [announced](#) that he plans to remove 5,000 American troops from Germany and has suggested that the [U.S. should leave](#) the alliance despite being [prohibited by Congress](#) from unilaterally doing so.

There are several prompts for this continuing cold shoulder from Washington to Brussels. First, Trump is frustrated by Putin and Zelensky and their inability to negotiate a cease-fire and peace agreement between Russia and Ukraine. Second, the U.S. President launched a pre-emptive combat operation against Iran on February 28, 2026, without either consulting or informing NATO allies before the fact. Understandably, in this regard, European leaders have been hesitant to provide military support, and some [have refused to grant access to American bases or airspace](#)

for Operation Epic Fury, further frustrating President Trump. Third, the stalemate in the Strait of Hormuz has disrupted global supply chains and driven up the prices of fossil fuels and fertilizer worldwide.

European and U.S. Support for Ukraine

Despite distractions, NATO members remain committed to supporting Ukraine as long as needed. An agreement allows U.S. allies in Europe to buy weapons from the U.S. and pass them to Ukraine. The U.S. [continues to upgrade](#) its nuclear deterrent, especially the strategic nuclear triad, with a [\\$71.4 billion FY27 plan](#) for next-generation intercontinental ballistic missiles, ballistic missile submarines, strategic bombers with new Long Range Stand-Off (LRSO) missiles, and improved nuclear command and control.

It is doubtful that France's nuclear force, which includes several hundred warheads with delivery systems such as submarine-launched ballistic missiles and both land- and sea-based aircraft, can replace the U.S. nuclear extended deterrent – nor was it meant to. Instead, France's independent nuclear deterrence, designed to defend its own interests and sovereignty, along with the United Kingdom's small ballistic missile submarine force, offers a minimal deterrent against nuclear threats from Russia at a level below strategic nuclear weapons.

Since the beginning of Russia's war against Ukraine, Russian President Vladimir Putin has repeatedly reminded international audiences that Russia, under certain conditions of adversity in conventional war, might resort to nuclear first use of non-strategic or theater nuclear weapons (NSNW). These weapons, having shorter ranges and lower yields than strategic weapons, can be launched from land, sea, and airborne platforms and could number as many as 2,000 in Russia's [available inventory](#). In comparison, the U.S. deploys some 200 available NSNWs at several NATO bases.

U.S. Nuclear War Planning and NATO

This disparity in the number of NSNWs is not as alarming as it might seem because the nature of U.S. nuclear war planning has changed since the Cold War. Current U.S. operational plans include the full spectrum of nuclear and conventional kinetic and non-kinetic capabilities within one comprehensive plan. U.S. nuclear forces are expected to provide options for graduated escalation and flexible response. Toward that end, U.S. bomber deployments and military exercises provide additional support to U.S. European Command, bolstering NATO deterrence. In addition to the increased bomber presence, the Trump administration wants to add the flexibility of the nuclear sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM-N) for the deployment of weapons with variable yields. The purpose of SLCM-N is to deter limited nuclear use by adversaries and to provide reassurance to U.S. European and Asian allies.

France recognizes that deterrence is not only about the size of military forces, including nuclear arms, despite Macron's plan to [increase the number of French nuclear weapons](#). It also depends on perceived resolve among allies and potential adversaries. In Macron's view, Russia should not expect that democratic Europe can be intimidated by threats of limited nuclear war because (in

Russia's mind) that threat is more realistic compared to strategic nuclear war. Nor should Russia expect that French support for NATO excludes the possibility of deploying French nuclear-capable launchers outside French national territory. French training exercises with NATO countries closer to Russia's border will help send that message.

Conclusion

A more forward-leaning French military doctrine does not mean abandoning France's commitment to European security. Nor does it replace the U.S. nuclear deterrent. Macron recognizes that, in defense matters, truth counts more than words: the United States cannot completely detach itself from NATO, nor can NATO sever its ties with America. NATO without the U.S. invites nuclear coercion upon Western Europe, while the U.S. without NATO risks political and military isolation instead of credible deterrence. The American and European pillars of NATO, as the French might say, are "condemned to succeed" together.

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