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Sophie Kippen, Non-Resident Fellow
Center for Global Security Research

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Sophie Kippen¹

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Introduction

This note examines the evolving landscape of NATO's nuclear deterrence in light of recent geopolitical upheavals, including Russia's invasion of Ukraine and shifting transatlantic dynamics. Central to this analysis is the July 2025 Northwood Declaration, an agreement between the United Kingdom (UK) and France to "coordinate" their nuclear forces. The Declaration marks a significant step in European deterrence cooperation, reflecting both countries' recognition of increased uncertainty regarding U.S. security guarantees.

The Northwood Declaration builds on previous bilateral commitments by formalizing mechanisms for nuclear coordination at the highest political levels. However, France's continued self-exclusion from NATO's Nuclear Planning Group and its ambiguous stance on extending deterrence to European allies leave some uncertainties for non-nuclear NATO members.

The note argues that enhanced UK-France nuclear cooperation could bolster NATO's overall deterrence posture by increasing flexibility and unpredictability for potential adversaries. It also suggests that this model of bilateral coordination may become increasingly relevant as allies worldwide seek to reduce reliance on U.S. security guarantees and adapt to a more complex, multiple-challenger nuclear global order.

The Evolving Environment

To describe NATO's evolution over the past three years as merely significant would understate the profound transformation it has undergone since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War. Russia's invasion of Ukraine, continued after-effects of the pandemic, and a series of unpredictable political movements both within the Euro-Atlantic "home" and abroad have deepened a wellspring of uncertainty. Over the last year, the games of Euro-Atlantic ping-pong (including but not limited to barbed exchanges,² comments on Article V,³ and unveiled nuclear

¹ Based in Tokyo, Japan, Sophie Kippen works for a space start-up on international and corporate strategy. Prior to this, she worked extensively in the UK Civil Service on a range of foreign policy matters. She holds a bachelor's degree in French and Latin and a master's degree in international relations. The views expressed here are those of the author and in no way reflect those of the UK Government.

² "Zelensky told to leave White House after angry spat with Trump and Vance," BBC News (February 26, 2025). <https://www.bbc.com/news/live/c625ex282zst?page=5>. Accessed October 29, 2025.

³ Andrew Dorman, "As Trump threatens NATO, is it time for Europe to get its act together?" Chatham House (February 13, 2024). <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/02/trump-threatens-nato-it-time-europe-get-its-act-together>. Accessed October 29, 2025.



overtures⁴) have led many European leaders to reassess both their national and collective contributions to NATO's deterrence and defense, which is a big, beautiful nuclear strategy win for the U.S. president in many ways.

From a nuclear standpoint, the UK and France have been compelled to reassess their roles as NATO's nuclear powers. This reassessment reflects both reduced confidence in allied, particularly U.S., commitments and growing pressure to take greater responsibility for Europe's own defense interests. One of the outcomes of this introspection has been the UK-French July 2025 summit that led to the Northwood Declaration—a statement made by the UK and France about the coordination of nuclear forces that “contribute significantly to the overall security of the Alliance, and to the peace and stability of the Euro Atlantic area.”⁵

The summit itself served a range of broader bilateral talking points, including aligning on migration and the growth agenda, but the decision to deepen the “coordination” of their nuclear forces is conspicuous. Whether this is a commitment to actually coordinate, or an admission that such coordination is possible, is left open. However, this idea builds upon a long-running theme in nuclear deterrence policy circles in both countries and at NATO that has contemplated France's role in NATO's Nuclear Planning Group (NPG)—the alliance's senior body that discusses NATO's nuclear matters, comprising all allies except France.⁶ Comparisons between the British and French approach have been generally used to explain the inherent contradictions in a European nuclear deterrent, and this new statement is likely to evoke wider questions about France's willingness to extend nuclear deterrence by acting in conjunction with the UK. For European NATO members, it might start to provide a more useful definition of the “vital interests” outlined in the 1995 Chequers Declaration, where the UK and France publicly recognized that such interests might be shared for the first time.⁷

UK and France: Commonalities and Differences in Nuclear Strategies

The UK and France's shared nuclear history is inter-woven with complexity, but ultimately with shared values as the “nuclear bloc” of the P3—three of the Permanent Members of the UN Security

⁴ Mark Cancian and Chris Park, “Trump Moves “Nuclear” Subs: Negotiating Tactic or Escalatory Gamble?” Center for Strategic and International Studies (August 6, 2025). <https://www.csis.org/analysis/trump-moves-nuclear-subs-negotiating-tactic-or-escalatory-gamble>. Accessed October 29, 2025.

⁵ UK Prime Minister's Office, “Northwood Declaration: 10 July 2025 (UK-France joint nuclear statement),” Press Release (July 10, 2025). <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/northwood-declaration-10-july-2025-uk-france-joint-nuclear-statement>. Accessed October 29, 2025.

⁶ “Nuclear Planning Group (NPG),” North Atlantic Treaty Organization - NATO (May 9, 2022). https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_50069.htm. Accessed October 29, 2025.

⁷ “Mr. Major's Joint Press Conference with President Chirac – 30 October 1995,” John Major Archive, (October 30, 1995). <https://johnmajorarchive.org.uk/1995/10/30/mr-major-joint-press-conference-with-president-chirac-30-october-1995/>. Accessed October 26, 2025.

⁸ Paul Cormarie, “Can the United Kingdom and France Team Up in the Third Nuclear Age?” War on the Rocks (October 31, 2024). <https://warontherocks.com/2024/10/can-the-united-kingdom-and-france-team-up-in-the-third-nuclear-age/>. Accessed October 26, 2025.



Council, referring to the United States, UK, and France. The UK's nuclear capability was conceived in the 1950s as a way to ensure its strategic autonomy while British politicians remained skeptical of the growing "European Project."⁹ It was also viewed by UK and U.S. leadership as a way to ensure Britain had a "seat at the top table" and could be viewed by the United States as a partner—albeit a junior one.¹⁰ UK and U.S. collaboration on nuclear issues was crystallized through the signing of the UK-U.S. Mutual Defense Agreement—UK Prime Minister Macmillan's "Great Prize," and a highly comprehensive treaty, which is enduring.

This shoring up of UK-U.S. relations was in stark contrast to French perceptions: President de Gaulle, an architect of the European project from 1945 into the Treaty of Rome in 1957 and beyond, saw French development of nuclear weapons as a hedge against the uncertainty of the United States and its budding special relationship with the UK that might run contrary to French interests. Concerned that U.S. deterrence commitments were less than water-tight,¹¹ President de Gaulle conceived and constructed a nuclear enterprise that would be fiercely sovereign and open to interpretation by whomever the current French president may be. The divergences on nuclear strategies between the three nuclear powers led in part to the French decision to step away from NATO Command structures in 1966, and later to the decision not to rejoin the NPG in the 2006 *rapprochement*. France thus continues to self-exclude from the NPG, NATO's foremost group on nuclear policy.

It is clear, however, that the UK and France have a special relationship of their own when it comes to nuclear issues. Terms such as "nuclear warning shot"¹² or the "deterrence" versus "*dissuasion*" debate¹³ may sometimes fail to convey their fullest sense when translated in a policy context, but both concepts (and many more like them) exist in both systems by other names. The UK and France

⁹ Gill Bennett, "What's the Context? The decision to build a British atomic bomb, 8 January 1947," History of Government (January 7, 2022). <https://history.blog.gov.uk/2022/01/07/whats-the-context-the-decision-to-build-a-british-atomic-bomb-8-january-1947/>. Accessed October 26, 2025.

¹⁰ According to Secretary of Defense McNamara, "London has accepted the status of junior partner in the firm in exchange for a special relationship." Ed. William Burr, "The British Bomb and the United States – Part One," National Security Archive (May 13, 2021). <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/nuclear-vault/2021-05-13/british-bomb-united-states-part-one>. Accessed October 26, 2025.

¹¹ From the Memorandum of Conversation, Paris, May 31, 1961, "Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume XIV, Berlin Crisis, 1961-1962," Office of the Historian, U.S. State Department (May 31, 1961). <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v14/d30>. Accessed October 26, 2025.

¹² The "nonrenewable nuclear detonation that should suffice to reestablish the credibility of French deterrence." Astrid Chevreuil, "France's Nuclear Offer to Europe," Center for Strategic and International Studies (October 23, 2024). <https://www.csis.org/analysis/frances-nuclear-offer-europe>. Accessed October 26, 2025.

¹³ To simplify a complex linguistic explanation, the French term *dissuasion*, which translates in English to deterrence, is inextricably linked with the concept of nuclear deterrence. See Bruno Tertrais, "French Nuclear Deterrence Policy, Forces, And Future: A Handbook," Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique (February 2020), p 16. <https://www.frstrategie.org/sites/default/files/documents/publications/recherches-et-documents/2020/202004.pdf>. Accessed October 26, 2025.



have similarly sized nuclear stockpiles, with the UK at no more than 260¹⁴ and France at fewer than 300,¹⁵ significantly behind the United States, China and Russia. The focus of British and French nuclear doctrine is inflicting “unacceptable damage” through “strict sufficiency.”¹⁶

Crucially, recent decades have seen a much greater effort to align policy, most significantly through the 1995 Chequers Declaration where the then UK Prime Minister John Major reported that, “the [French] President and I have concluded that the vital interests of one could not be threatened without the vital interests of the other equally being at risk.”¹⁷ This statement, and the broader idea of the Chequers Declaration, has been repeated since many times by leaders on both sides, and is understood to infer that the proximity, whether physical, political, or cultural, between London and Paris means an attack on one would carry significant enough risk to the other, and the scenario would be considered threatening to both. Made in the dawn of the post-Cold War era, the original declaration alluded to a French view that a level of nuclear-political integration was worth pursuing.¹⁸

Northwood Declaration: Linking Vital Interests

The relevance of the Chequers Declaration’s principle—that the vital interests of the UK and France are intrinsically linked—remains significant today, particularly in light of the Northwood Declaration, which seeks to enhance the bilateral mechanisms for coordination. That the coordination will be led by the French Presidency and the UK Cabinet Office—the executive branches of both nations—marks a significant effort to join up decision-makers, demonstrating that both sides are committed to forging profound and enduring links.

¹⁴ This figure was last stated in the UK’s Integrated Review, Cabinet Office, “Global Britain in a competitive age: the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy,” Publication (July 2, 2021), p. 76. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/global-britain-in-a-competitive-age-the-integrated-review-of-security-defence-development-and-foreign-policy/global-britain-in-a-competitive-age-the-integrated-review-of-security-defence-development-and-foreign-policy>. Accessed October 26, 2025. However, the subsequent “Strategic Defence Review” of 2025 states that the UK “does not publicise figures for its operational stockpile, deployed warhead, or deployed missile numbers.” Ministry of Defence, “The Strategic Defence Review 2025 - Making Britain Safer: secure at home, strong abroad,” Publication (July 8, 2021). Accessed October 26, 2025.

¹⁵ Ministère de l’Europe et des affaires étrangères, “Nuclear Disarmament” Website (July 2024). <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/security-disarmament-and-non-proliferation/disarmament-and-non-proliferation/treaty-on-the-non-proliferation-of-nuclear-weapons/nuclear-disarmament/>. Accessed October 26, 2025.

¹⁶ Emmanuelle Maitre, “The French nuclear deterrent in a changing strategic environment,” Fondation pour la recherche stratégique (March 11, 2025). <https://www.frstrategie.org/en/publications/notes/french-nuclear-deterrent-changing-strategic-environment-2025>. Accessed October 26, 2025.

¹⁷ From “Mr. Major’s Joint Press Conference with President Chirac – 30 October 1995,” John Major Archive, (October 30, 1995). <https://johnmajorarchive.org.uk/1995/10/30/mr-majors-joint-press-conference-with-president-chirac-30-october-1995/>. Accessed October 26, 2025.

¹⁸ Bruno Tertrais, “Entente Nucleaire: Options for UK-French Nuclear Cooperation,” British American Security Information Council (BASIC) (June 2012). https://basicint.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/entente_nucleaire_basic_trident_commission.pdf). Accessed October 26, 2025.



France's leaders since De Gaulle have broadly been clear about their own understanding of French nuclear weapons having a key role within a European security paradigm. Many presidents have referenced the infamous "European dimension" without providing the audience with a more concrete definition of what this means, preferring to leave that to the imaginations of listeners—in France, across Europe, or in an adversary's intelligence department. President Macron has spoken of it¹⁹ in the context of greater European autonomy over defense and deterrence issues, with France firmly at the center. Although not new, the European dimension is now backlit by the multiple nuclear challenger order²⁰ in which NATO now finds itself. President de Gaulle's decision to pursue a sovereign French nuclear program was set against the auspices of uncertain U.S. defense guarantees.²¹ His concept of a "Europe of Nations" intended to protect the bloc from both U.S. and Soviet overreach.²² Macron embraced the idea of France's vital interests having a European dimension early in his tenure, in a speech to the Ecole de Guerre in 2020 against the backdrop of "an accelerated disintegration of our international legal order and institutions."²³ But Macron continues to remain suitably vague about what those European dimensions are, in line with French doctrine regarding both ambiguity and the president's ownership of policy.

Implications for European NATO Allies

The vagueness of the European dimension has at times been unsatisfactory for France's European NATO allies; for those non-nuclear allies to be assured of their security, the details of the European dimension must be better explained and understood. The Northwood Declaration, coupled with an understanding of more coordination between the UK and France's nuclear capabilities, may prove a salve for some of those allies with concerns about Europe's position in a nuclear crisis. The agreement, however, only goes as far as the bilateral relationship; the NATO alliance is not mentioned, and there is no suggestion that coordinating with the UK will include coordinating with NATO's policies and plans.

¹⁹ Joseph Ataman and Jessie Yeung, "France to consider protecting European allies with its nuclear arsenal, Macron says," CNN World (March 6, 2025). <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/03/05/europe/macron-france-nuclear-arsenal-ukraine-intl-hnk>. Accessed October 26, 2025.

²⁰ Brad Roberts, "From the "Unipolar Moment" to Multipolar Rivalry: Implications for the U.S. Nuclear Enterprise" in Brad Roberts, William Tobey, co-ed., *The Inflection Point and the U.S. Nuclear Security Enterprise* (Livermore, CA: Center for Global Security Research, 2023), pp. 15-21. <https://cgsr.llnl.gov/sites/cgsr/files/2024-08/cgsr-inflection-op-fullbook-10-04-2023-v4-web.pdf>. Accessed October 26, 2025.

²¹ Louis Gautier, "France's deterrent must be part of a future multi-layered European protection system," *Le Monde* (March 16, 2025). https://www.lemonde.fr/en/opinion/article/2025/03/16/france-s-deterrent-must-be-part-of-a-future-multi-layered-european-protection-system_6739197_23.html. Accessed October 26, 2025.

²² Éric Anceau, "De Gaulle and Europe," *Digital Encyclopedia of European History* (June 22, 2020). (<https://ehne.fr/en/encyclopedia/themes/international-relations/arbiters-and-arbitration-in-europe-beginning-modern-times/de-gaulle-and-europe>). Accessed October 26, 2025.

²³ Élysée, "Speech of the President of the Republic on the Defense and Deterrence Strategy," (February 7, 2020). <https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2020/02/07/speech-of-the-president-of-the-republic-on-the-defense-and-deterrence-strategy>. Accessed October 26, 2025.



French commentators²⁴ have reinforced the offer of “strategic dialogues” that Macron relayed to European leaders in 2020, and the French-Polish Friendship Treaty of May 2025 that put in place “security guarantees” for both countries.²⁵ For many NATO member states, it is not going to be achievable nor realistic to set up individual bilateral agreements with France. Without a significant change in the French approach to the NPG, most NATO member states will have to rely on the confidence, or the blind faith, that at least the UK has been able to achieve some alignment with French nuclear and deterrence planning, and that if required, Northwood’s “coordination” serves to make France a de facto wartime member of the NPG. The alternative could prove consensus-busting for the NPG; lack of communication on the extent of coordination compounded with a range of other complexities may serve to increase allies’ reluctance to act.²⁶

But the limited nature of the Northwood Declaration, and the ambiguity around coordination bilaterally and with the Alliance, may work in NATO’s favor from a deterrence perspective. It has been a long-standing theme of NATO’s nuclear deterrence policy to point to the separate centers of decision-making by way of having three sovereign nuclear powers—one of whom (France) does not consult with the wider alliance on its nuclear options—and a further 31 sovereign members of the NPG who provide support to NATO’s mission. NATO members could respond to nuclear threats or force in one of any number of ways, utilizing any of the tools at the disposal of any member state, and an adversary could and should never assume that any action would be taken based purely on whether consensus can be achieved. Early analysis may have demonstrated that NATO’s adversaries are paying more attention to the “European Dimension” now compared to before both the invasion of Ukraine and the Northwood Declaration.²⁷

The UK has now enhanced its own role as a convenor of information and planner of coordination. With its role as a sovereign nuclear weapons state, a close relationship with the United States, a coordinating function with France, and as announced earlier this year,²⁸ a future role in NATO’s Dual Capable Aircraft (DCA) mission, members of the UK’s nuclear policy and planning community can provide policy-shaping views that take into account NATO’s opportunity space using all available

²⁴ Astrid Chevreuil, “France’s Nuclear Offer to Europe,” Center for Strategic and International Studies (October 23, 2024). <https://www.csis.org/analysis/frances-nuclear-offer-europe>. Accessed October 26, 2025.

²⁵ Chancellery of the Prime Minister, Republic of Poland, “Poland and France Sign Historic Security and Cooperation Treaty in Nancy,” Press Release (May 9, 2025). <https://www.gov.pl/web/primeminister/poland-and-france-sign-historic-security-and-cooperation-treaty-in-nancy>. Accessed October 26, 2025.

²⁶ Beyza Unal with Julia Cournoyer, Calum Inverarity, and Yasmin Afina, “Uncertainty and complexity in nuclear decision-making,” Chatham House (March 2022). https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/2022-03-07-nuclear-decision-making-unal-et-al_1.pdf. Accessed October 27, 2025.

²⁷ Zsafia Wolford, James Black, and Paul Van Hooft, “Can More British and French Nuclear Cooperation help Deter Russia?” War on the Rocks (September 30, 2025). <https://warontherocks.com/2025/09/can-more-british-and-french-nuclear-cooperation-help-deter-russia/>. Accessed October 26, 2025.

²⁸ Prime Minister’s Office, 10 Downing Street, “UK to purchase F-35As and join NATO nuclear mission as Government steps up national security and delivers defence dividend,” Press Release (June 24, 2025). <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-to-purchase-f-35as-and-join-nato-nuclear-mission-as-government-steps-up-national-security-and-delivers-defence-dividend>. Accessed October 26, 2025.



levers. As an example, this might include better coordination between NATO and French nuclear exercises, with appropriate planning alignment through UK mechanisms.

And while it remains to be seen whether the forging of stronger deterrence relationships among NATO member states has the intended effect on its adversaries, the general benefits to the alliance of better coordination and understanding on a bilateral or multilateral level could have wider consequences across the traditionally U.S.-allied West and Indo-Pacific. As a former Prime Minister of Australia put it, if her allies cannot trust the United States to defend them, those allies should now look to find common ground.²⁹ That common ground is both that the United States is looking at its allies to strengthen both their military posture and their relationships with each other, and, in doing so, decrease dependence on the United States for defense and deterrence.³⁰

Blueprint for Allied Cooperation

Allies of the United States may forge stronger relationships based on common understanding and adherence to the rules-based international order. The UK-French declaration could function as a blueprint of how even the most traditional of U.S. allies can work together on issues to produce options that do not require a “U.S. reliance.” Uncertainty over traditional alliances is not only being felt at NATO; in the Indo-Pacific, Japan in particular is considering its defense and security arrangements with the United States in light of President Trump’s comments about the imbalance in the current relationship.³¹ Increasingly aware of the unpredictability of its neighborhood, including Russia, China, and North Korea, Japan has sought closer bonds with NATO³² and also other countries in its vicinity with whom it aligns in security challenges. The recent Japan-Philippines agreement, for example, is based on concerns over Chinese territorialism and an understanding that they have mutual interests that may not be defended alone through bilateral agreements with the United States.³³

The Northwood Declaration marks a pivotal step toward greater European responsibility in nuclear deterrence, offering a potential blueprint for allied cooperation in an era of shifting U.S. commitments. Seeking ways in which like-minded allies can coalesce around shared values should the United States waiver on previous security assurances may become a repeatable

²⁹ Malcolm Turnbull, “America’s Allies Must Save Themselves,” *Foreign Affairs* (June 6, 2025).

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/americas-allies-must-save-themselves>. Accessed October 26, 2025.

³⁰ Per U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth, as reported by Laura Kayali, “NATO allies cannot rely on America for their defense, warns US defense chief,” *Politico* (June 5, 2025). <https://www.politico.eu/article/nato-allies-cannot-rely-on-us-for-their-defense-warns-us-defense-secretary/>. Accessed October 26, 2025.

³¹ Jesse Johnson, “Trump calls the U.S.-Japan alliance ‘one-sided.’ Tokyo says otherwise,” *The Japan Times* (April 16, 2025). <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2025/04/16/japan/politics/japan-us-alliance/>. Accessed October 26, 2025.

³² Gabriel Dominguez, “Japan and NATO to launch defense-industrial talks, top envoy says,” *The Japan Times* (July 29, 2025). <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2025/07/29/japan/politics/nato-ambassador-defense-industry-dialogue/>. Accessed October 26, 2025.

³³ Jim Gomez, “Japan and Philippines agree to deepen defense ties due to their mutual alarm over Chinese aggression,” *AP News* (February 24, 2025). <https://apnews.com/article/philippines-japan-defense-alliance-3abcf01f70dbd92f29442b3dad34802a>. Accessed October 26, 2025.



pattern. The extent to which NATO and its members can adapt to this new reality will determine the future strength and credibility of the alliance's deterrence posture. Thirty years ago, the then UK Prime Minister Major and French President Chirac spoke about shared vital interests: today, those interests are spread across more NATO member states. Ultimately, the ability of nuclear deterrence policymakers to adapt to a changing world order and the fluid state of geopolitics, against a new security architecture, will determine how effectively alliances can advance and protect shared interests.