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EVROPSKO JEDRSKO ODVRAČANJE: KAKO SPODKOPATI TEMELJ RUSKIH JEDRSKIH GROŽENJ Z IZKORIŠČANJEM PREDNOSTI MAJHNIH EVROPSKIH SIL

EUROPE'S NUCLEAR DETERRENT: HOW TO ERODE THE FOUNDATION OF RUSSIA'S NUCLEAR THREATS CAPITALIZING ON SMALL EUROPEAN POWERS' ADVANTAGES

Povzetek Članek analizira ponovno aktualnost jedrskega odvračanja v Evropi po ruski invaziji na Ukrajino in predstavi argumente, da jedrska politika ni izključno domena velikih sil. Avtorica trdi, da Evropa ne potrebuje posnemanja ameriških strategij ali večjih arzenalov, temveč prilagojen pristop, osredotočen na zanesljiv t. i. drugi udarec, odpornost poveljevanja in nadzora ter močno konvencionalno odvračanje. Posebno vlogo pripisuje malim in srednje velikim evropskim državam, ki lahko z diplomacijo, političnim pritiskom in stigmatizacijo jedrskih groženj zvišujejo politično ceno jedrske uporabe ter tako slabijo verodostojnost ruskega jedrskega izsiljevanja.

Ključne besede *Jedrsko orožje, jedrsko odvračanje, jedrske grožnje, Evropa, Rusija, diplomacija.*

Abstract The article analyses the renewed relevance of nuclear deterrence in Europe following Russia's invasion of Ukraine and presents arguments that nuclear policy is not exclusively the domain of the major powers. The author argues that Europe does not need to emulate American strategies or larger arsenals, but rather an adapted approach focused on a reliable second-strike capability, command and control resilience, and strong conventional deterrence. She attributes a special role to small and medium-sized European countries, which can use diplomacy, political pressure, and the stigmatization of nuclear threats to raise the political cost of nuclear use and thus weaken the credibility of Russian nuclear blackmail.

Key words *Nuclear weapons, nuclear deterrence, nuclear threats, Europe, Russia, diplomacy.*

Introduction Since the end of the Cold War the idea of nuclear use on the Old Continent has seemed, at the least, far-fetched. Nevertheless, since the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Russia has repeatedly launched a number of nuclear threats while proceeding with reckless attacks on Ukrainian nuclear facilities. The war has exposed Russia's limitations as a conventional power, which led to the over-emphasis on its diverse nuclear arsenal – with the spotlight on its low yield, tactical nuclear weapons – as a coercive mechanism behind its revisionist agenda. European countries have once again begun to explore Chemical-Biological-Radiological-Nuclear (CBRN) scenarios, design shelters, and educate their publics on best practice in the event of a nuclear strike. Nuclear weapons have made a major comeback while pop culture movies – such as *Oppenheimer* or *House Dynamite* – have raised awareness among wider audiences on the massive destructiveness of the nuclear bomb and its potential consequences for humanity.

Against this backdrop, and maybe even paradoxically, there is a general feeling that the issue of nuclear weapons is a topic reserved for discussion only amongst the powerful states who possess them, leaving outside small and medium-sized conventional powers. This approach to nuclear policy is most probably a remnant of Cold War politics, when nuclear deterrence was left to be crafted by the two nuclear superpowers. In the post-Cold War environment, however, many things are different. Apart from Russia and the US, regional nuclear powers cast a large shadow on international politics, while China's evolving military capabilities make the Cold War bipolarity scheme look obsolete. The diffusion of power and military capabilities, the emergence of new technologies, and the rise of revisionism make the current environment more complex and risk prone.

Within this context, the idea that nuclear deterrence is the responsibility of those with the biggest arsenals appears to be anachronistic. The incredibly deleterious impact of the nuclear bomb (Wolfson, Dalnoki-Veress, 2025) on humanity means that every actor should feel not only empowered but also responsible to assert its participation in the decision-making process and contribution to deterrence through both military and political-diplomatic means. Lastly, the need for reinforced European security cooperation and the discussion for alternative nuclear security providers – in order to minimize European dependency on the US nuclear umbrella – require well-concerted coordination and cooperation amongst European states of all sizes and power potentials.

1 TAILORING NUCLEAR DETERRENCE FOR EUROPE AND THE ROLE OF SMALL POWERS

As quickly as Europeans – through French and British nuclear policies – seek to take meaningful steps toward reinforcing the 'Old Continent's' nuclear deterrent, scholars and pundits (Vaddi, Narang, 2025) rush to point out the deficiencies (Chevreuil, Horschig, 2025) and vulnerabilities (Samuel, 2025) of such a policy attempt. Some experts believe that the large numerical gap between Europe and Russia is a considerable obstacle toward a credible European deterrent and, most

probably, the only factor that matters. Other pundits add to this arithmetical issue the lack of delivery platform diversity and the lack of escalation management (Van Hooft, 2025) tools such as low yield (Cameron, 2025) nuclear weapons. Emerging technologies which favor the prospects of a disarming first strike complicate things even more (Gottemoeller, 2021).

To be fair, these arguments make a lot of sense as long as the purpose of a state's nuclear arsenal is damage limitation or nuclear warfighting. For example, currently, France's arsenal is somewhat smaller than 300 nuclear warheads, which are to be delivered either by submarine nuclear ballistic missiles (SSBNs) or air-to-ground supersonic missiles carried by two Rafale squadrons. With a medium-sized arsenal, without a land-based deterrent and with no low-yield nuclear bombs, the arsenal is not well suited for nuclear warfighting, damage limitation or limited nuclear war scenarios. And why would it need to be? Is it imperative for Europe to replicate U.S. nuclear strategies, postures and force structures in order to be able to credibly push back against Russia's nuclear threats?

No matter how experienced American nuclear strategists are, U.S. understanding of nuclear strategy is a product of a given domestic and geostrategic environment. As Lawrence Freedman recently stated (2025, 16): "The size of the US arsenal /.../ reflected the imperatives of an arms race and the desire of the US Strategic Air Command to be able to cover every possible target". Another critical reason behind U.S. strategists' obsession with large nuclear arsenals which offer diverse options – in terms of nuclear yield or range – is to carry out damage limitation missions (Vogt, 2020). The U.S. has embraced damage limitation in the past for a number of reasons which have to do with inter-service rivalries or even policy-makers' need to feel a sense of control over escalation (Weiner, 2023; Kaplan, 2020). The idea behind the concept is that nuclear war can be controlled, and damage from the enemy's retaliatory strike(s) can be contained.

While damage limitation strategies come with a series of escalation control propositions, the ugly truth is that in order to put an end to the escalation spiral, one needs the adversary's cooperation. This cooperation will depend on a number of unpredictable factors such as clear communication of intentions so that the adversary understands the signal of restraint at our end as an invitation for them to do the same. Nothing can guarantee that the enemy will not take the chance to proceed with a massive strike where escalation simply skyrockets and things get out of control, as wargames most frequently demonstrate. In fact, when McNamara read Bill Kauffman's paper where he introduced for the first time the concept of counterforce and damage limitation, the U.S. Defense Secretary just could not see how this war could end. Sixty-five years later, the question still haunts nuclear strategists and policymakers. Technological advancements notwithstanding, the sobering truth, even many decades later, is that for the war to end, one will need to convince the adversary to cooperate under the threat of further destruction with no guarantees that the other party will concede if they can still inflict more pain upon us.

In contrast to damage limitation doctrine, and as Lawrence Freedman recently argued (2025), small arsenals can yield considerable deterrent effects as long as they are tailored to the political and military objective they seek to serve. To be sure, there is no doubt that Russia will seek to emphasize the nuclear numerical gap rhetorically during crisis bargaining. However, it is up to European strategists to raise obstacles so that Moscow will not be able to reap any political benefits or coercive leverage out of this numerical disparity. In other words, Europe's big bet is not to prepare to win a limited nuclear war or carry out damage limitation, but instead to erode the foundation of any Russian coercive attempt seeking to leverage nuclear threats. Toward this goal, small and medium-sized European powers have an important role to play.

European leaders of non-nuclear states should work hard in order to send the nuclear weapon to the background – pushing back against Russian efforts to normalize the nuclear bomb in an effort to present the Kremlin's nuclear threats as credible. There are specific things that European leaders can do: firstly, they need to publicly reject damage limitation thinking coming from the nuclear powers on the 'Old Continent' and instead push for postures which seek to assure the second strike through investments in stealth platforms and command and control resilience as well as conventional deterrence. European leaders should challenge their counterparts in France and the UK to be responsible nuclear powers, emphasizing retaliation and negative control instead of brinkmanship and risk-prone uses of their nuclear arsenals. In this way, European leaders will signal that they are willing to be part of a nuclear policy discussion emphasizing that they are not willing to increase the salience of nuclear weapons in Europe's military planning for the sake of keeping the nuclear taboo robust against any Russian efforts to erode it. Lastly and most critically, European leaders will need to capitalize on their diplomatic leverage to increase *ex ante* the political cost of nuclear use. In this way, European deterrence becomes the product of a more pluralistic process and a more feasible task, without the need for bigger nuclear arsenals or nuclear warfighting capabilities emulating U.S. nuclear strategy.

2 SEND THE NUKES TO THE BACKGROUND

Nuclear strategies such as damage limitation over-emphasize the nuclear element in one's strategy, risking the conventionalization of the nuclear weapon which, paradoxically, makes the risk of nuclear employment higher. Small European states need to be aware of this dire risk, and instead advocate for responsible nuclear policies which will emphasize secured second-strike capability. Some will rush to argue that new technologies have made the idea of a disarming first strike feasible and, therefore, appealing to revisionist state leaders. However, recent research has shown that emerging technologies can also reinforce a state's retaliatory strike, thus re-establishing strategic stability. Apart from emerging technologies, platform choices based on survivability and stealth-related criteria are paramount too. Europe's reliance on its undersea deterrent – given its undetectability by the enemy – makes the numerical gap a bearable problem reinforcing survivability and assuring the delivery of a

retaliatory strike. Russia's mediocre Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW) capabilities, combined with scientific predictions which favor submarine nuclear ballistic missile (SLBM) survivability in the future, make investments in more SSBNs a sensible strategy moving forward (Gilli et al., 2021).

France already has plans for its next-gen SSBNs, while the UK plans to replace its Vanguard SSBNs with the Dreadnought class in the early 2030s (Vavasseur, 2024; West, 2025). The stealth character of the undersea deterrent injects the right dose of uncertainty into Russian decision-makers' calculations. It needs to be highlighted that French and British multiple independently targetable reentry vehicles (MIRV) SLBMs can cause more than unacceptable damage to Russia. UK Dreadnaughts will carry US Trident missiles, each armed with eight warheads, while France's submarines carry the M-51 Submarine Launched Ballistic Missile which also holds MIRVs.

That said, however, the reliance on an undersea deterrent begets another issue which needs to be addressed urgently: that of Command, Control, Communications and Intelligence (C3I) resilience. C3I survivability—even though it is, nowadays (Freedman, 2025), reinforced by the proliferation of new technologies such as space-based intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) – was still an unresolved issue (Blair, 1984) even for mature or big nuclear arsenals until very recently (Acton, 2023). For instance, China has invested extensively in C3I redundancy and resilience, while the U.S. (Cunningham, 2025) was not confident of its C3I survivability until relatively recently. Securing communications between regional commands and the civilian leader during a crisis or after a first nuclear strike has been absorbed lies at the heart of a state's second-strike survivability. It cancels any incentive a revisionist power might find in a disarming first strike, and establishes a robust strategic stability by ensuring retaliation.

Toward this goal, France and the UK will need to work hard on C3I survivability through investments in over-the-horizon radars and in a variety of early warning sensors, both ground and space-based. Command and Control Centers will need to be defended against cyberattacks, while Russia's obsession with hypersonic glide vehicles might demand greater future investments in infrared space-based early warning sensors which will detect and track low attitude, maneuverable vehicles. Given Europe's reliance on U.S. ISR for now, the path toward C3I resilience may be longer than many think. And yet, both France and the UK will have to prioritize investments in C3I resiliency; the *sine qua non* for a reliable European deterrent which could erode the credibility of Russian nuclear coercion attempts.

Lastly, if Europe wants to send the nuclear weapon to the background, eroding Russian coercive attempts, then investments in conventional weapons are required. Instead of investing in big nuclear arsenals, European countries should first and foremost channel resources toward conventional capabilities for long-range conventional strikes against critical nodes such as logistics and ISR (Boswinkel, 2025). Paradoxically, this could reinforce nuclear deterrence as well, adding more

rungs to the escalation ladder, offering space and time for diplomacy. Europeans have taken some important steps toward this goal, but ISR deficiencies, as well as manufacturing vulnerabilities, raise strong obstacles (Wright, 2024). It is an offense-dominant environment, where emerging technologies (hypersonic weapons) and the precise masses of older technologies (torpedoes, ballistic missiles or any sort of older technology munition) will impact the final outcome (Horowitz, 2024). Numbers and defense industrial capacity are not relics of the past, but important indicators of military effectiveness for the future. A robust conventional deterrent will render any discussions on low-yield nuclear weapons unnecessary and, therefore, throw the ball into Russia's court.¹

3 DO NOT FORGET THE DIPLOMATIC FRONT

European states will need to work hard against the ongoing conventionalization and normalization of the nuclear bomb. Russia's nuclear threats and emphasis on battlefield, low yield nuclear weapons have risked blurring the distinction between conventional and nuclear weapons. Some will argue that Europe needs low yield nuclear weapons to be able to match Russian threats in a proportional way. However, by mirroring Russian efforts to conventionalize the nuclear bomb, we do not reinforce deterrence, but instead we reinforce Russia's game of making its nuclear threats more salient, thus increasing the prospects of actual nuclear employment. Small European powers, as I argued earlier, should focus on finding their own contribution to conventional means to counter such threats, while working on the diplomatic front with advocacy networks, international fora and scientific organizations in order to raise awareness on the impact of nuclear use on the European regional environment. Whereas Western powers have failed considerably so far to galvanize global support against Russia's nuclear threats, small European states are better positioned to function as bridges between Western nuclear powers and the rest of the world. Europe's power over opinion – built through decades of human rights protection around the world, foreign aid, FDIs, and cultural exchanges across the globe – should position it favorably when talking to Global South countries. In fact, linking the use of nuclear weapons to climate change and environmental concerns should make the argument against nuclear threats even more compelling.

What we tend to forget is that by increasing the political cost of nuclear use, we can reinforce nuclear deterrence (Sechser, Fuhrmann, 2017). Declassified Cold War documents have shown that policymakers may often be tempted by the promises of the nuclear bomb, but the prohibitively high political cost involved has pushed them to consider conventional alternatives. For revisionist goals and not against existential threats, Seitz and Talmadge (2025) have argued that madman strategies do not work because – among other reasons – leaders are constrained by their allies, who will rush to express their disapproval. Even Putin has shown some sort of restraint so far, and it looks as if he is not willing to jeopardize his good relations with states such as

¹ For more concerning the concept of conventional deterrence, see Mearsheimer (1985).

India or China, which have expressed their fervent opposition to setting a precedent of nuclear use in the 21st century (Ganguly, 2024). Russia-China relations are already fragile enough, and the nuclear question makes frictions even worse. Small European powers are nicely positioned to act as diplomatic entrepreneurs, capitalize on their clean record in the field of nuclear policy, and work discreetly behind the scenes to make the political cost of nuclear use for Russia unbearable.

Conclusion As a concluding thought, Europe is in the process of re-thinking its nuclear deterrent. It may be one that is not in congruence with Cold War practices, and there is nothing wrong with that. What is needed, however, is for Europe to tailor its deterrent to its current geostrategic situation, emphasize its strengths, and work hard to address its limitations. It is not a lost game just because the numbers say so. On the contrary, success will hinge upon cooperation and an excellent distribution of labor, where small non-nuclear powers play their own critical role through active participation in the nuclear policy discourse. It is up to the small – albeit paramount – European powers to remind European nuclear states of their responsibilities and best practices, which could reinforce strategic stability while acting in the diplomatic backstage as a force for the stigmatization of nuclear threats and the increase of the political cost of nuclear coercion. Nuclear deterrence is a process which everyone in Europe should contribute toward. Being an observer is not something that small European powers can afford any more.

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