



French Security Policy and Its Prospects

On March 2, 2026, French President Emmanuel Macron announced in Brest a revision of nuclear deterrence policy aimed at increasing France's nuclear potential and enhancing cooperation in this area with allies. This is another element of a broader adaptation of French security policy in the context of Russia's war against Ukraine and growing uncertainty regarding the United States' commitment to European security, including in light of the new U.S. National Security Strategy. These changes may also be significant for Poland, for which, under current political conditions, defence cooperation with European states is becoming increasingly important. France, the only EU country possessing nuclear weapons and independent, comprehensive military capabilities, may play a particularly important role here. However, internal problems of the Fifth Republic may pose a significant challenge.

French Security Policy

As in the case of a number of other European countries, Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine in February 2022 has significantly influenced French security policy. In mid-July 2025, France presented the results of its first National Strategic Review since 2022. The document points to a rapidly deteriorating security environment, manifested by the multiplication and intensification of conflicts as well as an increase in transnational threats and challenges. The document clearly states that Russia constitutes and will continue to constitute in the coming years the most direct threat to France's interests, its partners and allies, as well as to the stability of the European continent and the Euro-Atlantic area itself. The French strategic review also highlights destabilizing actions by Iran and a more assertive stance by China, which seeks to become the world's leading power by 2050. More broadly, it indicates that the European model of liberal democracy and humanism is currently being attacked and challenged as part of a global ideological offensive. Importantly, the review also points to a high risk of a high-intensity conflict in

Europe involving France and its allies by 2030, as well as a “less predictable” U.S. foreign policy under the administration of Donald Trump, with potentially significant consequences for NATO and transatlantic relations. In this context, the document emphasizes the need to strengthen European strategic autonomy and sovereignty, while noting that NATO remains the only organization possessing the credibility, structures, mechanisms, and legitimacy necessary to respond collectively to a major conflict on the European continent. Therefore, according to the authors of the review, greater responsibility of Europeans within NATO is needed, along with coordination between the EU and NATO and closer strategic cooperation among “willing” European states. In the context of the growing importance of nuclear threats, the review also emphasizes the French president’s March 2025 call to open a “strategic debate on protecting our allies on the European continent through our deterrence.”¹

In the military dimension, based on lessons learned from the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, the review stresses the need for strong and advanced capabilities to overcome anti-access systems supported by the mass use of missile and unmanned systems. In particular, it highlights the importance of capabilities to penetrate enemy defences, control the electromagnetic spectrum, conduct long-range strikes, and deploy ground-based air defence systems, as well as the need for an innovative defence industry capable of supplying necessary ammunition and military equipment. The military objectives outlined in the document are clear: by 2030, France should be capable of preventing, and if necessary conducting and winning, together with allies and partners, a large-scale high-intensity conflict near Europe. More broadly, France should be able to maintain a balance of power with major adversaries (presumably Russia) and their allies. According to French assumptions, the European pillar of NATO is to be strengthened through military, industrial, and technological resources, reinforcing European strategic

¹ France maintains, however, that a non-negotiable issue in this debate is any potential sharing of decision-making on the use of nuclear weapons, which must remain in the hands of the President of the Republic.

National Strategic Review 2025,

https://www.sgdsn.gouv.fr/files/files/Publications/20250713_NP_SGDSN_RNS2025_EN_0.pdf

autonomy. This vision is to be implemented through 11 strategic priorities encompassing both political and strictly military goals.²

French strategic assumptions are also supported by increasing military expenditure. In 2023, the Military Programming Law for 2024–2030 was adopted, providing for a record defence budget of €413.3 billion over this period, representing an increase of €118 billion compared to the previous period (2019–2025).

Armed Forces and Defense Potential

France currently possesses the largest and most comprehensive armed forces in Europe. They consist of four branches: the Army (Armée de terre), Navy (Marine nationale), Air and Space Force (Armée de l'air et de l'espace), the National Gendarmerie (Gendarmerie nationale), and the National Guard (Garde nationale). In 2025, the French Armed Forces numbered approximately 200,000 soldiers. Additionally, there were 44,000 reservists and over 134,000 members of the national gendarmerie (generally performing police functions). France's military budget in 2025 amounted to €61.8 billion, representing 2.07% of GDP.

The strongest component of the French Armed Forces remains the Army, with approximately 111,000 soldiers. Its core combat strength is based on two divisions (1st and 3rd), as well as independent combat aviation and artillery brigades and units of the Foreign Legion. The French Army operates around 220 Leclerc main battle tanks (200 currently being upgraded to the Leclerc XLR version), over 600 infantry fighting vehicles (VBCI), around 180 AMX 10 RCR reconnaissance vehicles, and more than 5,000 armoured personnel carriers and lighter combat vehicles. French units are also supported by approximately 70 self-propelled howitzers and 67 attack helicopters.

Within the comprehensive SCORPION program, older equipment is being replaced with modern Griffon, Serval, and Jaguar vehicles (over 900 vehicles of these types have already

² A robust and credible nuclear deterrent; a united and resilient France: contributing to the moral rearmament of the nation to deal with crises; an economy prepared for war; first class cyber resilience; France as a reliable ally in the Euro-Atlantic area; France as a driving force behind European strategic autonomy; France as a reliable sovereignty partner and credible provider of security; guaranteed autonomy of assessment and decision-making sovereignty 65 SO 9 The capacity to defend and act in hybrid fields; the ability to achieve decisive outcomes in military operations; supporting French and European sovereignty through academic, scientific and technological excellence.

been delivered, with total needs estimated at over 4,000 units). Under a contract signed in 2024, 109 new CAESAR self-propelled howitzers are to be introduced into service. Plans also include acquiring new multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS) to replace the withdrawn American M-270 systems.³

The French Air and Space Force employs 38,000 personnel. It is based on six combat aviation squadrons operating around 180 combat aircraft (105 Rafale and 78 Mirage 2000 in 2025). Transport and support aviation squadrons operate approximately 70 transport aircraft and 17 tanker aircraft. Ground-based air defence is based on eight batteries of medium-range SAMP-T "Mamba" systems and an equal number of short-range Crotale NG systems.⁴ France has also ordered eight batteries of the upgraded SAMP-T NG system, to be delivered between 2026 and 2030. Combat aviation is being systematically strengthened by Rafale multirole fighters, with plans to reach a fleet of 225 aircraft by 2030.

France also possesses one of the strongest navy in Europe, with over 34,000 personnel. The fleet includes one nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, three large amphibious assault ships, four nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs), four nuclear attack submarines (with a target of six Suffren-class units), 15 destroyers and frigates, and several patrol vessels. The navy is undergoing modernization, including the introduction of new attack submarines and planned new ballistic missile submarines to replace the Triomphant-class starting in 2036, as well as Amiral Ronarc'h-class frigates replacing La Fayette-class vessels.

French armed forces are also highly active outside European territory. In 2025, as many as 30,000 soldiers were deployed for deterrence missions, in overseas territories, and in operations under the auspices of the UN, EU, and NATO.⁵

France is also a nuclear power, with nuclear weapons as its most powerful deterrent. According to French strategic documents, nuclear deterrence is the ultimate guarantee of national sovereignty, security, and independence, and its use is the sole responsibility of the President of the Republic. It may be used only in extreme circumstances to protect the

³ *Defence Key Figures 2025*, https://www.defense.gouv.fr/sites/default/files/ministere-armees/Chiffres_Cle%CC%81s_2025_UK.pdf

⁴ *Defence Key Figures 2025*.

⁵ *Defence Key Figures 2025*.

“vital interests of the state,”⁶ with the president defining those interests, what is an element of so-called “strategic ambiguity.” A potential adversary does not know which actions might trigger a nuclear response, complicating hostile calculations. In the event of an attack on France and violation of such interests, a single nuclear “warning strike” may first be carried out to signal that the nature of the conflict could fundamentally change. France declares no intention to engage in a nuclear arms race, maintaining its arsenal at a level sufficient to inflict “unacceptable damage” on an adversary at any time.⁷

France currently possesses approximately 290 nuclear warheads, with its nuclear forces based on air and sea components. The sea-based component consists of four Triomphant-class SSBNs, each carrying 16 multiple-warhead M51 intercontinental ballistic missiles. The air component relies on ASMP-A missiles and the newer ASMPA-R, carried by Rafale B and Rafale M aircraft. These are to be replaced by ASN4G hypersonic missiles entering service in the mid-2030s.

As mentioned earlier, in March 2026 President Macron announced a revision of French nuclear policy toward a concept of “enhanced nuclear deterrence.” He emphasized that in the current geopolitical situation France must consider its deterrence in a broader European context and announced cooperation with willing states (eight countries, including Poland, reportedly expressed interest), including joint exercises and potential deployment of air force units on allied territories.

This does not imply deployment of French nuclear weapons abroad or shared decision-making on their use, but it signals that France’s nuclear potential may be used to defend more than just narrow national interests. Macron also announced an expansion of France’s nuclear potential.

France’s industrial capacity should also be noted, as its armed forces are supplied by a strong domestic defence industry. French or largely French-capital defense companies—such as Dassault, Airbus, MBDA, Naval Group, Safran, Thales, and KNDS—are among the

⁶ It is worth noting that in February 2020 the President of France declared that France’s vital interests also have a European dimension, and in March 2025 he announced that, when defining the Republic’s interests, the vital interests of its main partners would also be taken into account. National Strategic Review 2025, p. 36.

⁷ *National Strategic Review 2025*.

global leaders and capable of providing virtually all military capabilities.⁸ France is also the world's second-largest arms exporter after the United States.

Polish-French Cooperation

In May 2025, Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk and French President Emmanuel Macron signed the Treaty on Enhanced Cooperation and Friendship between the Republic of Poland and the French Republic, known as the Treaty of Nancy. In addition to regular consultations and cooperation at the European and international levels, both countries committed to continuing cooperation in security. Poland and France declared readiness to assume greater responsibility for European security and its neighbourhood, including strengthening NATO's European pillar, and to provide mutual assistance –including by military means – in the event of armed aggression against either state. These commitments are to be supported by annual strategic dialogues and consultations, including at the level of foreign and defence ministers, as well as between chiefs of general staff and national armaments directors. The parties also committed to strengthening interoperability through joint exercises, missions, deployments in strategically important regions, and deeper cooperation in armaments and defence industries.

The extent to which the Treaty of Nancy will strengthen Polish-French relations depends on political will on both sides. However, the broader geopolitical situation appears favourable. Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, France has significantly toughened its policy toward Moscow and halted political dialogue with the Kremlin. Paris has also become a strong advocate of support for Ukraine, including the transfer of advanced weapon systems, bringing its position closer to Poland's. At the same time, the Trump administration's policies – including suspending aid to Ukraine and announcing reduced U.S. engagement in European security – have increased Poland's understanding of France's long-standing calls for greater European responsibility for security. France has also nuanced its position, emphasising EU strategic autonomy in industrial, technological, and resilience areas while reaffirming NATO's primacy in defence of Europe.

⁸ According to the 2024 SIPRI ranking, seven companies based in France or with significant French capital were among the world's top 50 arms-producing companies. SIPRI, <https://www.sipri.org/visualizations/2025/sipri-top-100-arms-producing-and-military-services-companies-world-2024>

Both countries' ambitious defence policies also create opportunities for cooperation, including joint procurement and research and development programs. From Poland's perspective, French support in developing independent reconnaissance and situational awareness systems and long-range strike capabilities, including ballistic systems, could be particularly valuable. Both countries, as stakeholders in the security of NATO's eastern flank, should also strive to enhance interoperability and mutual understanding through joint exercises, exchanges of military academy students, and personnel from their respective defence ministries. France's declaration regarding the European dimension of its nuclear interests also creates potential areas for cooperation, such as consultations and joint air force exercises.

Problems and Limitations

France's international credibility is weakened by its complex domestic situation. The National Assembly is deeply divided, with no political force holding a majority. Despite the presidential system, this significantly affects governance, as seen in the turbulent budget process. This led to the fall of François Bayrou's government in September 2025 and the resignation (ultimately not accepted) of Prime Minister Sébastien Lecornu after less than a month in office. The budget was finally adopted in February 2026 using Article 49.3—a controversial procedure allowing passage without a parliamentary vote unless a no-confidence motion succeeds. The final budget deviates from the government's initial ambitions due to high deficits and growing public debt. Plans to reduce the deficit from 5.4% of GDP in 2025 to 4.7% were scaled back to 5% to secure political support.

Moreover, France is entering a pre-election campaign period ahead of its presidential elections, making it difficult to expect any significant reforms or major political initiatives during this time. An even greater risk may be looming on the horizon, as a likely candidate of the nationalist National Rally (formerly the National Front), Jordan Bardella, stands a strong chance of winning the election. The party is known for its skepticism toward European integration, NATO, and for its pro-Russian views. Bardella himself, however, distances himself from these positions, for instance by identifying Russia as a multidimensional threat; nevertheless, he presents a more cautious stance than Macron regarding support for Ukraine. France now faces an opportunity to realize many of its

long-advocated foreign policy goals, but much will depend on the decisions of the French electorate.

Conclusions

1. The revision of nuclear deterrence policy announced in March 2026, aimed at expanding France's nuclear potential and enhancing cooperation in this area with allies, constitutes another element of a broader adaptation of French security policy in response to Russia's war against Ukraine and the growing uncertainty regarding the United States' commitment to European security. Changes in French policy may also be significant for Poland, for which, under current political conditions, defense cooperation with European countries—including France—is gaining importance.

2. The extent to which the Treaty of Nancy will actually contribute to strengthening Polish-French strategic relations will depend on the political will on both sides. At present, however, favourable conditions exist for defence-industrial cooperation, including joint procurement of military equipment or collaborative research and development programs. From Poland's perspective, particularly valuable could be French support in developing an independent intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance system, as well as long-range strike capabilities, including in the field of ballistic systems. France's declaration of the European dimension of its interests in the context of nuclear weapons also creates a potentially interesting area for cooperation (for example, in consultations and joint air force exercises). However, a challenge to deepening cooperation may be France's complex domestic political situation and the approaching presidential elections.

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