



Nuclear deterrence is not the solution: it is the problem

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On the eve of presidential announcements on nuclear deterrence, it is worth revisiting the [article](#) published on 15 December 2025 in *Le Grand Continent* entitled “After deterrence: the new nuclear age”. In it, senior civil servant Louis Gautier, former Secretary General for Defence and National Security, analyses the new context of nuclear deterrence, which in fact contributes to its condemnation, while attempting to justify the maintenance of an outdated doctrine.

No one can deny the “*unprecedented and worrying events*” relating to nuclear issues mentioned by the author: conventional strikes by two nuclear states (the United States and Israel) against the civilian nuclear facilities of a country inspected day and night by the IAEA (Iran), the presentation of a new Chinese ballistic missile and the testing of a Russian nuclear-powered cruise missile, President Trump's “*reckless remarks*” on resuming nuclear testing, and North Korea's latest ballistic missile launch. To this, the author added, without qualifying it, the entry into service of France's new airborne nuclear missile.

Nor can we deny “*Russia's aggressive behaviour under the cover of its ‘nuclear impunity’*”, which risks inspiring China with regard to Taiwan. Nevertheless, it seems unreasonable to claim that it is solely because of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, even if it is taking place in a “*nuclear atmosphere*”, that “*the spectre of nuclear threat has thus returned to loom over our continent.*”

This threat has in fact existed since nuclear weapons came into being and is most concentrated among the opposing powers in Europe: NATO and Russia (currently a total of 8,524 operational nuclear weapons out of a global arsenal of 9,614).¹

The author explains the current “*nuclear fever*” as a symptom of “*lasting anarchy*” resulting from the fact that “*the use of force to settle state disputes is increasing*” and “*is now free from all preconditions and obligations.*”

Contradictory observations and conclusions

However, the author draws contradictory conclusions from an indisputable observation. He asserts that “*the current global disorder caused by powers that have broken free from established international frameworks and codes does not invalidate nuclear deterrence*”. On the contrary, he adds, this doctrine “*would once again find itself at the centre of an unbridled international game.*”

¹ Federation of American Scientists, ‘Status of World Nuclear Forces,’ 2025 (fas.org/initiative/status-world-nuclear-forces/).



Louis Gautier himself nevertheless lists the reasons why nuclear deterrence, far from offering a solution to world security, is part of the problem: it has not prevented the American nuclear “umbrella” from being called into question, the quantitative and qualitative increase in arsenals, the “*fluctuation*” of doctrines, the potential failure of non-proliferation and the “*dangerous*” debate on the acquisition of nuclear weapons by States parties to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). In short, “*nuclear deterrence, which has shaped the history of the last seventy-five years, no longer seems to know the history it is making.*”

The author admits that nuclear deterrence has not prevented crises or conflicts, but claims that it would prevent “*escalation to extremes, contagion and widespread conflagration*” as well as the “*runaway*” nature of “*armed confrontations*”, leading to their “*containment*” and rationalise “*the use of force between nuclear powers*”. And, in essence, he brandishes the old cliché that underpins the doctrine of deterrence: it is thanks to the atomic bomb, which is supposed to have ended the war with Japan, that nuclear war has been avoided since then.

Louis Gautier's article is presented as a “*piece of doctrine*”. However, doctrine is defined by *Le Petit Robert* as a “*set of notions that are claimed to be true and by which one claims to provide an interpretation of facts, to guide or direct action*”. It is therefore a matter of putting forward beliefs in order to provide an explanation of reality. In this case, by deliberately confusing causality with coincidence.

Just as Saddam Hussein could not prove that he no longer possessed weapons of mass destruction in 2003, so it cannot be proven that the nuclear powers have not used their nuclear weapons against each other solely out of fear of retaliation. Indeed, proof of the negative (the absence of nuclear war) is impossible by reference to nuclear deterrence alone.²

In fact, as US Secretary of Defence Robert McNamara acknowledged after the Cuban missile crisis, the factor that best explains the absence of nuclear war is simply luck.³

But the myths and beliefs that underpin this “*doctrine*” die hard. The author attributes to nuclear weapons an “*apotropaic virtue*”, namely the ability to ward off evil and avert malevolent influences, like an amulet. Is this not tantamount to acknowledging that world security depends on devastating talismans in the hands of a few gullible leaders?

The “*game*” of nuclear deterrence, the author asserts, needs to be “*managed*”, which the current world makes more difficult. Leaders of nuclear powers are expected to behave in a “*comprehensible*”,

² See, among others: J.-P. Dupuy, M. Finaud, B. Norlain, A. Suzor Wiener, “Affirmer que la dissuasion nucléaire a préservé la paix ne repose sur aucun fondement scientifique” (Claiming that nuclear deterrence has preserved peace has no scientific basis), *Le Monde*, 4 March 2024; Ward H. Wilson, *Nuclear Weapons and What If They Were Useless: Five Myths to Debunk*, GRIP, 2013.

³ Harvard Kennedy School Belfer Centre, “Cuban Missile Crisis” (<http://www.cubanmissilecrisis.org/lessons-policymakers/robert-mcnamara/>). See also: B. Pelopidas, N. Frozel Barros, A. Motta. “Schelling, deterrence and luck. Interview with Benoît Pelopidas,” *Émulations: Revue de sciences sociales*, 31, pp.79-90, 2019; R. N. Lebow and B. Pelopidas, “Facing Nuclear War: Luck, Learning, and the Cuban Missile Crisis,” in: M. Bukovansky et al. (eds). *The Oxford Handbook of History and International Relations*, Oxford University Press, pp.705-720, 2023.



and therefore rational, manner. But can the act of preparing to exterminate millions of human beings, including one's own population, according to the logic of “mutually assured destruction” be described as rational?

The current crisis, Louis Gautier implicitly acknowledges, is largely attributable to the failure of the “*directory*” set up by the five nuclear powers of the NPT. If other countries have acquired or are seeking to acquire nuclear weapons, it is by following the example of the Five, for whom it is the “*ultima ratio*” that ensures their “*nuclear impunity*”. Regardless of their regional environment, it is clear that the solemn promise of nuclear disarmament contained in the NPT in exchange for non-proliferation has largely remained unfulfilled since 1970 and that even bilateral measures to cap or reduce nuclear weapons have been demolished.

The third nuclear age?

If the current nuclear crisis is a “*symptom*” of a broader trend, why not tackle its causes instead of protecting nuclear deterrence, which is at the heart of this crisis? How can we claim that the “*third nuclear age*” is characterised by “*too much nuclear power*” and that nuclear deterrence is not therefore “*invalidated*”?

How can we continue to talk about deterrence, which is supposed to prevent the use of nuclear weapons, while at the same time acknowledging, without condemning this development, that the modernisation of nuclear arsenals aims to dangerously lower the threshold for their use (“*increasing the performance of nuclear weapons and delivery systems — stealth, velocity, precision, range and payload — or to vary their manoeuvrability and adaptability in order to have a more diverse range of tools and therefore uses*”)?

The distinction made by the author between weapons of deterrence, which are supposed to prevent aggression, and weapons of intimidation, which are intended to force the adversary to yield, is intellectually appealing. In reality, it seeks to exonerate the “good” nuclear weapons of Western powers considered responsible from those of irresponsible powers. However, as former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said, “*there are no good hands for bad weapons*”.⁴

Furthermore, as the International Court of Justice pointed out in its 1996 advisory opinion, “*the threat or use of nuclear weapons would generally be contrary to the rules of international law applicable in armed conflict, and in particular to the principles and rules of humanitarian law.*” Consequently, any threat to use nuclear weapons, whether for deterrence or intimidation, is contrary to international law.⁵

Moreover, in his book *La Guerre qui ne peut pas avoir lieu* (The War That Cannot Take Place), philosopher Jean-Pierre Dupuy concluded that any nation state possessing nuclear weapons was

⁴ United Nations, “Ban Ki-moon calls for renewed efforts on nuclear disarmament,” 13 January 2013 (news.un.org/en/story/2013/01/260042).

⁵ International Court of Justice, ‘Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons,’ Advisory Opinion, 8 July 1996 (<https://www.icj-cij.org/case/95>).



criminal.⁶ It is this same conviction that led Pope Francis to condemn not only the use of nuclear weapons but also their possession as “immoral” and even as “a crime, not only against man and his dignity, but also against any possibility of a future in our common home.”⁷

The impossible Europeanisation of French deterrence

With regard to France's nuclear deterrence strategy and its possible extension to other European countries, the author faithfully traces its developments and limitations. To the point where one might legitimately wonder whether, despite his support in principle for the French President's remarks, he does not recognise a total incompatibility between French doctrine and what our partners might accept.

The typically French doctrine of the “*ultimate warning*”, dating back to 1979 but reiterated by Emmanuel Macron in 2020, is mentioned in passing. It consists of admitting that deterrence, although the “*cornerstone*” of our security, can fail and that, in order to “*restore*” it, France would launch a limited nuclear strike on a military target.⁸ Given that the “*smallest*” French airborne missile is equipped with a warhead with an estimated capacity of between 100 and 300 kt, such a strike would be equivalent to between 7 and 20 times the destructive power of the Hiroshima bomb. Who can seriously believe that “*collateral*” victims would be avoided or that the adversary would not retaliate with strategic weapons capable of destroying France?

The author rightly notes that French presidents have repeatedly made proposals to our partners, but he refrains from pointing out that these have been diplomatically but systematically rejected. He is careful not to mention the hostility towards nuclear weapons among most European populations, including in countries where the United States stations its hundred or so so-called non-strategic nuclear bombs (Germany, Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands), as regular opinion polls show.⁹ It should be remembered that several European countries (Austria, Holy See, Ireland, Liechtenstein, Malta, San Marino) are among the hundred or so states that have signed the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), which is incompatible with any extended deterrence (or nuclear “*umbrella*”).

It is true that this strategy and its possible expansion, which directly affect the security and future of populations, have never been the subject of in-depth debate, at least in France, despite requests

⁶ J.-P. Dupuy, *La guerre qui ne peut pas avoir lieu*, Desclée de Brouwer, 2018.

⁷ Vatican News, ‘The Pope's words on nuclear weapons,’ 6 August 2020 (<https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2020-08/pope-francis-calls-for-world-free-of-nuclear-weapons.html>).

⁸ Elysée, ‘Speech by President Emmanuel Macron on defence and deterrence strategy to the 27th class of the École de Guerre,’ 7 February 2020.

⁹ See in particular: B. Pelopidas, *Repenser les choix nucléaires* (Rethinking Nuclear Choices), SciencesPo Les Presses, pp. 197-200, 2022, and IDN-ICAN, *Twenty Lies About Nuclear Weapons and How to Respond to Them*, pp. 55-56, October 2024 (<https://www.idn-france.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/TWENTY-LIES-ABOUT-NUCLEAR-WEAPONS.pdf>).



from civil society.¹⁰ This is hardly surprising in a system controlled by elites who are jealous of their power and claim to possess the necessary qualifications to ensure the security and happiness of the people despite themselves.

About the authors

Marc Finaud is a former French career diplomat. During his diplomatic career (from 1977 to 2013), he was assigned to several bilateral posts (USSR, Poland, Israel, Australia) as well as multilateral missions (CSCE, Conference on Disarmament, UN). He then worked until 2022 as a trainer for young diplomats and officers at the Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP) in all areas of international security. He holds Master's degrees in International Law and Political Science and continues to teach at several universities. He has also been a Research Associate at the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR) (Programme on Weapons of Mass Destruction). He is now also a Swiss citizen.

Jean-Luc Lefèbvre is a Colonel (CR) in the Air and Space Force who became a researcher in strategy and held positions of responsibility in the field of aerospace systems. Responsible for the general training of trainee officers at the École de Guerre, he participated in the creation of the Strategic Research Institute of the École Militaire (IRSEM), where he studied issues raised by new areas of conflict: cyberspace and outer space. He is the author of numerous specialist articles and several books, including the influential essay *Stratégie spatiale* (Space Strategy). Retired since 2013, he devotes his time to writing and informing the general public about space and defence issues, appearing regularly on television channels. He is a member of the Collège de Spatiologie and director of the reference domain of the *SCIENCES* encyclopaedia. He is also involved in humanitarian actions.

Air Force General (3S) **Bernard Norlain** holds an engineering degree from the Air Force Academy and is a former fighter pilot. He served as Chief of Staff to Prime Ministers Jacques Chirac and Michel Rocard. He then headed the Institute for Higher National Defence Studies (1994-1996), was Vice-President of Deloitte & Touche France and then Chief Executive Officer of the SOFEMA Group. Former director of the *Revue Défense Nationale*, he is now Honorary President of the National Defence Committee. He is a Commander of the Legion of Honour and has received UNESCO's Mahatma Gandhi Gold Medal. He is the president of Initiatives for Nuclear Disarmament (IDN), an association founded by Paul Quilès.

Vincent Pilley, after completing his national service, began his career as a sales executive and manager in industry. Twenty-five years later, he joined a company to work as a strategy and wealth management advisor to business leaders. For many years, he was president of a neighbourhood council and then vice-president of an association supporting the mayor of Voisins-le-Bretonneux (78). Through his involvement since the early 2000s in the field of interfaith dialogue, he has coordinated some fifteen conferences in several cities in France, bringing together more than 50 speakers. He is

¹⁰ *Le Monde*, "The debate on the military use of nuclear weapons must be open to civil society, since it is the population that would be destroyed," Tribune, 22 March 2025 (http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2025/03/22/le-debat-sur-l-usage-militaire-du-nucleaire-doit-etre-ouvert-a-la-societe-civile-puisque-ce-sont-les-populations-qui-seraient-aneanties_6584636_3232.html).



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Patrick Zahnd has been a professor of international humanitarian law at the School of International Affairs at Sciences Po Paris and at various other universities around the world, including TEC in Mexico City, for more than ten years. He previously served as a delegate for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) for 32 years as an operational manager and diplomatic, legal and political advisor in numerous conflict zones as well as at the headquarters in Geneva. He has also been responsible for development programmes at the UNDP in Mali and at the European Commission.