

FEATURE ARTICLES

Modernizing Nuclear Deterrence in U.S. Alliances: Poland's Experience



Dr. Justyna GOTKOWSKA
Deputy Director, Center for Eastern Studies (OSW)

Poland is a non-nuclear country, and nuclear deterrence was a topic that preoccupied only a handful of experts and officials in the ministries of foreign affairs and defense until Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014. However, the discussion in Poland surrounding nuclear deterrence has gained prominence following the modernization of Russia's nuclear forces, the expansion of its delivery systems, the deployment of Russian tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus, and the execution of nuclear exercises

involving offensive scenarios against its neighbors. After the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Russian threats of the use of nuclear weapons not only against Kyiv but also against NATO allies intensified and led to a discussion in Warsaw on the necessity of changing NATO strategy. This has led to an enhancement of nuclear deterrence capabilities, particularly for countries on the eastern flank.

On top of these discussions, the second Trump administration has seriously unsettled the United

States' European allies, including Poland, regarding the U.S. commitment to European security. Following the U.S.–European confrontation over Greenland in January 2026 and fears that the United States would use military force against Denmark, a NATO ally, questions were raised across Europe about the credibility of U.S. security guarantees. This has reignited the debate on nuclear deterrence to include discussions on both the European and national levels. In this context, the French proposals to extend France's nuclear deterrence to European allies were welcomed in Warsaw,¹⁴ while discussions on developing Polish nuclear weapons lingered in the background.

NATO NUCLEAR DETERRENCE: THE U.S. SECURITY GUARANTEES

Nuclear deterrence in NATO is ensured by the United States, which provides the Alliance with its strategic nuclear capabilities. These are complemented by approximately 100 U.S. tactical nuclear B-61 bombs deployed in six bases located on the territories of Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy, and Turkey under NATO's nuclear sharing program. Within these arrangements, the mentioned European countries provide aircraft (such as F-35 fighter jets) to carry out NATO nuclear missions using U.S. tactical weapons stationed in Europe. The nuclear sharing program is the most visible U.S. commitment to guaranteeing European security in the nuclear sphere, even if questions arise about the feasibility of these arrangements in real war scenarios.¹⁵

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Decisions on the use of nuclear weapons in NATO are made by all Allies (except France) within the Nuclear Planning Group, but they ultimately rest with the U.S. president. NATO's nuclear strategy reflects the U.S. doctrine, which does not specify under which circumstances Washington would decide to use nuclear weapons. Under the nuclear sharing program, NATO holds regular nuclear exercises in Europe involving U.S. strategic bombers, European aircraft, and fighter jets from other NATO countries (including Poland), which provide conventional support for nuclear missions.

At present, and for at least the coming decade, only the United States can provide Europe with credible nuclear deterrence. Russia is also convinced that only Washington has the political will and capabilities to use nuclear weapons in defense of its interests and alliances. Despite the uncertainty generated by President Donald Trump's statements questioning the value of NATO during his second presidency, and notwithstanding the U.S.–European confrontation over Greenland, the Alliance functions well on a day-to-day basis with substantial U.S. involvement. Moreover, following the Greenland episode, representatives of the Trump

¹⁴ Artur Kacprzyk, "France Seeks to Strengthen Nuclear Deterrence in Europe", PISM Spotlight no 14-2026, 3 March 2026, <https://www.pism.pl/publications/france-seeks-to-strengthen-nuclear-deterrence-in-europe>

¹⁵ Jakub Graca, Justyna Gotkowska, "NATO's nuclear deterrence: is it time for change?" OSW Commentary, 19 June 2024, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2026-03-03/sovereign-yet-forward-oriented-towards-europe-evolution-frances>

administration traveled to Europe with a more conciliatory message within the new “burden shifting” approach. Europe is to assume primary responsibility for its own conventional defense, with critical but limited military capabilities provided by the United States, but Washington will be further responsible for nuclear deterrence.¹⁶

EXTENDING THE NUCLEAR SHARING ARRANGEMENTS

For over a decade, the discussion in Warsaw has primarily focused on extending nuclear sharing arrangements to Poland by deploying U.S. tactical nuclear weapons on Polish territory and/or certifying Polish F-35s as dual-capable aircraft capable of undertaking NATO nuclear missions.

The possibility of stationing U.S. tactical nuclear weapons on Polish territory has been deemed in Warsaw as an additional demonstration of the U.S. will to defend the most threatened allies on NATO’s eastern flank. However, such a decision or even a meaningful debate within the Alliance has been hindered by the U.S. adherence to the NATO-Russia Founding Act of 1997. In this document, NATO committed itself, inter alia, not to deploy nuclear weapons on the territory of new member states as part of the developing partnership with Russia in the late 1990s. These provisions implicitly included Poland, which joined NATO in 1999. Even if nowadays the Allies do not assess the NATO-Russia Founding Act as valid after Russian violations of its provisions and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the United States has not been willing so far to open this debate. Washington has, however,

quietly sent a message to Russia by redeploying its tactical nuclear bombs to Lakenheath Air Base in the UK, together with the British government ordering 12 F-35A dual-capable aircraft for nuclear missions within the nuclear sharing program, adding to the UK’s own nuclear capabilities.

Perceiving the deployment of U.S. tactical weapons on Polish territory as not feasible in the short term, Poland came up with a compromise for expanding the nuclear sharing program. This would involve certifying Polish F-35s as dual-capable aircraft, allowing them to carry out nuclear missions with U.S. tactical B-61 bombs stationed in existing European bases. It would require bilateral agreements with the United States, including arrangements with at least one of the base-hosting countries regarding exercises, training, and use of U.S. nuclear weapons from their bases.

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The Polish government maintains continuous, albeit low-key, dialogue with the U.S. administration on the issue of certifying Polish F-35s. No decision on this has been taken or communicated yet. Poland ordered 32 F-35s to be delivered by 2030 and

¹⁶ Elbridge Colby, Remarks by Under Secretary of War for Policy Elbridge Colby at the NATO Defense Ministerial (As Prepared), 12 February 2026, <https://www.war.gov/News/Speeches/Speech/Article/4404801/re>

marks-by-under-secretary-of-war-for-policy-elbridge-colby-at-the-nato-defense/

considered buying additional fighter jets of this type. Beyond extending nuclear sharing arrangements, Warsaw would also wish for more visible NATO nuclear exercises and more robust strategic communication in this domain directed at Russia.

EUROPEAN DIMENSION: THE FRENCH SUPPLEMENT

Perceiving the United States as the main guarantor of European security, especially for nuclear issues, Poland has been skeptical of discussions on creating a European nuclear deterrent, perceiving it as unfeasible both from political and practical perspectives. This debate reemerged in Europe in 2023 in anticipation of Donald Trump returning to the White House and the possibility of the U.S. withdrawing from NATO. It assumed the “Europeanization” of French and/or British nuclear potential, either within the European Union (with French participation) or by creating separate multinational European structures (with both French and British involvement).

The UK and France are the only European allies that are nuclear-armed, and since 1974, both have officially contributed their nuclear potential to NATO’s security. However, their potential is limited, and both countries maintain independent decision-making authority. In developing its nuclear capabilities, the UK is tightly linked to the United States, in contrast to France, which has developed its own nuclear capacity both in terms of weapons and means of delivery. France is also the only NATO ally that does not participate in the NATO Nuclear Planning Group. The French nuclear doctrine considers the use of nuclear weapons for self-defense

and the defense of France’s vital interests, with the latter being deliberately vague.

In view of the U.S.-European tensions, the Polish government welcomed the 2026 French proposal on Europeanizing the French nuclear doctrine, as this time it was underpinned by more concrete ambitions. In March 2026, President Emmanuel Macron announced the transformation of France’s nuclear doctrine towards “forward deterrence,” aimed at strengthening European security. Paris proposed allied participation in French nuclear exercises, as well as overflights and temporary deployment of French nuclear-capable aircraft to Germany, Poland, the Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark, Greece, and Sweden. France would also like to increase its number of nuclear warheads and expects willing European allies to contribute key conventional capabilities (such as early warning signals, enhanced air defense, and long-range strike forces) to strengthen the credibility of this “forward deterrence.”¹⁷

In April 2026, during the first Polish-French summit, the countries announced the launch of a high-level strategic dialogue on “forward deterrence” to strengthen cooperation on European security in both conventional and nuclear dimensions. The goal is to complement NATO’s defense and deterrence posture, not substitute it. Under the proposal, French nuclear exercises are to take place in Poland and other countries. If cooperation develops further and the announcement materializes, it would constitute a major step forward in strengthening nuclear deterrence in Europe.

¹⁷ Lukasz Maślanka, ‘Sovereign, yet forward-oriented towards Europe: the evolution of France’s nuclear deterrence doctrine’, 3 March 2026, OSW Analysis,

<https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2026-03-03/sovereign-yet-forward-oriented-towards-europe-evolution-frances>

NATIONAL DISCUSSIONS: POLISH NUCLEAR WEAPONS?

With the shift in the international order, the United States redefining its priorities and alliances, and the increased uncertainties linked to Russian aggression in Ukraine, Polish public debate on nuclear deterrence has also included discussions on developing its own nuclear weapons. According to an IBRIS public opinion survey from February 2026, public support for Poland acquiring nuclear weapons rose to 50.9%, with 38.6% against and 10.5% having no opinion.¹⁸ However, such a proposal is not backed by the Polish government, even if some politicians occasionally claim support for the idea, which results in allies taking Polish concerns regarding nuclear deterrence more seriously.

Poland developing a nuclear weapons program could theoretically be considered in the event of NATO's dissolution and the end of the U.S. nuclear umbrella over Europe, provided a replacement U.S.-Polish agreement or a credible European nuclear deterrent is not created. Such a move from the Polish side would imply the collapse of the international nuclear arms control regime, which would likely result in the proliferation of nuclear weapons worldwide.

In such a hypothetical situation, Polish society would probably be inclined to develop indigenous nuclear capabilities. However, the lack of a civilian nuclear program would be a serious impediment. The challenge for Warsaw would also lie in independently constructing its delivery systems. Poland would also face the risk of preventive strikes by Russia on nuclear installations. Hence, without

strong U.S. backing, the prospects of developing a Polish nuclear weapons program would be bleak.

CONCLUSION

In light of a more aggressive Russia that treats nuclear weapons as a coercive instrument in its policy towards Europe, there is a clear need to further enhance nuclear deterrence within NATO. There are two most feasible options currently on the table to make it happen: extending U.S.-European nuclear sharing arrangements and implementing the “forward deterrence” dimension of the French nuclear program. This needs to be linked with an increase in conventional capabilities by the non-nuclear NATO allies to support nuclear missions. Poland perceives a clear need to enhance nuclear deterrence in Europe and is ready to contribute and cooperate both with the United States and France. It is now up to these two allies on how to proceed.

In terms of nuclear deterrence, Poland and the Republic of Korea find themselves in different positions but share some similarities. Poland is a member of a multilateral alliance, in which the United States is the main security guarantor in conventional and nuclear terms. The U.S.-European nuclear sharing arrangements in NATO provide a visible link between European and U.S. security, with Poland aiming to play an active part in the program. Additionally to the U.S. commitment to nuclear deterrence in Europe, European nuclear-armed states—France and the UK—have started to rethink their nuclear doctrines in order to strengthen deterrence on the continent. France is the most active ally willing to provide additional commitments to Europe's security, linked with a build-up of conventional capabilities needed for

¹⁸ Mikołaj Pietraszewski, 'Polska powinna pozyskać broń jądrową? Polacy wyrazili zdanie', Radio Zet, 3 Marcu 2026,

<https://wiadomosci.radiozet.pl/polska/polska-powinna-pozyskac-bron-jadowa-polacy-wyrazili-zdanie>,

nuclear missions by some of the European allies, Poland included. A multilateral Alliance, a visible transatlantic link in the form of the nuclear sharing program, and supplemental commitments from nuclear-armed European states make the environment in which Warsaw develops its policy on nuclear deterrence different from the South Korean one.

What unites both Poland and the ROK, however, is the rising threat of the use of nuclear weapons by aggressive neighbours (Russia and North Korea, respectively), the non-nuclear status of both countries (with South Korea, contrary to Poland, being a nuclear threshold state possessing an advanced civilian nuclear programme and delivery systems) and a more demanding and unpredictable main ally, the United States, which is primarily focused on countering China while perceiving the European and Korean Peninsula theatres as secondary. The Polish experience that could be translated into the South Korean context could be: keeping the importance of nuclear deterrence high on the bilateral ROK-U.S. agenda and continuously reminding the United States of the necessity of greater participation - be it consultations on nuclear planning, the possibility of reintroducing nuclear sharing arrangements, or the integration of South Korean conventional capabilities with U.S. nuclear ones. Polish nuclear deterrence policy shows that non-nuclear states can contribute to creating an environment in which ground-breaking U.S. decisions can be made in the future.

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Dr. Justyna
GOTKOWSKA



Dr. Justyna GOTKOWSKA is Deputy Director and Head of the Security and Defence Department at the Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW). She focuses on the security and defence policies of Germany, Nordic and Baltic states, NATO, and the EU. She also writes about Polish security and defence policy vis-à-vis NATO, the EU, and the United States.