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To cite this article: Tom Sauer (2020): Power and Nuclear Weapons: The Case of the European Union, Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament, DOI: [10.1080/25751654.2020.1764260](https://doi.org/10.1080/25751654.2020.1764260)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/25751654.2020.1764260>



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Published online: 13 May 2020.



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# Power and Nuclear Weapons: The Case of the European Union

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## ABSTRACT

For the European Union, nuclear weapons are a taboo. But the more the EU takes steps towards defense integration, the closer the moment comes that the role of the French nuclear weapons has to be discussed. This article hopes to clarify that debate. The first part of this article outlines the debate between those who regard nuclear weapons as powerful and legitimate defense instruments and those who perceive them as too powerful and therefore illegitimate. It is argued that power and deterrence are concepts that are constructed and given meaning by people. The second part applies this debate to the future role of the non-American nuclear weapons in the EU: is there a chance that the French nuclear weapons will be further Europeanized, or will the EU in contrast turn itself into another nuclear weapon free zone (similar to Latin America, the Pacific, and Africa), or will not much change? It is argued that the outcome of this political debate to a large extent will be determined by the outcome of the aforementioned general debate about power and legitimacy of nuclear weapons.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 30 December 2019  
Accepted 23 April 2020

## KEYWORDS

Nuclear weapons; european Union; power; nuclear Ban Treaty; nuclear deterrence; france

On the 7<sup>th</sup> of February 2020, President Macron in a long awaited speech at the Ecole de Guerre in Paris stated that the French nuclear forces “strengthen the security of Europe through their very existence”, and proposed to have a “strategic dialogue” with the EU partners about the role of the French nuclear weapons in European security (Macron 2020). Although the EU is not a state, it has many characteristics of a state: it has a territory with open borders in the Schengen zone, a population (= combination of the people of the EU member states, which all have a European passport), it speaks with one voice on trade policy, it has a research, industrial, and social policy, and more. The EU has its own currency (limited to the eurozone). Since the Treaty of Maastricht, it has even a “common” foreign and security (including defense) policy, although still inter-governmental and therefore less important than the national foreign policies, especially those of the larger EU states. Nevertheless, European defense integration is slowly deepening. The 2016 EU Global Strategy talks about “strategic autonomy”. The European Commission, already under Juncker, spent money on joint defense industrial projects via the European Defense Fund (EDF). The current European Commission – under the heading of Ursula von der Leyen – has even more ambitious goals and sees itself as the first “geopolitical” Commission.

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At the same time, NATO has been criticized by the presidents of the two leading NATO member states: both by Trump (“obsolete”) and Macron (“brain dead”). It is therefore not by chance that right after Trump’s election (after the Brexit referendum), a new debate about the future of European defense was triggered. To the surprise of many, some German observers raised the question that hitherto was taboo: whether the EU (or even Germany itself) needed its own nuclear weapons. The assumption is that the more the EU becomes an economic and political powerhouse, the more it needs its own defense instruments that should include nuclear weapons, as nuclear weapons are linked to power.

Nuclear weapons are generally perceived as powerful, both military and politically. Not only are they the most destructive weapons ever invented, they are also seen as militarily powerful in the sense of being the ideal deterrent, just because of their destructive capacity. In addition to their deterrent effect, the possession of nuclear weapons is related to prestige and influence in the world, and therefore political “power”. Not by chance, many powerful nations on earth possess nuclear weapons: the US, China, Russia, India, the UK, and France. The major exceptions are Germany and Japan, who do not have nuclear weapons because of their role during the Second World War. Upcoming states like Brazil, Mexico, Nigeria, Indonesia, and others may or may not aspire acquiring nuclear weapons, but they – just like Germany and Japan – are not allowed to possess nuclear weapons by the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

There is a tendency to minimize the importance of the debate about the role of nuclear weapons in the EU. That is a mistake. The topic deserves an open debate with arguments in favor and against. If not, the chance exists that the Europeanization of the French nuclear weapons will happen anyhow, without much debate, due to creeping decision-making. That is how US tactical nuclear weapons for instance were installed in Europe in the Cold War: without much or any debate, let alone approval, of the respective parliaments.

Another reason to take this issue serious is that there is both demand and supply for the further Europeanization of the French nuclear weapons. President Macron is only the last French president who offered to spread the French nuclear umbrella over the rest of Europe. At the same time, defense circles and conservative political constituencies in Germany and other European states are willing to consider the idea. One could even make the argument that the EU is already moving in that direction. Atlanticists on the other hand do not see any reason for having such a debate, as long as there is the US nuclear umbrella. This article wants to sketch some of the parameters for such a debate that is needed as transparency and openness are important democratic values of the EU.

The first part of this article outlines the debate between those who regard nuclear weapons as powerful and legitimate defense instruments and those who perceive them as too destructive and therefore illegitimate. The second part analyzes whether and to what extent the EU regards itself, and is regarded by outside powers, as a powerhouse in international politics. The third part applies the debate about the power of nuclear weapons to the future role of the French nuclear weapons in the EU: is there a chance that the French nuclear weapons will be Europeanized in one way or another, or will the EU turn itself into another nuclear weapon free zone (similar to Latin America, the Pacific, and Africa) ? Or will everything stay the same? The outcome of this political

debate will to a large extent be determined by the outcome of the debate about power and legitimacy of nuclear weapons.

## Power and Nuclear Weapons

Since the arrival of the Bomb, atomic weapons have been ascribed – rightfully or wrongfully – powerful (sometimes even magical) attributes. Here, a distinction should be made between powerful in a military and a political sense, two reasons why states (try to) acquire nuclear weapons (Sagan 1996/1997). Militarily speaking, nuclear weapons were first seen as a more destructive and therefore more efficient (read more “powerful”) instrument for strategic bombing by the US against Japan during the Second World War. Before the use of the atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, dozens of other Japanese cities had been destroyed with conventional and incendiary weapons. For the US military, like General Curtis LeMay, there was no substantial difference between these weapon systems and nuclear weapons.

Although debatable, the use of the atomic bombs in Japan is also perceived as the main reason why Japan surrendered. Of course, the American people were happy that the war was over and that no more American soldiers had to risk their lives and die; 85% of the US public at that time agreed with the decision of President Truman to bomb both cities with nuclear weapons<sup>1</sup>. The bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki put the final nail in the coffin of the Japanese, according to the mainstream view. What happened in reality is more complex. On the 8<sup>th</sup> of August, for instance, right between the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Russia declared war against Japan, which is seen by other observers as the main trigger for the Japanese surrender (Hasegawa 2005).

In contrast to the military, US civilian strategists – right from the beginning – regarded nuclear weapons as a weapon system that was unique. Strategists like Bernard Brodie perceived nuclear weapons as weapons of deterrence, yielding stability, security and peace (Brodie 1946). These were weapon systems that were not meant to be used on the battlefield anymore. The period of interstate wars would be over, especially with the arrival of the H-bombs, which were hundreds times even more destructive than the first generation atomic bombs. Nuclear weapons were meant to convince the opponent not to provoke each other, so that they had not to be used, and that stability and security would prevail. Deterrence was (and still is) the name of the game. The latter is of course fundamentally different from the idea that nuclear weapons are only more destructive strategic bombs to be used in war. As a result, over time the US military had to adapt their views in this regard.

The scientists who had built the bombs were fully aware that these weapons were of a different caliber. Those who were present at the first atomic test explosion ever – the Trinity explosion in the desert of New Mexico (US) in July 1945 – remember it as a quasi-religious moment. Brigadier-General Thomas Farrell was an eye-witness of the test. He wrote in his diary:

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<sup>1</sup>Over the years, that number has substantially decreased (Moore 2005). On the other hand, there have been US critics of the use of atomic weapons right from the beginning, including from the Afro-American community in the US (Intondi 2015). I would like to thank one of the reviewers for pointing this out.

‘The effects could well be called unprecedented, magnificent, beautiful, stupendous and terrifying. No man-made phenomenon of such tremendous power had ever occurred before. The lighting effects beggared description. The whole country was lighted by a searing light with the intensity many times that of the midday sun. It was golden, purple, violet, gray and blue. It lighted every peak, crevasse and ridge of the nearby mountain range with a clarity and beauty that cannot be described but must be seen to be imagined. It was that beauty that great poets dream about but describe most poorly and inadequately. Thirty seconds after the explosion came first the air blast pressing hard against the people and things, to be followed almost immediately by the strong, sustained, awesome roar which warned of doomsday and made us feel that we puny things were blasphemous to dare tamper with the forces heretofore reserved to The Almighty. Words are inadequate tools for the job of acquainting those not present with the physical, mental and psychological effects. It had to be witnessed to be realized’ (Nuclear Peace Age Foundation).

Already before the start of the Manhattan Project, scientists had been obsessed by the clear magnitude of energy and potential destruction capacity that the splitting of an atom could provoke. Some of them took action in the form of writing the Franck report (that recommended not to drop the atomic bomb on Japanese cities) in June 1945, beside actions by individual scientists like Albert Einstein (who regretted having written the “Manhattan Project” letter to President Roosevelt in 1939 and who in the last days of his life signed the Einstein-Russell Manifesto in 1955 that warned for the consequences of a nuclear arms race), Soviet atomic scientist Andrei Sacharov and Joseph Rotblat. The latter was the only scholar who quit the Manhattan Project when Hitler was defeated in 1944, and who later founded the Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs. The journal *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* and its Doomsday Clock – founded by scientists – also originates from these years.

The debate about the legitimacy of nuclear deterrence between some of these scientists and a major part of public opinion on the one hand versus the civilian strategists and another part of public opinion on the other continues until these days.

Secondly, nuclear weapons are not only regarded as powerful military instruments, they are also regarded as means to acquire political influence and prestige in international politics, for a substantial part building upon their ascribed military deterrent effect. Arguably, some states acquired nuclear weapons *mainly* for reasons of prestige. France is probably the best example. Imagine France without the “force de frappe”. The country arguably would lose a lot of its “grandeur”, at least in the eyes of many. Here, a distinction should be made between internal and external prestige. Acquiring nuclear weapons yields internal prestige, in the sense that many citizens are proud that their scientists are able to build and test the Bomb, so that their country can belong to the small club of nuclear “haves”. That sentiment for instance was apparently present in both India (Times of India 1998) and Pakistan after their tests in 1998. At the same time, the acquisition of atomic weapons also yields external prestige in the sense of influence and political power vis-à-vis their neighbors and regional rivals. The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)(1968) – that divided the world in a small club of “haves” and many “have nots” – institutionalized the uniqueness of nuclear weapons and further strengthened the prestige of those countries who possessed atomic weapons, even though nuclear disarmament is one of the three main pillars of the NPT. The US, the USSR, the UK, France and China were not only lucky to be permanently represented in the UN Security Council and to be the only ones with a veto power, from 1970 onwards they were also

recognized as the formal and therefore only legitimate (temporary) nuclear weapon states<sup>2</sup>. To conclude, nuclear weapons were – and still are – regarded as powerful instruments, especially in the nuclear armed states and their allies. As Anne Harrington (2009) states, nuclear weapons are regarded as a “currency of power”.

As the EU is more and more regarded as a political power and to a lesser degree a military power (see further), and as nuclear weapons are perceived as powerful weapon systems, some would like to see the EU to obtain nuclear weapons, mainly for enhancing its prestige and therefore power in the world<sup>3</sup>. Before going into this debate, we take a step back by questioning whether nuclear weapons are that powerful as described above, as the answer to this question will for a substantial part re-appear in the discussion about the Eurobomb.

### ***Power Is Constructed, so Is Nuclear Power***

Military power, including nuclear weapons, is generally regarded as one of the most important indicators of (national) power in general (Waltz 1979). However, just as one can criticize the classic definition of power (Lukes 1974), one can also question whether nuclear weapons are real instruments of power, either in the form of deterrence, prestige, or both.

Nuclear weapons are generally regarded and perceived to deter and yield prestige. But the power that is attributed to nuclear weapons is attributed by people: by experts (be it military or civilian), politicians and the public at large. It is to a certain extent attributed, not a given. As Harrington (2009, 327) observes: “Nuclear weapons are powerful because we treat them as powerful”. From a constructivist point of view, these military objects are to a large extent given meaning – and political power – by humans. This leads us to the question: without denying the possibility that nuclear weapons can and do to a certain extent deter due to their destructive capacity, could it be that humans have imbued nuclear weapons with exaggerated power and meaning? Could it be that that nuclear weapons have become a kind of fetish object? Harrington (2009) defines nuclear fetishism as a process by which nuclear weapons are regarded as carriers of a positive social value, namely security and power.

Contrary to the mainstream school of deterrence, it is extremely difficult – if not impossible – to prove that deterrence works in a particular situation, let alone in general. Explaining the absence of an activity – in this case war – by one specific explanatory factor is by definition nearly impossible, especially if we are dealing with complex phenomena such as conflict and war. The fact that there has not been a Third World War since 1945 is probably due to a lot of factors such as the remembrance of the two world wars with tens of millions of deadly victims, and a denser network of international organizations, international law, and international regimes (Mueller 1988). Nuclear deterrence may be another explanation, but it is unclear to what extent.

Remarkably, even a nuclear hawk like Elbridge Colby admits that: “Of course, I don’t know that major war is still plausible, or that our nuclear forces effectively deter; or would dampen it; or that they protect us from coercion; or that they dissuade adversaries from

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<sup>2</sup>France and China only became member of the NPT in 1992.

<sup>3</sup>The deterrent argument is heard much less because those who have more reason to use that argument in Europe, more in particular the Eastern European states, prefer to keep relying on the US nuclear umbrella, and keep quiet on the Eurobomb.

investing more in their military capabilities. With apologies to any true believing social scientists out there, I think these things are true, but of course neither I nor anyone else can prove any of our assessments on these questions” (quoted in Meyn 2018, 127).

As there are clear instances of nuclear deterrence failures (e.g. the Yom Kippur war, and violent conflicts between India and Pakistan since 1998, including a dog fight in the air in the beginning of 2019), claiming that there has not been a Third World War predominantly due to the existence of nuclear weapons (Waltz 1981; Craig 2020) is reductionist and in all likelihood wrong. Nevertheless, over time most people in the nuclear armed states and even in the foreign policy establishments of the non-nuclear armed states came to believe that nuclear deterrence “worked” and that nuclear weapons are powerful instruments that enhance stability, security and peace.

### ***The Role of Subjectivity: Narratives and Images***

If this analysis is correct, it means that there is a gap between what is generally believed about nuclear weapons and their objective characteristics. What can explain this gap? What can explain “the myth of nuclear deterrence” (Wilson 2008)? Why do people so easily believe in the “power” of nuclear weapons? There are societal and political mechanisms at play that can explain why the effect of nuclear weapons is larger than one could expect based on the characteristics of atomic weapons and the history of the nuclear era. More in particular, two societal and political mechanisms can be distinguished: firstly, the influence of the narrative by the foreign policy elite on public opinion, and secondly, other positive images that are associated with nuclear weapons.

Firstly, the narrative of the foreign policy establishment is (partly via the media) able to influence public opinion, which is less knowledgeable and therefore more malleable (Lipset 1966; Verba 1967; for a skeptical view, see Holsti 2004). That shifts the question to why the foreign policy establishment uses this public narrative of nuclear deterrence and prestige. One part of the answer is a genuine belief in deterrence and the related prestige. (Former) US Senator Alan Cranston (1999) claims: “I think one of the major obstacles to achieving the cause of nuclear abolition lies in what [former CINCSAC General] Lee Butler calls the ‘nuclear priesthood’, people who have built their lives and their careers upon nuclear weapons or nuclear doctrine. They are spreading the gospel – and some of them are in very high and influential places – that we need nuclear weapons, and we need them forever”.

Another – less acknowledged, but even more important – part of the answer has to do with materialistic interests, more in particular the parochial interests of the military-industrial complex. As Fellows (1981, 62) once pointed out: “The Pentagon is in business to devise war plans and understand the enemy and protect the nation; but before any of those things, it is in business to spend money”. In this case, the US complex, for instance, can be narrowed down to the nuclear complex that includes nuclear labs and the Department of Energy, the nuclear priesthood in the Department of Defense (both military and civilians), the industry (like Boeing and Lockheed Martin) that receives gigantic contracts, and (local) politicians that want to preserve jobs related to this complex. Scott Sagan (1996/1997, 64) describes the process in his country as follows: “The initial ideas for individual weapons innovations are often developed inside state laboratories, where scientists favor military innovation simply because it is technically



exciting and keeps money and prestige flowing to their laboratories. Such scientists are then able to find, or even create, sponsors in the professional military whose bureaucratic interests and specific military responsibilities lead them also to favor the particular weapons system. Finally, such a coalition builds broader political support within the executive or legislative branches by shaping perceptions about the costs and benefits of weapons programmes". The US alone spent more than 5.5 USD trillion on nuclear weapons during the Cold War (Schwartz 1998). Hundreds of thousands of people have worked in this nuclear weapons complex. The same applies to the former USSR. Also in the smaller nuclear armed states many people earn an income thanks to the maintenance of the nuclear complex.

Nowadays, the US still spends 30-50 USD billion per year on the development, acquisition and maintenance of nuclear weapons and their delivery vehicles. For France, the number is much smaller, but 4.55 bn euro annually is not a small figure for a country like France. Those who are involved in this business have a lot to lose and have an incentive to (mis)use the arguments of deterrence and prestige in order to strengthen their own agenda. Deterrence, in other words, also becomes a justification for spending money on nuclear weapons related business. Former CINCSAC General Butler (1998) formulated it as follows: "For us, nuclear weapons were the savior that brought an implacable foe to his knees in 1945 and held another at bay for nearly a half-century ... These are powerful, deeply rooted beliefs ... [These beliefs] gave rise to mammoth bureaucracies with gargantuan appetites and global agendas. They incited primal emotions, spurred zealotry and demagoguery, and set in motion forces of ungovernable scope and power".

One specific political mechanism is the conditional support by the nuclear priesthood for arms control treaties in exchange for compensation in the form of force modernizations, so that a maximum deterrence posture could be maintained, especially in the US and the former USSR, and to a lesser extent also in the smaller nuclear armed states. Not because a maximum deterrence posture is strategically better, but because it demands a larger budget than a minimum deterrent (Sauer 2005). Stockton (1991, 153) explains how this mechanism in the US works in practice: "That leverage over ratification gives the [military] services a powerful voice in the drafting of US treaty proposals, which the services – and their civilian allies in the executive branch – use to ensure that prospective treaties will accommodate the new weapons they deem necessary ... arms development and arms control go forward in tandem, through intra-governmental logrolling mechanism in which support for one is traded for the other". The Limited Test Ban Treaty (1963) for instance led to an expanded underground testing program. The SALT I treaty led to accelerated defense spending for Trident and the B-1 bomber, and SALT II led to the development of the MX ICBM. There is also a link between START I and the B-2. For instance, CINCSAC General Chain warned in 1990: "There are several bills on the Hill to cancel the B-2. If those bills are passed, I will go and testify strongly against support of the START agreement" (Stockton 1991, 154). The most recent political deal was the approval by President Obama for a gigantic nuclear modernization package worth 1.2 USD trillion (plus 0.5 USD trillion inflation) in exchange for the ratification of New START by the Republican dominated Congress in 2010.

These mechanisms are mostly hidden from the public. The public legitimation for nuclear weapons is deterrence and in second order prestige. What these mechanisms



show is that the public legitimation for nuclear weapons is a narrative that does not reveal the complete picture. This may explain the gap between what the general public thinks about nuclear weapons and the objective characteristics of nuclear weapons.

Secondly, apart from those narratives, there are images that are consciously or unconsciously associated with nuclear weapons. For instance, the debate between nuclear deterrence and nuclear elimination is most of the time presented as a debate between Realists and Idealists. Some define those in favor of elimination as “utopian”, “soft”, or as British Marshal Sir Robert Saundby once said “people who feel rather than think” (Cilessen 1998, 114). One could as easily accuse Realists for being “naïve” to believe that nuclear weapons will never be used anymore, although that argument is much less heard (Pélopidas 2016; Meyn 2018).

The result of these mechanisms – both the narratives and the images – is the limited contestation of the notion of nuclear deterrence, at least in the nuclear armed states and their allies. Public opinion in the nuclear armed states is reinforced in thinking that nuclear weapons are “good because they make the country safe and secure”. As MccGwire (1998, 26) argued: “For some 40 years, the American people were told that nuclear deterrence kept the peace, that as long as money was invested in such weapons, deterrence couldn’t fail, and that there was no danger of accidental or inadvertent nuclear war . . . it would be difficult to wean the US electorate from that version of the past”. To a certain extent, citizens of the nuclear armed states have become “addicted” to nuclear weapons (Lifton and Falk 1982). As the political philosopher Hannah Arendt once stated: “The danger is that these [deterrence] theories are not only plausible because they take their evidence from actually discernable present trends, but that, because of their inner consistency, they have a hypnotic effect; they put to sleep our common sense, which is nothing else but our mental organ for perceiving, understanding, and dealing with reality and factuality” (quoted in Harrington 2016, 105–106). The result is a world in which humans abdicate responsibility for wielding this power to the weapons themselves. That is what Marianne Hanson (2018) calls the “normalization of nuclear weapons”. If that is the case, it becomes of course difficult to imagine a world, or the European Union, without nuclear weapons.

### ***Nuclear Weapons: Too “Powerful” and Therefore Illegitimate***

By the same token, if human beings were to start to think differently and more critical about nuclear weapons, these weapon systems might receive a more negative meaning. If people would be aware of the historical failures of nuclear deterrence and of the societal and political mechanisms mentioned above, nuclear deterrence would already lose a lot of its attractiveness and power. If people are aware that there is human agency at work in our perception of the weapons’ power, it is possible “to imagine changes that might otherwise be considered unrealistic” (Harrington 2009, 329).

Fortunately, this exercise in critical thinking has not to start from scratch. Nuclear weapons have been controversial right from the beginning of the atomic era (Intondi 2015). There have always been critical voices that have questioned the legitimacy of nuclear weapons because it is believed that these weapons are too destructive to be used as defense instruments, both in their capacity as battlefield weapons and as a deterrent. Based on human and sometimes religious values and norms, they argue that the use and therefore the threat of use is not compatible with international humanitarian law. They

have been criticizing the nuclear arms-race and the resulting overkill-capacity throughout the nuclear era. For them, nuclear weapons are not prestigious, but infamous instruments.

Peace movements, scientists like Albert Einstein, and public intellectuals like Bertrand Russell, Günther Anders and Hannah Arendt, but also Realists like Hans Morgenthau and John Herz raised their voice in this regard in the 1950 s and 1960 s (Wittner 2003). At first sight to no avail. It is, however, too easy to conclude that these critical voices have lost the debate. In some countries, the voices of these critics prevailed. Some countries halted their secret nuclear weapons program over time, e.g. Sweden, directly or indirectly thanks to arguments made by these domestic critics (Jonter 2016).

That said, it is fair to conclude that in the nuclear armed states and their allies as well as in many other foreign policy establishments, the nuclear deterrence logic and narrative prevailed and still prevails. One can argue that the view of the few nuclear “haves” has even prevails on a global scale, more in particular in the non-proliferation and disarmament regime. The indefinite extension of the NPT at the Review and Extension Conference in 1995 institutionalized the discrimination between the nuclear weapon states and the non-nuclear weapon states, as the non-nuclear weapon states actually gave up the only leverage they had.

Nevertheless, over the last ten to fifteen years there has been a substantial shift in the nuclear debate. In particular, since 2010 the non-nuclear weapon states have learned to use the power of their number. Hannah Arendt (1972) distinguishes power and *strength*. The latter she defines as “something in the singular . . . the property inherent in an object or person . . ., which may prove itself in relation to other things or persons, but is essentially independent of them”. *Power*, on the other hand, corresponds to the human ability not just to act, but *to act in concert*. Power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group. In other words, Arendt dismisses the connotation that power is synonymous with commands and obedience, since power relates to consent and support. Rules, norms, and values are not orders that are commanded from above, but are consented to and supported by society. Organizational capacity plays an important role in Arendt’s concept of power, since proper organization of the few, or poor organization of the many, can lead to minority rule (Arendt 1972, 149). Previously, the non-nuclear weapon states were unwilling or unable to unite against the nuclear armed states, with the exception of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) sponsoring perennial, non-binding resolutions in the UN General Assembly. That has changed. The major explanation for this shift in tactics on behalf of the non-nuclear weapon states is the growing frustration about the non-fulfillment of the disarmament obligations by the nuclear weapon states under the NPT (Meyer and Sauer 2018).

This increased cooperation amongst the non-nuclear weapon states led to the Humanitarian Initiative (Ritchie 2013; Borrie 2014; Sauer and Pretorius 2014) and the resulting Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, better known as the Ban Treaty (Gibbons 2018). The assumption behind the Ban Treaty is that the existence of nuclear weapons is simply too dangerous (because of the risk of authorized use, non-authorized use, authorized use after false alarm, or accidental/incidental use (Schlosser 2009)), and that the only logical conclusion is to eliminate and therefore to ban nuclear weapons. The likely result of the Ban Treaty, especially if it will enter into force in the foreseeable future, will be to strengthen the norm against nuclear weapons. The advocates of the Ban Treaty

hope that nuclear weapons will be regarded as pariah weapons instead of weapons of prestige. According to them, nuclear weapons should not be regarded as powerful instruments anymore, but as illegitimate and illegal. They also hope that this enhanced stigmatization in turn may lead to a renewed societal and political debate inside some of the (democratic) nuclear armed states and their allies, and to policy changes later on (Sauer and Reveraert 2018). Skeptics doubt whether the Ban Treaty will have an effect on the nuclear armed states or their allies (Roberts 2018). It remains to be seen what the impact of the Ban Treaty will be in the nuclear armed states and their allies. We now turn to our case-study: the EU.

## The EU: From Soft to Hard Power

The EU is generally regarded as a soft or “normative” power (Manners 2002). While the original goal of the European project in the 1950s was maintaining peace, its main instrument was economic cooperation. That said, already in 1952 the European Defense Community was set up, only to be vetoed by the French Assembly two years later. It is probably no coincidence that in the same period French Prime Minister Mendès-France started up a secret nuclear weapons program. Jean Monnet – one of the founding fathers of the European Community – was against the *force de frappe* because in his view it was incompatible with the fact that Germany was constitutionally not allowed to possess nuclear weapons.

Since then, European integration made progress on a step-by-step basis, including the establishment of the European Economic Community and Euratom in 1957, the latter aiming to create a European free zone for nuclear fuel, i.e. uranium<sup>4</sup>. Unsurprisingly, Europe was called “a civilian power”. Duchène (1972), then director of the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), predicted in the beginning of the 1970s: “Europe would be the first major area of the Old World where the age-old process of war and indirect violence could be translated into something more in tune with the twentieth-century citizen’s notion of civilized politics. In such a context, Western Europe could in a sense be the first of the world’s civilian centres of power” . . . ‘Europe will be a giant middle power’. Similar ideas were still heard in the 1990s, despite the announcement of a Common Foreign and Security Policy by the Treaty of Maastricht (1991). Christopher Hill (1996, my emphasis), for instance, stated: “Where [European Political Cooperation] is weak in leverage, it is strong on *values* . . . and European diplomacy has steadily become associated in the public mind with a distinct set of *principles*”. Earlier on, Hill (1990) had characterized the EU “a civilian power”. Later on, Manners (2002, 241, my emphasis) triggered a lively academic debate describing the EU as “a normative power”. He argued: “This combination of historical context, hybrid polity and legal constitution has, in the post-cold war period, accelerated a commitment to placing *universal norms and principles* at the centre of its relations with its member states and the world”. Also Sjørusen (2003, 38) claimed that “the EU has considerable impact on the international system”, in a liberalist sense.

That said, since the end of the Cold War, steps have been taken to give body to a Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), including in the field of defense. For instance, respectively Javier Solana, Catherine Ashton, Federica Mogherini and Joseph

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<sup>4</sup>Euratom would also control the civilian nuclear fuel cycle in the six member states.

Borell have taken up the position of High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, leading the European External Action Service. An EU Military Committee aided by a EU Military Staff – be it small-scale (in comparison with NATO) – has been set up in Brussels. The EU initiated both civilian and military interventions, be it low-risk, around the world. A European Defense Agency (EDA) and a European Defense Fund (EDF) have been created. It was also the E(U)-3 that negotiated a deal with Iran in 2003 and that was successful in coordinating the multi-lateral talks that led to the Joint Common Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015 (Sauer 2007, Sauer 2019a). The Lisbon Treaty (2009) included the notion of an integrated security policy and foresees the possibility of creating a common defense. The Treaty also included a mutual defense clause in the sense that if one member state is attacked, the other member states have the “obligation of aid and assistance by all the means in their power”(art.42.7). It also contains the possibility to integrate further with a limited group of member states in the framework of PESCO. The EU Global Strategy (2016) introduced the concept of “strategic autonomy”. But – as sceptics do not hesitate to repeat all the time – progress with respect to European defense integration is slow, especially in comparison with NATO. Even the Lisbon Treaty continues to regard NATO as the main security organization responsible for collective defense. In short, European defense today can be described as a glass half full or a glass half empty. Experts are divided between Atlanticists and Europeanists.

The assumption in this article is that despite the financial crisis in 2008–2009, the Brexit, and the Corona-crisis, the European integration will continue, including in the military sphere. The European Monetary Union (EMU) requires better political oversight, and phenomena like migration, global warming and pandemics can better be managed on a European scale than on a national scale. The trend towards more political integration (including foreign, security and defense policy) in all likelihood will continue, be it maybe at a slower rate than in the past. One of the side-effects of Brexit is progress made in the field of defense integration, as the UK was always skeptical.

In addition, there is an important factor that may further stimulate European defense integration: the shifting balance of power in the world with China on the rise and the US on the (relative) decline. As a result, there are more and more voices in the US that argue for isolationism or restraint, or at least offshore balancing (Posen 2014; Walt 2018). President Trump does not stand alone in his request to spend less money on US alliances, especially NATO. Many Americans believe that Europe should take up its responsibility to protect itself. Trump has stated on different occasions – both before and after his election – that NATO is obsolete (although – paradoxically – he has sent more US troops to Europe). While NATO is still regarded as the main security framework in Europe, there are more and more cracks in the wand (Sauer 2019b). In January 2019, there were even rumors that the US would leave NATO (Barnes & Cooper 2019). From a European point of view, the most logical alternative for the Atlantic Alliance is EU defense integration. If NATO stops to exist, which admittedly is still unlikely in the foreseeable future, the EU (or a core group within the EU) in all likelihood will take over.

## The EU and Nuclear Weapons

If there is one taboo or dilemma (Jasper and Portela 2010) left, it is whether the EU will end up being a nuclear armed entity. Politicians rarely talk about it. At first sight, it seems a non-issue. It is not.

There are two reasons why the issue of the Eurobomb is only sporadically touched upon: first of all, many observers of European security, especially in the US, the UK and Eastern Europe, do not believe in further defense integration in the EU, let alone a European army, and for that reason perceive a Euro-bomb as unrealistic. According to these voices, Europe continues to rely on NATO, including on the US nuclear umbrella (Rühle and Rühle 2017). Secondly, apart from France, there is a strong anti-nuclear tendency in Western Europe, certainly amongst the general public. Even if a European army is seen as a preferable goal by many Western European citizens, that does not mean that they are also in favor of Europeanizing the French nuclear weapons. That is also the reason why some predict that if the Eurobomb is realized, it will be done in secret (Fischer 2017a; Tertrais 2019, 61). The latter, however, may undermine the legitimacy of European defense integration and the European Union project as such.

That said, there have been two instances in the post-Cold War period when the debate about a possible Eurobomb got traction: first of all, after the French nuclear weapons tests in 1995 (Küntzel 1995; Dumoulin 1996; Croft 1996; Boniface 1996; Schmidt 1997; Sauer 1998; Tertrais 1999), and secondly, after Trump's election in 2016 (Kühn 2016; Fischer 2017a). Notice that both instances were unrelated to external threats, which supports our hypothesis that advocates regard the Eurobomb more as a political than a defense project.

### *Three Scenarios for the Future*

Although there is a range of scenarios imaginable, they all boil down to three: upgrading, read (further) Europeanizing the French nuclear weapons; delegitimizing and possibly eliminating them, and the status-quo.

#### *Status-quo*

After Brexit there will only be one EU member state (France) that possesses nuclear weapons, while the EU institutions themselves – because of internal divisions amongst the member states – keep silent on nuclear deterrence. Interestingly, neither the Ban Treaty nor the Eurobomb is much discussed at the yearly gatherings of the EU Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Consortium, a consortium of think-tanks in the EU.

France and the UK have negotiated bilateral agreements in 1992 and 2010 with respect to their nuclear arsenals, including a mutual defense clause. Both states “do not see situations arising in which the vital interests of either Party could be threatened without the vital interests of the other also being threatened” (Perot 2019, 2). Whether those arguments will stay alive after the Brexit remains to be seen.

As a result of the mutual defense clause of the Lisbon Treaty, the French nuclear weapons are also used to deter attacks against other EU member states, though implicitly. Already a long time ago, France made clear that the security interests of the other EU member states are regarded as similar to the security interests of France. For instance, French Defense Minister Chevènement stated in October 1989: “It is not necessary for

the radius of action of France's deterrence to be declaratively extended to the territory of the FRG to apply there de facto, according to the concept of 'vital interests'" (quoted by Palmer 1991, 54). President Sarkozy extended that notion to the EU in 2008: "As for Europe, it is a fact: by their very existence, French nuclear forces are a key element in Europe's security. Any aggressor who might consider challenging it must be mindful of this" (quoted in Jasper & Portela, 161). That idea was repeated in the more recent Franco-German Cooperation and Integration Treaty, signed in Aachen on 22 January 2019. That Treaty does not refer to NATO being central for collective defense, in contrast to the Lisbon Treaty, and contains a mutual defense clause with respect to Germany. But it uses the words "security interests" instead of "vital interests", which, according to Perot (2019) who is affiliated with the Brussels based Egmont Institute, "could be interpreted as a persisting timidity when it comes to explicit references to nuclear deterrence within the Franco-German relationship".

### *Upgrading*

Each scenario that goes further in the direction of Europeanizing the French nuclear weapons should be defined as upgrading. Advocates of this approach agree that nuclear weapons are powerful and legitimate. We can distinguish three sub-scenarios:

First, there is the idea of an *explicit* extended nuclear deterrent by France that is accepted by at least one other EU member state, which is not the case yet. It corresponds to the idea of a "dissuasion concertée" as floated by France after its nuclear tests in 1995. President Chirac claimed at that time that "this is about drawing all the consequences from a community of destiny, of a growing and intertwining of our vital interests" (quoted in Jasper & Portela, 158). The idea remained, however, rather vague. For Jacques Mellick, the junior minister of defense of France who initiated the concept, it meant "the establishment of a consultative mechanism about nuclear weapons use" (quoted by Tertrais 2019, 53). At that time, most politicians in Europe were against or did not speak out. Javier Solana, at that time Spanish foreign minister, compared it to "starting to build a house from the roof down" (Tertrais 1999, 60).

Nevertheless, a couple of German CDU-CSU politicians like Friedbert Pflüger (1995) and Wolfgang Schauble liked the idea at that time. Also in Belgium some high-level Christian-Democrats, like former Prime Ministers Mark Eyskens and Wilfried Martens, were in favor. Respectively in 2001 and 2015, President Chirac and President Hollande repeated the same concept. Once this idea would be formally accepted by one or more EU member states, one could speak of the Europeanization of the French nuclear weapons. A first step – as suggested by Tertrais (2019) who is affiliated to the Foundation of Strategic Research (FRS) in Paris – could be the creation of an informal grouping that "aims at fostering the emergence of a common European strategic culture", similar to the European Intervention Initiative that was also set up by France. That may include President Macron's recent idea of having a strategic dialogue amongst EU member states (or some of them) about the role of the French nuclear weapons in European security. In his speech in February 2020, Macron (2020) proposed to the other EU member states to participate in exercises of the French nuclear forces. Johann Wadephul, a German politician (CDU), was one of the only politicians who reacted positively to Macron's speech (Brzozowski, 2020).



Second, one step further is a dual-key system, like the US tactical nuclear bombs in Western Europe. French nuclear weapons could be stationed in other EU member states and the French government could hand over the bombs to local pilots in times of war (Tertrais 1999). Former French President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing (1995) favored that idea. After the election of Trump, Roderich Kiesewetter, foreign policy spokesman for the German conservative party and member of parliament for the CDU, also advocated this option, referring to the necessary “international diplomatic standing” of the EU. A 2017 report from the Bundestag stated that French nuclear weapons could be used in response to the activation of the EU Mutual Defense clause (Perot 2019, 4) and that it would be legal to co-finance the French nuclear weapons by Germany or by any other member state of the EU. The same applied to stationing French nuclear weapons on German soil (Fischer 2017b).

Third and lastly, a federal European state could inherit the French nuclear weapons. According to the advocates of such a “Eurobomb”, the latter would not be contrary to the NPT as that scenario was envisaged by Germany at the time that it acceded to the treaty in 1975 (Küntzel 1995, 146; Tertrais 2019, 51). Opponents do not agree and believe that it would violate the NPT (Müller 1996; Jasper and Portela 2010, 162; Kühn 2016; Herzog 2017).

As the last two scenarios are probably only options for the longer term, the debate in the short-term will focus on the first sub-scenario.

### ***Downgrading***

Europeanizing the French nuclear weapons can be regarded as legitimizing those weapons, while France is supposed to dismantle its arsenal according to article 6 of the NPT. A Eurobomb, in other words, will be perceived by the rest of the world as a non-proliferation liability. Jasper and Portela (2010, 162–63) state: “Instead of representing a step towards disarmament, the replacement of a US-dominated nuclear deterrent by a Franco-British equivalent would reinforce the growing perception among non-nuclear weapon states that nuclear weapon states are unwilling to abide by their commitments, further undermining the legitimacy of non-proliferation efforts”. That may have serious repercussions for the survival of the NPT that is already under fire (Pretorius and Sauer 2019; for a different view, see Scheinman 2019). The option of downgrading the French nuclear weapons corresponds to the view of those who regard nuclear weapons as illegitimate weapon systems.

Due to the Humanitarian Initiative and the resulting Ban Treaty, the case for an EU without nuclear weapons becomes in principle more attractive. If (although it remains rather unlikely that) the UK reviews the Trident decision in light of the Brexit costs, France will be the only nuclear armed state left in Western Europe. In that case, the pressure to create a European nuclear weapon free zone could gain weight (Müller 2016). Ideally, Russia should in principle be part of that zone. On the other hand, Russia will only dismantle its arsenal if the US and China eliminate their nuclear weapons. Advocates of a EU nuclear weapon free zone argue that the latter is a recipe for inertia, and that the EU should not wait for Russia. The EU can and should show to the rest of the world that nuclear weapons are not needed in order to be regarded as a regional power (just like Brazil, South Africa, etc), especially in a period when the Nuclear Ban will enter into force, making nuclear weapons illegal. In a tit-for-tat gesture, Russia could withdraw and ideally dismantle its nuclear weapons in the European part of Russia (on the condition that also the US tactical nuclear weapons would



be withdrawn to the US). Similar reciprocal gestures by President Bush,Sr and President Gorbachev – the so-called Presidential Nuclear Initiatives – led to large nuclear cuts right after the Cold War.

***Categorizing the Views about the Europeanization of the French Nuclear Weapons***

The views about the Europeanization of the French nuclear weapons can be divided along two dimensions: whether one is a believer or a skeptic of EU defense integration; and whether one believes that nuclear weapons are powerful and legitimate, or too powerful and illegitimate weapon systems (see [Table 1](#)).

Whether the EU (or part of it) will end up being another nuclear armed polity or a nuclear weapon free zone, or whether not much will change, depends on whether those who regard nuclear weapons as “powerful” and legitimate or those who perceive them as too destructive and illegitimate will prevail in the coming societal and political debate. At a certain point in time, the question needs to be tackled as the EU is moving in the direction of more defense integration.

Jacques Hymans ([2006a](#), [2006b](#), [2013](#)) and others rightly emphasize the important role of domestic actors in proliferation decisions. Domestic political actors decide whether nuclear weapons are needed for either deterrence and/or prestige reasons, or not. Which scenario will prevail in the EU therefore depends on the outcome of the societal and political debate inside the EU member states, more in particular those close to France like Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, and Italy, that are currently also the hosts of the US tactical nuclear weapons in Europe (together with Turkey).

That debate should be focused on the power and legitimacy that is ascribed to nuclear weapons. The outcome of the debate depends to a substantial extent on *how* this debate will be conducted. If one reaches the general public via a referendum, the most likely outcome is downgrading the role of nuclear weapons, as surveys show that a majority of the public opinion in Western Europe is in favor of the idea that their countries join the Nuclear Ban Treaty (ICAN [2018](#)). That is the reason why Bruno Tertrais ([2019](#)), an advocate of upgrading school, believes that this issue should not be a matter for the public at large. He states that “if Europeans grew more serious about a nuclear program, you would not necessarily see it”, implying that it would be done in a secret way, the reason being that the general public does not like nuclear weapons (quoted in Fischer [2017a](#)). The latter, as stated above, may undermine the legitimacy of European defense integration and the European Union project as such. It also remains to be seen if and to what

**Table 1.** Categorizing the views about the Europeanization of the French nuclear weapons.

	Nuclear weapons are powerful and legitimate	Nuclear weapons are too powerful and illegitimate
EU defense believers	UPGRADING States like France; politicians like J.Wadephul (CDU, Germany)	STATUS-QUO or DOWNGRADING
EU defense skeptics	STATUS-QUO States like the US, Poland, the Baltic States, Denmark, the Netherlands; NATO	DOWNGRADING States like Ireland and Austria; peace movement in Europe

extent the Ban Treaty will be able to resurrect a debate inside the European nuclear weapon states and their NATO allies in the coming years (Sauer and Reveraert 2018).

If in contrast the debate is held exclusively in the foreign policy establishments of the (especially large) member states, the odds are that the idea of the Europeanization of the French nuclear weapons will make further progress. But also Tertrais (2019) admits that “the coming to power of political forces with anti-nuclear sympathies in several European capitals would be an obstacle to any meaningful discussion about deterrence”. As a result, for the next two decades, even Tertrais discards this scenario. Only the entry into service of the Franco-German fifth generation fighter jet (in 2040 at the earliest) may operationalize the idea (Tertrais 2019, 49–50).

Lastly, this debate may also be influenced by two external nuclear-related factors whose impact is difficult to assess in advance. First, what will be the impact of the possible (but for the moment unlikely) withdrawal of the US tactical nuclear weapons from Europe (starting maybe in Turkey)? That may cut both ways. Advocates of a Eurobomb will argue that US tactical nuclear weapons should be replaced by a EU nuclear deterrent. Opponents of nuclear weapons will argue that the withdrawal should inspire the further delegitimization of nuclear weapons by creating a nuclear weapon free zone. Second, a further weakening of the nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament regime may similarly energize both camps: advocates of a Eurodeterrent will argue that the more states go nuclear, the more the EU should follow. Opponents will argue that the EU should set a positive example for the rest of the world with respect to nuclear disarmament.

## Conclusion

Nuclear weapons do not automatically yield power. They yield power also because people attribute power to them. That attribution is caused by the perception that nuclear weapons have deterrent capabilities, and that they are status-enhancing. Others regard nuclear weapons as illegitimate and inhumane weapon systems because they are too destructive to be used. They refer to the Nuclear Ban Treaty that declares nuclear weapons illegal. It remains to be seen what the potential effects of that Treaty on the policies of the nuclear armed states and their allies will be.

This article applied this debate to the European Union. The question was asked whether the EU will end up being another nuclear armed entity or whether it will become another regional nuclear weapon free zone, or whether not much would change. This article argues that the outcome of this debate will predominantly depend on which argument will win the societal and political debate: the argument of those who regard nuclear weapons as powerful and legitimate or those who regard nuclear weapons as too powerful and therefore illegitimate. But most importantly, there need at least to be a debate, of which this article tried to sketch the parameters.

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on Contributor

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