

Does Europe Have a Nuclear Deterrent?

Russia has been testing Europe's defense posture for decades. Beginning with a symbolic Arctic expedition in August 2007 [to plant a 1-meter-long titanium Russian flag under the North Pole](#), then invading the Georgian region of [South Ossetia](#) and [Abkhazia](#) in the Russo-Georgian War in August 2008, followed by [the take-over of Crimea in Ukraine in February-May 2014](#) and [the ongoing attacks on Ukrainian soil since 24 February 2022](#). Western intelligence warns that any ceasefire with Ukraine may serve merely [as a prelude to the next invasion on European soil](#), since [the Russian economy is now fully converted to a war economy](#).

Especially given [U.S. President Trump's reluctance to support Europe with any NATO Article 5 triggering event](#), Russia may well see an opportunity to further challenge European borders.

The combination of an aggressive Russia and a reluctant U.S. begs the question: can Europe assert itself on its own? Can the continent successfully deter potential aggressors? Since Europe lacks a pan-European army, what is the continent's ultimate threat? A short list of countries, including the U.S. and Russia, have a final resort in the form of nuclear weapons.

On paper, Europe hosts an estimated 765 nuclear warheads across 10 military bases in 7 countries. The catch is who owns and thus wields the power to deploy these arms. Only France and the United Kingdom possess their own nuclear arsenal; the rest rely on U.S.-owned and controlled warheads (see [Figure 1](#) and [Figure 2](#)).

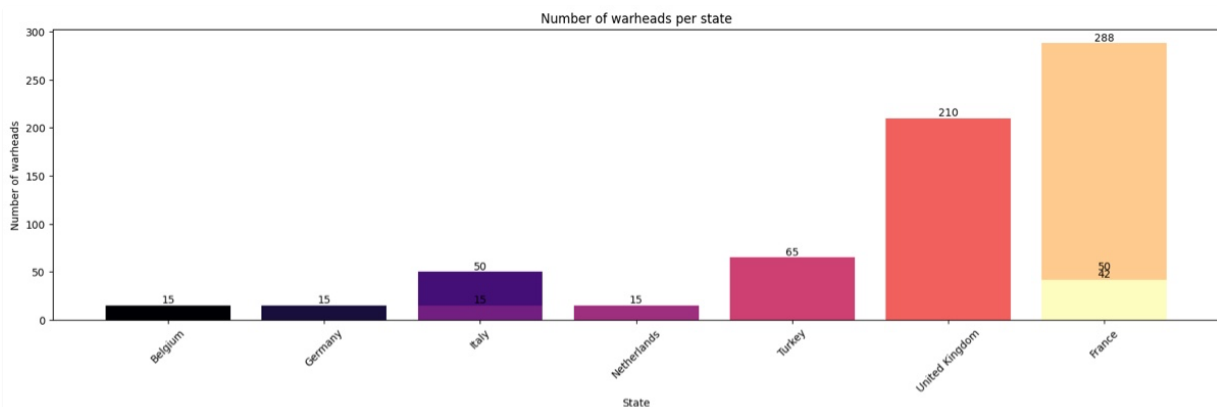


Figure 1. The number of nuclear warheads in Europe. The United Kingdom and France own their own arsenal, the rest of the countries host U.S.-owned warheads.

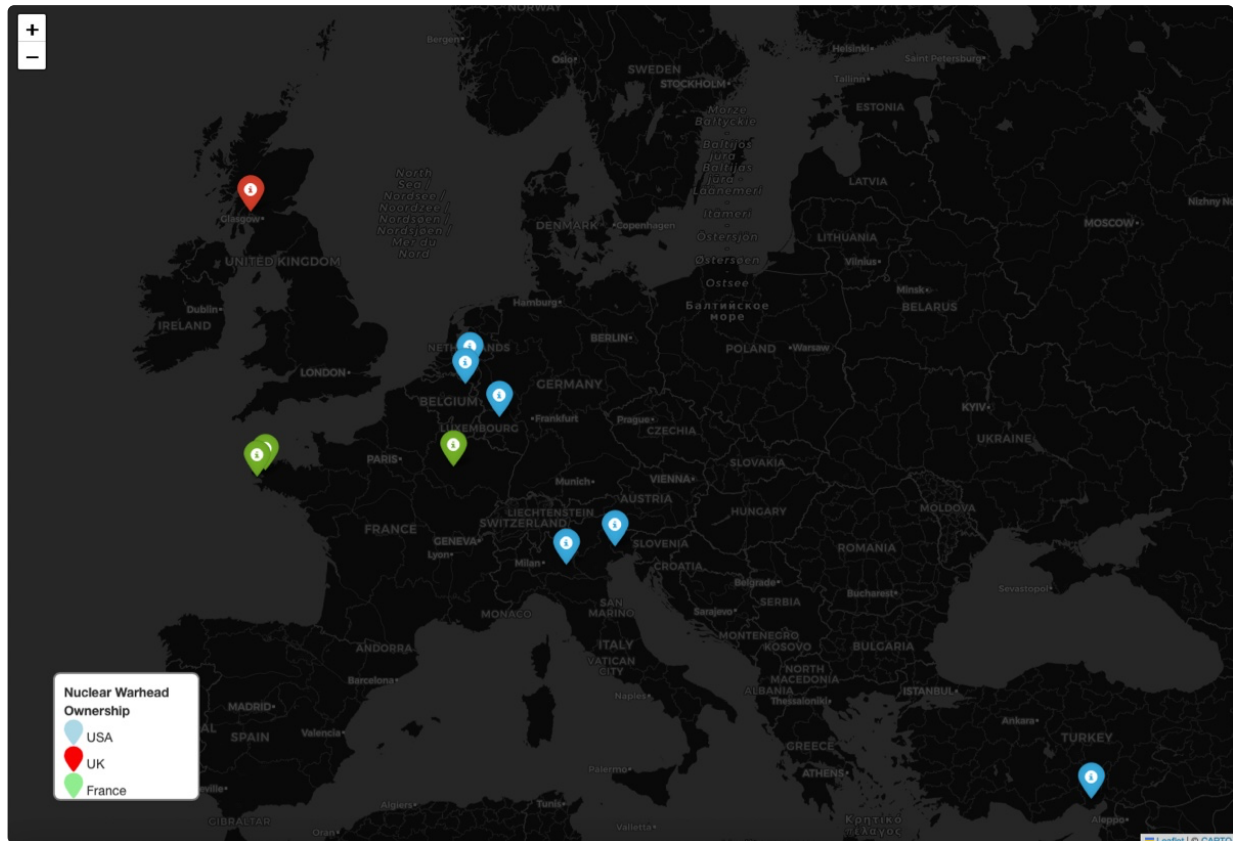


Figure 2. The distribution of nuclear warheads across the European continent.

As shown in [Figure 3](#), the U.S. nuclear stockpile in Europe totals 175 units of air-to-ground B61-12 warheads. France maintains around 380 warheads: 92 TNA units for air-to-ground delivery and 288 TN 75 and TNO warheads for sea-to-ground delivery. Meanwhile the United Kingdom own a stockpile of 210 sea-to-ground Holbrook warheads.

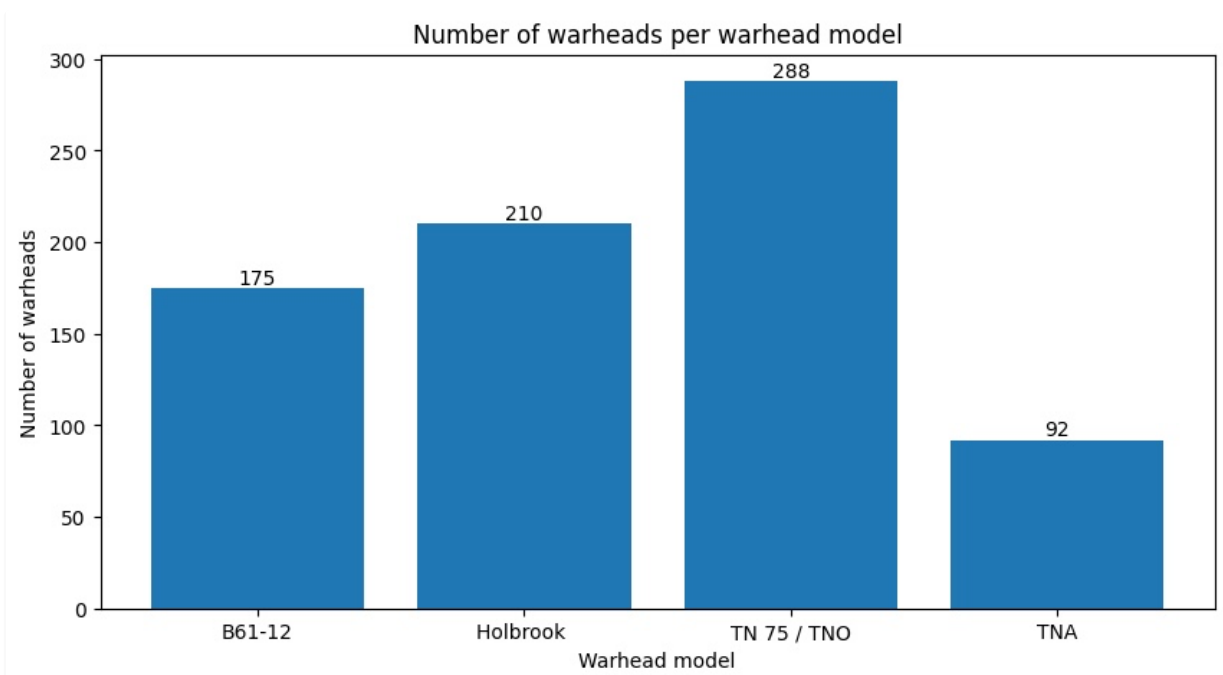


Figure 3. The number of nuclear warheads per warhead model.

This breaks down to roughly 50% for France, 27% for the United Kingdom and 23% for the U.S. This means that Europe does in theory have a nuclear capacity, for which it does not need to rely on the U.S.' willingness to deploy their weapons on the continent's behalf. However, the use of French or British nuclear warheads remains at the discretion of either country's head of state. In practice, there is no certainty that either country would use their arsenal in a collective defense scenario akin to NATO Article 5.

[French president Macron opened the debate](#) in this direction, and highlighted Europe's need to wean itself off the increasingly shaky U.S. military guarantees. [British Prime Minister Starmer reiterated](#) that the United Kingdom's nuclear arsenal would "ensure vital protection for the UK and (the) NATO allies in the years ahead." These statements, while encouraging, fall short of the ironclad guarantees required to reassure the rest of Europe.

So does Europe have a nuclear deterrent? My take: yes... kind of. If the need for launching a nuclear warhead from Europe would arise, heaven forbid, and that all leaders in Europe agree, I see 3 levels of involvement. First check whether the U.S. through NATO is willing to use their stockpile. If the U.S. are found blinking, then the United Kingdom or France, whoever is willing to discuss it first. If that fails, the final recourse would lie with the remaining nuclear power; either France or the United Kingdom, whoever hasn't blinked. And it bears repeating, with the added complication of requiring consensus among over 30 European leaders, a feat perhaps more elusive than any military manoeuvre.

Sources:

Articles as linked to in the text.

Jupyter Notebook: https://github.com/MrGeegor/Professional_Portfolio/blob/main/EUNuclearDeterrent/Nuclear_Warheads_in_Europe.ipynb