

Does Europe Have a Nuclear Deterrent?

Russia has been testing Europe's readiness to defend its borders for the past few decades. Starting with an Arctic expedition [to plant a 1 meter long titanium Russian flag under the North Pole](#) in August 2007, 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 officials expect any ceasefire with Ukraine to serve [as preparation for the next invasion on European territory](#), since [the Russian economy is now fully converted to a war economy](#).

Especially given [US president Trump reluctance to support Europe with any NATO Article 5 triggering event](#), Russia may well see an opportunity to challenge European borders more.

The combination of an aggressive Russia and a reluctant US begs the question: how well can Europe assert itself? Can the continent successfully deter potential aggressors? Since Europe does not have an army of its own, what is Europe's ultimate move? Select countries, including the US and Russia have a final resort in the form of nuclear weapons.

Europe does have a nuclear stockpile with a total of about 765 nuclear warheads stored in 10 military bases across 7 countries. The catch is who owns and thus wields the power to deploy these arms. With France and the United Kingdom, Europe counts 2 nuclear states of its own and hosts US-owned nuclear warheads across the continent (see [Figure 1](#) and [Figure 2](#)).

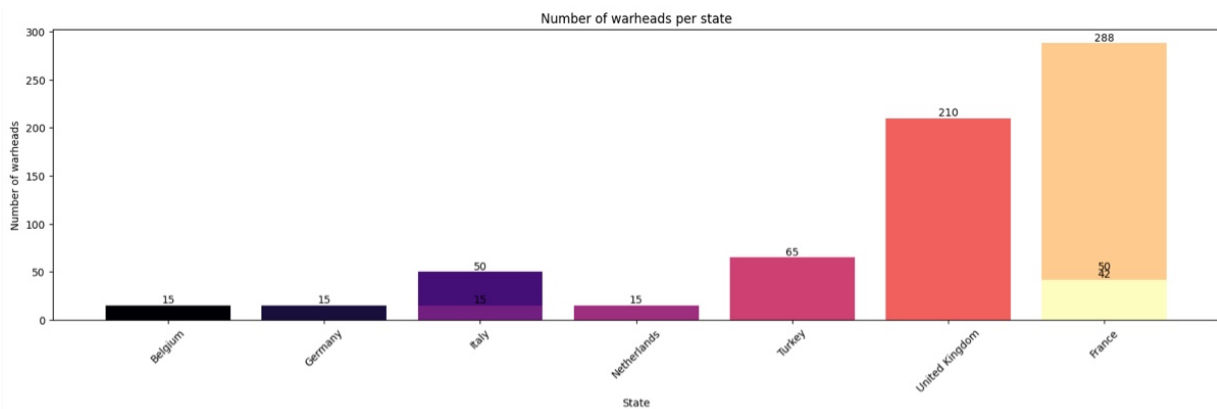


Figure 1. The number of nuclear warheads in Europe. The United Kingdom and France own their own arsenal, the rest of the countries host US-owned warheads.

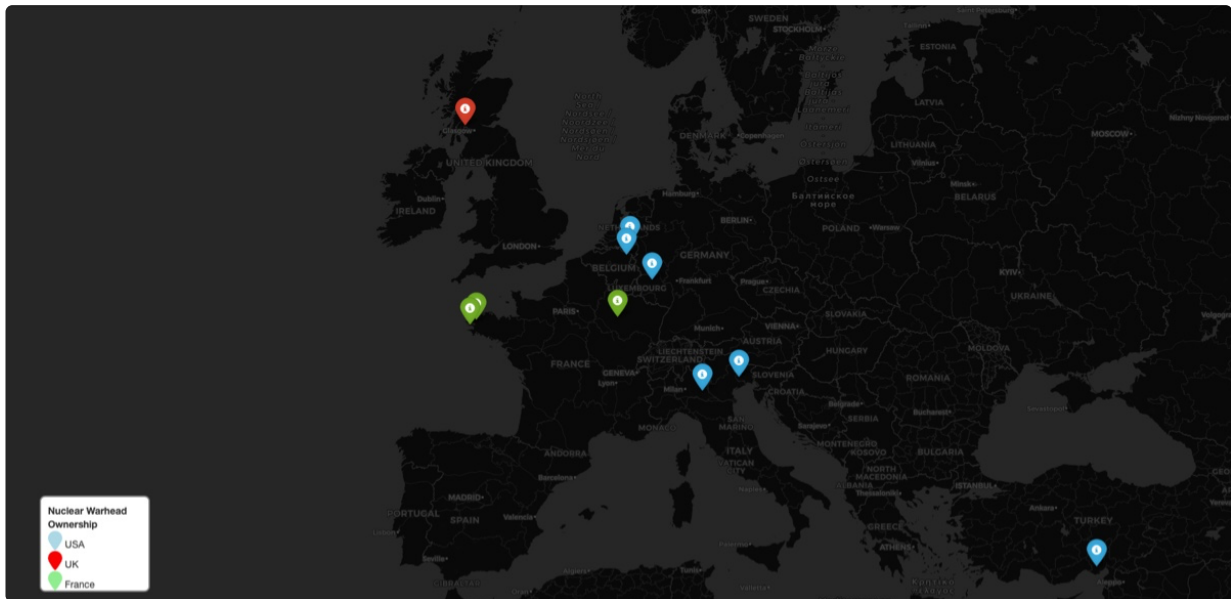


Figure 2. The distribution of nuclear warheads across the European continent.

As shown in [Figure 3](#), the combined US nuclear stockpile in Europe contains 175 air-to-ground B61-12 warhead units. France maintains around 380 warheads, among which 92 TNA warheads 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.

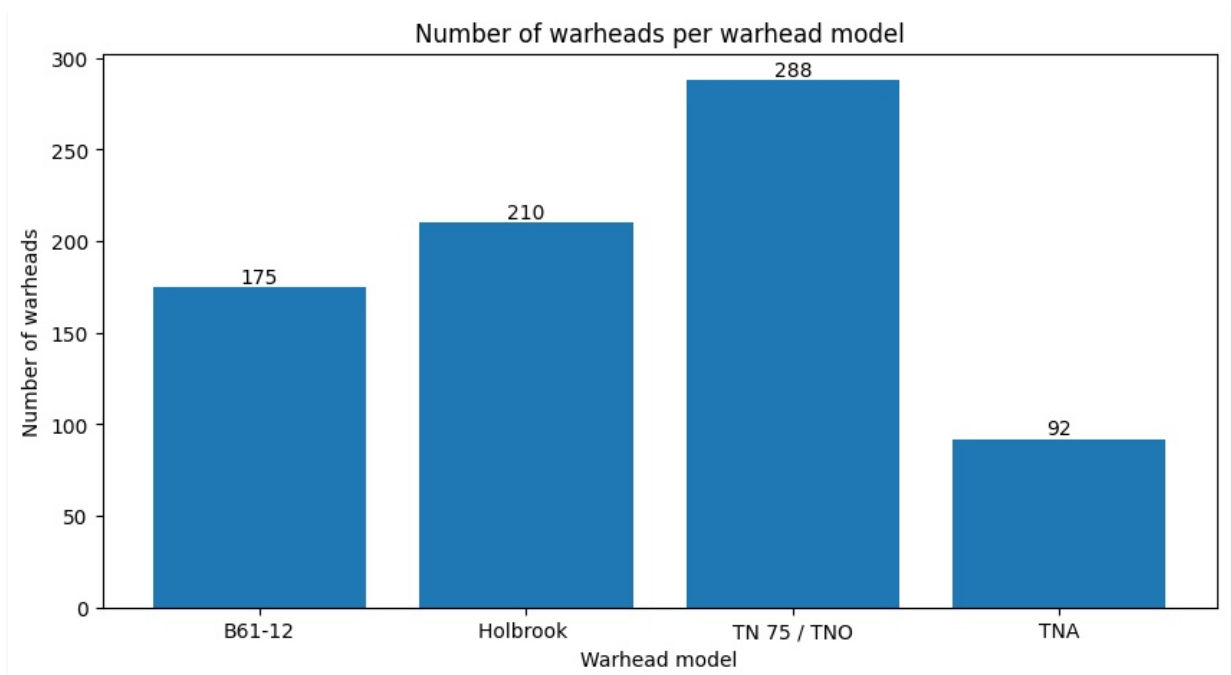


Figure 3. The number of nuclear warheads per warhead model.

Percentage-wise this puts the French nuclear warhead presence at 49.67%, the United Kingdom at 27.45% and the US at 22.88%. This means that Europe does in theory have a nuclear capacity, for which it does not need to rely on the US' willingness to deploy their weapons on the continent's behalf. However, the use of French or British nuclear warheads remains at their discretion. In practice, there is no guarantee that either country would use their weapons in NATO-like fashion, i.e. to extend a protective umbrella to the rest of Europe. [French president Macron opened the debate](#) in this direction, and highlighted Europe's need to wean itself off the increasingly shaky US 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." Great promises and initiatives, but not yet ironclad guarantees to keep the rest of Europe safe.

Where does all of this leave Europe? Does Europe have a nuclear deterrent? My thoughts here: Yes, Europe does have a nuclear deterrent... 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 US through NATO is willing to use their stockpile. If the US are found blinking, then the United Kingdom or France, whoever is willing to discuss it first. Further blinking of that party would lead to the last-resort country: the United Kingdom or France, whichever country did not blink first. And of course, it bears repeating, all 30+ leaders in Europe agree, which may prove to be the trickiest part of the decisioning.

Sources:

Articles as linked to in the text.

Jupyter Notebook: https://colab.research.google.com/drive/1h0kII_7KtNm-SxGyDCBmT4jx4iujO7Km?usp=sharing