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How France greenwashes nuclear weapons

France plans to modernise its nuclear power – allegedly to insure cheaper and greener electricity. Yet behind it nestles a nuclear weapons agenda

At the turn of the year, France assumed the presidency of the Council of the European Union. And last week, the EU defence ministers met informally to talk about the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). Among other issues, they discussed nuclear security and nuclear deterrence strategies.

In recent years, the French president has been a strong advocate of nuclear power. Historically, France's independent development of nuclear technology for atomic weapons has been an important source of national pride. Since the 1990s, however, nuclear power has been declining as a consequence of the Chernobyl disaster. Annual reports by Mycle Schneider, an international consultant on energy and nuclear policy, show that this is a part of a global trend. Nevertheless, France continues to be a tireless advocate of this technology.

Nuclear answers for green energy and weapons

On 1 January 2022, a draft regulation of the European Commission classified the investment in nuclear energy and natural gas as sustainable. This concerns billions of euros in financial support in the so-called EU Taxonomy. Emmanuel Macron was keen to acquire a 'Green Label' for nuclear energy. France's real interests concerning nuclear energy emerged clearly in a speech Macron delivered on a visit to Framatome's Le Creusot facility in 2020: 'Without civilian nuclear energy there is no military use of this technology – and without military use there is no civilian nuclear energy'. In a nutshell, this means that without a cutting-edge nuclear industry France cannot continue to expand and modernise its nuclear weapons arsenal. This remains true for all nuclear weapons states.

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At present, these states are upgrading their arsenals. Russia and the United States are procuring new delivery systems – such as hypersonic missiles – that will be able to deliver their nuclear bombs much more quickly and accurately, leaving the enemy with no time to defend themselves. Thus, a new nuclear arms race has begun.

The US think tank Atlantic Council is quite open about how crucial it regards civilian use of nuclear power to be for national security policy: the civilian US nuclear industry is a U.S. strategic asset of vital importance for US national security. Similar formulations can be found in the speeches of other presidents of nuclear weapons states. Its civilian nuclear complex costs the United States at least USD 42.4bn a year. The *International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons* (ICAN) claims that all nuclear weapons states together invest over USD 100bn a year in their nuclear weapons arsenals.

France, too, wants to join in the ongoing technological development in other nuclear weapons states for quite some time. President Macron has announced investment of one billion euros in research and construction of small modular reactors (SMRs). SMRs are small nuclear reactors that are to be used primarily for submarine propulsion and thus for military purposes in distant theatres of war. The new Hunter class submarines underline France's great-power ambitions. This needs to be understood against the background of the collapsed submarine deal with Australia. Last year Australia announced that it was cancelling its contract to buy French diesel submarines in favour of US and UK nuclear technology.

Flexible submarine-based nuclear weapons systems have major strategic importance for all nuclear weapons states. They have the capability of going for up to three months without surfacing. They can cover great distances at high speeds undetected and surface almost wherever they want around the globe. They are capable of launching up to 20 missiles, each with a dozen individual guided warheads. All this plays a key role in the nuclear weapons doctrine of the five 'official' nuclear weapons states, the United States, the United Kingdom, Russia, France, and China. At the same time, the possession of this technology underpins these countries' great-power status. France, like the other nuclear weapons states, is keen to consolidate its status.

Exposing the French agenda

The first meeting of EU defence ministers under the French Council Presidency was held on 12–13 January 2022 in Brest. This is where France's sea-based nuclear weapons are stationed, making this a clear demonstration of its military power. As early as his 2020 speech in Le Creusot, the French President confirmed his country's military ambitions: 'the nuclear industry will remain the cornerstone of our strategic autonomy. It affects every aspect of deterrence, powering our nuclear submarines, submarines for launching ballistic missiles, and powering our nuclear aircraft carriers.'

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Behind the planned modernisation of French nuclear power, allegedly to ensure cheaper electricity, nestles the agenda of its nuclear weapons programme. For years now, the state has imposed the exorbitant costs of its civilian-military nuclear industry on the French public. The costs of building the pressurised water reactor in Flamanville, for example, ran to €19.4bn. Ultimately, electricity customers and investors subsidise military applications with 'climate-saving nuclear power'.

Nuclear power and nuclear sharing are controversial in the European Union. Austria and Luxembourg have sharply criticised the EU Taxonomy. At the same time, there has been a multilateral UN treaty banning weapons of mass destruction since the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons of 22 January 2021.

In any case, as France takes over the EU Council Presidency it is now perfectly placed to promote the civilian-military use of nuclear energy and a European security and defence strategy based on the doctrine of nuclear deterrence.



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