



NUCLEAR POSTURE AND TRANSATLANTIC COUNTER-HEGEMONY:

*A NEOREALIST CASE ANALYSIS OF THE ANGLO-FRENCH NUCLEAR
POSTURES AND US COUNTER-HEGEMONY OVER EUROPE*

Author
Hugo Contreras Velasco
0009-0001-5665-309X



Abstract

In light of the most recent debates during the Trump administration, the study seeks to answer why the US is combining a reduction in its presence in Europe with a strengthening of NATO under its tutelage. To reconcile this apparent contradiction, it is postulated that the degree of nuclear autonomy from Washington would be a key factor in explaining this phenomenon, given that total autonomy would also represent nuclear autonomy. In neorealist terms, European nuclear autonomy would represent a loss of US counter-hegemony in Europe.

To this end, a case study of the different reactions of the US towards the nuclearisation of the United Kingdom (partial support) and France (diplomatic opposition) is carried out. This process corresponded with a reorientation of US interests and subsequent attempt at military withdrawal from Europe, conditions very similar to those currently prevailing. Consequently, two hypotheses are formulated: the greater the degree of European nuclear autonomy, the greater the erosion of US counter-hegemony; the greater the erosion of counter-hegemony, the more hostile Washington's reaction will be. Hence, two variables are formulated –nuclear dependency (ND) and counter-balancing effect (CBE)– which allow the formulation of the following observable expectations (OE):

- OE-FR-1: 1958 French memorandum demanding a tripartite veto or threatening to leave NATO (CBE \geq 4).
- OE -FR-2: Withdrawal from NATO's integrated military structure (1966) as an indicator of CBE = 5 and ND = 1.
- OE -UK-1: Accession to MC-48 and renunciation of the European veto (ND \geq 4, CBE \leq 2).
- OE-UK-2: Eisenhower–Macmillan Agreement (1958): nuclear cooperation + non-transfer clause (ND \geq 4).

From this explanation, it can be concluded that opposition to the French nuclear programme was due to its clear autonomy and Paris's subsequent revisionist behaviour, in contrast to London's drift towards subordination. Henceforth, it is concluded that the US maintains incentives for promoting greater conventional autonomy but never greater nuclear autonomy in Europe. These results contribute to understanding the structural limits of US transatlantic (counter-)hegemony in contexts of strategic autonomy.

► **Keywords:** Nuclear dependency or autonomy, counter-balancing effect, US counter-hegemony, European security, nuclear weapons, revisionism

Postura Nuclear y Contrahegemonía Transatlántica: Un análisis de caso neorrealista sobre las posturas nucleares anglo-francesas y la contrahegemonía estadounidense sobre Europa

Resumen

A colación de los más recientes debates durante la administración Trump, el artículo busca responder por qué los EE. UU. combinan una reducción de su presencia en Europa con un fortalecimiento de la OTAN bajo su tutela. Para conciliar esta aparente contradicción, se propone que el grado de dependencia nuclear con respecto a Washington sería un factor clave para explicar este fenómeno puesto que una autonomía total representaría una autonomía nuclear al mismo tiempo. Bajo una óptica neorrealista, una autonomía nuclear europea es lesiva para la contrahegemonía transatlántica de Washington.

Para ello, se realiza un análisis de caso de las distintas reacciones de los EE. UU. hacia la nuclearización del Reino Unido (apoyo parcial) y de Francia (oposición diplomática). Este proceso correspondió a una reorientación de los intereses de los EE. UU. y subsecuente tentativa de retirada militar de Europa, condiciones muy similares a las actuales. En consecuencia, se formulan dos hipótesis: mientras mayor sea el grado de autonomía nuclear europea, mayor será la erosión de la contrahegemonía estadounidense; a mayor erosión de contrahegemonía, más hostil será la reacción de Washington. En consecuencia, se formulan dos variables –dependencia nuclear (ND) y efecto de contrabalanceo (CBE)– que permiten desarrollar las siguientes expectativas observables (EO):

- EO-FR-1: Memorandum francés de 1960 exigiendo veto tripartito o amenaza de salida de la OTAN (CBE \geq 4).
- EO-FR-2: Retiro de la estructura militar integrada de la OTAN (1966) como indicador de CBE = 5 y ND = 1.
- EO-UK-1: Adhesión a MC-48 y renuncia al veto europeo (ND \geq 4, CBE \leq 2).
- EO-UK-2: Acuerdo Eisenhower–Macmillan (1958): cooperación nuclear + cláusula de no transferencia (ND \geq 4).

A partir de esta explicación, se concluye que la oposición al programa nuclear francés se dio por su clara autonomía y el subsecuente comportamiento revisionista de París, caso contrario a la deriva de subordinación de Londres. Desde estos hallazgos, se identifica que los EE. UU. mantienen incentivos para la promoción de una mayor autonomía convencional pero nunca de una mayor autonomía nuclear en Europa. Estos resultados contribuyen a comprender los límites estructurales de la (contra-)hegemonía transatlántica estadounidense en contextos de autonomía estratégica.

► **Keywords:** Dependencia o autonomía nuclear, efecto de contrabalanceo, contrahegemonía estadounidense, seguridad europea, armas nucleares, revisionismo



1. Introduction

Since the beginning of the second (and during the first) Trump administration, Washington has been reorienting its main interests towards the Western Hemisphere and the Pacific in order to prevent the emergence of a peer competitor (Matlé, 2021, p. 176) – though the strategic “pivot to Asia” began during the Obama administration (Cruz de Castro, 2013, p. 345). Therefore, the US is showing a declining interest in Europe and has instead begun promoting a more autonomous security development there. This is mainly shown through Washington’s demands to increase defence spending (up to 5% of the GDP) (Dimitrova, 2020, pp. 3–4). This is often justified by claiming that US presence in Europe only generates costs without clear gains (Mearsheimer, 1998, p. 225).

This debate reopens the discussions on the persistence of hegemonic power in a post-unipolar international order. Especially for rational-actor theoretical frameworks, explaining this type of phenomena becomes increasingly important. With the increase in further great power politics competition, achieving hegemony beyond the geographically near areas becomes increasingly counterintuitive.

Nevertheless, this prima facie evident direction proved many times to be rather inconsistent. For example, during the first Trump administration, French president Emmanuel Macron’s plea for total security autonomy in Europe by arguing NATO was brain dead was categorically rejected by former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. Back then, Washington emphasized strengthening NATO and US presence in Europe in the National Security Strategy (NSS) (Dimitrova, 2020, pp. 3–4). During the current administration, contrary to some expectations, the US did not abandon but increased its commitment to supporting Ukraine (see Kundnani, 2025). Nonetheless, the administration is also allegedly planning to only focus on regional dynamics in the coming version of the National Security Strategy (NSS)³⁸ (see McLeary & Lippman, 2025).

This set of events seems to be contradictory: on the one hand, the US demands further European capacity building in order to achieve greater autonomy and, on the other, rejects creating frameworks to reach said autonomy. Usually, the President. Trump’s erratic personality is considered the main explanatory variable for this inconsistency (Knutsen, 2022, p. 169). However, this kind of explanation offers rather little structural traceability and can fall into a “psychologicistic error” as institutions within the framework of nation-states reduce individuals’ room for manoeuvre (see Waltz, 2001). For this reason, neorealist theory can offer an alternative explanation.

This theoretical paradigm is preferred, since institutionalist approaches consider the persistence of alliance frameworks as a result of negotiations and adaptations within institutional frameworks (Dijkstra et al., 2024, pp. 185–186; Keohane, 2005, p. 53) or by the self-imposition of institutional constraints on hegemonic powers (Ikenberry, 2019, p. 29; Schweller, 2001, p. 166) which regarding the rising transatlantic discord are not utterly relevant. Poststructuralist approaches situate the origins of transatlantic divisions in an increasing rift of values between Europe and the US and tend to predict that NATO is doomed to fall apart or in irrelevance (see van Ham, 2001), which contravenes the prima facie contradictory US approaches towards the alliance.

According to neorealist main postulates, these developments can possibly be a consequence of the end of the unipolar moment. As the U.S. is losing its capacity to exercise world hegemony, classical US Grand Strategy is returning (Mearsheimer, 2019, p. 42). Until 1991, this was characterized by containing or preventing a peer competitor (Mearsheimer, 1998, p. 225; 2001, p. 41; Mearsheimer & Walt, 2016, p. 73; Walt, 2006, p. 45). Therefore, preventing the existence of a European one remains an important priority for Washington (as part of a hegemonic foreign policy). Hence, the U.S. cannot allow Europe to become too powerful.

Nuclear weapons may constitute a decisive factor. Nuclear weaponry has the capacity to infringe enormous damage on (even destroy) other states in short periods of time. Hence, conventional weaponry cannot deter it. Therefore, it can be argued that atomic weapons could deactivate great power competition among nuclear armed states (Mearsheimer, 2001, pp. 128–129). For this reason, it provides a sufficient factor to counterbalance an existing great power from a position of weakness. This argument is further deepened if the US nuclear umbrella as the main basis of NATO structure is taken into account (Mearsheimer, 1990, p. 7; Tertrais, 2019, p. 48). A European total security autonomy vis-à-vis the U.S. in the nuclear era means thus a complete nuclear autonomy (understood as the complete control by a state over the procurement of nuclear arsenals), too (Dimitrova, 2020, p. 4).

A neorealist explanation of the intuitively contradictory behaviour of the US under President Trump is that Washington is willing to make Europe conventionally more autonomous in order to reduce costs but not to allow a European nuclear autonomy (in the military sense). As this process is currently under development, there is not enough evidence to illustrate and predict all its outcomes from this perspective. However, in order to produce parsimonious but consistent predictions, examining past situations under similar conditions can be a very effective strategy (see Mearsheimer, 1990). During the 1950s and 1960s Washington had, broadly speaking, intentions to withdraw from Europe (Bowie & Immerman, 1998, p. 191; Taliaferro, 2019, p. 11). Back then, the US pushed for more European autonomy—this was possible due to the absence of rival nuclear powers in the Old Continent besides the Soviet Union until the late 1960s (Jameson, 2013, p. 49; Taliaferro, 2019, p. 11). Nevertheless, as nuclear powers (Britain and France) began to form there, Washington reacted diametrically differently to their developments: whereas London was supported (with reserves), Paris was (diplomatically) opposed. This situation represents a similarly “inconsistent” set of events.

A significant difference between the processes in Britain and France is the nuclear posture they adopted. According to Narang (2014, pp.

38 By the moment of publication of this article, the NSS was already released.

3–4), while London primed nuclear interdependence or dependency, Paris opted for nuclear autonomy. By analysing and explaining the different US reactions to both nuclear programmes a theoretical framework can be formulated to forecast future developments in this aspect of Transatlantic relations. Hence, this paper deals with the question: To what extent can Washington's different reactions to the French and British nuclear weapons programmes be explained by their different nuclear postures?

The novelty of this argument lies in differentiating conventional from nuclear autonomy as a way to explain transatlantic security relations and building up predictions from it. Other works on the topic often deal with the individual state's nuclear doctrines (see Clark, 1994; Kohl, 2015; Melissen, 1994) or do not examine the effects of nuclear posture on US (counter-)hegemony (see Dimitrova, 2020; Kundnani, 2025; Maddock, 1998).

To answer the research question, this paper is structured as follows: In Section 2, a theoretical framework will be presented as a basis for this case study. In Section 3 the used method (case selection, analysis type) will also be presented and justified. Section 4 will look deeper into US interests to explain Washington's different reactions. Sections 5 and 6 will deal with the individual cases of Britain and France regarding their nuclear postures and their implications. Finally, in Section 7, the research question will be answered after a brief summary of results, which will be used to formulate a brief prognosis of future transatlantic developments. Accordingly, this article proves the effects of nuclear autonomy in the erosion of the transatlantic counter-hegemonic order both in the past and in the potential future.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Power and hegemony in the international system

According to neorealist theory, the international system is an anarchy (due to the nonexistence of effective superior instances with a monopoly on violence). Its units are states and they thus operate under a self-help logic (Waltz, 1979, pp. 103–105). Under this constellation, only the accumulation of power can offer comprehensive guarantees for survival. However, power is a relative variable: a state can only be safe as long as it is stronger than other states (Mearsheimer, 2001, pp. 31–33).

Building on this premise, states have systemic incentives to balance excessive power concentration. Balance of power can either be intended to prevent the emergence of a hegemon (balancing) (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 49) or to revise the relationship towards an existing one (counter-balancing) (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2008, p. 25). This balancing process can be internal (increase military or economic power) or external (forming alliances or coalitions with other states) (Waltz, 1979, p. 168).

When states accumulate enough power to define the international rules of interaction, they become hegemons (Gilpin, 1981, pp. 29–30). According to offensive neorealist theory, this is the most secure situation for every state and drives hegemonic powers to perpetuate their position, since weaker secondary states are not able to confront them effectively (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 33).

This situation can be stabilized by forming international institutions which regulate interstate behaviour (Ikenberry, 2019, p. 45; Keohane, 2005, p. 46). The set of regulating institutions is called an order (Ikenberry, 2019, p. 23). Hence hegemony can be solidified in orders (Gilpin, 1981, pp. 28–29), which can include all great powers of the system (international order) or be bound to a specific region (bounded order) (Mearsheimer, 2019, p. 9). However, this situation can potentially always be revised and subverted through a new distribution of power (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2008, pp. 6–7).

Scholars like John Mearsheimer (2001) claim that since industrialization, power projection across oceans tends to be more difficult than across land. Therefore, they consider large masses of water to be a constraining factor for great power politics. Hence, the logical interest and goal of a great power is to achieve regional hegemony (turn one's own region into a sphere of influence). However, the International Anarchy does not guarantee that great powers in other regions will remain abstinent. They may attempt to destabilise the sphere of influence by supporting revisionist efforts or rivalling great powers. Therefore, the goal of every perfect regional hegemon is to prevent the emergence of other perfect regional hegemons (peer competitors).

The most rational Grand Strategy to prevent the emergence of peer competitors in the long run is to exercise hegemony in a limited and indirect manner in other regions by keeping a limited (military) presence there (Selective Engagement) (Mearsheimer, 2011, p. 18). Due to spatial distances, a hegemonic relationship in the classical sense is not possible. However, this selective and limited presence constitutes a case of counter-hegemony (pacifying presence to preventively deactivate the conditions for peer competitors) (Mearsheimer, 1998, p. 226). Fully retiring from a Selective Engagement policy means a factual return of anarchic power dynamics and therefore to the potential for the emergence of a peer competitor (Mearsheimer, 1990, pp. 7–8). However, Selective Engagement takes away vital resources from the counter-hegemon without concrete immediate gains. This also distracts it from more urgent interests (e.g., fighting a more powerful rival in another region) (Mearsheimer & Walt, 2016, p. 74). How can these two dictums of neorealism (prevention of the emergence of peer competitors, prevention of unnecessary costs at the expense of the own state's main interests) be reconciled? One possible answer is nuclear weapons. Offensive Neorealist theory dictates that accumulating power until reaching hegemony guarantees state survival. However, the introduction of nuclear weapons since 1945 altered this system. By being able to inflict enormous more damage than any conventional means, nuclear weapons made it possible to avoid conflict altogether. Therefore, they both allow states to perpetuate hegemony or to effectively contest hegemonic relationships from the weaker side.



2.2. The factor of nuclear weapons

A central component of modern-day hegemony is achieving nuclear superiority (monopoly on nuclear weapons) and hence practically eliminating or deterring the combat capacities of every other state depending on conventional forces (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 129). However, this is not given since 1949, when the former USSR acquired a nuclear arsenal of its own and broke up the US atomic monopoly (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 130). The development of nuclear powers since then allows nuclear armed states to exercise enormous damage on each other which usually exceeds the gains of possible victories (Mearsheimer, 1990, pp. 19–20). Thus, nuclear powers fail to fulfil their primordial survival goal in an open conflict and war becomes irrational (Waltz, 1988, p. 625).

Massive reduction of incentives for war and practical deactivation of conventional arsenals makes nuclear weapons a stabilizing factor in world politics under the assumption that states are rational unitary actors (especially when they are kept in the hands of a few states) (Mearsheimer, 1990, pp. 32–33). After all, as Barry Buzan (1991, p. 177) stated, “even the most rabid revisionist state cannot pursue its larger objectives if it cannot secure its home base”. If a single state monopolizes nuclear weaponry, serious counter-balancing becomes almost impossible (Mearsheimer, 2001, pp. 128–130).

Therefore, in a situation of counter-hegemony, the leading great power can guarantee nuclear superiority in another region and prevent the emergence of a peer competitor. In that scenario, nuclear deployment overseas would fulfil the neutralizing character of Selective Engagement. Since atomic arsenals are much cheaper to maintain than conventional forces (Divine, 1981, p. 36; G. H. Snyder, 1962, p. 470), this configuration resolves the apparent contradiction between maintaining a Selective Engagement Grand Strategy and not generating unnecessary costs at the expense of urgent national interests.

This approach can only be consistent by preventing nuclear proliferation. The more nuclear-armed states there are, the more eroded is nuclear superiority (both within a global and regional framework) (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 130). Achieving a nuclear deterrent hence becomes a safeguard for secondary states to cope and overcome power disparity (Ruble, 2010, p. 7), as well as effectively to prevent power projection by the counter-hegemon (Kroenig, 2014, p. 5). Nuclear proliferation is thus detrimental to Selective Engagement (Mearsheimer, 1990, p. 7). Why then do (counter-)hegemons not always react equally to the acquisition of nuclear weaponry by other states? For this, regarding the nuclear posture of a state is essential. A nuclear posture is a broader and more general nuclear strategy that also includes the political instrumentalization of atomic weaponry in peacetime, which defines its rules for use, responsibilities on its control, and the way it is incorporated into military structure. Posture is differentiated from strategy, as the latter refers to the usage of nuclear weapons in actual warfare (Narang, 2014, p. 4). For example, if the (counter-)hegemon controls the nuclear arsenal of another state, there are not any incentives to diametrically oppose its existence.

For the general idea of this work, nuclear posture could be examined regarding who is intended to take the decisions over the nuclear arsenals. This could lead to two ideal extremes: states can opt for an integrative posture, which seeks to conjointly manage nuclear weaponry with two or more other states (e.g., through alliances). Integrative postures hence prioritize (inter)dependency. States can opt for an autonomous posture, too, which means managing the use of atomic weaponry fully independently. Therefore, the latter is expected to be rejected by the counter-hegemon (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 162).

Therefore, nuclear superiority allows Washington to exercise Selective Engagement with low costs. A European nuclear autonomy, which is to be understood as full control on the procurement of nuclear weaponry among European states without participation of the U.S., paves the way for the development of revisionist policies and the potential emergence of a peer competitor because it undermines the stabilizing factor of the nuclear monopoly and reactivates anarchical power struggles. An integrative procurement paves the way for establishing dependencies towards the counter-hegemon, which can translate into future subordination in the release of nuclear weaponry. Therefore, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H1: The more autonomously the European states can produce and therefore use nuclear weapons, the more Washington’s counter-hegemony over Europe is eroded.

This situation contravenes US efforts to prevent the emergence of a peer competitor, which is the central goal of Selective Engagement and of every perfect regional hegemon. Hence, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H2: The more Washington’s counter-hegemony over Europe is eroded, the more hostile the U.S. will react.

To summarize, the logical Grand Strategy of an off-shore counter-hegemon in case of the emergence of autonomously controlled nuclear weapons in extraterritorial spheres of influence can be summarized in the following steps: 1. Adopt a Selective Engagement approach to prevent the emergence of a peer competitor or conditions for counter-balancing (power competition due to the absence of a stabilizer). 2. Guarantee this situation as cost-efficiently as possible by securing (total or de facto) nuclear superiority in the area. 3. Thus, prevent the development of nuclear autonomy in the area.

Although neorealism offers a parsimonious explanation, it does not fully address ideational or institutional factors which may also play a role in contemporary hegemony and are better systematized by liberal-institutionalist (see Ikenberry, 2019; Keohane, 2005) and constructivist (see Wendt, 1992) theories. Nonetheless, this study focuses especially on the factor of nuclear weapons which is by definition material and

power-structural. Hence, neorealism is better suited for this article. Furthermore, defensive neorealist approaches consider hegemony to be irrational and therefore cannot explain its dynamics from a structural position (see Mearsheimer, 2009, p. 247; Posen, 2014; J. Snyder, 2013). Thus, this paper opts for an offensive neorealist approach.

3. Research Design and method

3.1. Congruence analysis

Prognoses are future-orientated explanations. As there is no future data available, a theoretically driven deductive process is needed to develop prognoses. Theory can explain complex reality under parsimony and thus formulate expectations under certain circumstances. To do this, historical cases under similar conditions as anticipated can be analysed with the help of broader theories and the latter can be extrapolated to other contexts with the help of the results (Mearsheimer, 1990, p. 8). For this reason, the selected research method of this paper is the congruence analysis. Congruence of neorealist theoretical expectations with the actual empirical development of the cases of Britain and France is to be tested in this paper.

A congruence analysis consists of checking the correspondence of theoretical expectations with empirical findings (Blatter et al., 2018, pp. 150–151; George & Bennett, 2005, pp. 181–183; van Evera, 2016, pp. 56–58). Congruence of working hypotheses with the findings of the universe of cases can intuitively lead to extending the theory to specifically explain situations of that sort. Therefore, H1 and H2 were presented in the last section. Hence, a counter-hegemon is expected to react negatively to intended high nuclear autonomy from a secondary state, as it could lead to counter-balancing. To measure congruence to this expectation and to be able to illustrate a broader causal mechanism, two variables are thus recognised.

The independent variable for this analysis is nuclear dependency (ND). It is operationalized through the following ordinal scale from 1 (weak) to 5 (strong):

1. Total autonomy: The secondary state produced its nuclear weapons entirely independently or without help of the counter-hegemon, and thus it can control them nearly independently. This is caused by the lack of material barriers that the counter-hegemon could pose on the eventual usage of the newly acquired weaponry (which is implicit if the nuclear weapons are not acquired autonomously). This represents a maximum threat to the counter-hegemon, as nothing limits revisionist agendas.
2. Semi-autonomy: The secondary state procures nuclear weaponry with support from alternative partners instead of from the counter-hegemon. This represents a major threat to the counter-hegemon, since it has no incentives to generate dependency frameworks; however, nuclear proliferation is constrained by collective action.
3. Informal dependency: The secondary state is materially dependent on technological imports of the counter-hegemon to organize its nuclear programme, but without defined subordinations. Threats to the counter-hegemon are reduced drastically, as it can materially block revisionist agendas.
4. Semi-dependency: the secondary state possesses its own nuclear weapons, but its procurement relies on the help of the counter-hegemon. Hence, it can be forced to subordinate them (within the bounded order or through bilateral treaties). Dangers of counter-balancing are lowered drastically. However, dangers still exist due to the incorporation of a nuclear arsenal of its own into the secondary state's armed forces.
5. Total dependency: the secondary state has no nuclear weapons of its own; it only has the counter-hegemon deploying its nuclear arms on its territory. There are no threats to the counter-hegemon.

In order to assign each level of the ordinal scale to observable evidence presented in this article, the following indicators are selected to assess the rules of codification: procurement; launch control; external veto rights; mandatory interoperability; technological origin; non-transfer clauses.

The identified dependent variable is the Counter-Balancing Effect (CBE). It measures the tendency to enforce a counter-balancing policy justified by the existence of nuclear weapons. It is operationalized through an ordinal scale from 1 (weak) to 5 (strong):

1. Total subordination: the secondary state supports a total nuclear superiority from the counter-hegemon to be protected in the absence of its own nuclear arsenal.
2. Semi-subordination: the secondary state, while possessing nuclear weapons, attempts to bring other states to a situation of dependency on the counter-hegemon to prevent further proliferation.
3. Nuclear division: the secondary state, while possessing or seeking to procure nuclear weapons on its own, pursues a policy of accommodation with the counter-hegemon instead of revisionism (for example by proposing dividing expenses through the deployment nuclear weapons in less urgent areas of interest by the counter-hegemon or developing the nuclear program at a slower pace).
4. Intra-Order revisionism: the secondary state tries to improve its position within the counter-hegemonic bounded order by appealing to its nuclear weaponry.
5. Total revisionism: the secondary state demands a total revision or abolition of the counter-hegemonic bounded order because of its own nuclear weapons or tries to withdraw from it.

In order to assign each level of the ordinal scale to observable evidence presented in this article, following indicators are selected to assess the rules of codification: veto requirement; threat of withdrawal; effective withdrawal; FIG cooperation; own nuclear doctrine.

The relationship between variables is expected to be inversely proportional. This is, an extremely low level of ND (e.g., 1) should be followed by an extremely elevated level of CBE (e.g., 5).

This relationship allows to formulate observable expectations. Regarding the UK, it is expected that with the acquisition of nuclear weaponry it increases its material (even release) dependency towards the US as well as it minimizes the incentives for nuclear proliferation in Europe by incorporating NATO member states under its umbrella. This is evidenced by the accession to the MC-48 NATO-resolution (which also eliminated the room for European vetoes) and through the release of both the Global British Strategy (GBS) and the Defence White Paper (DWP), among other documents. The content of those primary sources, henceforth, works as hard evidence for these expectations.

Likewise, it is expected that France's path to nuclear autonomy allows it to demand a major role within NATO and (to threaten) to withdraw from the organization backed by its atomic capabilities. This is signalled through the French memorandum of 1958 and through the declaration of withdrawal from the joint military structure of NATO, among other documents. Thus, those primary sources are regarded as hard evidence for these expectations, as well.

The aforementioned observable expectations (OE) can be summarised as follows:

- OE-FR-1: 1958 French memorandum demanding a tripartite veto or threatening to leave NATO (CBE \geq 4).
- OE -FR-2: Withdrawal from NATO's integrated military structure (1966) as an indicator of CBE = 5 and ND = 1.
- OE -UK-1: Accession to MC-48 and renunciation of the European veto (ND \geq 4, CBE \leq 2).
- OE-UK-2: Mutual Defence Agreement (1958): nuclear cooperation + non-transfer clause (ND \geq 4).

The variables, rules of codification and observable expectations allow to formulate the following congruence matrix:

Table 04: Congruence matrix: Levels of nuclear dependence (ND) and counterbalancing effect (CBE) in the cases of the United Kingdom and France (1950–1966)

Case	Sub-phase	ND Level (1–5)	CBE Level (1–5)	OE (observable evidence)	Hard evidence
UK	1950–53	5	1–2	Deployment of US weapons in the UK; without European veto	MC-48
UK	1954–57	4–5	2	GBS 1952 / DWP 1957; brokering of MC-48	Defence White Paper
UK	1958–65	4	2–3	Mutual Defence Agreement (1958); Nassau Agreement (1962), Polaris Agreement (1963)	Mutual Defence Agreement; Nassau Agreement; Polaris Agreement
FR	1950–53	3	3	French dependence on external support for the procurement of nuclear weapons	Diagnosis from the US department of state
FR	1954–59	2	4	FIG (France–Italy–West-Germany); Colomb–Béchar Conference 1957	French-Italian-(West) German Cooperation Protocol
FR	1960–65	1	5	De Gaulle Memorandum of 1958; withdrawal from the joint military structure (1966)	Memorandum of 1958; Aide-mémoire from the official withdrawal declaration

Source: Author's own elaboration

3.2. Case selection and analysis

A congruence analysis is a technique of case analysis (Blatter et al., 2018, pp. 150–151; George & Bennett, 2005, p. 181). In this paper, the selected case type is the disciplined-configurative case. Since this study aims to examine the explanatory power of neorealism for this phenomenon (rejection of more European autonomy from the U.S. in contexts of intended US withdrawal), it utilizes the working hypotheses to develop prognoses for the future. Such a combination of theory-testing with theory-extension can only be achieved through a disciplined-configurative case study (Muno, 2009, p. 119). Since other European states did not manage to acquire nuclear weaponry but the UK and France, quantitative analyses are not feasible to answer the question. Likewise, as nuclear autonomy is to be examined as explaining factor under parsimonious conditions, an important first step to answering the research question is to undertake a congruence analysis before engaging in more complex methods such as process tracing efficiently (Schimmelfennig, 2014, p. 101).

To transfer possible results to future hypotheses, two prototypical disciplined-configurative cases are selected to consider the role of ND and CBE. France and Britain fit into this category because they were the first states to become nuclear-armed under US (counter-)hegemony (see Section 2.1). Until then, they were the only ones with the possibility to achieve said power development (from the late 1960s onwards, the US adopted a much more aggressive non-proliferation policy towards all states in the world).

Although both of them did not seek to counter Washington's primacy but to offset Soviet expansionist threats, international anarchy makes it irrational to permit other states to procure nuclear weapons (especially when they are under a hegemonic relationship), according to offensive neorealist precepts. Therefore, the effects of proliferation on these states are expected to have created a category regarding this issue and thus be the basis for future US reactions. Thus, these cases are prototypical (Muno, 2009, p. 117). Since Washington reacted differently to their nuclear endeavours, nuclear postures (and therefore ND) are regarded as the most key factor for this explanation.

To rule alternative variables out by keeping them constant, a most-similar-system design was used to select these cases as well (Przeworski & Teune, 1970, pp. 32–34). Both the UK and France were colonial empires in decline and therefore experienced a massive reduction in their position in the international power structure (Hammer, 1951, p. 470; Heuser, 1997, pp. 16; Kohl, 2015, p. 35; Ryan, 2003, pp. 64–65; Sanders, 1990, p. 229). They were both Western European embedded democracies (Mearsheimer, 1990, pp. 50–51, 2019, pp. 20–21). They had both social democratic (e.g., Clement Atlee, Guy Mollet) and conservative (e.g., Winston Churchill, Charles de Gaulle) governments (Allin, 2011, p. 100; Ehrmann, 1951, pp. 189–193; Heuser, 1997, p. 84; Hughes, 1951, pp. 252–253; Sanders, 1990, p. 57). They were both geographically close to Germany and the USSR, which were feared at that time, among other similarities often analysed when explaining international politics.

Regarding the specifically selected cases for this paper, the following are identified: The U.S. between ca. 1950 and 1965 represent the case of a perfect regional hegemon as well as an offshore counter-hegemon. In this period, Washington was facing the first traces of imperial overstretch in its history (on a much lower scale than nowadays) due to the costs of overextension after World War II (WWII) and the Korean War (G. H. Snyder, 1962, p. 414). Therefore, it was considering diametrically reducing its presence in Europe as well as prioritizing its reliance on nuclear weapons because they were much cheaper to maintain (Divine, 1981, p. 36). At the same time, it sought to -at least in a relative position- maintain nuclear superiority (Taliaferro, 2019, pp. 11–12) and to nuclearize NATO (Heuser, 1997, p. 16).

The main distinction between France and the UK, in contrast to all their similarities, was their nuclear posture (which is to be interpreted as equivalent to ND). The UK did adopt an integrative posture (which reflected a high dependency) and France an autonomous posture (which reflected a low level of dependency) (Narang, 2014, p. 25). Washington's reaction to their nuclear programmes was also substantially different, as it supported London (with reserves) (Maddock, 2010, pp. 128–129) and (diplomatically) rejected Paris (Kohl, 2015, pp. 207–208).

It is important to mention that this study is fully based on positivist methodological paradigms. Accordingly, this analysis can only rely on observable evidence and expectations based on a rational-actor model for the examined cases. This kind of methodology does not problematize different cultural or historically constructed conceptions of rationality nor takes non-observable evidence into consideration. Therefore, further research can also profit from interpretivist and postpositivist approaches which especially focus on the methodological gaps.

Likewise, congruence analysis only allows us to observe the variance between selected variables. Since most-similar-systems design cannot cover up all possible variables, congruence case analysis must be further validated by complementary methods such as process tracings or quantitative analyses (see George & Bennett, 2005, Chapter 9). Nonetheless, congruence case analysis allows us to take a first step in determining complex causal mechanisms (see Schimmelfennig, 2014). Hence, this method is utterly relevant to examine a political process under development.

4. The U.S. and nuclear weaponry in Europe

Since the detonation of the Trinity nuclear test in 1945 the US sought to consolidate its hegemonic position through nuclear superiority (Miller, 2018, pp. 40–41). Consequently, it tried to maintain its transatlantic primacy by hindering or delaying nuclear proliferation in Europe (Maddock, 2010, p. 129). This was achieved through different measures and phases.



In the first phase (1945–1957), the Atomic Energy Act (1946) blocked transfers of nuclear technology, reflecting a preference for maintaining the advantage and delaying foreign capabilities (Heuser, 1997, p. 93). From 1958 onwards, cooperation was selectively opened up with the United Kingdom through the Mutual Defence Agreement (MDA), consolidating British nuclear dependence and differentiating London from Paris (Baylis & Stoddart, 2014, p. 76; Lanoszka, 2018, p. 134). At the same time, the doctrinal shift in the 1960s towards deterrence and the institutionalisation of non-proliferation (culminating in the Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1968) reinforced the priority of preventing additional sovereign arsenals in Europe (Miller, 2018, p. 69).

This course of action was perfectly congruent with neorealist principles, since preventing nuclear proliferation in Western Europe was meant to disable or reduce possible revisionist-enabling effects of nuclear weaponry among secondary states (Maddock, 1998, pp. 557–558; Miller, 2018, pp. 41–43). In Washington, the idea of a “Third Power” in Europe was considered one of the most important security concerns of the 1950s (Bowie & Immerman, 1998, p. 204), especially considering that the epicentre of the US led bounded order during the Cold War was Western Europe (Mearsheimer, 2019, p. 20). The European Third Power was understood as Europe being neutral and decoupled from US influence due to vast amounts of power and power aspirations on the world stage (Harper, 1996, p. 3; Kagan, 2002, p. 22). This would have created a further rival apart from the Soviet Union and a potential ally to Moscow (Baum, 1990, p. 318).

Following this logic: an autonomous and, at the same time, powerful Europe would have meant having another peer competitor or at least a nagging counter-balancer pursuing the idea of a multipolar world with European ambitions (Maddock, 2010, p. 101). For many scholars, such as Robert Kagan and John Harper, US presence in Europe was always intended to inhibit European great power ambitions among other more evident purposes like preventing a Soviet continental takeover or possibly escalating European-Soviet confrontations (Allin, 2011, p. 100; Harper, 1996, p. 112). That scenario directly contravenes counter-hegemony. Therefore, it was in the US’ interest to prevent such a situation (Skogmar, 2004, p. 31). Consequently, strictly limiting the spread of nuclear weapons in Europe was perceived as vital.

Within this framework, NATO became the institutional vehicle for providing extended deterrence against potential Soviet expansionism without increasing the number of sovereign arsenals (Baum, 1990, p. 318; Heuser, 1997, p. 43). Although the idea of a multinational nuclear force (MNF) was ultimately discarded, allied nuclear planning and dual-key arrangements maintained US operational leadership, discouraging European allies from pursuing full nuclear autonomy (Skogmar, 2004, p. 74). According to an offensive neorealist perspective, this mitigated the risk of the Third Force Europe with its own deterrent and revisionist agenda, preserving Washington’s ability to prevent the emergence of a peer competitor.

This strategy was congruent with the efforts during the 1950s to reduce US presence in Europe while maintaining its role as a pacifier there (G. H. Snyder, 1962, p. 436). Hence, the nuclear priority of the New Look Policy under Eisenhower was intended to become an inhibitor for revisionist European tendencies. Having nuclear missiles progressively stationed in Europe could thus guarantee the Old Continent to become a non-threatening bulwark against Soviet expansion (Bowie & Immerman, 1998, pp. 35–37).

Nuclearizing NATO to successfully combine cost reduction or prioritization and a Grand Strategy of Selective Engagement makes it also logically possible for Washington to support limited proliferation in Europe. Having nuclear arsenals overseen by a central US-led institution (NATO) makes the nuclear deterrents of secondary states non-threatening if they are also superseded by it. Whereas arsenals beyond NATO could eventually develop into a revisionist Third Force Agenda, arsenals within the alliance could be directly controlled by Washington and thus factually act as an extension of its own arsenals. This definition of interests is congruent with the expectations of H1. Since incentives for nuclear autonomy in Europe would have meant that the US counter-hegemonic capacity would have been eroded, Washington positioned itself as nuclear protector of the Old Continent.

5. Nuclearization under US tutelage – the United Kingdom

5.1. The British nuclear posture (BNP)

Nuclear posture can be derived from overall military doctrine. In the case of Britain, it has been based on the principle of buck-passing since World War I (WWI) (Posen, 2014, p. 158). Buck-passing can be defined as indirectly fighting enemies with the help of closer or more powerful proxies (Mearsheimer, 2001, pp. 159–160). Therefore, it represents a massive cost reduction in possible power struggles (Posen, 2014, pp. 73–74). The strategy of buck-passing can thus be interpreted as a reason to join alliances, as allies can “take the buck” of fighting enemies (G. H. Snyder, 1990, p. 108). The UK adopted this international approach due to the excessive costs of warfare (Posen, 2014, pp. 176–177).

Regarding WWII, although some scholars like John Mearsheimer (2001, p. 263) and Barry Posen (2014, pp. 176–177) consider Britain’s approach towards France during the interwar period (at least since 1936) as following this buck-passing logic, London found it too costly to rely on French support due to Paris’ strong animosity towards Berlin (Schweller, 1998, pp. 118–119) and diametrically French relative weakness in front of Germany (Schweller, 1998, pp. 152–153). Hence, the UK opted for prioritizing British home-base defence by arming itself (Schweller, 1998, p. 154). Nonetheless, this course of action was consistent with externalising security costs as much as possible, internal balancing was only pursued when allies could not guarantee keeping security costs low.



Both France and Britain developed nuclear weapons during the Cold War (Mearsheimer, 2001, pp. 261–266). Whereas in a multipolar system, as up to 1945, perfect conditions are given for buck-passing, bipolarity practically neutralizes it as the number of buck-acceptors drastically decreases (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 272; Posen, 2014, p. 63). Nevertheless, the logic of buck-passing (combating an enemy with no direct costs) could be transferred to a hegemonic relationship. Historically, London tended to externalise or reduce security costs (Heuser, 1997, p. 63). In the bipolar era, this reflex translated into extended deterrence under US leadership (Melissen, 1994, p. 253; Reynolds, 1985, p. 8). Since 1945, Britain was hoping to continue with this approach because of the progressive collapse of its empire (Sanders, 1990, p. 171).

All hopes for US patronage in achieving nuclear weaponry (e.g. British collaboration in the Manhattan Project and signing of the Treaty of Quebec in 1943) were ruled out with the promulgation of the Atomic Energy Act (1946). From this point onwards, London tried to make the US collaborate in the creation of a British nuclear arsenal by any means (Heuser, 1997, p. 63). Following the aforementioned law, the 1951 *modus vivendi* enabled limited cooperation and deployment of US nuclear warheads in the UK (Clark, 1994, pp. 25–26), but without total guarantees of US support in case of aggression by other states (like the USSR) (Reynolds, 1985, pp. 8–9) or control transfers (Heuser, 1997, pp. 65–67). Hence, London was hoping to facilitate US deployments at the expense of sufficient guarantees.

The *modus vivendi* was accepted by the US because it gave Washington a forward base to deal with the Soviet Union. For this reason, Britain was given protection without having to invest too many resources—the UK was not even materially able to do that (Baylis & Stoddart, 2014, p. 76). The historical Grand Strategy of Britain has always been preventing the emergence of a continental European hegemon (Mearsheimer, 2001, pp. 261–266). Moscow represented the biggest hegemonic potential at that time, and for this reason, stationing nuclear weapons on British soil was congruent to British security concerns (Baylis & Stoddart, 2014, pp. 76–77; Heuser, 1997, p. 74). This initial position corresponds to an adaptation of buck-passing³⁹ and is scaled on a level 5 of ND and on a level 1 of CBE. The UK was defending US nuclear superiority and only having its weapons deployed there (total dependency and total subordination).

The problem with this approach was that without commitment guarantees, Washington could always deploy those weapons somewhere else. This possibility was highly feared during the Korean War and during the Suez Crisis (Heuser, 1997, p. 64). The logic of British nuclear posture from 1950 onwards therefore was to become partially more autonomous (Bell, 2019, pp. 20–21). However, reaching that goal was materially impossible without US support due to the complete economic integration of the Marshall Plan and the insufficiency and dispersion of British conventional forces (Reynolds, 1985, p. 8).

Although the first nuclear detonation was achieved rapidly (the nuclear programme began in 1947 and the first successful test of a nuclear bomb was conducted in 1952), it was only achieved due to the know-how won due to British collaboration in the Manhattan Project (Clark, 1994, pp. 77–78; Heuser, 1997, pp. 69–71). This achievement materialized in the DWP (Sandys, 1957) which pivoted to nuclear deterrence and cut conventional forces. For this reason, Britain intended to expand this dependency with already existing nuclear weapons. The UK's nuclear posture was systematized by pushing for the nuclearization of NATO (i.e., letting member states to be benefited from extended British and US nuclear umbrellas) but also by limiting consultation mechanisms and keeping out veto rights of other member states regarding the usage of Anglo-American nuclear arsenals within the alliance.

Therefore, the UK also lobbied for joint nuclear strategies with the US in order to geographically divide the defence of extra-European areas of common interest like the South China Sea (Heuser, 1997, p. 72) (CBE 3). By this means, Washington was supposed to more easily relocate nuclear resources against more urgent competitors like the USSR (Pierre, 1970, pp. 291–293). This reduced costs of covering up all interest areas and thus gave incentives to support British military nuclear development (Heuser, 1997, pp. 78).

The turning point was the 1958 MDA which reopened comprehensive nuclear technical-military cooperation between London and Washington and, later, the Nassau Agreement (1962) and the Polaris Sales Agreement (1963), which consolidated British technological and operational dependence on the US. These measures eroded all nuclear cooperation between the UK and France and hence eliminated all possible alternative technology suppliers except the U.S. (Sanders, 1990, p. 172; Stoddart, 2007, p. 720). In short, the BNP maximised guarantees and minimised the costs of autonomy.

The structural implication of these developments was that the UK was obliged to adopt a nuclear posture congruent to US interests in order to maintain the technological support. For these reasons, the aforementioned treaties crystallised in the US-British nuclear special relationship (Narang, 2014, p. 25). This institutional configuration corresponds to a level 4 of ND.

5.2. The implications of the BNP in the transatlantic power structure

With the measures adopted through the special relationship, Britain became the leading voice for a nuclear NATO. Whereas pushing for the

³⁹ It must be considered that the British military was also deployed on European soil, as it sought to prevent nuclear proliferation across the continent (see Section 5.2). Hence, London maintained ground troops in West Germany, which aimed to provide Bonn with protection guarantees and thus reduce proliferation incentives (Lanoszka, 2018, pp. 56).



deployment of US nuclear weapons in Europe was initially a French initiative, this was intended to be constrained by European veto rights (Kohl, 2015, p. 6; Melissen, 1994, p. 256). The British, in contrast, lobbied for voluntarily relinquishing said veto rights in order to facilitate US support (see Section 5.1). This British initiative can be identified in the GBS (1952) and the DWP (1957).

Both mutually ratifying documents expanded the British national defence logic to the whole European continent. The British option discouraged sovereign proliferation in Europe: by offering a credible nuclear umbrella via NATO, it reduced incentives for third parties to pursue independent arsenals. In neorealist terms, this preserved the counter-hegemonic capacity of the US in Europe (avoiding a peer competitor) and aligned the UK with a regime where the US retained the final say, keeping effective European nuclear autonomy low. This corresponds to a CBE of level 2. Since the UK adopted an integrative nuclear posture, allowing the US structural position to be eroded would have been counterproductive. Therefore, only the course of action adopted by London was rational under the aforementioned conditions.

This approach materialized in the Military Committee Decision 48 of 1954 (MC 48, 2018), heavily based on the GBS. Hence, it was especially defended by British diplomacy at that time (Heuser, 1997, pp. 33–35). The MC 48 (an official NATO resolution) foresaw deploying US nuclear weapons in Europe progressively and without veto rights for European secondary states (Baylis & Stoddart, 2014, p. 75; Melissen, 1994, p. 259). By eliminating all security incentives to develop an independent nuclear device against the USSR by relying on the promise of US protection instead (Baylis & Stoddart, 2014, p. 96), a situation of dependency was created and thus all intentions of counter-balancing could be prevented by threatening to abandon Europe (Melissen, 1994, pp. 271–273).

The effect of Britain's pro-dependence posture thus shows a general extremely low CBE (level 2), which can be summarized as: 1. Making all postures but dependency counterproductive. 2. Thus, expanding dependency within the NATO framework across Europe. Therefore, the British aim to reproduce the effects of dependency can be identified.

6. Nuclearization against US influence – France

6.1. The French nuclear posture (FNP)

Based on the European mainland, France could have never been an offshore balancer like the UK. Without aquatic natural barriers and being traditionally surrounded by adversaries, France has never had the possibility to opt for buck-passing (Mearsheimer, 2001, pp. 88–92; Posen, 2014, p. 155). For that reason, Paris organized relatively loose defence pacts with Poland, Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union as well as tried to form an Anglo-French alliance (Schweller, 1998, p. 237). However, those efforts proved to be unsuccessful in guaranteeing French security (see Groth & Randall, 1991). Hence, external balancing was not a reliable strategy for France either.

Unlike the UK, France, marked by previous invasions, favoured a logic of self-help, power maximisation and the construction of an independent nuclear deterrent (*force de frappe*) (Bell, 2019, p. 14). Following De Gaulle's memorandum of 1958 (1985) proposing a tripartite leadership with the US and the UK, Paris accelerated its programme, culminating in *Gerboise Bleue* in 1960 (Baum, 1990, p. 323).

French security interests during the Cold War can thus be defined as the following: 1. Prevent Soviet (and German) aggression (Narang, 2014, p. 156), 2. Maintain the colonial empire as a basis for world power status (Heuser, 1997, p. 93). The USSR (and eventually Germany) were situated within the continent as well as France. Therefore, Paris would be among the first states to be confronted with in a war (Raflik, 2022, p. 52). As the lessons of the Suez Crisis showed, an Anglo-Saxon support was not infallibly guaranteed (Kohl, 2015, pp. 36–37).

At the same time, France was a decaying colonial empire. With colonial losses, access to important resources was also lost. This meant a direct reduction in the share of global power, which was to be prevented (Kohl, 2015, p. 35; Miller, 2018, p. 152). Lack of support from the U.S. as well as direct hostility from the USSR towards colonial empires (Ryan, 2003, pp. 64–65) gave France key incentives to autonomously preserve and maximize its power (Baum, 1990, pp. 317–318).

After witnessing the lack of support of transatlantic allies in the last French colonial adventures, it was not clear for Paris that they would successfully deter potential Soviet (and eventually also German) threats (Heuser, 1997, p. 93; Samaan & Gompert, 2009, p. 487). This led France to the path of nuclearization (mainly under Pierre Mendès-France and Charles de Gaulle) (Kohl, 2015, p. 22). Therefore, France strategically decided to prioritize nuclear weaponry over conventional weaponry (signalled by the lack of attention to civil defence plans after the beginning of nuclear research in 1954) (Heuser, 1997, p. 96).

Without any special relationship like the UK and with a prioritization of self-help in the process, France adopted an autonomous nuclear posture and hence pursued nuclear autonomy (Narang, 2014, p. 156). According to Wilfred Kohl's (2015, p. 356) prolific work on French nuclear diplomacy, although a completely unilateralistic position was firstly adopted with Charles De Gaulle's rise to power, French leaders during the Fourth Republic emphasized the development of a nuclear deterrent of its own to avoid full subordination to the Anglo-Saxon powers and thus better up the French position within NATO. The French nuclear posture also aimed to make Europe prepared for an eventual US abandonment and therefore less dependent on the protection of the counter-hegemon. Henceforth, the aim for total nuclear autonomy under De Gaulle is considered partially as a deepening of nuclear efforts during the Fourth Republic.

At the beginning of the nuclear programme, France showed a ND of level 3 because it was highly dependent on financial US support. Because of the McMahon Act and the MDA, French nuclearization was developed much slower than the British one (Pierre, 1970, p. 293).



However, Paris was able to develop a domestic nuclear industry through the Commissariat à l'énergie atomique (CEA) (US Department of State, 1957). This partial material dependence made France seek new nuclear partners and potentially share future nuclear weaponry with them in order to avoid US lack of support (Heuser, 1997, p. 93; Miller, 2018, pp. 150–153). During the Fourth Republic, Paris collaborated with Israeli scientists as well as with the defence ministries of Italy and West Germany in order to seek assistance apart from the counter-hegemon in acquiring nuclear weapons (Raflik, 2022, p. 56).

The latter states cooperated in standardizing military doctrines, conventional armaments and goals regarding the military applications of atomic energy but also kept the U.S. and Britain out of this informal system (FIG Protocol, 1957). However, it was not clear if all states wanted to create a collectively controlled force in competition to NATO (this was explicitly neglected by Foreign Minister Christian Pineau at a conference with British Secretary of State Selwyn Lloyd) (Raflik, 2022, p. 56). Nonetheless, this evidently signalled a tendency to seek support from alternative partners in both defence and nuclear policy with more autonomy vis-à-vis the counter-hegemon.

Considering that Italy and West Germany were substantially less powerful than France (Miller, 2018, pp. 157–158), aiding Paris in acquiring nuclear weapons and be protected by them would have made them less dependent on sole US-British nuclear support (Kohl, 2015, p. 38). Hence, the ND of France during the Fourth Republic was reduced to level 2. During the Fifth Republic, France decided to single-handedly control its weapons (mainly due to the advanced stage of its nuclear programme) (Raflik, 2022, p. 57). Consequently, it materialized its search for total autonomy by reducing its ND to level 1.

6.2. The implications of FNP in the transatlantic power structure

French nuclear autonomy increased the CBE and reduced ND drastically, putting pressure on the US counter-hegemonic architecture in Europe (Bowie & Immerman, 1998, p. 206). Aiming to remain a leading great power, France was not willing to be absorbed under a US-led bounded order (Baum, 1990, p. 317). Hence, as the US was willing to prevent an autonomous and eventually non-aligned Europe as a key counter-hegemonic goal, France chose to gain autonomy corresponded to a direct defiance to Washington's structural position.

The first signal of high CBE was shown during the Fourth Republic. As France tried to develop its nuclear arsenal with financial and technological assistance from West Germany and Italy (Miller, 2018, pp. 157–158). Developing the so-called FIG (France-Italy-Germany) Force was a direct confrontation of US dominance within NATO. As a result of the Colomb-Béchar Conference of 1957, these states aimed to uniformize the military doctrines, weaponry, and the state of nuclear research (FIG Protocol, 1957). Nuclear weapons should have helped to further increase their power within NATO (Kohl, 2015, pp. 38–39). This set of ideas was deliberately not revealed to the US or NATO authorities. Although joint responsibilities on nuclear releases were not settled with this framework (Raflik, 2022, p. 56), it contributed to nuclear proliferation beyond the lineages of the MC-48. The general idea was to redirect the NATO nuclearization process to a more secondary-state-dominated system (Heuser, 1997, pp. 148–151).

This was a revision of leadership roles through cooperation and power and thus a deteriorating factor to US counter-hegemony. By coordinating with West Germany and Italy, France showed a clear power-balancing strategy. Cooperation and nuclearization should have reduced the power disparity with Washington and thus have allowed to push some goals with US opposition. This signals a CBE of level 4. In short, explorations for non-subordinate European structures (e.g., the FIG framework) served as signals of a preference for room for manoeuvre outside the American umbrella.

With the rise of the Fifth Republic, France reoriented its security policy to a national level and thus terminated the FIG initiative (Raflik, 2022, p. 57). However, although this change is often seen as contradictory to the path of the Fourth Republic (Heuser, 1997, pp. 103–105), it can also be interpreted as a deepening of it (Kohl, 2015, p. 356). From trying to create a competing structure within NATO in order to challenge its dominant powers, France shifted to confront the NATO structure entirely (Kohl, 2015, pp. 77–78). This revisionist policy was based on the autonomy gained through independent nuclearization (Kohl, 2015, p. 157).

The memorandum of 1958 further signals the revisionist aims implicit with autonomist postures. As the sole continental European nuclear power, France was meant to have an overall veto right within the alliance within the framework of a Tripartite Directorate with Washington and London (Gaulle, 1981, pp. 82–85). Otherwise, France threatened to leave the organization entirely. Being justified by nuclear autonomy, France began its distancing process from the US and NATO in the 1960s with this document (Kohl, 2015, p. 207). This was an evident attempt to subvert US counter-hegemony sustained by the lack of nuclear dependency. Hence, this represents a CBE of level 5.

The role of nuclear weapons in this process is clearer if the aftermath situation is analysed, too. The withdrawal from NATO's integrated military structure (1966) crystallised the aforementioned orientation (French Republic, 1981): France remained in the Alliance, but removed its deterrent from allied control, maximising its strategic freedom (Kohl, 2015, p. 253). States under nuclear dependency had no incentives to adopt a revisionist position while the autonomously nuclear France had them.

7. Conclusion and prognosis

During the 1950s and 1960s, the United States planned a partial withdrawal of its forces from the European continent. However, the intention



to promote a more autonomous Europe contrasted with Washington's different reactions to the British and French nuclear programmes. The findings of this study confirm that each state's initial nuclear posture –autonomist or integrative– determined its level of Nuclear Dependency (ND), which was inversely related to the Counter-Balancing Effect (CBE).

France adopted an autonomous stance, consistent with low levels of ND (1–2) and high levels of CBE (4–5). Its strategy of independent nuclearization responded both to its continental vulnerability and its desire to maintain a great power status, generating a revisionist behaviour within the transatlantic bounded order. The UK, on the other hand, pursued a strategy of integration with a high ND (4–5) and low CBE (2–3), based on adapting buck-passing to the nuclear age: delegating security costs to Washington in exchange for technological and strategic dependence. Hence, London tried to prevent further proliferation.

In neorealist terms, nuclear autonomy –by reducing structural dependence– expands counter-balancing capacity and thus erodes US counter-hegemony. Given that nuclear weapons are the only instrument capable of reducing (military) power disparities between hegemonic and secondary states, the French results (mainly) during the De Gaulle-era confirm H1, while Washington's reaction to this autonomy confirms H2: the counter-hegemon acts rationally to prevent the emergence of a peer competitor.

Transferred to the present, although the US encourages European conventional autonomy, it will never support nuclear autonomy. Contemporary initiatives of a Euro-Deterrent, as proposed by such as former German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 2023), consider that European states should develop an own nuclear arsenal to avoid the possible consequences of US-abandonment (Dimitrova, 2020, p. 4). This reflects the same structural tension observed in the cases of France and (to a much lesser extent) the United Kingdom: a nuclear-independent Europe would undermine the US counter-hegemonic order.

Finally, this study offers a theoretical framework for understanding the link between nuclear dependence and balance of power in hierarchical systems. However, the identified causal mechanism must be empirically tested in other contexts and through quantitative analysis. Domestic political factors not addressed –like the different degrees of political fragmentation or the structure of the internal political systems– as well as ideational differences –like the cultural meaning of the Anglo-American special relationship– also deserve consideration to strengthen the explanatory power of the argument. Hence, insights from liberal and constructivist theories of International Relations should also be taken into account.

Likewise, this analysis relies on a positivist paradigm. For this reason, this paper depends on observable evidence to reach its conclusions which can blur cultural and sociological structural factors. For example, all analysed cases come from a Western definition of the nation-state. Future research on the nuclear aspect of transatlantic relations should also be open to interpretivist and postpositivist approaches. In short, while nuclear dependence preserves the counter-hegemonic order, nuclear autonomy challenges it. For this reason, both in the past and at present, Washington encourages a Europe that is autonomous in conventional terms but subordinate in the nuclear sphere. This relationship will continue to define the transatlantic security architecture in the coming decades.



8. References

- Agreement for Co-Operation on the Uses of Atomic Energy for Mutual Defense Purposes, 326 U.N.T.S. 3 (1958).
- Allin, D. H. (2011). De Gaulle and American Power. En B. M. Rowland (Ed.), *Charles de Gaulle's Legacy of Ideas* (pp. 99–116). Lexington Books.
- Atomic Energy Act of 1946, Pub. L. No. 79-585, 60 Stat. 755 (1946).
- Baum, K. W. (1990). Two's Company, Three's a Crowd: The Eisenhower Administration, France, and Nuclear Weapons. *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 20(2), 315–328.
- Baylis, J. y Stoddart, K. (2014). *The British Nuclear Experience: The Roles of Beliefs, Culture and Identity*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198702023.001.0001>
- Bell, M. S. (2019). Nuclear opportunism: A theory of how states use nuclear weapons in international politics. *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 42(1), 3–28. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2017.1389722>
- Blatter, J., Langer, P. C. y Wagemann, C. (2018). *Qualitative Methoden in der Politikwissenschaft*. Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden.
- Bowie, R. R. y Immerman, R. H. (1998). *Waging peace: How Eisenhower shaped an enduring cold war strategy*. Oxford University Press.
- Brooks, S. C. y Wohlforth, W. C. (2008). *World Out of Balance: International Relations and the Challenge of American Primacy*. Princeton University Press.
- Buzan, B. (1991). *People, states and fear: An agenda for international security studies in the post-cold war era* (2nd ed.). Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Clark, I. (1994). *Nuclear Diplomacy and the Special Relationship: Britain's Deterrent and America, 1957-1962*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198273707.001.0001>
- Communiqué of John F. Kennedy and Harold Macmillan on nuclear defence systems (Nassau, December 21, 1962). (1962). En Western European Union Assembly–General Affairs Committee: *A retrospective view of the political year in Europe 1962* (p. 105).
- Cruz de Castro, R. (2013). The Obama Administration's Strategic Pivot to Asia: From a Diplomatic to a Strategic Constraint of an Emergent China? *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, 25(3), 331–349.
- Dijkstra, H., Allwörden, L., Schuette, L. A. y Zaccaria, G. (2024). Donald Trump and the survival strategies of international organisations: when can institutional actors counter existential challenges? *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 37(2), 182–205. <https://doi.org/10.1080/095557571.2022.2136566>
- Dimitrova, A. (2020). *The State of the Transatlantic Relationship in the Trump Era* (No. 545). Robert Schuman Foundation.
- Divine, R. A. (1981). *Eisenhower and the Cold War*. Oxford University Press.
- Ehrmann, H. W. (1951). The Decline of the Socialist Party. En M. Earle (Ed.), *Modern France: Problems of the Third and Fourth Republics* (pp. 181–199). Princeton University Press.
- Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. (2023, December 31). *Joschka Fischer wirbt für atomare Aufrüstung: Im Europäischen Rahmen*. Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/joschka-fischer-wirbt-fuer-atomare-aufruestung-der-eu-19357478.html>
- French Republic. (1981). Aide-mémoire der Regierung Frankreichs und die Mitgliedstaaten der NATO. En K. D. Bracher (Ed.), *Dokumente zur Deutschlandpolitik: 1. Januar bis 30. November 1966*. Oldenburg.
- Gaulle, C. de. (1981). *Lettres, notes et carnets*. Plon.
- George, A. L. y Bennett, A. (2005). *Case studies and theory development in the social sciences*. MIT Press.
- Gilpin, R. (1981). *War and change in world politics*. Cambridge University Press.
- Groth, A. J. y Randall, R. G. (1991). Alliance Pathology: Institutional Lessons of the 1930s. *Political Science Quarterly*, 106(1), 109–121.
- Hammer, E. (1951). The French Empire Today. En M. Earle (Ed.), *Modern France: Problems of the Third and Fourth Republics* (pp. 449–471). Princeton University Press.
- Harper, J. L. (1996). *American visions of Europe: Franklin D. Roosevelt, George F. Kennan, and Dean G. Acheson*. Cambridge University Press.
- Heuser, B. (1997). *NATO, Britain, France and the FRG: Nuclear strategies and forces for Europe, 1949-2000*. Palgrave MacMillan.
- Hughes, S. (1951). Gaullism: Retrospect and Prospect. En M. Earle (Ed.), *Modern France: Problems of the Third and Fourth Republics* (pp. 251–263). Princeton University Press.
- Ikenberry, G. J. (2019). *After Victory*. Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400880843>
- Jameson, R. P. (2013). Armageddon's Shortening Fuse: How Advances in Nuclear Weapons Technology Pushed Strategists to Mutually Assured Destruction, 1945-1962. *Air Power History*, 60(1), 40–53.
- Kagan, R. (2002). Power and Weakness. *Policy Review*, (113), 3–28.
- Keohane, R. (2005). *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*. Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400820269>
- Knutsen, B. O. (2022). A Weakening Transatlantic Relationship? Redefining the EU–US Security and Defence Cooperation. *Politics and Governance*, 10(2), 165–175. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v10i2.5024>
- Kohl, W. L. (2015). *French Nuclear Diplomacy*. Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400869886>
- Kroenig, M. (2014). Force or Friendship? Explaining Great Power Nonproliferation Policy. *Security Studies*, 23(1), 1–32. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412014.870863>



- Kundnani, H. (2025). Europe Can't "Trump-Proof" Itself. *Dissent*, 72(1), 35–37. <https://doi.org/10.1353/dss.2025.a950172>
- Lanoszka, A. (2018). *Atomic assurance: The alliance politics of nuclear proliferation*. Cornell University Press.
- Maddock, S. J. (1998). The Fourth Country Problem: Eisenhower's Nuclear Nonproliferation Policy. *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 28(3), 553–572.
- Maddock, S. J. (2010). *Nuclear apartheid: The quest for American atomic supremacy from World War II to the present*. University of North Carolina Press.
- Matlé, A. (2021). US-Präsident Trumps Unberechenbarkeit in der Sicherheits- und Verteidigungspolitik: Ein Glücksfall oder schlechtes Omen für das Abschreibungspotenzial der NATO. En S. Arnautovic (Ed.), *Die europäisch-amerikanischen Beziehungen unter US-Präsident Trump: Eine Bilanz mit Politikempfehlungen* (pp. 173–192). Tectum Verlag.
- McLeary, P. y Lippman, D. (2025). *Pentagon plan prioritizes homeland over China threat*. Politico. <https://www.politico.com/news/2025/09/05/pentagon-national-defense-strategy-china-homeland-western-hemisphere-00546310>
- Mearsheimer, J. J. (1990). Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War. *International Security*, 15(1), 5–56. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2538981>
- Mearsheimer, J. J. (1998). The Future of America's Continental Commitment. En G. Lundestad (Ed.), *No end to alliance: The United States and Western Europe; past, present and future* (pp. 221–242). MacMillan; St. Martin's Press.
- Mearsheimer, J. J. (2001). *The tragedy of great power politics*. Norton.
- Mearsheimer, J. J. (2009). Reckless States and Realism. *International Relations*, 23(2), 241–256. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117809104637>
- Mearsheimer, J. J. (2011). Imperial by Design. *The National Interest*, (111), 16–34.
- Mearsheimer, J. J. (2019). Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order. *International Security*, 43(4), 7–50. https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00342
- Mearsheimer, J. J. y Walt, S. A. (2016). The Case for Offshore Balancing: A Superior U.S. Grand Strategy. *Foreign Affairs*, 95(4), 70–83.
- Melissen, J. (1994). Nuclearizing NATO, 1957–1959: the 'Anglo-Saxons', nuclear sharing and the fourth country problem. *Review of International Studies*, 20(3), 253–275. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210500118066>
- Miller, N. L. (2018). *Stopping the Bomb*. Cornell University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7591/9781501717819>
- Muno, W. (2009). Fallstudien und die vergleichende Methode. En S. Pickel, G. Pickel, H.-J. Lauth y D. Jahn (Eds.), *Methoden der vergleichenden Sozialwissenschaft: Neue Entwicklungen und Anwendungen* (pp. 113–132). VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.
- Narang, V. (2014). *Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era*. Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400850402>
- North Atlantic Military Committee Decision on M.C. 48 (Final). (1954). En *Charter of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization* (p. 58). (2018).
- Pierre, A. J. (1970). Nuclear Diplomacy: Britain, France and America. *Foreign Affairs*, 49(2), 283–301.
- Polaris Sales Agreement, Treaty Series No. 59 (1963).
- Posen, B. R. (2014). *The Sources of Military Doctrine*. Cornell University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7591/9780801468582>
- Protocol, Documents Diplomatiques Françaises, 762 (November 25, 1957).
- Przeworski, A. y Teune, H. (1970). *The logic of comparative social inquiry*. Comparative studies in behavioral science. Wiley-Interscience.
- Raflik, J. (2022). France and the Abandoned Dream of a European Bomb. En N. Badalassi y F. Gloriant (Eds.), *France, Germany and Nuclear Deterrence: Quarrels and Convergencies during the Cold War and Beyond* (pp. 43–60). Berghahn Books.
- Reynolds, D. (1985). A 'special relationship'? America, Britain and the international order since the Second World War. *International Affairs*, 62(1), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2618063>
- Rublee, M. R. (2010). *Nonproliferation Norms: Why States Choose Nuclear Restraint*. University of Georgia Press.
- Ryan, D. (2003). *The United States and Europe in the twentieth century*. Seminar studies in history. Routledge.
- Samaan, J.-L. y Gompert, D. C. (2009). French Nuclear Weapons, Euro-Deterrence, and NATO. *Contemporary Security Policy*, 30(3), 486–504. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260903327386>
- Sanders, D. (1990). *Losing an empire, finding a role: British foreign policy since 1945*. MacMillan.
- Sandys, D. (1957). *DEFENCE Outline of Future Policy - Defence White Paper*.
- Schimmelfennig, F. (2014). Efficient process tracing. En A. Bennett y J. T. Checkel (Eds.), *Process Tracing* (pp. 98–125). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO978113985472.007>
- Schweller, R. L. (1998). *Deadly imbalances: Tripolarity and Hitler's strategy of world conquest*. Columbia University Press.
- Schweller, R. L. (2001). The Problem of International Order Revisited: A Review Essay. *International Security*, 26(1), 161–186.
- Skogmar, G. (2004). *The United States and the nuclear dimension of European integration*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Snyder, G. H. (1962). The New Look of 1953. En W. R. Schilling, P. Y. Hammond y G. H. Snyder (Eds.), *Strategy, Politics, and Defense Budgets* (pp. 379–524). Columbia University Press.
- Snyder, G. H. (1990). ALLIANCE THEORY: A NEOREALIST FIRST CUT. *Journal of International Affairs*, 44(1), 103–123.
- Snyder, J. (2013). *Myths of Empire*. Cornell University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7591/9780801468605>
- Stoddart, K. (2007). Nuclear Weapons in Britain's Policy towards France, 1960–1974. *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 18(4), 719–744. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592290701807184>



-
- Taliaferro, J. W. (2019). *Defending frenemies: Alliances, politics, and nuclear nonproliferation in US foreign policy*. Oxford scholarship online. Oxford University Press.
- Tertrais, B. (2019). Will Europe Get Its Own Bomb? *The Washington Quarterly*, 42(2), 47–66. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2019.1621651>
- United Kingdom Chiefs of Staff. (1952). *Defence policy and global strategy*. National Security Archive, George Washington University. <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/nukevault/special/doc04.pdf>
- US Department of State. (1957, October 19). National Security Council report NSC 5721/1: Statement of U.S. policy on France (Document 55). En *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955–1957: Western Europe and Canada* (Vol. XXVII). Office of the Historian. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1955-57v27/d55>
- van Evera, S. (2016). *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science*. Cornell University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7591/9780801454455>
- van Ham, P. (2001). Security and Culture, or, Why NATO won't last. *Security Dialogue*, 32(4), 393–406.
- Walt, S. M. (2006). *Taming American power: The global response to U.S. primacy* (1st ed.). Norton.
- Waltz, K. N. (1979). *Theory of international politics*. Addison-Wesley.
- Waltz, K. N. (1988). The Origins of War in Neorealist Theory. *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 18(4), 615–628.
- Waltz, K. N. (2001). *Man, the state, and war: A theoretical analysis*. Columbia University Press.
- Wendt, A. (1992). Anarchy is what States Make of it: The Social Construction of Power Politics. *International Organization*, 46(2), 391–425.