

Research Context

This academic year, I had the privilege of working with Dr. Lauren Sukin on her research project *The Role of Nuclear Weapons in U.S. Alliance Politics*. The project explores how U.S. allies assess the credibility of American nuclear guarantees and considers when such assurances might backfire—arguing that strong signals of resolve can, paradoxically, fuel allies’ desire for military independence.

As part of this broader project, I contributed to a book chapter focused on French nuclear dynamics during the 1960s. This was a pivotal period for France, which had just developed its own nuclear arsenal, and for NATO, as European allies began to reconsider their strategic reliance on the U.S. Contrary to assumptions that U.S. protection would deter proliferation, the cases of France and the UK offered important counterpoints.

In my final weeks, I also participated in a literature review on how social media users engage with foreign policy news related to nuclear weapons. This involved identifying research on the types of news people share, sources they trust, and the extent of political polarization—particularly differences in sharing patterns between Republicans and Democrats.

Methodology

My primary task involved analyzing a wide range of archival documents—official letters, meeting summaries, and correspondence between senior officials from France, the UK, and the U.S.—with a focus on NATO’s internal dynamics and nuclear strategy. These documents spanned from the late 1940s to the 1960s, covering both the immediate post-World War II period and the shifting strategic landscape of the early Cold War. This allowed me to trace how nuclear policy evolved alongside broader questions of alliance structure and international security.

While my main focus was on nuclear discussions, the material offered rich insights into other major geopolitical developments. Many correspondences touched on the decline of European colonial empires and the rise of new global threats beyond Europe, reflecting an international order in flux. The documents revealed the increasing importance of regions outside the traditional Euro-Atlantic sphere, foreshadowing a more multipolar global power structure.

Within this context, I paid close attention to how key figures—particularly Charles de Gaulle—positioned France in relation to both NATO and the U.S., often challenging the assumption that American nuclear guarantees were sufficient to deter independent arsenals. I summarized each set of documents, highlighted key quotes, and annotated them using a specific digital format designed for integration into the broader project database. Many of the sources were in French, and I translated relevant excerpts into English to ensure accessibility and consistency across the team’s research materials.

Findings

The archival documents revealed deep strategic tensions within NATO during the early Cold War, especially surrounding nuclear policy and alliance cohesion. A central theme was Charles de Gaulle's persistent push for French autonomy in defense matters, motivated by a desire to reassert France's global status following World War II and a fundamental skepticism about U.S. commitments to Europe.

De Gaulle repeatedly expressed doubt that the United States would truly risk using nuclear weapons to defend Europe in the event of a Soviet attack. One translated quote that stood out came from a 1963 meeting summary: *"Il n'est pas certain que les Américains sacrifieraient Chicago pour Strasbourg."* ("It is not certain that the Americans would sacrifice Chicago for Strasbourg.") This encapsulated France's fear that its security was ultimately subordinate to U.S. domestic calculations—a concern that underpinned its pursuit of an independent deterrent.

In correspondence with British officials, de Gaulle also highlighted what he saw as an imbalance within NATO. While the United Kingdom was treated as a privileged partner and granted more direct access to U.S. nuclear planning, France often felt sidelined. De Gaulle advocated for a tripartite leadership model within NATO, emphasizing the need for a *"Europe des patries"*—a Europe of sovereign nations—rather than integration under U.S. leadership. In one letter to Harold Macmillan, he insisted: *"La France ne saurait rester une puissance subalterne dans une alliance dominée par une seule voix."* ("France cannot remain a subordinate power in an alliance dominated by a single voice.")

The documents also reflected broader geopolitical anxieties. While much of the official discourse centered on Europe, there was growing awareness of global shifts—decolonization, the rise of non-aligned movements, and the increasing strategic relevance of the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. French officials frequently referenced the need to maintain influence in their former colonies and navigate new security threats beyond the traditional East-West divide.

The combination of nuclear uncertainty, intra-alliance asymmetries, and shifting global dynamics made it clear that France's nuclear ambitions were not simply about military capability—they were also a political assertion of sovereignty. As one internal memo stated: *"L'arme nucléaire est le symbole de notre indépendance retrouvée."* ("The nuclear weapon is the symbol of our recovered independence.")

Overall, the findings strongly supported Dr. Sukin's argument that U.S. nuclear guarantees, while intended to reassure allies, can sometimes have the opposite effect. In France's case, the desire for strategic autonomy and distrust of U.S. resolve led not to compliance, but to defiance—and ultimately to the development of an independent nuclear arsenal. This challenges the conventional wisdom that extended deterrence always discourages proliferation and suggests a more complex, context-dependent relationship between reassurance and autonomy within alliances.

Personal Reflections

This experience profoundly deepened my academic interests, exposing me to historical materials and political dynamics I might never have otherwise encountered. Working directly with primary sources gave me a unique, tangible perspective on Cold War history and its enduring relevance today. It also helped me grow intellectually and practically, as I became more confident in assessing material independently and managing my time effectively.

A highlight of the program was the sense of community I found within the US Phelan Centre. From our first meeting in December, I felt part of a close-knit, intellectually stimulating group. Weekly meetings with Dr. Sukin were invaluable—not only for guidance, but also for connecting my daily work to the broader goals of the project and learning from the other team members working with her. While the UGRA role is largely independent, I was struck by how collaborative and engaging the overall experience was.

This assistantship offered a rare behind-the-scenes look into academic research and helped me form meaningful connections with both faculty and peers. Beyond the academic benefits, this experience also enriched my non-academic pursuits. As someone passionate about writing and aspiring to work in international journalism, gaining first-hand exposure to historical documents and strategic decision-making deepened my understanding of how global power operates—not just in theory, but in practice. I'm incredibly grateful for the opportunity: it has been one of the most rewarding aspects of my year at LSE.