4-3 The Challenge of the French Military Budget for the Future
by Dr Jean-Paul Doguet

Date: 13 June 2026 15:00

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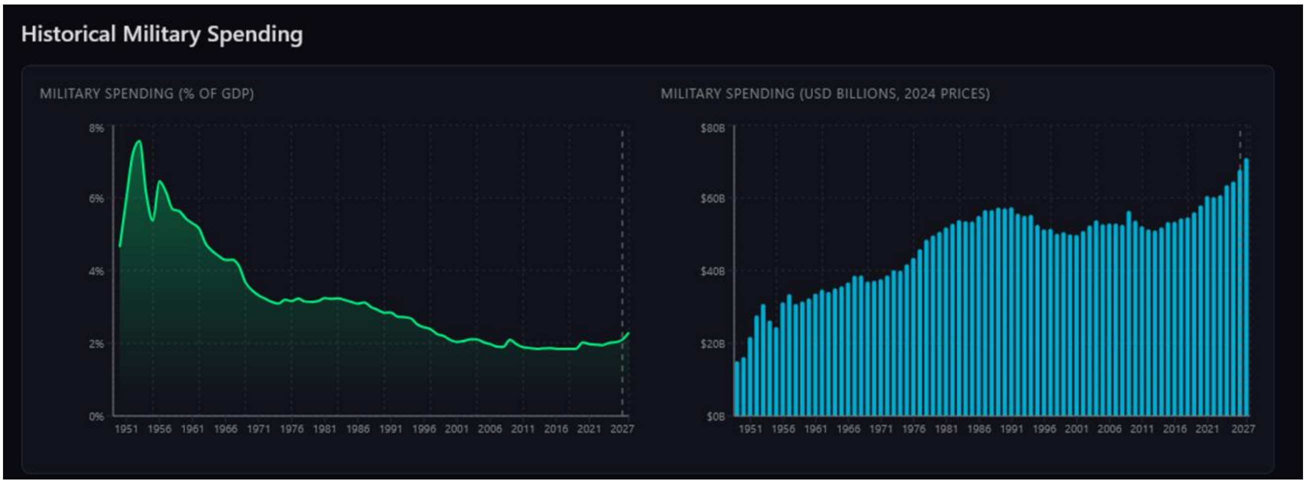
1°Review

I would like, to begin with, to situate France, a **medium sized power**, among other militaries in the world. There are several criteria to rank a country one of them being the manpower of its armies, the personal, which is by no means an index of skill and value. In this ranking France is low on the scale. It has 445 000 men if you include the reserve and the gendarmerie, which is not that impressive. But another criterium is a set of indices, including the amount of budget. The American website Powerranking ranks France as nr 6 in power that is beneath India or China, and even South Korea but above Germany and Britain. However, they also stress the fact that France is now gaining power, due to its effort to strengthen its current military position.

France Military Spending 2026: $69.4B

Let's have a look at the figures regarding its **past** situation. You will see that its military budget is important (a fresh estimate for 2026) in absolute value. It became the 8th or 9th in 2026, and it keeps on rising. It could (it will actually) in the years to come reach an all time high. To understand why this value is so high, even by international standards it is important to understand French past. Here are two curbs, on the left it symbolizes the percentage of military budget within the complete French budget, and on the right side you will see the amount of the military expenses in absolute value. One surprising thing is that both curbs have an opposite direction. The percentage is declining whereas the absolute value is rising. The explanation is quite simple: French growth and prosperity. From 1950 to say 1975 the budget grew and grew, and although its absolute value kept growing the relative percentage declined compared to other domains (say education and healthcare).



You may notice on the left side graphic that there are several peaks in the curbs. One on them corresponds more or less to years after WWII 1951, another one being later, more or less 1955. These peaks correspond to the two colonial wars France had to conduct, in Indochina and then Algeria (the expedition of Suez being a part of it). In Indochina the US became gradually the main spenders (because the enemy was communist). On the other hand, the absolute amount of expenses keeps on rising. Why? Because there were important events in the French military history. Right after the end of our colonial past, France became a nuclear power in 1960. Actually, the decision to build and test a nuclear bomb was made in 1954 by Pierre Mendes-France, but it was finished in 1958 and detonated in 1960. And nuclear warheads are expensive to maintain, they require many other tools and arms like nuclear powered submarines, fighter jets etc.. This is the reason why the curb is constantly rising. If France hadn't developed nuclear weapons, the right curb would be probably much flatter. Maintaining and making nuclear weapons costs a lot. On the other hand, you may see on the graphic that there are clearly THRESHOLDS, that is periods where the curb tends to flatten. One of them is more or less 1987, the starting point of the Perestroika and the end of the cold war, another one being the year 2012, where on the contrary the expenses start again. The reason why there is indeed no gap, no serious disruption in that graphic is that France's military effort was never really twinned with NATO. The main scope was to secure French security **and** independence. So unlike Germany or the Netherlands the link is not that direct with the geopolitical context. You can see that the curb never really descends.

2° Present situation

There are several French specificities to the French military budget. It is not voted every year, but more or less every 7th year. We have in France a type of law called "Loi de programmation militaire" Act of military planning (LPM), which plans the military expenses to come **7 years in advance**. That system is mentioned in our constitution. It was meant by De Gaulle to allow a continuity and prevent any brutal disruption in the French military effort, especially regarding nuclear weapons. This means that the decisions regarding the future must be made now. But this also means that expenses are decided without taking receipts into account.

Another specificity: financing nuclear weapons. The percentage of money devoted to nuclear weapons in the French budget is less and less important. It reached 50% in 1965, 40% in 1970 and 30% in 1985. In 2024 it represented 11% and **in 2026 it represents 13%**. Why such a trend to decline, that could be reversed in the years to come? Because **building** nuclear weapons is very expensive, more expensive than just **maintaining** or even modernizing them. Besides France not only had to maintain them but also to build atomic submarines (SNLE) which were necessary for the credibility of French deterrence, not to forget the **nuclear tests** in Algeria and Polynesia. The percentage of investments in nuclear armaments is now rising again due to the present context.

Why this reversal, not limited to nuclear weapons? Because of two (different) factors : the **Putin factor** and the **Trump factor**. The attack upon Crimea in 2014 and the aggression upon the Ukraine changed the way Russia was seen and led to the conclusion that there was a Russian threat for everybody in Europe. France had to abandon the sale of Mistral helicopter carriers to Russia. They were all finished, but since Russia was then considered an enemy, they were sold instead to Egypt. There is a trend to increasing military budget of course. But we must also notice that the sanctions against Russia have a positive impact upon France's international position in arm trade. It has become the **second exporter of arms**, partially thanks to the Russian setback, due to the embargo. However, it is **also** a consequence of the excellency of French armaments, favored by national commands to national companies.

The second factor is different, it is the Trump factor. The US commitment to defend Europe has become uncertain and there is a strong demand of European autonomy. This has also consequences for the French army. It facilitates the common trade agreements with European partners (like Sweden for instance, who purchased recently 4 NDI French fregates for the defence of Baltic Sea). On the long run it could facilitate the insertion of French nuclear deterrence in European structures and maybe also give France a wider access to European markets. In general, French arm exporters targeted non-NATO countries because NATO countries were traditionally captive markets, preferring the US to French offer.

[France Military Spending 2025: $68B Defense Budget | MilitarySpend]

3°The challenges for the future

At the NATO summit in The Hague in 2025 NATO countries decided to **devote 5% of their GDP to military spendings in 2035**. Our government accepted this challenge. Will France hold this promise? It is far from certain and it is even unplausible, but the trend is here, it cannot be denied. However 3,5% of the French GDP will mean 120 billion of euro and 5% 172 billion of euros. This will mean that the amount of the budget will be **duplicated**. And possibly become superior to education for instance. France is set to increase its military budget to €413 billion by 2030, reflecting President Emmanuel Macron's ambition to reposition France as a central military power in Europe.

According to the French government, the latest defense bill represents a 40% increase compared to the 2019–2025 military programming law. This rise signals a focus on rapid force deployment, cyber defense, space capabilities, and nuclear deterrence. The French Armed Forces Ministry emphasized that the budget aims to prepare the country for "high-intensity conflicts" and to fulfill its NATO obligations. What does actually the €413 Billion cover? The budget is supposed to finance:

- Modernization of the nuclear deterrent and submarine fleet
- Expansion of cyber warfare and space defense programs
- Procurement of Rafale fighter jets and next-gen armored vehicles
- Development of artificial intelligence for command systems

There are several problems regarding this perspective that actually make **unplausible** to reach the 5% percentage for military spendings:

First: politics. Our next general elections will happen in June 2027. I personally don't believe that the RN can win them, a more likely winner is probably Edouard Philippe. However, none of these candidates is likely to reverse the trend to re-armament. For the minimum they could be tempted to "slow down" but not more. Besides the very nature of the LPM makes it very difficult to introduce any disruption in the budget line. I don't think that there will be a real problem regarding politics in France, contrary to what our allies seem to believe. The next president will be kind of forced to carry on.

[France boosts its military budget to €413 billion | Defence Agenda]

Now the real challenge is **financial**. France has a very high indebtment and a deficit in its budget that makes this challenge a problem. Where can we find 170 billion of euros to reach 5% of the budget? « *We must not believe in magical solutions*», warned the minister Clément Beaune. The Plan High Commission drafted in May 2025 a dense document regarding the French budget challenge. It will be impossible to rise to this challenge without scorning funds devoted to global warming or healthcare and education. The current French public debt reaches actually 113% of our GDP (far less than Japan or the US) and our public deficit is one of the highest in Europe, reaching 5,8%. The document suggests several options : to rise the taxes (more than 15 billion every year), to reduce public expenditures (0,7% every year during 5 years). Another option might be to rise the activity rate of the population (5 points) which is in contradiction with the current retirement policy.

The High Commission made an interesting proposal: **developing a common European debt,** creating a **common** 450 billion rearmament programme, with 70 for France. The document insists that this represents only the half of what was spent during the COVID crisis. However, it is very unlikely that

Germany will agree with this idea, since a European programme already exists "ReArm Europe". Without European agreement the whole burden will be on France's shoulders, which will force to make difficult decisions the current government is postponing and transferring to its successors. Even reaching a 3% percentage will be very difficult in terms of budget.

The High Commission has no illusion and suggests that these proclaimed scopes are much too high and ambitious to be realistic. This will certainly make difficult decisions necessary and possibly provoke harsh debates or even tensions with French opinion.