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German Nukes: The Phantom Menace

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The views expressed are the authors' own.

According to some recent press reports, Germany is considering acquiring nuclear weapons.¹ If this were in fact the case, the prospects for international security would indeed be grim: fears of German nuclear militarism would haunt Europe; the European integration process might well be over; NATO could be thrown into a terminal crisis; Russia's reaction would be intense, and global nuclear non-proliferation efforts might be dealt a fatal blow.

Fortunately, this gloomy scenario will not come true because the spectre of a "German bomb" remains as implausible as it has been for over half a century. As a closer look reveals, Germany's so-called nuclear debate is actually a non-debate: After one editor of the respected conservative newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine* speculated about the fading US commitment to European security and, consequently, the need for Germany to think the "unthinkable"², most of those who felt compelled to comment empathically rejected his views.³ Only a handful of observers, including a conservative Member of Parliament, some journalists, and an associate professor, appeared to make the case for German nukes.⁴

At closer inspection, even this crew was not talking about the same thing. While some demanded that Germany acquire a national nuclear deterrent, others were championing a European deterrent based on the British and French nuclear arsenals. Throughout this peculiar non-debate, the German public displayed sound instincts: it ignored the talking heads. The nuclear dog didn't bark.



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Europe's Nuclear Jitters

To be sure, the debate about the future of nuclear deterrence in Europe is continuing. In part because some European observers are concerned about the possible US abandonment of Europe; others view it as a means to re-energise faltering momentum for European integration. However, the debate, such as it is, focuses on using French and British nuclear weapons as the pillars of a European deterrent rather than on creating a new nuclear weapon state in Europe.

Banking on extended deterrence provided by London and Paris, however, is an option fraught with problems: the lack of credibility of UK and French nuclear commitments; the small size and inflexibility of the arsenals of both powers; the UK's "Brexit", etc. Moreover, unlike in NATO, there is no nuclear consensus among EU member states, as evidenced by various anti-nuclear initiatives championed by countries such as Austria. It is therefore very unlikely that this debate will lead to any serious developments, including to increased defense cooperation, regardless of the hype that often tends to surround it. Greater defense efforts and cooperation have yet to be an appropriate tool for advancing broad European integration.⁵

Despite the noise reverberating in the echo chambers of left-wing German (and Russian) internet fora, a German national nuclear option is hardly worth discussing. In addition to the massive political and legal hurdles militating against such a step, virtually nobody wants German nukes, not even Germans themselves. The fact that journalists who are covering the current German nuclear debate are now reverting repeatedly to the same few available sources says as much: the issue has no traction.

The Real Issue: America's Nuclear Role

Does this sound the "all-clear"? Is there nothing to worry about with regard to German and European nuclear musings? Not quite. As insignificant as these debates are in terms of substance, their timing is not. They are a direct result of the now-blatantly obvious Russian revanchism emerging at a time when statements made during the US election campaign seemed to suggest that the US was no longer willing to honour its commitments to the nuclear protection of its allies – the US "nuclear umbrella." While most European observers consider US grievances about fairer transatlantic burden sharing to be legitimate, the impression that Washington was eventually going to end its role as a nuclear guarantor led to a palpable nervousness – not only in Germany, but also far beyond.

The question at issue is not German national nuclear ambitions or European daydreams about an independent European nuclear deterrent, but the United States' role as a linchpin of the established global order. Arms control enthusiasts usually praise the Non-Proliferation Treaty for having contained the global spread of nuclear weapons, yet the non-proliferation successes of the past fifty years were in no small measure due to extended US deterrence. The nuclear abstinence of many states in pivotal geopolitical regions is neither a law of nature nor the result of a universal nuclear 'taboo' and non-proliferation norm. Rather, these states derive their security from a predictable international system – a system that is still upheld by the United States, including through the US nuclear umbrella. If the US were to reduce or even end its role as a nuclear protector, the security perceptions of its allies would



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change radically – and in some cases could even lead them to re-consider their attitudes vis-à-vis nuclear possession. The result could well be the largest wave of proliferation since the dawn of the nuclear age.

For Germany, as well as for other non-nuclear allies of the United States, the priorities should thus be clear: instead of musing about national nuclear options or a “Europeanised” nuclear deterrent, the focus must be on sustaining healthy transatlantic security ties, including in the nuclear domain. The conditions for a consolidated nuclear policy in the NATO framework clearly exist: a more assertive Russia has brought home the continuing need for nuclear deterrence; the erstwhile flirt by some allies, including Germany, with sweeping nuclear abolition schemes is over; and only the “usual suspects” from the political left and Russia still continue to rant about the alleged “illegality” of NATO’s nuclear sharing arrangements.⁶ Even on potentially divisive issues, like a Nuclear Weapons Ban Treaty, the US and its allies are demonstrating a remarkable degree of unity. All this indicates that the logic of US extended nuclear deterrence in a transatlantic framework remains the best option, both politically and militarily. It relieves US allies of worrying about a sudden deterioration in their security environment and thus dampens proliferation incentives.

Conclusion: Back to Basics

The current nuclear debate in Europe, as limited and erratic as it may be, brings home that the image of the nuclear non-proliferation regime as a set of ironclad norms that transcend national interests is a myth. The regime remains highly dependent on – and vulnerable to – specific political and military developments. Hence, this debate is in fact a resounding vindication of an argument that most anti-nuclear arms controllers ritually deny: US extended deterrence is a most effective non-proliferation tool and must be sustained for the deterrence of aggression, the assurance of allies and non-proliferation purposes. The precondition for this arrangement to continue is obvious, however: the US must stand unequivocally behind it.

That is why the US needs to take great care about its declarations and actions in this regard. Doubts about the credibility of the US nuclear umbrella are risky. They will degrade both the deterrence of aggression and the assurance of US allies. The latter will not lead Germany to go nuclear, but perhaps quite a few others, not least in Asia. The key to arresting corrosive Western nuclear debates, including in Germany, lies not only in US allies paying more for the common defense, which is perfectly legitimate and a message the allies have gotten, but in Washington speaking and behaving in accord with its unique role as the nuclear guarantor of established order.



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1. The London-based “Economist” even used a German title. See, “Eine deutsche Atombombe,” Germans are debating getting their own nuclear weapon, *The Economist*, 2 March 2017 (<http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21717981-donald-trumps-questioning-natos-credibility-has-berlin-thinking-unthinkable-germans-are>); see also Max Fisher, “Fearing U.S. Withdrawal, Europe Considers Its Own Nuclear Deterrent,” *New York Times*, 6 March 2017 (https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/06/world/europe/european-union-nuclear-weapons.html?_r=0).
2. Berthold Kohler, „Nach Trumps Wahlsieg: Das ganz und gar Udenkbare,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 26 November 2016 (<http://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/trumps-praesidentschaft/nach-donald-trump-sieg-deutschland-muss-aussenpolitik-aendern-14547858.html>).
3. See Gunther Hellmann, Carlo Masala et. al. “Deutschland braucht keine Atomwaffen,” *Spiegel Online*, 11 December 2016 (<http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/gastbeitrag-deutschland-braucht-keine-atomwaffen-a-1125247.html>).
4. See Andrea Shalal, „German lawmaker says Europe must consider own nuclear deterrence plan,” *Reuters*, 16 November 2016 (<http://www.reuters.com/article/uk-germany-usa-nuclear-idUSKBN13B1GO>); Maximilian Terhalle, „Deutschland braucht Atomwaffen,” *Tagesspiegel*, 23 January 2017 (<https://causa.tagesspiegel.de/politik/europa-und-die-weltweiten-krise/deutschland-braucht-atomwaffen.html>). For a more thoughtful evaluation, see Ulrich Kühn, “The Sudden German Nuke Flirtation,” *Carnegie Endowment*, 6 December 2016 (<http://carnegieendowment.org/2016/12/06/sudden-german-nuke-flirtation-pub-66366>).
5. See Michael Rühle, “Daydream Believers: Assertive rhetoric about European security autonomy rings hollow,” *Berlin Policy Journal*, 23 November 2016 (<http://berlinpolicyjournal.com/daydream-believers/>).
6. For a rebuttal of such criticisms, see William Alberque, “The NPT and the Origins of NATO’s Nuclear Sharing Arrangements,” *IFRI Proliferation Papers*, No. 57, February 2017 (https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/alberque_npt_origins_nato_nuclear_2017.pdf).

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