



ANALYSIS

GERMANY AND EXTENDED DETERRENCE

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Introduction: Extended Deterrence as a Constant of German-U.S. relations

Extended nuclear deterrence has become a central pillar of the international order. Today, well over 30 countries in Europe and the Asia-Pacific region are considered to be under the U.S. “nuclear umbrella.” Critics of this concept often assert that the U.S. would never risk its own destruction in order to protect its allies; hence extended deterrence was nothing but a convenient fiction. Yet, despite this inherent credibility dilemma, the United States and its allies consider this arrangement to be of existential importance. As Lawrence Freedman has observed, nuclear weapons “can have a deterrent effect well beyond their logical limits.”¹ By explicitly extending its nuclear (and conventional) deterrence to other countries, Washington sends a powerful signal that it regards their security as a fundamental national security interest.

Germany’s preferences regarding the U.S. nuclear “umbrella” has shifted over times depending on the state of transatlantic relations. What has remained constant over many decades, however, has been the concern that the United States might withdraw its protection, be it because geopolitical or power shifts left it with no other choice, or because of a major political alienation between Europe and the United States. In addition, like in other European countries that relied on U.S. military protection, there always remained a tension between craving this very protection while at the same harboring concerns that this arrangement cemented an unhealthy infringement of national sovereignty and status. In a similar vein, Germany’s need for extended deterrence had to be balanced against the need not to have these security arrangements interfere with specific national interests, e.g., “Ostpolitik” vis-à-vis the Soviet Union in the 1970s.

Yet another constant is the fact that Germany has cultivated only a small group of experts who were familiar with the U.S. strategic debate and thus could explain (and advise on how to respond to) shifts in U.S. defense policy or posture. The most important aspect of continuity, however, is the fact that Germany’s perception of the health of extended deterrence is directly linked to how it perceived the overall health of the U.S.-German or U.S.-European relationship. Hence, despite lingering doubts about the credibility of the U.S. extended deterrence, its value has largely been taken for granted, and thus discussed only when unwelcome political or military changes seemed to threaten its continuation.

¹ Lawrence Freedman, “Disarmament and Other Nuclear Norms,” *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (2013), p. 102, available at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/0163660X.2013.791085>.



Extended Deterrence Becomes Real

The signing of the Washington Treaty in April 1949 marked the beginning of U.S. extended deterrence for Western Europe. Four years after World War II, the Treaty, which later evolved into the NATO alliance, was hardly more than a unilateral U.S. security guarantee for a devastated and demoralized Europe. Although West Germany would not join NATO until 1955, its exposed geographical situation made it a military centerpiece of Western defense against the Soviet Union and its Eastern European allies. This postwar phase also saw the beginning of a pattern of cooperation between the United States and West Germany that would last for decades and went far beyond the military realm. After having suffered an unprecedented military and moral defeat, West Germans eagerly embraced close ties with the United States, as this country seemed to not only epitomize values like freedom and democracy, but also displayed a degree of magnanimity with its former wartime enemy that Germans very much appreciated.

West Germany's accession to NATO in 1955 marked its return into the international community. Although the need for Germany to rearm was highly contested among the German population, the country's political leadership was aware that building new armed forces was the necessary price to pay in order to achieve the broader objective of getting West Germany back into the group of civilized nations. A year before joining NATO, West Germany had accepted a legal obligation to abstain from producing nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons.² Within a rather short period of time, the German *Bundeswehr* was stood up, a sizeable force featuring modern, mostly U.S.-made, equipment. Due to conscription, the West German armed forces possessed considerable potential to grow in crisis and wartime, making it a major asset for the collective defense and deterrence in a region with little strategic depth.

The United States had played a major role in getting West Germany into NATO. It was strong enough to quell the fears of a resurgent Germany that were still prevalent among that country's neighbors, and its massive investments in European security gave its warnings that Germany was essential for the defense of NATO's Central Front considerable credibility. When the concept of a European Defense Community failed in 1954, because the French Parliament was more afraid of a resurgent Germany than of the Soviet Union, the path was clear for an arrangement that became essential for West Germany's security policy: notwithstanding occasional European defense initiatives, the country's key provider of hard security would be the United States.

² The formula that Germany would not produce Weapons of Mass Destruction *on its own territory* was briefly discussed as a potential loophole to allow for a nuclear capability, see Peter Siebenmorgen, Franz Josef Strauss, *Ein Leben im Übermaß* (Munich: Siedler, 2015), p. 127.

The Paradoxes of Extended Deterrence

The difficulties of organizing a coherent defense for Western Europe contributed to the symbiotic relationship between West Germany and the United States. The lack of strategic depth led Washington to lobby for West German membership in NATO, and for decades that country would remain the major staging ground for U.S. and other allied forces. By dint of geography, West Germany hosted U.S. nuclear weapons early on, and most German political and military leaders embraced the logic of nuclear deterrence. This acceptance of nuclear deterrence, however, was not without caveats. First, while West German military planners were constantly worried about the Warsaw Pact's conventional superiority, they wanted to avoid a situation where the United States would initiate nuclear use on German soil. The fear that nuclear employment would result in the devastation of the very country that one was supposed to defend became a recurring theme in the German discourse on nuclear deterrence and extended deterrence.

These fears led to a second caveat regarding deterrence: a growing distinction between deterrence and warfighting. Despite the large numbers of battlefield nuclear weapons deployed in Western Europe, and despite their potential military value in defending against Soviet and Warsaw Pact tanks, West Germans did not want to contemplate the actual battlefield employment of these weapons, given their fearful consequences. Hence, while it was seen as advantageous to threaten the Soviet Union with nuclear weapons, for example to prevent Moscow from massing its tanks, any actual employment was increasingly deemed unthinkable.

This differentiation between deterrence and warfighting became most evident in the debates following the Kennedy Administration's taking office in 1961. It argued that a U.S. deterrence threat of "massive" nuclear retaliation was likely credible only to deter a Soviet attack on the U.S. homeland, but not a Soviet attack on an ally. Given the Soviet ability to strike the U.S. homeland in response, the concern was that Washington's massive nuclear threat on behalf of a distant ally simply lacked sufficient credibility to deter. To address this questionable credibility of the nuclear umbrella, the Kennedy Administration proposed "Flexible Response" as an alternative. This was a clear step in favor of emphasizing the conventional defense of allies and away from a massive nuclear deterrent threat to Moscow as the basis for extended deterrence.

However, "Flexible Response" met with fierce resistance, not only from West Germany, but by all European allies. They disliked the strategy's emphasis on conventional forces, which they deemed not only too expensive but also to be of a lesser deterrence value than nuclear weapons. And they equally disliked the idea that nuclear deterrence would become less central, fearing that this would weaken deterrence overall. The U.S. argument that massive nuclear retaliation was likely incredible for extended deterrence because it burdened the U.S. with risks it was not willing to bear, did not have traction among the allies.

Consequently, it took several years before "flexible response" was officially adopted by NATO. The controversy showed that for West Germans, very much like for their European allies, their understanding of what constituted credible extended deterrence differed

markedly from U.S. views. For Washington, what mattered most was to reduce risks to its own security while maintaining the U.S. extended deterrence commitment under more difficult circumstances. The European allies, by contrast, did not focus on the political and military intricacies of the U.S. extended deterrence construct, but rather on their estimate of the overall deterrence value of nuclear weapons. Paradoxically, what the U.S. understood as a necessary adjustment to allow the continuation of extended deterrence credibility was interpreted by the allies as an attempt by the United States to reduce its commitment to European security. Such differences were to become a recurrent issue in the U.S.-German security relationship.

Germany's Short-Term Nuclear Flirtation

West Germany's embrace of U.S. extended deterrence remained firm, as the United States was seen as the ultimate guarantor of peace in Europe. However, some West German political leaders repeatedly toyed with ideas that were at odds with the country's obligation *not* to acquire its own nuclear deterrent. Doubts about the U.S. commitment, concerns about a lack of influence over U.S. nuclear planning and employment, uncertainties regarding the country's political status, but also the perception of nuclear power becoming a crucially important emerging technology led West Germany to not only explore the peaceful use of nuclear energy, but also investigate opportunities for a national nuclear weapons option.

In November 1957, the defense ministers of France, Italy and West Germany signed an agreement on the joint production of nuclear weapons. However, the rapid failure of this project led Bonn to reconsider. Instead of trying to complement the transatlantic nuclear relationship with a European option, the focus moved to changing the nuclear dimension of Germany's relationship with the United States, to allow for a better reflection of German interests. Accordingly, Germany, as well as some other European countries, pushed Washington to allow allies a greater say in nuclear strategy and employment planning.³ Not least because of Washington's desire to have its allies sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), the United States sought to accommodate these allies. While one such attempt at accommodation—the ill-conceived Multilateral [European nuclear] Force—failed, the standing up of the NATO Nuclear Planning Group and deeper involvement of allies in the nuclear mission provided the necessary steps that many European countries deemed sufficient to preserve their interest in a world in which the NPT would freeze the status quo and their lack of independent nuclear capabilities.⁴

³ On the many different approaches pursued by Bonn to minimize the NPT's impact and to increase its own say on nuclear matters, see Andreas Lutsch, "In Favor of 'effective' and 'non-discriminatory' Non-dissemination Policy: The FRG and the NPT Negotiation Process, 1962-1966," in Roland Popp, Liviu Horovitz and Andreas Wenger (Eds.) *Negotiating the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty: Origins of the Nuclear Order* (London/New York: Routledge, 2017), pp. 36-57.

⁴ For the crucial role of an ally's perceived political status in determining the success or failure of U.S. non-proliferation policy, see Jonas Schneider, *Amerikanische Allianzen und nukleare Nichtverbreitung. Die Beendigung von Kernwaffenaktivitäten bei Verbündeten der USA* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2016).

Irrespective of their ongoing discussions with Washington on greater participation in the formulation of nuclear strategy, successive West German governments opposed the NPT as a means by the established nuclear weapon states to cement their unique power status at the expense of non-nuclear countries. It took intensive lobbying by Washington to cajole Bonn into signing the Treaty in 1969.

A degree of German unease remained, however, which was reflected in a statement published in the context of West Germany's ratification of the NPT in 1975. In this statement, Germany reiterated certain conditions that it regarded as central to its interpretation of the NPT, namely that the Treaty would not hinder the eventual development of a nuclear armed European Union, and, more importantly, that Germany would remain protected by NATO.⁵ Although this statement came at a time when fears of a German bomb had long been put to rest, it was a reminder that the NPT, although often hailed as one of the most important security agreements, was in essence the result of a complex bargain—a bargain that might hold only as long as the security situation of its signatories was not fundamentally altered.

Challenges to Extended Deterrence

Extended deterrence again became a theme of discussion in the context of the U.S.-Soviet Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT), which resulted in a number of agreements in 1972. In Europe, such superpower bilateralism was often regarded with suspicion, as it always entailed the risk of Washington negotiating “over the heads” of Europeans, thus neglecting allied concerns. The case of SALT, however, appeared particularly worrying, as the agreements were a reflection of the Soviet Union having achieved strategic nuclear parity with the United States., thereby challenging the credibility of extended deterrence. The U.S. sought to address European concerns by emphasizing the flexibility of the U.S. nuclear arsenal and U.S. “limited nuclear options,” which would allow for limited nuclear escalation threats in defense of the allies.⁶ Still, some West German analysts claimed that strategic parity amounted to a power shift that would make extended deterrence less credible.⁷

Throughout the 1970s, West German worries about the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence co-existed with worries about the consequences of what was perceived as a dramatic shift in U.S. policy away from détente and towards a more confrontational approach vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. Whereas West Germany felt that it should try to at least salvage some elements of its accommodation with Moscow (“Ostpolitik”), the United States looked at concrete Soviet actions, from intervening in Afghanistan and putting pressure on Poland's

⁵ See “Statement of the Federal Government in the context of the deposit of the ratification instruments,” May 2, 1975, reprinted in Matthias Küntzel, *Bonn und die Bombe: Deutsche Atomwaffenpolitik von Adenauer bis Brandt* (Frankfurt/New York: Campus Verlag, 1992), p. 329.

⁶ See Keith B. Payne, “James Schlesinger's Lifelong Creed of Public Service and the Schlesinger Doctrine,” *Information Series*, No. 439 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press), March 6, 2019, available at <https://www.nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/IS-439.pdf>.

⁷ See Andreas Lutsch, *Westbindung oder Gleichgewicht? Die nukleare Sicherheitspolitik der Bundesrepublik Deutschland zwischen Atomwaffensperrvertrag und NATO-Doppelbeschluss* (Oldenbourg: De Gruyter, 2020), chapter VI.

democratic movement, to Moscow's continuing buildup of strategic and theater nuclear forces, and concluded that a conciliatory policy vis-à-vis the Soviet Union was no longer possible or desirable.

Irrespective of these differences, however, the strategic community of both countries looked at Soviet military developments with considerable alarm. With Moscow's nuclear force expansion, notably including the deployment of a new category of "Eurostrategic" nuclear missiles, Moscow appeared bent on "de-coupling" the United States from the European theatre. Consequently, NATO's ailing nuclear deterrence posture was considered to be in urgent need of repair, with many analysts arguing in favor of deploying new U.S. medium-range nuclear missiles in Europe.⁸

Deterrence and Reassurance

These Western attempts to re-dress the potentially negative consequences of Soviet nuclear modernization led to a major crisis among the NATO allies, in particular between West Germany and the United States. U.S. plans to deploy a new type of nuclear weapon in West Germany, the "enhanced radiation weapon," had to be cancelled due to political resistance in Bonn as well as public outcry. While this controversy about the "neutron bomb" was largely a bilateral U.S.-West German affair, the use by anti-nuclear politicians and activists of slogans and imagery to exploit perennial nuclear fears turned out to be a harbinger of a much more severe controversy that followed shortly thereafter: NATO's so-called dual-track decision of December 1979.

This decision, according to which NATO would respond to Soviet "Eurostrategic" nuclear missiles (largely the SS-20) with the deployment of somewhat similar U.S. Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) sparked the largest anti-nuclear protests in Europe's postwar history, including in Germany. Paradoxically, Germany had been a major driving force behind NATO's INF deployment decision, with Chancellor Schmidt arguing as early as 1977 that the West was about to face a dangerous imbalance in "grey area" weapons, i.e. nuclear systems that were not covered by existing arms control agreements.⁹ However, even though NATO's "dual-track" decision contained an arms control offer to Moscow, it became a lesson of the limits of Western nuclear policy.

For the first time in decades, issues of nuclear deterrence, including the consequences of the employment of nuclear weapons, were discussed by a broader public that proved unprepared for such delicate matters. Already worried by the breakdown of détente and by the confrontational rhetoric by some members of the Reagan Administration, many Europeans became outright afraid of an impending war that would engulf Europe while sparing the "sanctuaries" of the Soviet Union and the United States.

⁸ See *Ibid.*, chapter VII.

⁹ See Noel D. Cary, "Review Essay: Helmut Schmidt, Euromissiles, and the Peace Movement," *Central European History*, Vol. 52, No. 1 (March 2019), pp. 148–171.

The fact that Chancellor Schmidt was brought down by his own party's anti-nuclear base was another reminder of the risks a government would run by making the case for a publicly controversial nuclear deployment decision, even if this decision had been taken by all NATO allies. This entire debate revealed, in the words of British military historian Michael Howard, that the focus of Western governments on acquiring new military capabilities to restore deterrence had led them to lose sight of the political imperative of reassuring their own publics.¹⁰

The crisis was further aggravated by the U.S. Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), a research program to investigate ballistic missile defense technologies that, according to President Reagan, was intended to overcome mutual nuclear deterrence via a "balance of terror," which he criticized as immoral.¹¹ Although Reagan Administration officials were quick to point out that U.S. homeland missile defense could augment rather than replace deterrence, and that a less vulnerable United States would be a more reliable/credible protector, European views remained mostly negative. Like with the shift from massive retaliation to flexible response more than 20 years earlier, Europeans, including West Germans, worried less about America's vulnerability concerns and extended deterrence risks than about the motives they believed were behind this apparent shift: a desire to shed the burden of extended deterrence for Europe, by allowing the U.S. to withdraw into "fortress America" behind a missile defense shield.¹²

In stark contrast to large parts of the German strategic community and the media, the West German Government sought to calm the waves. Realizing the low likelihood of an "astrodome"-type defense, but acknowledging the new technical opportunities such a research program might provide, Germany, like several other European nations, concluded agreements with the U.S. on technical cooperation. The mostly negative reception of missile defense remained, however, all the more so as it was seen as a major obstacle for meaningful arms control with the Soviet Union.

Ultimately, the INF and SDI controversies had a happy ending. Moscow finally accepted Western proposals, which resulted in the historic 1987 INF Treaty that banned this entire weapon category, while SDI became a major instrument for eliciting Soviet arms control concessions. However, European governments had learned that any public discussion of the nuclear dossier risked becoming emotionally charged and politically counterproductive and, hence, had to be avoided. The price they had to pay for ending this crisis—to allow arms control to trump nuclear strategy considerations—was considerable.

The point of NATO's dual-track decision—namely, to prevent a "de-coupling" of Europe from the U.S.—had almost disappeared in the heated debate. SDI, in turn, had introduced the specter of the United States leaving the system of mutual deterrence altogether, thus highlighting the tensions between a strategic deterrence strategy based on mutual nuclear

¹⁰ See Michel Howard, "Reassurance and Deterrence: Western Defense in the 1980s," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 61, No. 2 (Winter, 1982), pp. 309-324.

¹¹ See Donald R. Baucom, *The Origins of SDI, 1944-1983* (Lawrence, KS: Kansas University Press, 1992), chapter 8.

¹² See Christoph Bertram, "Strategic Defense and the Western Alliance," *Daedalus*, Summer, 1985, Vol. 114, No. 3, pp. 279-296.

vulnerability and the perennial instinct of the protector to minimize the risks stemming from its extended deterrence commitments. However, the crises also demonstrated the continued willingness by Bonn and Washington to maintain the foundation of their defense and security relationship. This partnership allowed both countries to play a key role in winding down the Cold War when the Soviet empire started to collapse.

Extended Deterrence after the Cold War

The end of the East-West conflict, which resulted in German unification, the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, and, ultimately, the collapse of the Soviet Union, reinforced the role of the United States as a key player in European security. Like in the 1950s, when Washington had acted as honest broker for West Germany's re-joining of the democratic club, Washington was once again instrumental in ameliorating European fears of a reunified Germany. Germany, in turn, was clear about its preference to see the United States remain in Europe. The enlargement of NATO to include the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe, was to a large degree inspired by the United States and Germany.

The end of the erstwhile Soviet threat allowed the NATO enlargement process to evolve with little apparent concerns about matters of nuclear deterrence in general and extended deterrence in particular. Washington reduced the number of U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe dramatically, and NATO's "three nuclear no's," which ruled out the deployment of nuclear weapons in the new NATO members states, pre-emptively de-fused any potentially self-destructive political debate on the subject among allies or with Russia.¹³ All new member states accepted NATO's nuclear position, however, and joined the Nuclear Planning Group. Moreover, the security challenges confronting the West, notably the threat of terrorism in the wake of the "9/11" attacks, put extended deterrence concerns further on the back burner. In large part to demonstrate its solidarity with the United States, Germany sent forces to Afghanistan, becoming the third-largest troop contributor of the U.S.-led international coalition. Transatlantic disagreements, such as the U.S.-German rift over the war in Iraq in 2002 and 2003, had no extended deterrence dimension, although they pointed to a more fundamental divergence in both countries' threat perceptions.

The Obama Administration's nuclear disarmament rhetoric led to a certain degree of "bandwagoning" in Europe, with the German Foreign Minister championing the removal of the remaining U.S. nuclear weapons from Europe. The fact that the United States, Germany's traditional protector, was leading the quest for nuclear disarmament, made it appear to be the new transatlantic mainstream opinion, and put the traditional pro-nuclear Atlanticists on the defensive.¹⁴ However, German disarmament proposals were heavily caveated,

¹³ Final Communiqué, Meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Defence Ministers Session, December 18, 1996, available at https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_25057.htm?selectedLocale=en.

¹⁴ For a typical endorsement of the Obama Administration's policy, see Harald Müller, "Security in a Nuclear-weapons-free World: Thinking out of the Box," in David Atwood and Emily J. Munro (Eds.) *Security in a World without Nuclear Weapons: Visions and Challenges* (Geneva: Geneva Center for Security Policy, 2013), available at (<http://dam.idesso.com/files/2y10TehBC3qMHopw7eNDBc0sY3qTEQhzNW9PuYpfH1wzbhtmurNFq>); for a critique

revealing a desire not to upset existing arrangements too much, too soon. NATO's 2010 Strategic Concept, in turn, gave lip service to the goal of a nuclear-free world by putting the emphasis on creating the conditions for such a world, thereby effectively pushing it aside. When Washington finally made it clear that NATO's nuclear dimension was not going to be undermined, the issue faded away.

What remained, however, were worries about Germany's continuing willingness to remain one of several European "DCA countries," i.e. allies who hosted nuclear weapons and provided certified dual-capable aircraft (DCA) for NATO's nuclear mission. Since their military value was questioned by some,¹⁵ and since purchasing the logical successor for the ageing *Tornado* aircraft, i.e., the U.S. *F-35*, was deemed expensive and potentially controversial, successive German governments delayed the decision and implemented life-extension measures for the existing *Tornado* fleet. Given Germany's important role in NATO, some analysts worried that an eventual German decision to leave this unique part of NATO's nuclear sharing arrangement might tempt other countries, notably Belgium and Holland, to follow suit.

The fact that NATO's collective decision not to deploy nuclear weapons on the territory of the new member states had increased the responsibilities of the established DCA countries was never discussed. Without a concrete threat to worry about, Germany—like many of its neighbors—paid little attention to nuclear matters. On the contrary, the brief flirtation with nuclear disarmament also showed that a considerable part of the German strategic community was willing to discard traditional calculations about alliance cohesion and extended deterrence for the sake of manifestly infeasible global disarmament hopes.

Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in March 2014 fundamentally changed security perceptions in Europe, including in Germany. In 2008, Russia had conducted a short campaign against Georgia to arrest its Western orientation. However, in 2014, the first time since World War II, European borders had been changed by force. Consequently, NATO's statements started to put much greater emphasis on deterrence, both conventional and nuclear. Moreover, after 20 years of focusing on expeditionary missions, the emphasis began to shift back to NATO's core function of collective defense. Given the disappointing results of "out-of-area" engagements in Afghanistan and Libya, such a return to NATO's original purpose seemed all the timelier. However, since Russia was not seen as a threat to NATO proper, but only to its immediate neighbors like Ukraine or Georgia, many Allies, including Germany, did not implement the 2014 agreed decision to raise defense expenditures to at least 2 percent of their GDP. To strengthen deterrence, Germany participated in the

focusing on the incompatibility of Obama's nuclear disarmament vision with extended deterrence see Michael Rühle, "Global Zero" and the future of non-proliferation," in, Reiner K. Huber, Klaus Lange, and Daniel F. McDonald (Eds.), *Implications of Nuclear Disarmament for Global Security*, Hanns-Seidel-Stiftung, *Studies & Comments*, No. 11, 2010, available at <https://latinamerica.hss.de/download/publications/suc11-Implications1.pdf>.

¹⁵ See Karl-Heinz Kamp and Robertus Remkes, "Options for NATO Nuclear Sharing Arrangements," in, Steve Andreasen and Isabelle Williams (Eds.) *Reducing Nuclear Risks in Europe: A Framework for Action, The Nuclear Threat Initiative* (Washington, D.C.: Nuclear Threat Initiative, 2011), pp. 76-95, available at https://media.nti.org/pdfs/NTI_Framework_full_report.pdf.

deployment of NATO forces on the territory of the geographically exposed allies in NATO's East. However, it also remained among those allies who continued to believe that Russia could be accommodated with diplomatic and economic engagement.

Across the West, the events of spring 2014 led to a renaissance of the concept of deterrence. In Germany, the number of articles on that subject increased markedly. This discussion was further amplified by a debate on hybrid threats, which was sometimes portrayed as a new and successful way of war. Although much of this debate often lacked intellectual rigor, it contributed to a greater awareness that Europe was not at peace, and that Germany had to play its part in what looked increasingly like a competition between the West and its challengers, be it Russia or an emerging China, or both.

Renewed Doubts about Extended Deterrence

Since West Germany's inclusion into the democratic West, and in particular after the end of the Cold War, German observers repeatedly harbored doubts about the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence. While some focused on the logical inconsistencies of the very concept, or criticized U.S. or NATO force postures as being ill-suited for such a task, most observers worried about a gradual U.S. disengagement from Europe and European security.¹⁶ Such a disengagement, it was feared, would also lead to the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Europe, leaving the European states to their own devices and, bereft of their "American Pacifier,"¹⁷ possibly provoking greater competition among them. U.S. views, according to which a lower American profile would force the Europeans to cooperate more closely, were not shared by German observers, who maintained that the U.S. political and military presence and leadership in Europe was indispensable for the Old Continent's stability.

Most Germans understood that the United States, as a global power, also had to pay attention to other regions, notably the Asia-Pacific. German media also reported extensively on the increasing political polarization in U.S. domestic politics, as well as on the generational change that would inevitably weaken the transatlantic bond that had been forged in the Cold War. However, the view prevailed that the continuing interest of the United States in remaining a "European power" (including for political and economic reasons) would rule out any major short-term changes. Moreover, since President Obama's "Asian pivot" did not materialize, and with Russia's militarism requiring more rather than less U.S. engagement in Europe, Washington did not appear to be moving away from the Old Continent. Perennial U.S. complaints about having to shoulder an unfair amount of the common defense burden, it was hoped, could be alleviated by gradually increasing allied defense expenditures. All in all, Germans assumed that the fundamental transatlantic bargain would remain intact, and so would extended deterrence.

¹⁶ Such worries were expressed, *inter alia*, with respect to the Vietnam War, the Nixon Doctrine, or the various Congressional amendments that sought to punish insufficient European defense efforts with an eventual U.S. troop withdrawal.

¹⁷ Josef Joffe, "Europe's American Pacifier," *Foreign Policy*, No. 54 (Spring, 1984), pp. 64-82.

The 2016 U.S. election campaign seemed to turn Germany's complacency into a panic. Candidate Donald Trump built his campaign on the transactional narrative that the United States had been taken advantage of by free-riding allies. He called NATO "obsolete," and mused about Asian allies getting their own nuclear weapons so as to relieve the United States of the extended deterrence burden.¹⁸ Views like those of Candidate Trump had always been around, but this was the first time that a serious contender for the U.S. Presidency voiced them so unequivocally. For some German observers, this meant that the United States was about to shed its extended deterrence commitments.

Consequently, Germans increasingly talked openly about an alternative means of protection: a German or European nuclear capability. Within a few months, several articles appeared that made the case for various nuclear schemes to replace U.S. extended deterrence.¹⁹ Such proposals, which included the case for a "German bomb," did not gain much traction, however, all the less so as the Trump Administration, while severely criticizing Allies for not spending enough on defense, did not question extended deterrence, and indeed emphasized extended deterrence in its policy documents.

However, the nervousness displayed by the German strategic community had once again demonstrated how vital U.S. extended deterrence is for German security. Moreover, as Germany had emerged as the main object of the President's wrath—culminating in his decision to redeploy some U.S. troops from Germany to Poland—the Trump Presidency became a traumatic period in German-American relations. While Central and Eastern European allies viewed Trump's policies in a more favorable light, many German observers regarded them as the beginning of a much rougher and less predictable transatlantic relationship. The shift in U.S. attitudes vis-à-vis global engagement in general and Europe in particular finally seemed to have arrived. When Joe Biden defeated Trump in the 2020 election, the German media labelled him the last true "trans-Atlanticist" President, indicating that a return to the status quo pre-Trump was no longer possible.²⁰

The "Zeitenwende" and Its Nuclear Dimensions

Russia's second assault on Ukraine in February 2022 came as a shock to the entire West, but particularly to Germany. Berlin had to admit that its policy of still seeking areas of accommodation with Russia after 2014 had failed, and that the new security situation required a major re-orientation of German security policy. Chancellor Scholz proclaimed a

¹⁸ See "Japan and South Korea hit back at Trump's nuclear comments," *CNN Politics*, March 31, 2016, available at <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/03/31/politics/trump-view-from-south-korea-japan/index.html>.

¹⁹ For a comprehensive overview, see Ulrich Kühn, Tristan Volpe and Bert Thompson, "Tracking the German Nuclear Debate," Carnegie Endowment, August 15, 2018 (updated March 5, 2020), available at <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/08/15/tracking-german-nuclear-debate-pub-72884>; Hans and Michael Rühle, "German Nukes: The Phantom Menace," *Information Series*, No. 419 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, March 22, 2017), available at https://nipp.org/information_series/ruhle-hans-and-michael-ruhe-german-nukes-the-phantom-menace-information-series-no-419/.

²⁰ Ines Pohl, "US president opts to prioritize trans-Atlantic ties," *Deutsche Welle*, February 3, 2022, available at <https://www.dw.com/en/opinion-us-president-opts-to-put-trans-atlantic-ties-over-popularity-at-home/a-60988438>.

“Zeitenwende” [a turning point in history], which included additional funding for the German armed forces, a commitment to nuclear sharing, and a substantial increase in Germany’s troop presence in Lithuania.²¹ Germany also became the second-largest contributor of military and financial aid to Ukraine after the U.S.

For years, Germany had been debating the deplorable state of its armed forces, which had been under-funded by successive governments. Russia’s belligerence now injected a sense of urgency into this debate, as many observers no longer could rule out a Russian attack on NATO’s Eastern allies. While the United States is now heading into another Presidential election, there is speculation about how Washington might draw down the U.S. role in European security and shift the support of Ukraine to a European responsibility. Germany is now confronted with a double dilemma: an aggressive Russia to its East, and the prospect of a potentially unpredictable future U.S. Administration to its West. What has followed has been almost a repetition of the 2016 debate, only with more participants, and with a stronger focus on a European instead of purely German independent nuclear option.²²

As with the brief debate in 2016, the arguments for a European nuclear deterrent were advanced mostly by academics. Maximilian Terhalle, a German academic who in 2016 had been the most vocal advocate of a German national option, and whose subsequent publications toyed with different nuclear schemes, proposed in February 2024 that Germany should buy 1.000 mothballed warheads from the United States, preferably while President Biden was still in office.²³ Since his proposal neither covered crucial technical aspects, such as delivery means, nor political questions, such as the effective destruction of the NPT by such a move, it had no positive echo. Rather, it was mocked by other discussants as an example of the intellectual recklessness of some participants in Germany’s “Euro-Nukes” debate.²⁴ Similarly, Herfried Münkler, a well-known and widely respected German academic, received criticism for his proposal to have a “nuclear suitcase rotating” among major European countries.²⁵ Despite—or because—of this criticism, Münkler never elaborated on his proposal.

²¹ Policy statement by Olaf Scholz, Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany and Member of the German Bundestag, February 27, 2022 in Berlin, available at <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/policy-statement-by-olaf-scholz-chancellor-of-the-federal-republic-of-germany-and-member-of-the-german-bundestag-27-february-2022-in-berlin-2008378>.

²² See Michael Rühle, “German Musings about a European Nuclear Deterrent,” *Information Series*, No. 571 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, January 3, 2024), available at https://nipp.org/information_series/michael-ruhle-german-musings-about-a-european-nuclear-deterrent-no-571-january-3-2024/; for a comprehensive analysis from a liberal arms control perspective see Ulrich Kühn (Ed.), *Germany and Nuclear Weapons in the 21st Century: Atomic Zeitenwende?* (London: Routledge Press, 2024), available at, <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/oa-edit/10.4324/9781003341161/germany-nuclear-weapons-21st-century-ulrich-k%C3%BChn>.

²³ Maximilian Terhalle, quoted in, “Uns fehlen mindestens 1000 strategische Nuklearsprengköpfe” (“We are lacking at least 1.000 strategic nuclear warheads”), *Die Welt*, February 14, 2024, p. 5.

²⁴ See Karl-Heinz Kamp, “Nuclear Hot Air: The German Debate on Nuclear Weapons,” German Council on Foreign Relations, *External Publications*, February 20, 2024, available at, <https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/nuclear-hot-air-german-debate-nuclear-weapons>.

²⁵ Herfried Münkler, quoted in, “Europa muss atomare Fähigkeiten aufbauen” *Stern*, November 30, 2023, p. 73.

Ekkehard Lübckemeier, a retired German diplomat whose earlier career included working as a defense analyst in a think tank of the Social Democratic Party, made a strong case for a European nuclear deterrent based on the French arsenal.²⁶ In addition to the usual arguments about having to prepare for a disengagement of the United States, he also focused on issues such as sovereignty. Following the argument of the late Egon Bahr, the so-called architect of German Ostpolitik, he hinted at the fact that in a nuclear world, only countries with nuclear weapons could be truly sovereign.²⁷ In February 2024, he published a “Plan B for Germany,” building on the Franco-German Aachen Treaty of 2019, which contains a mutual support clause. In the longer run, he argued, both countries should do more to align their policies, bring their strategic cultures closer together, undertake common armaments projects and draft common arms export guidelines. French nuclear weapons could be based in Germany, while the Franco-German Security and Defense Council would be augmented with a nuclear consultation group.²⁸

Former German Ambassador Wolfgang Ischinger, a frequent commentator on international security affairs, joined in the debate as well, arguing that Germany had for too long ignored French offers to bilaterally discuss the European dimension of its nuclear deterrent. Ischinger argued that a common criticism launched against such proposals, namely that only the French President would decide over any nuclear use, was “ridiculous,” since the same was true for the American President in the context of U.S. extended deterrence. However, in order to avoid any misunderstandings, he suggested that the United States be included in confidential Franco-German talks on that subject.²⁹

Uniformed military analysts have been largely silent in this debate. A notable exception was an article by Jacques Lanxade, Denis MacShane, Margarita Mathiopoulos, and Klaus Naumann. In a paper that was published both by a German newspaper and the U.S. Atlantic Council, they argued that Europe had to prepare for the inevitable U.S. shift to the Asia-Pacific theater. This preparation should also entail the nuclear dimension of European defense. To this end, the authors made a concrete proposal that deserves to be quoted in full:

Europe needs a credible nuclear deterrent of its own, under NATO command. Only a trilateral British, French, and German nuclear umbrella, combined with a US umbrella, all under the command and control of the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) will be a credible deterrent for Russia. This would require that France and Germany find a solution for equipping their joint Future Combat Air

²⁶“Nuklearmacht Europa. Braucht Europa gemeinsame Nuklearwaffen? Ein Für und Wider. Pro: Aufbruch zu einer europäischen Selbstverteidigungsunion,” *Internationale Politik*, January 2, 2024, available at, <https://internationalepolitik.de/de/nuklearmacht-europa>.

²⁷ In 2009, Bahr had written that Europe could exert self-determination only on the level of conventional defense, see “Der nukleare Traum des Michael R.,” *Die Welt*, May 2, 2009, available at, https://www.welt.de/welt_print/article3662161/Der-nukleare-Traum-des-Michael-R.html.

²⁸ Eckhard Lübckemeier, “Voilà, ein Plan B für Deutschland,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, February 17, 2024, p. 10.

²⁹ Wolfgang Ischinger, “Ständiger Sitz im Sicherheitsrat ist nicht zwingend notwendig” (A Permanent Seat in the UN Security Council is not absolutely necessary), *Handelsblatt*, September 20, 2023, available at, <https://www.handelsblatt.com/meinung/kolumnen/geoeconomics-staendiger-sitz-im-sicherheitsrat-ist-nicht-zwingend-notwendig/29400146.html>.

System—a new generation of advanced fighter jets—and the German F-35 dual capable aircraft with French nuclear weapons. Germany would not have its own nuclear weapons, so this arrangement would not violate the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. The NATO command structure must be tailored in such a way that Europe can fight a conflict in which neither Americans nor Canadians may wish to get involved, while taking advantage of NATO commands and systems. To this end the deputy SACEUR has to be European, and a headquarters-based Combined Joint Task Force must serve as his or her operational command.”³⁰

This proposal went unnoticed in Germany, presumably because it contained too many politically and militarily unrealistic elements.³¹ While other observers have also argued for a NATO command structure to function independently from Washington, their rationale is not driven by nuclear considerations but rather by preparing for eventual conventional contingencies that would not involve the United States, or in case the U.S. were to initiate its gradual disengagement from NATO.³²

As during the brief debate in 2016, several German politicians also publicly made the case for a European nuclear deterrent. Katarina Barley, a former cabinet minister who had become the Social Democratic Party’s top candidate for the European Parliament, argued that a European nuclear deterrent was an issue that warranted consideration.³³ Her Christian Democratic colleague, Manfred Weber, also expressed support for exploring such an option.³⁴ Several other German politicians made similar remarks. However, the German Government did not embark on any speculation about a Euro-deterrent. On several occasions, Chancellor Scholz stated categorically that current arrangements in NATO plus the independent French and British nuclear arsenals were sufficient, thereby indirectly criticizing some within his own party for their public musings about an EU-based

³⁰ “Europe needs a nuclear deterrent of its own,” *New Atlanticist* (Atlantic Council), July 11, 2023, available at <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/europe-needs-a-nuclear-deterrent-of-its-own/>. Adm. Lanxade was Joint Chief of Staff of the French Armed Forces and served as a defense advisor to French President Francois Mitterrand; Denis MacShane is a former UK Minister of Europe and a former UK delegate to the Parliamentary Assembly of NATO; Gen. Naumann served as chairman of the Military Committee of NATO and was Germany’s Chief of Defense Staff. Margarta Mathiopoulos is a lecturer on foreign and defense policy.

³¹ Moreover, the nuclear issue was only a small part of the paper. As the title of the German original version (“Wir brauchen eine Europäisierung der Nato”—We need a Europeanization of NATO) implied, the authors focused on much broader questions.

³² See Nicholas Williams and Simon Lunn, *NATO’s revival of collective defence and the challenge of national Commitments*, European Leadership Network, July 2024, available at <https://europeanleadershipnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/NATOs-revival-of-collective-defence-and-the-challenge-of-national-commitments.pdf>.

³³ See James Rothwell, “EU will need own nuclear deterrent if Trump wins, Scholz ally warns” *The Telegraph*, February 13, 2024, available at <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2024/02/13/eu-nuclear-deterrent-nato-trump-olaf-scholz/>.

³⁴ See Jack Schickler, “Centre-right leader Weber supports Macron’s call for European nuclear deterrent,” *EuroNews*, May 10, 2024, available at <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/05/10/centre-right-leader-weber-supports-macrons-call-for-european-nuclear-deterrent>.

deterrent.³⁵ Some parliamentarians, including from the major conservative opposition party, agreed, arguing that Germany's involvement in NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements was the preferable path, and that an EU-based deterrent was prohibitively expensive.³⁶

A Lack of Specifics

With the exception of the aforementioned proposals by Lübckemeier as well as the article by Lanxade, Naumann et.al., most other contributions to the Eurodeterrent-debate are devoid of details. While the need for such a deterrent—to have a “Plan B” in case the United States disengages from Europe—is sometimes cogently explained, almost all authors shy away from offering any detailed steps to implement such a project. Most of them seem to pursue rather minimalist aims, i.e., to explore how far the French would be willing to go towards “Europeanizing” their deterrent, and to launch a broader strategic debate about the future of nuclear deterrence in Europe. In part, their reluctance may be explained by a desire to avoid the impression that one was welcoming any U.S. disengagement. However, the main reason for their vagueness is clearly a lack of expertise.

Equally noteworthy is the fact that most German defense experts who joined the debate did so either in order to speak out against a Eurodeterrent, or to shed some light on the obstacles that such a project would have to overcome. Many pointed out that President Macron's 2020 speech,³⁷ which supporters of a Eurodeterrent often referred to as the key indicator for a French change of mind, was rather vague and hardly differed from statements by previous French Presidents. For example, Germany's premier security policy think tank, the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), published several studies that provided more detail on the difficulties of implementing a Eurodeterrent, and also argued that a second term of Donald Trump should not be equated with an end of extended deterrence.³⁸

It is worth noting that the sceptics regarding a Eurodeterrent option constitute a heterogeneous group. Criticism of such proposals comes from traditional Atlanticists, who see Germany's security best served by maintaining strong ties with the United States, but also from commentators on the liberal-left side of the political spectrum, who generally

³⁵ See, “Kanzler Scholz gegen eigenen europäischen Atomschirm,” *Der Spiegel online*, February 16, 2024, available at <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/olaf-scholz-gegen-einen-europaeischen-atomschirm-a-b88c1513-c633-4e8d-8882-87a2262f1dbc>.

³⁶ See Max Biederbeck, “Ein EU-Atomschirm ist finanziell nicht umsetzbar,” *Wirtschaftswoche*, February 14, 2024, available at <https://www.wiwo.de/politik/deutschland/nato-ein-eu-atomschirm-ist-finanziell-nicht-umsetzbar-/29653748.html>.

³⁷ *Speech of the President of the Republic on the Defense and Deterrence Strategy*, February 7, 2020, available at <https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2020/02/07/speech-of-the-president-of-the-republic-on-the-defense-and-deterrence-strategy>.

³⁸ See, for example, Liviu Horovitz and Lydia Wachs, “France's Nuclear Weapons and Europe: Options for a better coordinated deterrence policy,” *SWP Comment*, No. 15, March 2023, available at https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2023C15_Frances_NuclearWeapons.pdf; and, Liviu Horovitz and Elisabeth Suh, “Trump II and US Nuclear Assurances to NATO: Policy Options Instead of Alarmism,” *SWP Comment*, No. 17, April 2024, available at https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2024C17_TrumpII_NATO.pdf.

oppose nuclear weapons and want Germany to play a greater role in nuclear disarmament, e.g., by signing the Nuclear Ban Treaty. This scepticism by different political camps is another factor that suggests that Germany is not likely to actively push for a Eurodeterrent, let alone for a national option.

Acknowledging the dearth of nuclear expertise in Germany, some observers have argued that the first step for Germany was to “raise the nuclear IQ,” i.e. to make a more determined effort to educate decision-takers and the successor generation.³⁹ Predictably, this has drawn criticism by liberal observers, who see this as a thinly veiled attempt to promote traditional pro-deterrence arguments. However, Russia’s war against Ukraine has changed German security perceptions so much that the traditional arguments by the liberal arms control community now have little traction.⁴⁰ By contrast, a concerted attempt by the government, universities and think tanks to teach the basics of deterrence appears most timely, as it would help to put the German nuclear debate on a more solid intellectual foundation.

Alternatives to U.S. Extended Deterrence?

Notwithstanding the flurry of publications about a German national or a Euro alternative to U.S. extended nuclear deterrence, Germany has very few alternative options that appear realistic.

A German national nuclear option remains politically inconceivable in the absence of a dramatic worsening of the threat environment. While there are many technical hurdles—Germany has abandoned nuclear power generation and thus no longer has an infrastructure that could support a nuclear weapons program—the main obstacles are political. Even though proponents of such a national option argue that a radically changing security environment would inevitably change the goalposts of what would be considered politically acceptable, a “German bomb” nevertheless would send political shockwaves far beyond Europe, evoking memories of that country’s militaristic past. Germany would likely risk provoking counter-coalitions of mistrustful European nations, thus ending up in a worse situation than before. Finally, while the German population is not principally anti-nuclear, it is difficult to assume that it would support a national nuclear program.⁴¹ Hence, any quest for nuclear self-sufficiency is more conceivable in a broader European context.

³⁹ See Karl-Heinz Kamp, “Den nuklearen IQ Deutschlands stärken: Ein Plädoyer für mehr Realismus und eine besser informierte Debatte,” *Working Paper*, No. 2/24, Federal Academy for Security Policy, available at https://www.baks.bund.de/sites/baks010/files/arbeitspapier_sicherheitspolitik_2024_2.pdf.

⁴⁰ For an overly dramatic assessment of the current German nuclear debate see Ulrich Kühn, “Germany debates nuclear weapons, again. But now it’s different,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, March 15, 2024, available at <https://thebulletin.org/2024/03/germany-debates-nuclear-weapons-again-but-now-its-different/>.

⁴¹ Throughout West Germany’s postwar history, certain individuals had been advocating a “German bomb,” usually because they harbored doubts about the U.S. willingness to defend Europe, or because they wanted Germany to free itself from U.S. “hegemony.” However, these voices were considered exotic and never received much attention. For one such example, see Peter Scholl-Latour, “Deutschland muss atomar aufrüsten,” *CICERO*, March 19, 2014, available at https://www.focus.de/politik/cicero-exklusiv/deutschland-muss-atomar-aufruesten-cicero-exklusiv_id_1797719.html.

The most plausible option in the current debate is Germany's closer cooperation with France. After Britain's "Brexit" from the EU, France is the only nuclear power within the Union, and Berlin would most likely seek to extend its long-standing cooperation with Paris in defense matters into the nuclear realm. This option, however, would suffer from major deficiencies in potential practice.

First, the French nuclear arsenal is quite small, and thus does not send the powerful deterrence message the U.S. arsenal is capable of sending. Moreover, as a highly centralized country, France is particularly vulnerable to a nuclear strike on key decision centers (i.e. Paris), which could limit its bargaining power in a crisis.

Second, Paris—like Washington—will maintain full control of the decision-making process on nuclear targeting and employment. The fact that France is the only NATO ally that does not belong to the Nuclear Planning Group suggests that Paris will not accept any arrangement that might infringe on its nuclear sovereignty. Moreover, the July 2024 elections pushed France further to the left, reinforcing doubts about the leeway of President Macron on nuclear matters. Indeed, the election results appear to have made an unlikely option even more remote. Consequently, the hope expressed by some German observers that by contributing financially to the French *force de frappe*, Germany could buy nuclear protection, is likely to be dashed.

Third, France continues to harbor doubts about Germany's stance on all things nuclear, given its occasional anti-nuclear impulses on nuclear weapons as well as its complete—and largely ideologically motivated—exit from nuclear power generation. All this suggests that a Franco-German nuclear partnership would be a nervous one, and not remotely on a par with the established relationship with the United States.

A considerable wildcard regarding the French role in an eventual Eurodeterrent is the Future Combat Air System (FCAS), a complex network of fighter jets and drones. Currently led by France and Germany, with Spain and Belgium also participating, the plane is supposed to be dual-capable, which would imply the option of carrying French warheads. This has led some observers, including the aforementioned Lanxade and Naumann, to speculate about Germany engaging in a French-based nuclear sharing system, akin to the current one centered on the United States.⁴² However, the FCAS project has been in political and financial turmoil from its very start, with some insiders expressing doubts that it will ever come to fruition. At the very least, persistent disagreements between Germany and France over technical specifications, funding and political control of the project would threaten considerable delays and cost overruns, which renders speculations about Franco-German nuclear sharing moot at this stage.

Another option would be to adopt a broader approach and also include the United Kingdom in a new nuclear deterrence architecture for Europe. However, the U.K.'s arsenal is closely tied to the United States and NATO, which would likely lead London to approach European-only schemes with great hesitation. Even if the new Labour Government will turn out much more pro-European than its predecessor and has already reached out to Berlin on

⁴² See also Liviu Horovitz and Lydia Wachs, "France's Nuclear Weapons and Europe," op. cit.

defense issues, and irrespective of the U.K.'s investment in the modernization of its nuclear arsenal,⁴³ the nuclear dimension is unlikely to be on the front-burner in the UK's relationship with the EU or Germany. Hence, while German skepticism about a French-based solution may grow due to political changes within France, London, which has committed its nuclear capabilities to NATO, is unlikely to replace Paris as the centerpiece of a future Eurodeterrent.

The argument that some countries in Central and Eastern Europe would hasten to acquire their own nuclear deterrent⁴⁴ appears even more unrealistic, as the technical and political hurdles would seem too high. Judging from these countries' past behavior, it seems far more likely that they would seek bilateral agreements with the United States, emphasizing their willingness and ability to pay their dues as good allies.

In sum, the most plausible steps that Germany might take would be to launch an institutionalized dialogue—bilaterally with France, multilaterally within the EU—on nuclear deterrence. This could lead to modest innovations, such as seminars and table-top exercises, visits to French and British nuclear installations, and, eventually, the participation of EU countries in French or British nuclear exercises. However, these steps would have to be designed so as not to interfere with or even contradict ongoing activities within NATO. A true leap forward could be achieved if France (and, eventually, the UK) would publicly declare that they would extend their nuclear deterrent to cover all of EU/NATO Europe and establish a corresponding EU-based planning group.

While the additional deterrent value of these two arsenals has long been acknowledged in NATO statements, a more explicit commitment to a genuine European “nuclear umbrella” might assure European, including German, publics that, even after a U.S. retreat from Europe, nuclear deterrence was still available. Even if many analysts would be quick to uncover the flaws of these new arrangements, a change in rhetoric may offer the simplest quick fix to avoid a situation where Europe would feel that Washington had pulled the rug from under their security.

How Should the U.S. Respond?

Any move by allies—in Europe or the Asia-Pacific region—towards a national nuclear arsenal would constitute a major blow to U.S. non-proliferation policy. This policy was a driving force behind the NPT, for nuclear sharing arrangements, and for extended deterrence more generally. All these steps were intended to assure allies that their security concerns

⁴³ For different views on the U.K.'s nuclear options see, “How could the UK augment its nuclear forces?,” *Britain's World, Council of Geostrategy*, March 28, 2024, available at <https://www.geostrategy.org.uk/britains-world/how-could-the-uk-augment-its-nuclear-forces/>. See also, UK Government, Defence Nuclear Enterprise, *Delivering the UK's Nuclear Deterrent as a National Endeavour*, March 2024, available at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6622702b49d7b8813ba7e576/Defence_Nuclear_Enterprise_Command_Paper_v6.pdf.

⁴⁴ See Ulrich Speck, “A separate nuclear umbrella for Europe? The prospect of a Trump victory is spurring a new debate over nuclear weapons,” *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (English edition), January 18, 2024, available at <https://www.nzz.ch/english/the-prospect-of-a-trump-victory-spurs-debate-over-nuclear-weapons-in-europe-ld.1774685>.

were being taken care of, and that they would not need to acquire nuclear weapons of their own. The logic of this policy remains eminently sound, as it remains in the U.S. interest to contain the spread of nuclear weapons and thereby avoid the risks of an unpredictable multi-nuclear world.

At the same time, however, the United States is seeking relief from the burden of international commitments and has become increasingly impatient with what it considers continuing European foot-dragging on providing stronger conventional forces. In this context, former President Trump's transactional view of the transatlantic security relationship, which even led him to publicly question the U.S. role as a protector of its allies, was unusual in terms of style, but not in terms of its underlying message: Washington's patience was running out. Trump's strategy worked in part, as some European allies, who had already become worried about Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea, were keen to demonstrate their unflinching commitment to the transatlantic security pact by increasing their defense budgets.

However, as the German nervousness about extended deterrence showed, the same approach will not work in the nuclear domain, because Germany, in the current context, cannot "do more" in terms of nuclear burden-sharing, except arresting anti-nuclear reflexes with a strong commitment to nuclear sharing and by a clear rejection of other steps that could de-legitimize nuclear deterrence, such as the Nuclear Ban Treaty. Instinctively, Chancellor Scholz's "Zeitenwende" speech contained such pro-nuclear messages, thereby forcing his own, latently anti-nuclear political party to accept the basics tenets of transatlantic security and extended nuclear deterrence. Assuming that Germany will continue on this path, it would have delivered as much as a non-nuclear ally can deliver.

Should the United States (and some of its European allies) conclude that Russia's continued belligerence requires the deployment of new nuclear systems in Europe, Germany would likely face a potentially controversial debate that it would much rather avoid. While such deployments would constitute a clear reaffirmation of U.S. extended deterrent, and thus would be welcomed by parts of the German strategic community, any German government would be hard pressed to "sell" such a decision, if the threat posed by Russia has not increased substantially. The initial discussion on the U.S.-German agreement to deploy U.S. long-range *conventional* missiles in Germany starting in 2026, in which some observers have evoked the specter of another INF-debate, indicates the potential difficulties of such decisions.⁴⁵ As pointed out above, Germany's perception of the health of extended deterrence depends less on specific force posture decisions, but on its perception of the health of the overall German-U.S. relationship and the character of the threat. Hence, a cordial transatlantic relationship would be the prerequisite for successfully managing eventual new nuclear deployments.

⁴⁵ See Thorsten Jungholt, "Was hinter dem Tomahawk-Deal des Kanzlers steckt," *Die Welt*, July 12, 2024, available at <https://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article252481964/Marschflugkoerper-in-Deutschland-Was-hinter-dem-Tomahawk-Deal-des-Kanzlers-steckt.html>).

In sum, while Washington is well advised to continue its pressure on the European allies—and notably Germany—to do more on conventional defense, raising doubts about the continuing U.S. commitment to extended nuclear deterrence for Europe would be self-defeating. As Germany's nervous debate about an alternative European nuclear option demonstrates, any American signaling of a withdrawal of its extended nuclear deterrent would lead only to a political alienation that both countries can ill-afford.

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