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A nuclear consensus

Why Germany and France must strengthen their cooperation in questions of nuclear proliferation and arms control

Read this article in German.

Opinion polls show it year after year: French and Germans do not see eye to eye when it comes to nuclear issues. This is true concerning nuclear energy, which is being phased out in Germany but, across the Rhine, will remain a major part of the energy mix for years to come.

This holds true even more so for nuclear weapons. In France, the so-called consensus on nuclear deterrence is visible in the lack of popular or political opposition to the modernisation of nuclear weapons. In Germany, the public is to a large extent hostile to nuclear weapons and movements are periodically ongoing to challenge Berlin's participation in NATO's nuclear mission.

Despite this divergence, both partners are facing similar challenges and have come to adopt closer perspectives in a range of nuclear-related issues. This rapprochement should be used to increase cooperation. In the current environment, there's a real opportunity for the two countries to work together and enhance their respective weight and capacity to influence the global nuclear order.

Divergent paths

The French-German history on nuclear weapons could not have started in worse circumstances. Indeed, it is largely because of the fear of a resurgent Germany that the government of Pierre Mendès-France eventually decided to pursue military nuclear capacity. While secret talks between Germany, Italy and France evoked the possibility of a joint nuclear force, the two countries eventually made opposite choices on that front.

France, under the influence of General De Gaulle, built a completely

autonomous nuclear force and distanced itself from NATO. Germany, on the other hand, had little choice but to play the Alliance card, request closer integration with Washington on nuclear matters in particular and the stationing of nuclear weapons on its territory. The lack of understanding did not end there. As France's arsenal grew, it deployed land-based nuclear-tipped missiles whose limited range targeted West Germany, a capacity that was of course criticised by Bonn.

Despite these divergent paths, the end of the Cold War also led to a common assessment of challenges in other domains of the nuclear order.

At the end of the Cold War, the two partners adopted different stances once more. France remained committed to its nuclear deterrent and made several attempts to evoke its 'Europeanisation.' Buoyed by a feeling of optimism, Germany's pacifism grew stronger with a rising feeling that the time of nuclear deterrence was over and that international relations could now be managed through cooperation and norms.

The anti-nuclear public stance, which expressed itself in mass demonstration during the late 1970s and early 1980s, found an echo in several political parties. Specifically, foreign ministers such as Joschka Fischer and Guido Westerwelle spelled out ambitious disarmament policies and called for the withdrawal of nuclear weapons from the territory of Germany.

A rapprochement to deal with common challenges

Despite these divergent paths, the end of the Cold War also led to a common assessment of challenges in other domains of the nuclear order. While France and Germany had historically been outliers or reluctant participants in efforts to control the spread of nuclear technologies, they reversed course in the early 1990s and participated jointly in the strengthening of non-proliferation measures.

This took shape in initiatives favouring export control mechanisms and supporting organisations such as the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) or norms such as the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT). The two countries also increasingly worked together to try and solve the proliferation crises in Iran and in North Korea. These cooperative efforts in the negotiations with Iran that led to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015.

The Ukraine crisis and the deterioration of relations between world powers also led to a convergence on strategic matters. Increasingly, Paris and Berlin have shared the view that NATO's solidarity should be a priority and that the security of the Alliance required a reinforcement of capacities and language, including on nuclear deterrence. This does not mean that the assessment is exactly the same in the two capitals. Nuances can be perceived on the right mix of conventional capacities, nuclear assets, anti-missile deployments and arms control efforts. Globally however, analysts in both countries tend share a similar threat evaluation and to agree on the policies necessary, within and without NATO, to mitigate these menaces.

Many areas of cooperation

In this context, several areas of cooperation have been explored and should strengthened in the future. On strategic affairs, the election of Donald Trump has increased instability inside NATO and damaged the transatlantic relations. France and Germany have an obvious interest in defending the European interests within the Alliance. In a coordinated fashion, they have bigger leverage to influence the decision-making process, on issues such as the defence of the continent, the burden-sharing question or the future of arms control. Outside of NATO, their efforts to bolster a European defence require a global understanding of the security imperatives of all stakeholders.

In a cooperative manner, the two partners could explore ways for progress, however limited they might be in the short term.

On non-proliferation, the American withdrawal from the JCPOA has dealt a blow to the credibility of the regime. Together with the UK, France and Germany have been instrumental in forging the EU response. This should continue in the future. While Washington is currently lacking legitimacy to lead the struggle against the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, Germany and France can help the EU fill the gap by securing the Iranian nuclear deal but also supporting export control regimes, enhancing international institutions and pushing the evolution and adaptation of norms prohibiting the proliferation of these weapons.

Finally, the apparent re-emergence of nuclear weapons as an instrument in European security policy should not mask the need for efforts in the field of disarmament. This is particularly visible in Germany, where public opinion remains strongly committed to a nuclear-free world. For

many Germans, sincere efforts to advance the cause of disarmament are necessary to make the reliance on nuclear weapons acceptable for the time being. These efforts are also necessary to show that disarmament is possible in a step-by-step approach and as a response to more radical initiatives such as the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.

France can and should show more understanding when it comes to the German perspective here. In a cooperative manner, the two partners could explore ways for progress, however limited they might be in the short term. Such efforts are currently ongoing in the field of conventional weapons and new technologies. Keeping an open dialogue on disarmament and arms control should, given the context, already be read as a positive sign and should lead to joint propositions to limit the danger posed by nuclear weapons.



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