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Europe's nuclear boomerang

Demanding a common European deterrent is counter-productive – and could lead to even more nuclear weapons states

Read this article in German or Russian.

The goal of a world free of nuclear weapons is one of the guiding principles of German foreign policy. A few weeks ago, the conservative politician Johann Wadephul told the Tagesspiegel newspaper: 'Being a good European means cooperating not only on environmental policy, but has to do so also on armaments policy.' He continued: 'Germany should be prepared to contribute to nuclear deterrence with its own assets and capabilities. In exchange, France should place the deterrent under the joint command of the EU or NATO.'

Calls for nuclear weapons in response to international crises are setting back the debate by decades. Although the guiding principles of German foreign policy are often vague and fail to meet the expectations of various players, one thing is clear. Germany is at least dabbling in a new political approach: multilateralism instead of solo action, diplomacy instead of *force de frappe*. A Franco-German or European nuclear weapons programme would be consistent with the German government's political approach in recent years.

Germany and France are already closely working together when it comes to defence, including on the new Future Combat Air System. But a stronger Franco-German or European cooperation on nuclear matters would go against any Alliance for Multilateralism.

Incidentally, France offered Germany limited participation in the French nuclear arsenal in 2007, under President Sarkozy. The idea was that Germany would contribute to the costs of France's nuclear force in exchange for having a say. The German government turned down the offer. As then Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier pointed out, Germany is a signatory to the Non-Proliferation Treaty and has no aspirations to possess nuclear weapons. This attitude should to still hold true today. Participating in the French nuclear programme would not be

a brief fling, but a marriage for the long term. And it would have consequences for the entire arms control and disarmament regime. Any future 'divorce' would be inevitably painful.

The nuclear boomerang effect

Nuclear weapons are weapons of mass destruction. An effective nuclear deterrent relies on the will and the ability to use these weapons. This strategy is neither a foundation for a unified Europe, whose security policy outlook varies considerably from the Baltics to Portugal, nor can it be expected to form the basis for a cooperative approach to other countries. How can Germany argue persuasively against other nations' nuclear armament or the nuclear ambitions of North Korea and Iran if it signs up to a new European nuclear deterrent initiative? In practice, this would be even less consistent than the nuclear sharing with the US that is already practised by NATO.

Yes, Germany needs to develop an independent foreign and security policy, and this includes taking on more responsibility in some areas. But participating in nuclear weapons programmes cannot be a part of this in the long term. And it makes no difference whether this debate is being spurred by the current political style of US President Trump, or whether Marine Le Pen will one day be in charge of France's nuclear capabilities. Decision-makers change, but the concept of a nuclear deterrent has shaped international cooperation for the past 75 years. It has given rise to a system in which certain nations have the right to possess an instrument that can annihilate all of mankind, while others will never be permitted to do so.

It is time for the debate on nuclear weapons to finally arrive in the 21st century.

It would be naive to assume that this situation can result in long-term stability. We have already seen the erosion of this approach in recent years. North Korea continues to test nuclear weapons and long-range missiles even in the face of international sanctions. The relationship between Russia and the West is more strained than ever before. The conflict with Iran is intensifying again following the breathing space created by the adoption of the JCPOA in 2015. In autumn 2019, even Turkish President Recep Erdogan demanded the right to nuclear weapons. Nuclear deterrence does not make for stability. Quite the opposite, in fact: It encourages other players to aspire to possess nuclear weapons, because they see the 'nuclear

card' as the trump card in the fight for influence and recognition in the international community.

Technology and communication is fallible

The idea of a new European nuclear deterrent can be founded only on a belief that there will be a manageable number of rational players and that communication and technology will work flawlessly. The accelerated processes of communication and decision-making are changing the available political leeway, especially in crisis situations. In this context, the risks of the nuclear deterrent are typically underestimated in public discourse, if not denied altogether. We do not even have to go back as far as all the false alarms throughout history, which brought Russia and the US to the brink of nuclear war on more than one occasion. As recently as January 2018, during the escalation of the conflict between North Korea and the US, there was a period of 48 minutes when it was unclear as to whether a missile was headed for Hawaii or not. It turned out that the Emergency Management Agency (EMA) had incorrectly triggered an information chain that sent out an SMS warning to residents.

Meanwhile, a recent Pentagon report identified security vulnerabilities in the software of the new B61-12 nuclear bombs, leaving them open to cyber-attacks. Studies on the nexus between new technologies and nuclear weapons show that the development of autonomous weapons, artificial intelligence and offensive cyber-capacities increases the risk of nuclear deployment.

Technical systems and human decisions are fallible. As such, political decision-makers are responsible for minimising the security risk to the population. This means rejecting the nuclear deterrent. As a 'good European', to borrow Johann Wadephul's words, this would be a truly preventive security policy measure. Not only in Germany's national interests, but also in the interests of the wider community. The deployment of just one nuclear weapon over just one city, whether accidentally or deliberately, would have devastating consequences for which the International Red Cross says there would be no suitable aid. The potential fallout would not stop at the borders of the EU, or indeed of the Kashmir region if the conflict between the nuclear powers of Pakistan and India were to escalate.

It is remarkable that the discussion on the nuclear deterrent should be couched in the paradigms of the Cold War – and the disconnect between

the attitudes of the German conservatives and its voters is no less surprising. In summer 2019, a Greenpeace survey found that 89 percent of supporters of the Christian Democrats (CDU) surveyed would be in favour of Germany signing up to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. This indicates their condemnation of these weapons of mass destruction. Almost three-quarters of CDU supporters surveyed also explicitly stated that they would be in favour of nuclear weapons being removed from Germany. Approval among supporters of most other parties is even higher.

It is time for the debate on nuclear weapons to finally arrive in the 21st century. If it does not, clinging on to outdated paradigms will simply continue to boomerang back on us and create new nuclear weapons states.



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