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Anything but routine

The deployment of US missile systems in Germany is not a risk-free silver bullet, nor is it without any alternatives

It was arguably the most surprising news to come out of last week's NATO summit: In four short sentences, the US, together with the German government, announced its intention to station American land-based medium-range missiles in Germany by 2026. The joint declaration reads as concisely as if it were a mere routine act. However, this step will have far-reaching consequences in terms of security policy. It is indicative of the lack of a serious strategic debate in Germany.

The declaration provides for the future deployment of three conventional, land-based systems, so-called stand-off weapons, with ranges of over 2 500 km in some cases: land-based Tomahawk cruise missiles (Typhon weapon system), Standard Missiles 6 (SM-6) in the surface-to-surface missile version and and 'Dark Eagle' hypersonic missiles, which are still in the test phase. All three are part of the Multi-Domain Task Force, a military unit structure of the US Army that was introduced in 2017. There are now five such task forces worldwide, all of which are due to be fully operational by 2028. At least three of them are focused on the Pacific region. Since 2021, one has been led out of Germany and serves US operations in Europe and Africa. The task forces integrate land, air, sea, space and cyber forces to flexibly engage enemy targets. The main objective is to overcome so-called anti-access and area denial zones in which the enemy seeks to restrict access and movement.

The German Federal Defence Minister Boris Pistorius considers the deployment of the US systems necessary to 'close a serious capability gap in Europe', which has also been identified by the National Security Strategy. The need for medium-range systems also arises from current NATO plans — prioritising such a development for years. Behind this are considerations for deterring Russia, but – and this often remains unacknowledged in public – also for possible warfighting in a crisis. After all, the basis of successful deterrence is always military capabilities that make it possible to threaten and destroy enemy targets in the event of war. At the same time, signalling such consequences is intended to prevent an attack in the first place.

Offensive strategies for defensive means?

In the event of war, the US stand-off weapons deployed to Germany would probably be used primarily against Russian integrated air defence systems and command and control facilities. For the US, they are an elementary component of a comprehensive warfighting concept that is intended to enable operations across the land, air, sea, space and the cyber domains. This approach is also decisive for NATO: The Alliance's 2019 military strategy already emphasises horizontal escalation options. According to this strategy, in the event of a Russian attack, a defence should not only be launched directly at the site of the attack, for example in the Baltic states. Instead, NATO is focusing on the possibility of expanding a war geographically to exert pressure elsewhere. Stand-off weapons would provide the necessary flexibility for this.

Ideally, the hope is that Russia would be forced to cease its original attack. But there is also another option: Moscow could escalate to the nuclear level in view of its own conventional inferiority in the event of war. Even pre-emptive strikes would be conceivable should the Kremlin come to the conclusion that conventional but precise stand-off weapons in Europe would be able to threaten its own nuclear capabilities.

The truth is that Russia has already deployed land-based medium-range weapons in addition to a large number of air and sea-based systems.

A smart defence policy must anticipate such possible developments to be able to prevent them. It is therefore particularly surprising that Russia's reactions have hardly played a role in the public commentary on the deployment decision. Moscow itself has so far kept a low profile. Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov merely said that a military response would be developed calmly.

The truth is that Russia has already deployed land-based medium-range weapons in addition to a large number of air and sea-based systems. The centrepiece is a 9M729 cruise missile (SSC-8), the development of which contributed significantly to the end of the INF Treaty on Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces in 2019. This treaty banned corresponding land-based weapons systems with a range of 500 to 5 500 kilometres in Europe.

Strategies for escalation management

While Russia still denies that the aforementioned cruise missile has a

range of more than 500 kilometres, President Vladimir Putin proposed a new moratorium on land-based medium-range missiles after the INF Treaty was dissolved in 2019 and 2020: The country would not develop and deploy its own systems as long as the US also refrained from doing so. In return, Moscow offered mutual verification measures. In December 2021, the US took up the proposal and agreed in principle to inspections.

The Russian war against Ukraine put an end to this plan. The idea of a moratorium has now also become obsolete due to the planned deployment of US medium-range missiles. It is to be expected that Russia will expand its arsenal of 9M729 cruise missiles or convert sea-based missile systems for use on land. Finally, it is also conceivable that Russia will resume the development of the RS-26 Rubezh, a medium-range ballistic missile.

It cannot be ruled out that Russia will react to the general expansion of conventional stand-off weapons in Europe with changes to its nuclear doctrine or the composition of its strategic nuclear forces.

These kinds of countermeasures might lead to a minimisation or even complete absence of the hoped-for positive effects on deterrence and warfighting against Russia. In this case, little would be gained. Worse still: In the long term, the stationing of conventional US stand-off weapons in Europe could also influence the nuclear balance between the US and Russia. For Moscow, these are always also strategic weapons, as they would in principle be capable of destroying elements of its own nuclear forces, such as radar systems and communications equipment. The opposite is not true, at least not for the US. Against this background, it cannot be ruled out that Russia will react to the general expansion of conventional stand-off weapons in Europe with changes to its nuclear doctrine or the composition of its strategic nuclear forces.

The fact that the current deployment is planned solely in Germany also has consequences for the distribution of risks within NATO. In the context of the NATO Double-Track Decision of 1979 on the deployment of nuclear-tipped medium-range missiles, the then German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt had insisted on avoiding such singularisation at all costs. Unlike today, the decision to deploy missiles was also linked to an arms control offer, provided Moscow was prepared to limit its own systems.

The stationing of American missile systems in Germany is therefore neither a silver bullet without risks, nor without any alternatives. Instead,

it raises new questions of war prevention, warfighting and escalation management. These cannot be addressed by simply pointing to more and supposedly ever better deterrence. Rather, what is required is a substantial process of weighing-up pros and cons.

An open debate on and analysis of military strategic options for escalation management is needed.

However, while such questions are discussed intensively and publicly in the US, they are hardly ever problematised in Germany. Instead, people tend to go to extremes. While some uncritically welcome any military investment in the context of the '*Zeitenwende*', others see it as a pure provocation on the direct path to a Third World War. At times, observers seem to suggest that Russia could be completely defeated militarily in the event of war. However, this ignores one of the most fundamental insights of the nuclear age. As early as 1956, the US strategist William W. Kaufmann came to the conclusion that classic conventional warfare would inevitably end in total nuclear war, that no party could win in any meaningful sense.

In view of these fundamental and unresolvable risks, an open debate on and analysis of military strategic options for escalation management is needed. These should also include a minimum set of rules of behaviour and targeted communication channels to ensure that not every military incident and every possible miscalculation leads to disaster. Under no circumstances, however, should the impression arise that the German population is being presented with a fait accompli without any risk assessment. This would open the door to deliberate attempts of creating insecurity and unsettling people from the outside.



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