FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY 13.04.2017 | Oliver Thränert

Between the Devil and the deep blue sea

Why a European nuclear shield is not a viable option

Donald Trump's inauguration as US President has led to huge question marks over US promises to provide assistance to Europe via the so-called 'nuclear shield', the US-developed missile shield which underpins trans-Atlantic security. However, any attempt to replace this with a purely European nuclear deterrent is doomed to failure.

The American shield and nuclear 'sharing'

The security of NATO member states who do not possess nuclear weapons is dependent upon the US maintaining its promise to use its nuclear weapons to protect its alliance partners in an emergency situation. In a bid to strengthen this nuclear agreement, the US has been deploying part of its nuclear weapons arsenal on the territory of its European alliance partners since the 1950s. In return, these countries have been engaging in 'nuclear sharing', i.e. making delivery systems (at present exclusively fighter jets) available to enable US nuclear weapons to be used in wars. In peacetime, access to nuclear bombs is strictly limited to the US armed forces. Pursuant to this agreement, US nuclear weapons are currently deployed at the German air force base in Büchel and at support bases in Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy and Turkey.

No nuclear protection from Paris or London

Currently, the United Kingdom and France are the only European countries to possess nuclear weapons. Whilst these weapons do contribute to NATO security, neither London nor Paris is capable of providing a Europe-wide nuclear shield. They certainly don't have the necessary firepower. This European arsenal is not that flexible either. French and British weapons stocks consist almost exclusively of high explosive rockets deployed on submarines, so targeted nuclear strikes on

enemy forces are almost impossible. In short, if deterrence fails, the only remaining option is escalation and all-out nuclear war.

Whilst such a threat may well be credible as a national nuclear deterrent, it is impossible to use it to protect alliance partners. A potential enemy would bank on London or Paris playing down an attack on an alliance member with no nuclear weapons, rather than engaging in full-blown nuclear conflict. Developing nuclear arsenals with a range of options would be too costly for France and the UK.

European sharing?

Some have suggested that European states like Germany should possess nuclear weapons. Currently though, all European nations except France and UK are banned *ad infinitum* from possessing nuclear weapons under the nuclear non-proliferation treaty (NPT). Withdrawing from the treaty could lead to a worldwide nuclear arms race, ultimately threatening European security interests.

With a European nuclear shield leaving London and Paris overstretched, the only viable option may be European nuclear sharing. This would mean non-nuclear European States relying in the future on UK or French nuclear weapons and their own delivery systems to launch an attack in wartime.

Neither NATO nor the EU

European nuclear sharing won't work through NATO. For a start, a functional Atlantic alliance will always be led by the US in nuclear matters. The Supreme Allied Commander in Chief for Europe is always a US General, a setup which doesn't tally with a purely European nuclear deterrent. Secondly, no longer relying on the US would leave the alliance politically dead and unable to underpin the European deterrent.

The EU is overwhelmed with other problems. It is in no position to shoulder nuclear responsibilities.

Some suggest the European Union should act as an anchor for a European nuclear deterrent, but this is also impossible. The UK is leaving the Union. Austria and Ireland are at the forefront of an international movement seeking to abolish all nuclear weapons. The huge divergence in views on nuclear issues between Vienna and Dublin on one hand and London and Paris on the other has seen the two sides at loggerheads for years. And the EU is overwhelmed with

other problems: the Euro crisis, migration issues and the management of its member states' diverging strategic positions. It is in no position to shoulder nuclear responsibilities.

Could a brand new political and military framework be established independently of NATO and the EU? This is possible in theory but such a step would be akin to remodelling Europe's entire security infrastructure. Outsourcing a European nuclear deterrent beyond EU borders would only make sense if conventional defence planning outside the EU proves successful. This would spell the end of the common EU security and defence policy.

What do EU states want?

Would France or the UK actually be willing to establish a European nuclear defence system? Unlikely. Extending the protection afforded by nuclear weapons to other countries would require a revolution in their military and political mindset. There would need to be much closer cooperation on nuclear issues and even the establishment of joint UK-French commando units for nuclear weapons operations. But the UK is heavily dependent on US cooperation when it comes to maintaining its nuclear infrastructure and France also benefits from US nuclear expertise.

And which European nations would sign up as non-nuclear partners? It certainly wouldn't work without Germany, but Berlin would have to redefine itself as a nuclear junior partner of Paris and London rather than furthering nuclear cooperation with the US superpower. Other countries such as Poland would be all too happy to engage in European nuclear sharing, although this may stoke up significant conflict with Russia. European nations would struggle at any rate to provide the financial, technical, military-political and bureaucratic support required for their own independent nuclear deterrent. In any case, there would be no point in ordering the necessary nuclear delivery systems from the US.

A purely European nuclear deterrent would prove expensive and complex and would cause undesired political consequences. So Europe should certainly not embark upon such a risky undertaking unless the trans-Atlantic alliance proves to be unsustainable in the long-term. If that proves to be the case, European security would require a complete and total nuclear overhaul.



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