FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY 15.05.2020 | Rolf Mützenich

Germany and nuclear sharing

In these critical times funds are limited and we must have a serious debate on every expense — including military expenses

Read this article in German.

In an interview, I expressed my opposition to extending technical nuclear sharing and replacing the US tactical nuclear weapons stationed in Büchel with new atomic warheads. As expected, I was criticised for this, but also received a lot of support. What I would like is an open and honest debate about the rationale for nuclear sharing, not least because it is time to decide on a new delivery system – and in light of the fact that the US is toying with the idea of using low-yield nuclear weapons at an early stage in a war. Such a debate should be a matter of course in a democracy; and in the interest of our allies and partners in NATO in particular.

The German Social Democratic Party (SPD) remains committed to a strong transatlantic alliance and is also still in favour of political participation in the Nuclear Planning Group – along with 25 other non-nuclear NATO countries, some of which have ruled out the stationing of nuclear weapons on their territory during peace time. We are aware of the fact that the German armed forces (*Bundeswehr*) are in need of a replacement for the ageing Tornado combat aircraft. We are not calling for the immediate denuclearisation of NATO. Instead, we are, above all, calling for new initiatives and discussions on disarmament and arms control, such as those that German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas has already set in motion with great commitment in the context of the United Nations and with the Stockholm Initiative.

We are well aware that there are always two sides involved in the implementation of disarmament and arms control. Furthermore, we are under no illusion when it comes to Russian politics and the destabilisation and dangers to security policy that come from it. Nor are we turning a blind eye to Russian armament and the large number of Russian tactical nuclear weapons that pose a direct threat to Europe. This is why we have been campaigning for a disarmament treaty on tactical

nuclear weapons in Europe for many years. We therefore believe that the issue of the nuclear weapons stationed in Germany is not the only security policy problem we face.

No German *Sonderweg*

I do, however, want to firmly reject the accusation that we are pursuing a pacifist 'German *Sonderweg*' (special path). This catchword generally refers to the sinister path that Germany took in the past, which resulted in two world wars. Millions of people in Europe and other parts of the world have suffered under this special path, just like we social democrats have in the course of our long history. The purpose of the accusation is obviously to nip the debate in the bud.

Specifically, the debate is about the future of nuclear sharing and the question of whether the US tactical nuclear weapons stationed in Germany and Europe (the Netherlands, Italy, Belgium, the United Kingdom and Turkey) increase the level of safety of Germany and Europe or whether they have perhaps become obsolete now from a military and security policy perspective.

The topic of nuclear sharing remains overloaded with symbolism and is representative of the credibility of the American nuclear umbrella.

What we need in Germany and in coordination with our European NATO partners is therefore a broad public debate on the sense and non-sense of nuclear deterrence and Europe's ability to assert itself. Who is closing their eyes to the new geopolitical realities? Those who are calling for steps towards disarmament and an end to technical nuclear sharing? Or those who are still clinging to the myth that we have some sort of influence on the American nuclear strategy because we have the US president's permission to deliver nuclear bombs to their targets in the event of war? This reasoning was built on sand even during the Cold War. Today, it is out of touch with reality.

Trump's mini nukes

If the claim made by the supporters of technical nuclear sharing is true – that Germany can influence the nuclear strategy of the US indirectly – I wonder where and to what extent we are supposed to have exerted this influence in the past. Ever since George W. Bush was president, we have been experiencing a reorientation of nuclear weapons as a means of conducting warfare. I was also not able to identify any trace of our

supposed influence on American security policy when Donald Trump pulled out of the nuclear treaty with Iran and the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty. We should be honest with ourselves: Non-nuclear powers do not have any influence on the nuclear strategy, let alone when it comes to the deployment options of nuclear powers. This is no more than a long-held pious hope.

I realise that uncertainty about nuclear powers' motives, intentions and courses of action amounts to a fundamental prerequisite for the essence and philosophy of nuclear deterrence, which is known to fill entire libraries. Helmut Schmidt's call for rearmament is generally seen as an example of direct influence exerted by the Federal Republic of Germany on the nuclear strategy of the US. However, even this call was only effective when his threat analysis was shared in Washington. As we know, this resulted in the NATO Double-Track Decision. Incidentally, this does not apply to the US exclusively, but to all nuclear weapons states. The British nuclear capability is decided in London, the Russian one in Moscow and the Chinese one in Beijing. It therefore was and still is prudent not to succumb to any illusions with regard to the French 'offer" of having a say in, let alone a Europeanisation of the *force de frappe*. No French president will ever share the power to control the nuclear key.

A decisive factor in the call for the nuclear bombs stationed in Germany to be removed is that the nature of European requests for the right to have a say in the deployment of nuclear weapons in Europe has changed fundamentally in recent years. With the *Nuclear Posture Review* released in February 2018, the Trump administration is accelerating the further development of *mini nukes* and adopting the doctrine of early and flexible deployment of small nuclear weapons. Over the next few years, the Trump administration also intends to replace all strategic systems, procure low-yield nuclear warheads, increase the range of air-launched cruise missiles and install nuclear weapons in sea-launched sub-strategic systems that were withdrawn under Bush and Obama as a confidence-building measure. The increasing geopolitical competition between the nuclear weapons states, the development of new types of weapons, the combination of conventional and nuclear deterrent potential and the continuing modernisation and diversification of nuclear weapons arsenals is leading to new arms races. They are a concrete threat to Germany and Europe.

Corona debt and defence

The topic of nuclear sharing remains overloaded with symbolism and is representative of the credibility of the American nuclear umbrella. A political assessment must address the following questions: Is it enough to

rely solely on the American nuclear umbrella and nuclear sharing in its current form in the future as well, or should we not rather be taking more steps towards disarmament and arms control – regardless of whether Trump or Biden is the next US president?

In times when the German federal budget is incurring dramatic debt because of the battle against the coronavirus pandemic, when funds are scarce and when it is also becoming clear that we urgently need to invest in the healthcare system, the expansion of broadband capability, climate protection and the infrastructure, it must be possible to have a serious debate on every expense that is not directly related to the current pandemic.

A new nuclear arms race would not only swallow up enormous amounts of money that is now needed elsewhere, it would also provoke new dangerous threats that could have catastrophic consequences.

The intention to spend billions on the procurement and maintenance of US aircraft whose sole purpose is to drop American nuclear bombs therefore needs sound reasons. This holds true even if they are part of the NATO security architecture and the deterrence concept. Even if one believes that deterrence by means of American nuclear weapons is essential in light of the new threat levels, it is already ensured by US intercontinental ballistic missiles, the US bomber fleet and the nuclear-armed submarine fleet. Furthermore, the stationing of US troops in Europe and the provision of logistics and headquarters is not only in the interests of Europe, but definitely also in the interests of the US.

The withdrawal of the tactical nuclear weapons would not result in the end of the American nuclear guarantee nor of Germany's say in nuclear matters (which is already rather non-binding), as it would still be guaranteed through its membership in the Nuclear Planning Group. And by the way: If the stationing of tactical nuclear bombs really were the only link between Europe and the US in terms of security policy, that would indeed be a sad commentary on the quality and future of the transatlantic relations and the much-heralded security community and shared values.

Preventing a new nuclear arms race

However, the peace movement must also acknowledge that the removal of the 20 tactical nuclear weapons from Büchel would not result in immediate world peace and that nothing would be gained in terms of disarmament policy except for the symbolism of a nuclear-free Germany.

In light of thousands of tactical nuclear weapons stored in Russia and the stationing of the new Iskander intermediate-range ballistic missiles that led to the termination of the INF Treaty, disarmament and arms control are more important than ever. We need a new multilateral INF Treaty and complete disarmament of all tactical nuclear weapons.

And when the transatlantic 'Lord Keepers of the Privy Seal' paint the distorted picture of the 'German *Sonderweg*' and concerned European neighbours, this begs the question of what worries the European neighbours more: the open debate on whether Germany should end technical nuclear sharing or the philosophising of the Conservatives in public about Germany as a nuclear power. I would like to point out that the CDU and CSU likewise called for the withdrawal of nuclear weapons in the coalition agreement during the period when their parties and the liberals were in power without being accused of pursuing a 'special path' or a lack of ability or willingness to honour commitments within the Alliance.

The global pandemic is making it abundantly clear that the challenges of the future lie in ensuring meaningful healthcare, fighting climate change and achieving the sustainable development goals defined by the United Nations and not in modernising and replacing nuclear weapons. A new nuclear arms race would not only swallow up enormous amounts of money that is now needed elsewhere, it would also provoke new dangerous threats that could have catastrophic consequences.



Rolf Mützenich
Berlin

Rolf Mützenich has been a member of the German Bundestag since 2002. He was the Chairman of the SPD parliamentary group in the Bundestag from 2019 to 2025.