

CLING TOGETHER, SWING TOGETHER?

// Arguments for withdrawing from nuclear sharing

Plans to procure a replacement for the Tornado fighter jet have sparked a long-overdue debate about NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements and the nuclear weapons stationed in Germany. The weapons cannot really be deployed for military purposes and they are ill-suited to hold the crumbling Alliance together. In fact, in times of smoldering hegemonial conflicts, they are a potential target in the event of nuclear escalation. Thus, in its own security interests and to augment its room for maneuver when it comes to foreign and security policy in the tradition of non-proliferation, Germany should pull out of the nuclear sharing program.



The Büchel Air Base is the only location in Germany where US nuclear weapons are stored (Photo: Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 3.0, <https://bit.ly/3gdiGHY>).

By Sascha Hach

By stationing what are known as sub-strategic US nuclear weapons in Europe, during the Cold War, NATO created the possibility of a nuclear response to a conventional attack by the Soviet Union. This was done in the hope that the conflict would not escalate to the global (strategic) level, pulling the superpowers into the conflict in the process (flexible response). NATO used the option of limited nuclear warfare to respond to the conventional weapon superiority of

the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact countries, the intention being to deter an extensive conventional attack using nuclear means and thus avert the loss of Western Europe. The price of this strategy would have been the sacrifice of large parts of Germany and Central Europe on the nuclear battlefield. So as not to be entirely powerless in the face of this deterrent strategy and out of fear of the USA decoupling from the Alliance when it comes to nuclear decision-making, the countries participating in nuclear sharing attempted to secure a greater say by providing nuclear weapon delivery systems that could only be deployed with the consent of the host country.

It has been 30 years since the end of the Cold War. The Tornado fighter jets that serve as delivery systems are heading for retirement and are now barely capable of reaching targets outside NATO territory. Even if it were possible for them to fly further with refueling stops or in-flight refueling, they would face what are now highly advanced Russian air defense systems. It is hard to imagine a scenario where the technically superseded parachute and freefall bombs used in nuclear sharing could ever be deployed. But what direction are current military developments taking us in? And can they give nuclear sharing new meaning?

New systems no less ineffective

The life extension program that is part of the modernization of the American nuclear weapons arsenal seeks to increase operational capability, for example by replacing the B61-3 and B61-4 nuclear warheads stationed in Europe with the latest B61-12 models. In

Info box: Nuclear sharing

- Five NATO member states have US nuclear weapons stationed on their territory
- Around 100–150 warheads are being stored in the nuclear sharing states of Italy, Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, and Turkey
- Approximately 20 of these bombs are stationed at the military air-base in Büchel: B61 hydrogen bombs with variable explosive force

terms of their explosive force, the new weapons barely differ from the warheads stored at the Büchel air-base. However, the new model is said to be safer and boasts greater accuracy than the old weapons thanks to new electronic guts and guided tail kit assembly. That said, the USA now also has other, smaller type W76-2 warheads which are suitable for limited nuclear employment.

This is all the more relevant if we consider the capacity of the delivery systems that are being discussed for future nuclear sharing. The American F-18 jet that is to replace the Tornado is just as unsuitable for deployment on the margins or outside the territory of the Alliance due to its limited range. Moreover, it also lacks stealthiness and, similar to its predecessor, would be extremely vulnerable to enemy air defense systems. Even with the F-35, which other nuclear sharing states prefer over the F-18 owing to the aforementioned shortcomings and which is able to suppress enemy radars, Russian air defense systems may still be superior.

As a result, the focus has shifted to alternative delivery systems. For Russia and the USA, the development of their land, sea, and air capabilities is now centered on medium-range delivery systems. For employment in Europe, sea-based delivery systems are particularly relevant. In an intervention in Syria in 2015, Moscow demonstrated that it was capable of launching an offensive from the Caspian Sea using cruise missiles fired from warships, which, if their direction were to be changed, would hit Europe's southern periphery. These missiles can be equipped with both conventional and nuclear warheads. The USA, on the other hand, can reach large parts of European Russia with long-range Trident missiles launched from strategic submarines and equipped with W76-2 warheads. By developing new medium-range capabilities, the USA is further enhancing its options for limited regional conflict. Nuclear sharing therefore has virtually no operational military use, especially in light of technological advances and the development of new capabilities. Thanks to these W76-2 warheads on sea-based ballistic missiles, the USA has a new (first) strike option

of deploying nuclear weapons with limited explosive power on the European battlefield. In so doing, the USA is decoupling from the Alliance and Europe has absolutely no influence over nuclear decision-making in such a scenario, even as part of the NATO Nuclear Planning Group. As a result, the nuclear sharing countries miss out on the only benefit that, for some, may have justified the gamble of nuclear sharing in the first place—the reassurance that they would not, against their will, become the nuclear football of the two superpowers. Against this background, the US warheads stationed in Germany can be seen as a potentially self-destructive illusion — weapons with no viable possibility of deployment are incapable of developing any genuine deterrent effect, and, at the same time, represent likely military targets in the event of nuclear escalation.

Nuclear sharing will not hold the Alliance together

Advocates of nuclear sharing stress that it is an integral component of NATO and without it, the Alliance would be weakened. Yet, nuclear sharing is not part of the North Atlantic Pact. Moreover, nowadays, NATO's conventional defense is superior to Russia's and it therefore has more leeway for the denuclearization of its strategy. The unity of the Alliance is fragile, irrespective of the nuclear weapons in Europe. This is particularly evident from Turkey's defense industry cooperation with Russia and the withdrawal of thousands of US soldiers from Germany due to allegedly inadequate German defense spending. Nuclear sharing cannot be the binding force holding the crumbling Alliance together. The notion that withdrawing nuclear weapons from Europe would trigger a new level of destabilization exaggerates the military importance of those weapons and fails to acknowledge the structural dimension of the identity crisis that the Alliance is experiencing, seeking to counter its inner turmoil with new enemy images — the present enemy of choice, besides Russia, being China.

Germany's role as a key European member of the Alliance and favored target for the current US president is unlikely to change very much, if at all, with or without nuclear sharing. In any case, withdrawing nuclear weapons from Büchel would certainly not undermine the advantage nuclear sharing supposedly provides when it comes to participating in discussions on NATO's nuclear policy. As was the case with other former nuclear sharing countries (Canada 1989, Greece 2001), Germany would remain a member of the Nuclear Planning Group, if this is something it is interested in doing. The consultation mechanisms developed by the Group were never contingent on American nuclear weapons being stationed in Europe.



Tornado fighter jets were so far intended as carriers for US nuclear weapons (Photo: picture alliance/dpa/Rainer Jensen).

Some fear that Germany pulling out of nuclear sharing could result in US nuclear weapons being shifted to Eastern Europe. Although Poland would be prepared to accept this arrangement, it would be impossible to achieve any kind of consensus on this within the Alliance. The NATO-Russia Founding Act signed in 1997 prohibits any weapons from being stationed there. If the USA and Poland were to come to an agreement outside NATO this would hardly be compatible with the idea of NATO solidarity. In fact, another country's willingness to escalate conflict is a poor rationale for demonstrating Alliance loyalty. Rather, by adopting this line of reasoning, a country's own considerations of damage are subordinated to peer pressure, which only suits some of the allies and undermines common security interests.

Dismantlement of European security

The growing disparities in security policy positions are the most important reasons for ending nuclear sharing. Both Russia and the USA have made superpower rivalry the leitmotif of their defense strategies and nuclear doctrines, even incorporating the possibility of limited regional nuclear attacks. In the Nuclear Posture Review 2018, the USA reserves the right to respond to a conventional attack with a nuclear first strike. Similarly, in its nuclear doctrine which was revised in 2020, Russia, too, does not preclude this possibility. This constitutes a major rollback as, at the end of the Cold War, first-use options were severely restricted, strengthening crisis stability greatly. Germany and the majority of other European NATO states do not see sub-strategic weapons as suitable methods of warfare. On the contrary, for them it is about preventing (first) use of nuclear weapons. Germany's understanding of deterrent and that of

the other members of the Alliance is thus diametrically opposed to the USA's perception. For example, in the Stockholm Initiative, the German government has called for decision-making time to be increased, nuclear risk to be minimized, and the role of nuclear weapons to be reduced (Berlin Declaration 2019 ahead of the Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty of Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons).

Just how significant and fundamental the divergence of security policy interests actually is, can be seen if we look at the systematic dismantling of international agreements securing peace in Europe over the last 20 years. In 2002, the USA withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM Treaty) to be able to gradually establish an expanded system in Europe. After the NATO member states refused to ratify the revised version of the CFE Treaty (Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty) due to the unregulated territorial conflicts in Georgia and Moldova, Russia successively withdrew from the treaty. The USA's withdrawal from the INF Treaty, quickly followed by Russia, resulted in the termination of the ban on land-based medium-range nuclear missiles in 2019. This was followed by Trump's announcement that the US would also be pulling out of the Open Skies Treaty. All this can be interpreted as the USA and Russia seeking to carve out more room for maneuver, both in terms of international agreements and arms control policy, to wage their own military conflicts, including in Europe.

A clean break for disarmament policy

The German government ought to heed this alarming development of nuclear doctrines, operational military abilities, and the changed political context around arms control and make sure that nuclear

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weapons are withdrawn from Germany. Such weapons do not give Europe any additional influence: quite the contrary! They make Europe a danger zone. They are not a symbol of unity within NATO but instead embody conflicting security policy interests between Europe and the USA. Although there is no immediate indication of nuclear escalation, for preventative reasons, Europe must not let itself be one of the possible venues for a nuclear proxy war to be waged.

The end of nuclear sharing can serve as the first step toward a future where NATO is committed to a conventional strategy. To achieve this, a great deal of persuasive effort is still required, particularly when it comes to certain Eastern European countries. The conviction shared by the German government that the denuclearization of military strategies would represent a common security interest for Europe can, however, only be successful if words are accompanied by deeds.

Moreover, the withdrawal of nuclear weapons would also resolve the contradictions in German arms control and disarmament policy and would open up new scope for Germany to participate in multilateral initiatives such as the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons or strengthen its commitment to the reform of the UN disarmament apparatus. The inclusion of the non-nuclear-weapon states in the development of future-proof multilateral arms control architecture becomes increasingly important the more the nuclear-weapon states fail to fulfill their responsibilities. For the German government to be able to play a leading role here, it needs greater diplomatic independence and integrity when it comes to disarmament

policy. This is not something nuclear sharing provides. Not only is nuclear sharing controversial with regard to the non-proliferation regime, it also furnishes the USA, and indirectly Russia, too, with political legitimacy and ultimately reinforces their status as nuclear superpowers.

Germany, in contrast, has the requisite prestige and networking ability to drive the necessary change. If the world order is not to become one marked by new power imbalances and the paradigm of a nuclear schism once again, European countries must distance themselves from the looming hegemonial conflicts and concentrate all their European foreign and security policy efforts on strengthening multilateralism and the international peace order of the United Nations.



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