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President-Elect Trump and Extended Nuclear Deterrence: Whither Germany?

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The possibility that the next American president would once again be Donald Trump has been on everyone's mind in Germany for months. A much-discussed concern in Germany is that, if re-elected, Trump would not only give NATO a cold shoulder, but also end nuclear "extended deterrence" protection for America's European allies. If so, after more than 70 years under the American "nuclear umbrella," Europeans would be at the mercy of nuclear coercion by Russia, China and, prospectively, Iran. In line with this pessimistic scenario, many German observers conclude that Berlin would then have to find new ways of securing a nuclear arsenal for protection against nuclear coercion and attack. Their proposals—some serious, others not—range from German acquisition of nuclear weapons to the "Europeanization" of the French nuclear arsenal.

It is impossible to know in advance precisely what the new Trump Administration's policy will be regarding U.S. relations with allies. However, a look at President-elect Trump's first



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term suggests strongly that German fears of losing American extended deterrence protection are unfounded.

Trump has never made a secret of his frustration with many European allies' relatively low level of defense spending and corresponding lack of capabilities. Although he has used starker language than his predecessors, perhaps reflecting his background in New York City real estate, he basically has restated what all American presidents since Eisenhower have said. That is, unbalanced burden-sharing in terms of security policy, which de facto amounts to the United States heavily subsidizing European security, is unacceptable to the American people in the long term and is unsustainable. This is particularly true now given America's global responsibilities; Moscow's and Beijing's entente and aggressive designs; the looming "axis of upheaval," including Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea; and, the serious security and cost problems associated with the largely uncontrolled mass, illegal immigration on America's southern border. These developments have created enormous new security problems and costs for the United States.

In this context, Europeans who still believe that they do not need to spend even two percent of their own gross national product on defense do not understand the times. No administration in Washington, Democrat or Republican, will be able to tolerate continuing free riding by some allies. This is an inconvenient reality for Europeans and criticism of European and other allies will continue if they do not provide at least the increased resources for their defense that they themselves have promised. Berlin, whose "Zeitenwende" (an epochal shift in response to Russia's aggression in Ukraine) is threatening to fail, must be prepared for this criticism if it continues to underfund the Bundeswehr. Trump's past sharp language ultimately led many other allies to increase their investment in conventional forces; there is no reason to expect him to be more gentle now if Berlin does not respond to the times.

However, it is a fundamental mistake to conclude that Trump's criticism of European defense underfunding signals that he will remove the American nuclear umbrella over allies. There was no move to do so during Trump's first term in office, and the overwhelming reasons for America's extended deterrent have only increased with the expansion of Russian and Chinese threats. For example, for many decades, the American extended nuclear deterrent has ensured that allies in Europe and Asia have not had to arm themselves with nuclear weapons. Effective extended deterrence is key to the long-standing U.S. goal of nuclear non-proliferation. This logic has not changed.

It also should be recalled that the previous Trump Administration increased funds to strengthen the U.S. extended deterrent over allies. The Trump Administration's 2018 *Nuclear Posture Review*, its key nuclear policy document, initiated two new sea-based nuclear weapons to help prevent Moscow from exploiting its dramatic nuclear superiority in Europe either politically or militarily. There was considerable opposition within the Democrat Party to these new nuclear options at the time, but a political consensus appears to be emerging that the American nuclear arsenal must be adapted for the continued protection of allies in Europe and Asia. In other words: the "nuclear umbrella" will remain open and likely even strengthened.



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Does this mean that Berlin can now relax in the belief that it no longer has to worry about nuclear deterrence? Of course not. There is continuing risk and burden-sharing in the nuclear field. Germany plays an important role in NATO's so-called "nuclear sharing." Along with other allies, Germany provides aircraft – soon to be the ultra-modern F-35 – that reportedly can carry American nuclear weapons. This makes Germany an important factor in NATO's nuclear deterrent in Europe. It is not only the new "front line" Eastern European allies that want Germany to continue to play this role, but also Washington. Fortunately, Berlin may finally be facing up to uncomfortable looming nuclear threat realities and is no longer trying to hide behind idealistic disarmament virtue signaling.

In sum, a second term of Donald Trump may not be convenient for some allies. He is likely to continue to call out laggards regarding the urgency of more balanced transatlantic burden-sharing. However, the U.S. nuclear protection provided to Europe almost certainly will remain in place, and likely will be strengthened. Germany, therefore, would do well to speculate less about nuclear alternatives and focus instead on continuing its role in NATO's nuclear deterrent, while strengthening its conventional military capabilities, including its defense industry, and deployment of longer-range conventional weapons. That is a contribution to the Alliance that all of Germany's allies have a right to expect from Berlin.

This article is adapted from the authors', "Die Kultur des Trittbrettfahrens ist vorbei [The Culture of Free Riding is Past]," *Welt am Sonntag*, July 21, 2024, p. 9.

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