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German Nuclear Independence From Washington?

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Introduction

The question of an independent German nuclear capability was seemingly settled in 1969 with Bonn's signing of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The decision to sign the NPT followed a long, highly-contentious debate within West Germany. Finance Minister and Christian Social Union (CSU) Party leader Franz Josef Strauss led the opposition to the NPT, fearing Germany would be "boxed in." Then-Foreign Minister and head of the Social Democrats (SPD), Willy Brandt, led NPT support. The final German decision to sign the NPT came only with the elections of September 1969, which led to Willy Brandt becoming Chancellor. Brandt signed the treaty for Germany in November 1969.

Germany's signing and ratification of the NPT (the latter in 1975) confirmed Germany's non-nuclear status and came with several expressed conditions, including undisturbed NATO collective security, continuation of the U.S. nuclear security guarantee, and that "...the treaty does not hinder the union of European states."¹ Nevertheless, the German nuclear question effectively was settled; serious debate about an independent German nuclear capability all but disappeared as German politicians essentially dropped the subject and continued to seek escape from the shadow of National Socialism and past German militarism.



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However, the German nuclear question has been re-emerging slowly for approximately a decade, at first faintly, then much more noticeably since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and particularly since the re-election of Donald Trump in 2024. Numerous German political commentators, academics, and even senior military officers have increasingly called for some form of German nuclear capability that is independent of the United States.² In fact, German public commentary is now so skeptical of Washington, and by extension NATO, that its dogged German defenders have been compelled to write articles explaining “why transatlantic relations can still be saved” [“Warum die transatlantischen Beziehungen noch zu retten sind”].³ With regard to the future of NATO, an independent German or “Euro” nuclear deterrent could be both a result of the expectation of NATO’s demise, and a contributor to its demise given the underlying premise that Europe must be able to defend itself independent of Washington.

In December 2023, former German Foreign Minister and senior politician with the Green Party, Joschka Fischer, who earlier advocated in favor of nuclear disarmament, came out in favor of Germany’s participation in a Euro nuclear deterrent independently of Washington.⁴ French President Emmanuel Macron has floated the notion of French nuclear weapons providing extended deterrence for European partners, and the German Vice-Chancellor, Lars Klingbeil, reportedly has said publicly that he is open to talks with France about such an extended deterrent.⁵ Some members of the increasingly popular (and politically unorthodox) Alternative for Germany (AfD) political party have explicitly called for German nuclear weapons.⁶ Separately, in a co-authored statement, former Chief of Staff of the German Armed Forces, Gen. Klaus Naumann, called for German participation in a European nuclear deterrent “of its own,” because the Russian threat is from “tactical nuclear weapons,” not conventional.⁷ Brigadier General Frank Pieper, the Director of Strategy at the Bundeswehr’s Leadership Academy (Strategie an der Führungsakademie der Bundeswehr) recently said publicly, “Germany needs its own tactical nuclear weapons” (“Deutschland braucht eigene taktische Atomwaffen”).⁸ One German survey surprisingly shows the respondents evenly split on the question of whether “Germany needs its own nuclear weapons?”⁹ Other surveys show the majority of respondents remain opposed to German nuclear weapons.¹⁰

It seems doubtful, under *currently existing* conditions, that this re-emerging interest will actually lead to German withdrawal from the NPT and development of nuclear weapons.¹¹ Nevertheless, the European security threat context is extremely dynamic, as are German domestic politics. There are several plausible conditions, domestic and external, that could converge to make the seemingly “unthinkable” a realistic prospect. These conditions include the character of the Russian threat and the U.S. security commitment to NATO, including the U.S. extended nuclear deterrent.

This article briefly examines U.S. policy implications of the currents in the emerging German debate regarding national security and the nuclear question, and draws some tentative conclusions with regard to the prospective internal and external conditions that would be likely to accelerate or ameliorate German interest in independent nuclear capabilities. The issues of immediate interest are: Why is the question of German nuclear weapons now “on the table,”



and what set of conditions could move Germany toward or away from nuclear weapons independent of the United States? This is a significant question given the international turbulence a German decision in favor of independent nuclear capabilities would have—certainly with Russia, but also potentially with Washington and some European allies.

Assuring Berlin and Deterring Moscow

A repeated theme in the German national press is the perception that Donald Trump is hostile toward continuing U.S. security commitments to Europe.¹² Vocal claims that the U.S. security commitment to NATO Europe can no longer be trusted are not limited to Germany.¹³ In some German quarters, this has led to increasing doubts about U.S. extended nuclear deterrence credibility, and to suggestions of a German, or a European, nuclear deterrent independent of the United States.¹⁴ This thesis is separate from any concerns that the balance of U.S. nuclear forces with Russia (and China to a lesser extent) has become inadequate to provide credible extended deterrence—that a “gap” in extended deterrence has arisen given the much larger Russian (and Chinese) theater nuclear arsenals and apparent lowering of Russia’s threshold for nuclear employment.¹⁵ This latter dynamic for concern regarding the credibility of extended deterrence is apparent in the U.S. public discussion, but not much in the German discussion.

In short, the German public debate generally reflects doubts about the U.S. political commitment to European security but reflects little apparent doubt about the U.S. and NATO *nuclear* force posture needed to support extended deterrence. In contrast to expressed U.S. concerns about the correlation of forces, German concern appears to focus virtually entirely on a U.S. political relationship with Europe that many see as having been consciously and irrevocably broken by Washington.¹⁶

The significance of these two different reasons for questioning U.S. extended deterrence credibility is in the very different “fixes” that follow. These two different potential sources of currently-expressed concern about extended deterrence credibility—a concern about the U.S. political commitment to European security apparent in Germany, and a concern about the correlation of forces apparent in the United States—correspond to different expectations about the “fix” needed to sustain credible U.S. extended nuclear deterrence, and thereby mitigate potential German interest in nuclear capabilities. Addressing the reason for questioning the reliability of extended deterrence prominent in Germany involves, as some German commentators have suggested, only “waiting out” the Trump tenure and hoping for a new presidential administration that returns to previous U.S. security priorities and commitments.¹⁷ This supposed “fix” may be quite easy or not, depending on the direction of U.S. politics.

The second, separate balance of power-related reason for questioning the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence takes the focus off of the Trump Administration’s various disturbing expressions regarding European security and focuses instead on correcting the U.S./NATO position in a nuclear balance of power that has long seen a steep decline vis-à-vis Moscow. The corresponding “fix,” i.e., adjusting a degraded nuclear balance of power, would demand much more effort and time than would renewed U.S. expressions of commitment to European



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security, even assuming a U.S. administration supportive of nuclear deterrence and past U.S. security priorities.

These two different potential sources of doubt regarding U.S. extended deterrence and their respective corrections are, of course, not mutually exclusive. An adequate force posture *and* a recognized political commitment are likely both necessary for credible U.S. extended deterrence and for assuring Germany, respectively. But they typically are not combined in contemporary critical German commentary or in much American commentary – each focuses on a different problem.

Discussions of deterrence and assurance seem often to neglect that the twin goals of deterring Russia and assuring allies involve two separate audiences and dynamics that must be addressed simultaneously. U.S. declarations about security priorities, allies and alliances drive German perceptions of U.S. assurance via extended deterrence, and thus potential German interest in nuclear weapons (national or in cooperation with other European powers). The requirements for deterring Russia obviously include Moscow’s perceptions of the U.S. political relationship to Europe, but they also include as a priority an adequate U.S. and NATO correlation of forces, nuclear and conventional.

Expressions of U.S. commitment seem paramount for assuring Berlin, but the correlation of forces is paramount for deterring Moscow. “Fixing” German perceptions of an absence of a reliable U.S. political commitment to European security may repair German doubts about assurance but do nothing to address the “gaps” in the correlation of forces needed for actually deterring Moscow. Coincidentally, fixing those “gaps” without also addressing German concerns about the U.S. political commitment may do nothing to ease Berlin’s lack of assurance—and, correspondingly, nothing to moderate German interest in nuclear weapons independent of Washington. With these two different dynamics at work simultaneously, involving two different audiences, the United States must address deficiencies in both the assurance of Germany and the deterrence of Moscow, but with different, if overlapping, political and military solution sets.

This juxtaposition suggests a necessary caveat to the famous “Healy theorem.” Denis Healey, a British Labour politician and Defence Minister, often observed during the Cold War that, “it takes only five per cent credibility of American retaliation to deter the Russians, but ninety-five percent to reassure the Europeans.”¹⁸ The neglected point here is the difference in the conditions needed for German assurance and those needed for the credible deterrence of Russia. The emerging failure to assure Berlin following from a perception of a failing U.S. political commitment to European security is separate from the potential inadequacy of the U.S. and NATO force posture. Perhaps ironically, the priority requirement for German assurance and the priority requirement for deterring Russia (and China) involve different respective emphases, i.e., Washington’s renewed expressions of a strong political commitment to European security versus fixing a deficiency in the correlation of forces.

Recognition of these two problems and their needed “fixes” involves significant differences. For example, the specific requirements for assurance may be relatively easily understood given key allies’ obvious willingness/eagerness to voice their fears and concerns.



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The requirements for deterring Russia (and China) are inherently more speculative given the simple facts that opponents do not broadcast what would deter them and often instead seek to deny Washington that knowledge. In contrast to identifying what is needed for assurance, what is needed to deter is discerned much more by inference and involves a greater, inherent level of uncertainty.

In summary, a manifest U.S. political commitment and adequate force posture are likely both best practice for assurance and credible extended deterrence. However, if the needed “fix” for the assurance of Germany is renewed U.S. expressions of political commitment—as is suggested by most German commentary—without also advancing a renewed U.S./NATO force posture, Germany may be assured, but Russia (and China) may be inadequately deterred. Similarly, if Washington and NATO were to address force posture “gaps” to strengthen the deterrence of Moscow, without also renewing U.S. expressions of political commitment to European security, Washington may sustain credible extended deterrence, but still not assure Berlin and stem German interest in nuclear deterrence independent of the United States.

Looking at Deterrence and Assurance From Both Sides Now

If Washington continues to place priority on both its global alliances and on its traditional nuclear non-proliferation goals, as seems almost self-evidently prudent, the needed policy directions are clear: For non-proliferation, Washington must cease dismissive statements/commentary regarding allies and the U.S. commitment to their security. The alternative is to fan the flames of German and other allies’ interest in nuclear capabilities that are independent of Washington, with an attendant potential cascade of nuclear proliferation.¹⁹ In contrast, to address the likely requirements for deterrence of Russia and China, Washington and NATO must strengthen their nuclear and conventional force postures as necessary in the face of determined foes with expanding nuclear and conventional capabilities, and aggressive, coordinated agendas. This latter requirement demands that Washington continue to call out allies for greater contributions to the common cause of creating the force posture necessary for deterring authoritarian aggression. President Trump has rightly called attention to, and for the first time in decades demanded with effect, an end to allied free riding. Doing so *was not and is not a mistake*; it is wholly needed for deterrence purposes.

However, doing so with attendant language that leads allies to seriously doubt U.S. reliability and to search for alternative security structures is wholly unnecessary and harmful to U.S. non-proliferation and deterrence goals. Calling out the need for Washington to find the proper balance to support deterrence and assurance goals simultaneously is a “no brainer,” and not politically partisan. In searching for this needed balance, it is important to recognize that Washington’s relations with allies are far from entirely transactional, i.e., following from concerns about financial gain or loss. National pride often is involved, which, if deeply insulted, can harm relations significantly despite transactional gains or losses. Avoiding gratuitously insulting and threatening language toward allies is a first step for Washington to find the proper balance needed for deterrence and assurance.



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If Washington can achieve this balance, the needed prudent German policy response also is reasonably clear. Berlin must decide to help lead continental Europe in cooperative, determined common cause with Washington to establish a much more powerful force posture, nuclear and conventional, vis-à-vis the “axis of authoritarian evil.” France cannot, and likely will not, do so. This will not be inexpensive for European states long accustomed to free riding, including Germany, but it will be much less expensive than any real attempt to “go it alone” without Washington – not to mention infinitely less expensive than being the victim, yet again, of aggressive, militaristic authoritarian powers with malevolent intentions.

One critical element in this needed direction seems largely unrecognized in Germany: That is the need for serious German efforts to help reduce the risks and costs that Washington must bear for its commitment to European security – an inherently risky enterprise. Doing so will demand much more German support for NATO nuclear and conventional capabilities – which may be a hard sell in Berlin. But, in an increasingly threatening nuclear and geopolitical context, calling on the United States to continue to shoulder the burden and risk of a serious extended deterrence commitment to European security, without also helping to ease that burden to the extent possible, is what is no longer tolerable for Washington – whichever political party is in power. “Waiting out Trump” may sound convenient and relatively inexpensive, but it cannot solve a problem for European security that is inherent in the structure of emerging threats and geopolitics. The era of European free riding and viewing emerging threats through rose-colored glasses must end.²⁰ Fortunately, the German leadership appears finally to have recognized the harsh realities of the new threat environment following the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. Then-German Chancellor Olaf Scholz’s famous “Zeitenwende” [turning point] remarks reflect that recognition.²¹ A corresponding recognition of the necessary transformation in NATO Europe seems underway, at least in part,²² if not derailed by unnecessary and self-destructive rhetoric from Washington.

Conclusion

In conclusion, after decades, the confluence of several factors has brought back the question of Germany and nuclear weapons, either as a national capability or (more likely) as part of a yet-to-be-defined “Euro nuclear deterrent.” The most basic factors driving the return of the German nuclear question include: A manifestly aggressive Russia that issues nuclear threats frequently, and the Trump Administration’s departure from past U.S. expressions of commitment to European security and – most shocking for many Europeans – coincident suggestions that military force is an option to secure U.S. interests in (Danish) Greenland. The rise of a populist German political party, the AfD, that does not appear to be pro-American or to have “Atlanticist” roots may also become an important factor in how the German nuclear policy debate proceeds.

The return of the German nuclear question in contemporary conditions should be unsurprising given the confluence of factors noted above. Professor Gary Geipel foreshadowed the emerging debate in 1993:



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Like every powerful nation, Germany will find a nuclear umbrella somewhere. The United States is the most likely place. But if the United States does not provide a credible nuclear deterrent, who will? Short of a genuine European federal union that takes over the nuclear capabilities of France and Britain, it is difficult to imagine that Germany would rely for long on the nuclear deterrent of its weaker neighbors.²³

The German nuclear question should be an increasingly significant consideration for U.S. security policies. Independent German nuclear capabilities, or the creation of a “Euro” nuclear deterrent outside NATO and independent from Washington, could be part and parcel of the effective demise of NATO – Moscow’s goal for decades – and a cascade of subsequent nuclear proliferation. Either of these outcomes would create an essentially new international security environment with unpredictable and potentially extremely negative consequences for U.S. security. Understanding the “German mind” in this matter and adjusting U.S. policies to reduce the prospect for these potential outcomes, somewhat surprisingly, is now an important national security priority.

¹ “Note der Bundesregierung vom 28. November 1969 anlässlich der Unterzeichnung des NPT: „Die Bundesregierung geht davon aus, ... daß der Vertrag den Zusammenschluß der europäischen Staaten nicht behindert.”

² See the discussions of this in, Martin Debes, et al., “Braucht Deutschland Die Atombombe?,” *Stern*, January 29, 2026; Konrad Schuller, “Brauchen Wir Die Bombe?,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung*, January 4, 2026; Eckhard Lübke, “Pro: Aufbruch zu einer europäischen Selbstverteidigungsunion,” *Internationale Politik*, Issue 1 (January/February 2024), pp. 110-113; and, Markus Kaim, “Trump und die deutsche Bombe,” *Der Spiegel*, December 12, 2023, <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/verteidigungsfahigkeit-d>.

³ Michael Rühle, “Warum die transatlantischen Beziehungen noch zu retten sind,” *Cicero*, February 5, 2026, <https://cicero.de/aussenpolitik/usa-und-europe-warum-die-transatlantischen-beziehungen-noch-zu-retten-sind>.

⁴ Interview with Joschka Fischer, “Ich schäme mich für unser Land,” *Die Zeit*, December 3, 2023, <https://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2023-11/joschka-fischer-nahost-konflikt-israel-hamas-antisemitismus-ukraine>.

⁵ See the discussion in, Rudy Ruitenberg, “NATO’s Rutte says Europe can’t defend itself without U.S.; France balks,” *Defense News Online*, January 27, 2026.

⁶ See for example, “‘Europe cannot rely solely on the US,’ AfD calls for Germany to acquire nuclear weapons,” *BalkanWeb*, January 19, 2026, <https://www.balkanweb.com/en/europa-nuk-mund-te-mbeshtetet-vetem-te-shba-te-afd-ben-thirje-qe-gjermania-te-marre-arme-berthamore/#gsc.tab=0>.

⁷ See Klaus Naumann, et al., “Europe needs a nuclear deterrent of its own,” *Atlantic Council*, July 11, 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/europe-needs-a-nuclear-deterrent-of-its-own/>. This article is from, Klaus Naumann, et al., “Gastkommentar: Wir brauchen eine Europasierung der NATO,” *Handelsblatt*, July 11, 2023.

⁸ “Zur Abschreckung Russlands: Neue. Rufe nach taktischen Atomwaffen für Deutschland,” *n-tv*, January 29, 2026, <https://www.n-tv.de/politik/Neue-Rufe-nach-taktischen-Atomwaffen-fuer-Deutschland-id30298746.html>.

⁹ *Ibid.*



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¹⁰ See for example, “Deutsche mehrheit gegen Atomwaffen,” *n-tv*, February 2, 2026, <https://www.n-tv.de/politik/Deutsche-mehrheitlich-gegen-eigene-Atomwaffen-id30318979.html>.

¹¹ See the discussion in, Joachim Krause, “Die Idee ‘europaischen Atombombe’ ist unrealistisch,” *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, September 1, 2024; and, Michael Rühle, “The German Bomb: Much ado About Very Little,” *Defense News*, January 22, 2026.

¹² See for examples, Debes, et al., “Braucht Deutschland Die Atombombe?,” op. cit.; Thomas Gutschker, Johannes Leithauser, Michaela Wiegel, Matthias Wyssuwa, “Was macht Europa, wenn Trump gewinnt?,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung*, December 3, 2023; and, Jacques Schuster, “Der Verlust des amerikanischen Schutzschirms,” *Welt am Sonntag*, December 9, 2023.

¹³ See the discussion in, Ruitenbergh, “NATO’s Rutte says Europe can’t defend itself without U.S.; France balks,” op. cit.

¹⁴ See Heike Anger, et al., “Neue Debatte über nuklearen Schutzschirm für Europa,” *Handelsblatt* (online), January 16, 2026; and, Friederike Hofmann, et al., “Wie Frankreichs Nuklearschirm Deutschland schützen könnte,” *Handelsblatt* (online), February 1, 2026.

¹⁵ See for example, Gregory Weaver, “The urgent imperative to maintain NATO’s nuclear deterrence,” *NATO Review*, September 29, 2023; and, Greg Weaver, *The imperative of augmenting US theater nuclear forces* (Washington, D.C.: Atlantic Council, 2025). See also, Jim Stokes and Yamitsa Dyakova, “Nuclear Deterrence,” *NATO Nuclear Deterrence*, Issue 41, Article 16, 2025, pp. 53-57, https://www.jwc.nato.int/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/issue41_Art6_NATONuclearDeterrence.pdf. The Chairman of the JCS, Gen. Dan Caine, said that, “Our adversaries are advancing, global nuclear threats are on the rise and deterrence is paramount.” Moreover, “Our national defense requires urgent action and reform across the board. We must go faster. We must move with a sense of urgency. We can never forget that our number one job is to create peace through overwhelming strength.” Quoted in, Bill Gertz, “New Pentagon chairman: U.S. lacks ability to deter adversaries,” *The Washington Times*, April 15, 2025.

¹⁶ An exception is, Naumann, et al., “Gastkommentar: Wir brauchen eine Europasierung der NATO,” op. cit.

¹⁷ See the discussion in Martin Erdmann and Michael Rühle, “Die NATO wird Trump überleben,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, January 10, 2026.

¹⁸ Denis Healey, *The Time of My Life* (London: Michael Joseph, 1989), p. 243.

¹⁹ It must be recognized that some American neo-isolationist commentators are sympathetic to some nuclear proliferation, calling it a potential “antidote to American overextension in Europe.” See for example, Doug Bandow, “Maybe It is Time for a European Nuclear Weapon,” *American Conservative Online*, January 11, 2024, <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/maybe-it-is-time-for-a-european-nuclear-weapon/#:~>.

²⁰ See Michael Rühle and Keith Payne, “Die Kultur des Trittbrettfahrens ist vorbei,” *Welt Am Sonntag*, July 21, 2024.

²¹ See, “Policy Statement by Olaf Scholz, Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany and Member of the German Bundestag,” Berlin, February 27, 2022, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/policy-statement-by-olaf-scholz-chancellor-of-the-federal-republic-of-germany-and-member-of-the-german-bundestag-27-february-2022-in-berlin-2008378>.

²² See for example, NATO-OTAN, *Defence expenditures and NATO’s 5% commitment*, December 18, 2025, <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/introduction-to-nato/defence-expenditures-and-natos-5-commitment>; Chris Lunday and Rixa Fürsen, “New German military plan views foreign sabotage as preparation for war,” *Politico.eu*, December 30, 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/germany-new-military-plan-foreign-sabotage-hybrid-attacks-as-preparation-for-war/>; and, Marco Seliger, “Das Ende des parasitären Pazifismus,” *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, February 12, 2025.

²³ Gary L. Geipel, *Germany in a New Era* (Indianapolis: Hudson Institute, 1993), p. 193.



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