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Nuclear Deterrence: Germany's Options in a Changing Security Order

Michael Rühle

Michael Rühle is the former Head of the Climate and Energy Security Section, NATO, and served for over 30 years in NATO's international staff, specializing in policy planning, speechwriting, energy security, and hybrid threats.

Introduction

Germany finds itself in an unprecedented security situation. To the east it faces an aggressive, revisionist Russia that has been fighting for over four years to regain control of Ukraine, and, to achieve this objective, has already sacrificed over a million soldiers to injury and death. To the west is an unpredictable United States that increasingly views its alliances as a burden to be reduced or shed. In between, one finds a Europe that is weakened not only by economic stagnation but also by the rise of right-wing populist parties that are shaking the democratic foundations of the European project.

Germany, like Europe overall, has drawn the right conclusions from this difficult situation. It has dramatically increased defense spending, emerged as the foremost supporter of Ukraine, accepted the need to prepare for a NATO with a diminished U.S. presence, and is grappling with the reinstatement of mandatory military service. Germany is clearly committed to the logic of military deterrence and no longer shies away from advocating for a robust defense industry. In short, the "Zeitenwende" ("turning point"), proclaimed by former Chancellor Scholz right after Russia's attack on Ukraine, is happening, albeit slowly.

However, when it comes to the nuclear dimension of deterrence, things are not so clear-cut. The United States is reducing its conventional forces allocated to NATO but has not called into question its "nuclear umbrella" for allies in Europe and Asia. France, touted for decades by



some prominent conservative German politicians as Germany's alternative nuclear protector, has repeatedly made it clear that its offer of nuclear dialogue was not aimed at providing extended deterrence comparable to the U.S. nuclear umbrella. Finally, parts of the conservative German press tirelessly discuss the need to "think the unthinkable" and accuse Chancellor Merz of "negligence" for refusing to consider German nuclear weapons.¹

The German government has good reasons not to engage in such a discussion. Germany needs nuclear protection, but it must be organized in a way that does not create more problems than it solves. What follows are a few fundamental observations to help put the problem into perspective, followed by some recommendations for a sensible way ahead.

Germany and Nuclear Deterrence: Some General Observations

International politics are shaped by the existence of nuclear weapons. The use of these weapons is conceivable only in extreme circumstances; therefore, their immediate deterrent effect is limited to existential conflicts. However, their mere existence compels opposing states to exercise caution, even in conflicts that have no immediate nuclear dimension. Thus, nuclear weapons "can have a deterrent effect well beyond their logical limits."² The war in Ukraine confirms this logic. Neither Russia, a nuclear power, nor NATO, a nuclear alliance, wants to go to war with each other. Consequently, they seek other ways to assert their interests. NATO supports Ukraine militarily and financially, while Russia tries to hinder this support through various hybrid actions and nuclear threats. In other words, nuclear weapons can exert restraint in peacetime as well as in wartime. This is why these weapons are considered so valuable and why all attempts to abolish them will continue to fail.³

As a non-nuclear-weapon state, Germany depends on the protection of one or more nuclear-weapon states. For this reason, when the Federal Republic of Germany joined the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1969, Bonn made it clear that continued nuclear deterrence within the framework of NATO was a fundamental condition for joining that Treaty. Nothing has changed in this regard. However, if protection from the United States and NATO were to disappear, Germany would have to forge an alternative European path. Hence, the second important condition under which the Federal Republic acceded to the NPT Treaty was that this should not rule out a European nuclear deterrence option.⁴ At the time, this was a purely theoretical consideration, yet it demonstrated considerable foresight. Although Germany remained fully committed to NATO, Bonn felt the need to take legal precautions in case of an eventual degradation of the U.S. nuclear umbrella.

The practical implementation of a "European option" would be extraordinarily difficult. On the surface, the EU may appear to be a logical alternative to NATO, but it is not a suitable institutional framework for a European nuclear deterrent. There is no consensus within the EU on the nuclear dossier. Ireland and Austria have signed the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), which declares nuclear weapons and nuclear deterrence illegal. Therefore, these two countries will prevent any united EU policy on nuclear matters. Additionally, due to "Brexit," the UK's nuclear arsenal is no longer available to the EU. Consequently, serious



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discussions about nuclear alternatives to the U.S. nuclear umbrella currently focus on giving France's (and possibly the United Kingdom's) nuclear weapons a broader European dimension. This approach would preclude the emergence of new nuclear powers in Europe. It would be compatible with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and provide less political ammunition for critics, including Moscow, than the prospect of nuclear weapons in the national hands of, say, Germany, Sweden, or Poland.

Last March, President Macron outlined the options for giving French nuclear weapons a stronger European dimension. His concept of "dissuasion avancée" (roughly, "forward-looking deterrence") includes increasing the number of nuclear warheads and stationing French nuclear-capable aircraft outside of France for limited periods. It also includes nuclear deterrence discussions with interested European partners.⁵ This is far from constituting an alternative to the extended deterrence provided by the United States. Charles de Gaulle's credo of preserving French independence in nuclear matters remains unchanged. It is no coincidence that France remains the only ally outside of NATO's Nuclear Planning Group. In any case, the French nuclear arsenal is too small to offer a range of options akin to U.S. nuclear forces. The same holds true for the United Kingdom, the arsenal of which is also quite small and heavily dependent on the United States. In other words, if the American nuclear umbrella were to disappear, there would be no equivalent replacement. The idea that France, as Germany's direct neighbor, would be more willing to press the "red button" than the geographically distant United States, is a myth. The French president would be just as unlikely to "sacrifice Paris for Berlin" as the American president would be to "sacrifice New York for London." Such statements reduce the complexities of extended deterrence to a bizarre contest of willingness to commit suicide. The same applies to frequently used terms like "nuclear guarantee." States make promises to one another, but they do not offer guarantees. Any serious debate on extended deterrence needs to move beyond such self-defeating rhetoric.

Guideposts for a Pragmatic German Nuclear Policy

Extended deterrence by the United States remains the best option for Germany. This is due not only to the sophisticated U.S. nuclear arsenal, but also to the fact that Washington's promise of nuclear protection is backed by strong conventional forces and a commensurate military infrastructure. Neither France nor the United Kingdom can match this preponderance of power. Although the Trump Administration is attempting to shift the conventional military burden within the alliance towards Europe, it has explicitly reaffirmed nuclear protection for its allies.⁶ There is a clearly discernible logic to this. For the United States, a world in which its allies acquired nuclear weapons would be a nightmare given the likely cascade of nuclear proliferation that would follow. Therefore, as long as Washington does not call its nuclear commitment into question, neither should Berlin. To put it bluntly: You would not give notice on your apartment based on the mere suspicion that the landlord might evict you soon—particularly if alternatives appear unworkable. After all, the landlord might simply want to raise the rent.



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If extended deterrence provided by the United States remains Germany's preferred option, continuing nuclear sharing within NATO must remain a priority for Berlin. This arrangement preserves the U.S. prerogative of maintaining control over its nuclear weapons while allowing non-nuclear states to influence Washington's decisions on nuclear matters. Nuclear sharing is a difficult compromise, yet it embodies the highest degree of "communitarization" on the nuclear issue. Moreover, it likely will prevent the emergence of new nuclear powers in Europe. By purchasing the U.S. F-35, Germany has committed to continuing its prominent role in current nuclear sharing based on nuclear-capable aircraft (DCA). However, the significance of nuclear sharing extends far beyond DCA host nations. Numerous NATO countries participate in related support missions, such as countering enemy air defenses. Even the United Kingdom, a nuclear-weapon state, has reengaged in NATO's nuclear-sharing arrangements. Several NATO countries, including Finland and Lithuania, are amending their national legislation to allow the deployment of nuclear weapons on their territory. In short, despite being irritated by current U.S. foreign policy pronouncements regarding NATO, European allies continue to invest in nuclear sharing.

The renewed popularity of nuclear deterrence and nuclear sharing has led to calls for the United States to station U.S. nuclear weapons in Central and Eastern European NATO member states. However, Berlin should remain cautious in this regard. The 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act, which rules out the deployment of nuclear weapons in new NATO member states, may long have become obsolete. Nevertheless, deploying such weapons in the eastern part of the NATO territory could spark a new nuclear debate within NATO that would burden the current discussion about Europe's nuclear future. Russia would certainly react with a barrage of nuclear threats. Moreover, given the potential vulnerability of such weapons to Russian attack, the military argument for such a move may not be particularly convincing, which may be why the United States has consistently rejected it. A pragmatic solution would be to increase the involvement of Central and Eastern European allies in other aspects of nuclear sharing. However, such an approach requires those countries that host dual-capable aircraft ("DCA countries"), including Germany, to remain fully committed to playing their role in the current sharing arrangements.

Germany's discussions with France and the United Kingdom must continue, yet with a clear understanding that a stronger role for Paris and London in the European deterrence framework should complement, not replace, U.S. extended deterrence. Any appearance of France and/or Britain constituting an alternative structure must be avoided so as not to justify further U.S. distancing from Europe. Expectation management will be essential for yet another reason: A possible shift to the political right in France and/or the United Kingdom would likely limit these countries' willingness to engage with their European neighbors on nuclear issues. Overly optimistic rhetoric from the German government could make cooperation more difficult, even at this early stage, as it could lead to accusations that the incumbent governments of both countries are selling out national sovereignty.

Expectations regarding Franco-German nuclear relations should also be tempered because France harbors reservations about Germany's intention to become "the strongest conventional



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army in Europe.”⁷ This threatens French self-confidence because Paris has long viewed its military strength as a political counterweight to Germany’s economic power. This balance is now in danger of tipping. Consequently, the temptation in Paris to make Germany “pay” for its desire for nuclear protection through “quid pro quo” measures, such as introducing “Eurobonds,”⁸ or new joint defense projects, could grow. German policymakers must resist such deals. The failed “Future Combat Air System” (FCAS) shows the risks of governments initiating major joint defense projects because they deem them politically advantageous. When it comes to the development, procurement, and export of armaments, the two countries’ philosophies will often remain incompatible.

A German national nuclear option is not desirable under foreseeable circumstances. The German government has not prioritized this discussion nor participated in it, leaving the issue on the fringe. Germany’s preference is clear: U.S. extended nuclear deterrence, potentially supplemented by closer cooperation with France and the United Kingdom. There is a widespread conviction that a German go-it-alone approach to nuclear issues would fuel mistrust among other countries, exposing Germany to the risk of isolation and resulting in a net loss of security. This would hold true even in the unlikely case that the United States were to tolerate such a move. If other European states were to follow Germany’s example and initiate their own nuclear weapons programs, the European integration project could be shattered.⁹ Finally, considering the enormous technical and financial hurdles (nuclear weapons require an extremely complex infrastructure, including reconnaissance capabilities and submarines), it should become clear why a national nuclear option is out of the question. Germany’s contribution to strengthening deterrence lies in the conventional realm, as evidenced by the deals Berlin is seeking to strike with Washington on acquiring long-range conventional systems.

Concluding Observations

Given their destructive power, nuclear weapons remain a highly sensitive topic. However, even on such a difficult issue, the lessons of post-war German security and defense policy still apply: leadership trumps opinion polls. All landmark security policy decisions – from rearmament in the 1950s to “out-of-area” missions in the 1990s – were made contrary to public opinion. Public opinion eventually followed leadership because the government charted a clear course and stuck with it. This has not changed. In fact, Russia’s attack on Ukraine has shifted public opinion, creating more leeway for German security policy, including on issues related to nuclear deterrence. Taking advantage of these new opportunities requires a high degree of intellectual and rhetorical discipline. Thus far, the German government has been able to muster it. It remains to be seen whether an inherently fragile coalition government can also sustain it.



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¹ Berthold Kohler, „Die Furcht des Kanzlers vor der Bombe,“ *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, February 18, 2026, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/kommentar-zur-atomdebatte-warum-merz-vor-der-bombe-zurueckschreckt-110839798.html>.

² Lawrence Freedman, Disarmament and other nuclear norms, *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No.2, Spring 2013, p. 102, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/0163660X.2013.791085?needAccess=true>.

³ See the discussion in Keith B. Payne, *Chasing a Grand Illusion: Replacing Deterrence With Disarmament* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2023).

⁴ See Michael Rühle, „Germany and Extended Deterrence,“ *Journal of Policy & Strategy*, Vol. 4, No. 3, 2024, p. 23, <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Analysis-Ruhle-4.3.pdf>.

⁵ “Nuclear deterrence,” speech by M. Emmanuel Macron, President of the Republic, *Ile Longue*, March 2, 2026, <https://uk.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/president-delivers-speech-frances-nuclear-deterrence>.

⁶ Remarks by Under Secretary of War for Policy Elbridge Colby at the NATO Defense Ministerial (As Prepared) February 12, 2026, <https://www.war.gov/News/Speeches/Speech/Article/4404801/remarks-by-under-secretary-of-war-for-policy-elbridge-colby-at-the-nato-defense/>.

⁷ German Federal Ministry of Defence, *The overall concept of military defence. Military Strategy and Plan for the Armed Forces*, Berlin, April 2026, pp. 9, 19, <https://www.bmvg.de/resource/blob/6093998/678875025812878cfa657f9801f62ffc/dl-gesamtkonzeption-der-verteidigung-eng-data.pdf>.

⁸ Berlin remains wary of French Eurobonds proposals, as they seem to aim at using EU collective funds to subsidize French defense industry.

⁹ Even if Germany were to conclude that a French and/or UK alternative to U.S. extended deterrence is insufficient and more robust nuclear options had become inevitable, it would probably seek a “coalition of the willing” with like-minded European states rather than initiate a purely national effort.

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