Federal Academy
for Security Policy

7/21

#BAKS-Working Papers

Germany and NATO's Nuclear Deterrent

by Brad Roberts

Editor's Note: **Since its Tornado aircraft are rapidly approaching end-of-service, Germany has to make a far-reaching decision: Will it replace the fighter-bomber with a nuclear-certified model, thus continuing its contribution to NATO's nuclear sharing arrangement? This paper explains why to do so is in Germany's interest as well as in the interest of European and Transatlantic security as a whole – and what significant unintended costs Germany's opting-out of nuclear sharing would have.**

The benefits to Germany of retiring and not replacing its small fleet of nuclear-certified Tornado fighter-bombers are obvious. The German defense budget would save a bit of money. And a political irritant would be removed, given widespread public opposition to nuclear weapons. But what about the costs and risks? Four primary costs can be anticipated of a German decision to opt out of the alliance's nuclear deterrent mission: to NATO's nuclear deterrent, to NATO's arms control strategy, to NATO's nuclear consultative process, and to Germany's reputation. One significant risk can also be anticipated – which, if realized, would greatly magnify the costs to NATO's deterrent and to European security. So, let's understand this risk before assessing costs.

The risk in a German decision to opt out of the nuclear mission is that others will follow the German example, precipitating the collapse of NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements. These arrangements were agreed in the 1960s as a way to share nuclear burdens, signal collective resolve, ensure effective political control, and prevent further nuclear proliferation in Europe. NATO leaders have repeatedly endorsed them as central to European security, including most recently at the June 2021 Brussels summit. These sharing arrangements can involve hosting US nuclear weapons, owning and operating aircraft capable of delivering those weapons, and/or participating in preparations for their employment. Six countries currently operate aircraft capable of delivering US nuclear weapons. For most, the mission is a domestic political liability. In a couple of countries, the political coalitions in favor of remaining in the nuclear mission are especially fragile. A German decision to unilaterally withdraw from the nuclear mission could well tip the balance of debate in those countries in favor of withdrawal. Would the few remaining participants in the sharing arrangements then have the political will to persevere? This is highly unlikely.

This risk is not only plausible; it is significant. The nuclear ban treaty movement has put tremendous political pressure on host nation governments to end their cooperation with the United States. Conceivably, new nations might step forward to replace Germany and others in the nuclear mission. But the political barriers to entry would be high. Those most eager to do so are those closest to the Russian border; storage of US nuclear weapons on their territories would require that NATO abandon its assurances to Russia, dating to 1996, that it has no intention, no plan, and no reason to deploy nuclear weapons onto the territories of new members (the "three no's").

 | ISSN 2366-0805

The cost to NATO's nuclear deterrent

Let's now turn to the potential costs of a German decision to withdraw from the nuclear mission. The first cost – to NATO's nuclear deterrent – could be substantial. Although many in Germany see US nuclear weapons in Europe as "cold war relics," the heads of state and government of NATO's member nations do not. In the alliance's 2010 Strategic Concept, its 2012 Deterrence and Defense Posture Review, and regular summit communiques, including the most recent in June 2021, those elected leaders, across the political spectrum, have unanimously endorsed a continuing need for nuclear deterrence as a fundamental component of NATO's deterrence and defense posture. They have made commitments to not just modernize nuclear forces but to "strengthen" or "bolster" deterrence – as an "imperative." They have also repeatedly committed to "ensure the broadest possible participation by allies concerned in the agreed nuclear burden-sharing arrangements to demonstrate alliance unity and resolve." It should be noted that these commitments have been made by a constantly changing cast of elected leaders over decades, reflecting a degree of consensus that often goes unnoticed in the public discourse.

Moreover, NATO's leaders have also been encouraged to continue in this direction by the "reflection group" (co-chaired by former German defense minister Thomas de Maizière) which, in its NATO 2030 report, called on the alliance to "revitalize" the nuclear-sharing arrangements. This followed their judgments that the "nuclear sharing arrangements play a vital role in the interconnection of the alliance and should remain one of the main components of security guarantees and the indivisibility of security of the whole Euro-Atlantic area [...]. The political value of this commitment is as important as the military value it brings."

What logic underpins these judgments? NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements contribute to its deterrence strategy in two primary ways. They are a demonstration of allied political resolve to stand together in the face of nuclear coercion and attack, so that any enemy will understand that an attack on one would be treated by NATO members as an attack on all. They are also a demonstration of the transatlantic link (that is, the commitment of the United States in the North Atlantic Treaty to Europe's defense) and of the "coupling" of US deterrence capabilities to Europe (that is, the political resolve of the United States to extend nuclear deterrence to Europe even if the U.S. homeland is vulnerable to nuclear attack). Critics dismiss this logic as cold war thinking. In fact, when the Cold War ended and detente between Russia and the West seemed imminent, this way of thinking became much less important for NATO. In the 1990s, 97 percent of US nuclear weapons were withdrawn from Europe. But it began to rise again in importance to the alliance as Russia began to try to coerce NATO members with nuclear-backed threats in the period of approximately 2007-2012. After Russia's use of force to illegally annex Crimea and destabilize eastern Ukraine, the value to NATO of its nuclear deterrence posture rose dramatically, with the communiques of the Warsaw and Brussels summits (2016 and 2018, respectively) providing especially forceful re-statements of NATO nuclear policy and generating actions to "boost NATO's nuclear IQ" – that is, to raise throughout the alliance the level of understanding of the role, requirements, and limits of NATO's nuclear policy and posture.

German withdrawal from NATO's nuclear mission would result in a significant shrinkage of the alliance's fleet of dual-capable aircraft, as Germany contributes more aircraft to NATO's nuclear mission than any ally other than the United States. Equally importantly, German withdrawal would signal to Moscow the weakening of collective nuclear resolve among the allies at a time when Russia is actively testing that resolve. Moreover, withdrawal would contradict the commitment of alliance leaders to strengthen deterrence and broaden the sharing arrangements. The full collapse of NATO's sharing arrangements would be much more damaging, depriving the alliance of the means to signal that a nuclear attack on one would be treated as an attack on all and of this unique expression of the transatlantic link. That link has already been damaged in various ways in recent years and this new blow could have unanticipated repercussions.

It might be argued that Germany could compensate for its weakening of NATO's nuclear deterrent with compensatory investments in non-nuclear means of deterrence. For example, it could host NATO missile defense assets or develop and/or host advanced conventional missile strike capabilities. Or it could undertake a major renewal of its general-purpose military forces. But these would be costly and politically contentious initiatives. Germany might simply have swapped one costly and contentious project for another. Moreover, alliance leaders have clearly and often stated that non-nuclear capabilities are a complement to, but not a substitute for, nuclear weapons.

The cost to arms control

The cost to NATO's arms control strategy could also be significant. To be clear: NATO is not a formal party to nuclear arms control negotiations – that is the responsibility of nuclear-armed states. But it has an arms control strategy, as reflected in the strategic concept and summit communiques. The alliance seeks further reductions of nuclear weapons in Europe, taking into account the asymmetry in force postures of NATO and Russia (the Russian arsenal of non-strategic nuclear weapons is generally estimated to be at least ten times larger than that of NATO). NATO also seeks increased transparency about Russian nuclear deployments in the region and the relocation of Russian nuclear weapons away from the territory of its members. NATO has rejected Russian calls for unilateral withdrawal of US nuclear weapons as a pre-condition to begin negotiations on this matter. Thus, one of the roles of NATO's nuclear arsenal is as bargaining chips for a future negotiation. German withdrawal from the nuclear mission would further shrink the pool of chips. And it would encourage Moscow to think that further withdrawals might result in a situation favorable to Russian interests without any concession by Moscow. This would reduce its incentives to negotiate. The collapse of NATO's nuclear deterrent would, of course, eliminate this incentive. Are NATO's bargaining chips likely to be decisive in shaping Moscow's arms control calculus? Probably not. Are they irrelevant to that calculus? No. Do they increase the prospects for arms control success? Yes.

Conspicuously, NATO's arms control strategy has not so far paid off. Many argue that something new is needed. Accordingly, there is a rising discussion, driven by nuclear ban treaty advocates, of abandoning this strategy and undertaking additional unilateral steps. Following NATO's unilateral 97 percent reduction in the 1990s, the next logical unilateral step for NATO would have to be elimination of the remaining three percent. What should we expect of Russia in response? Ban treaty advocates argue that the end of US extended deterrence in Europe would bring pressure to bear on Moscow, leading to Russian denuclearization. This is fanciful. Russia's leaders are impervious to such pressures and have put nuclear weapons at the very center of their strategy to re-make a European security order to which they strongly object. Past experience is illustrative. How did Russia respond to NATO's 97 percent nuclear reductions and "three no's?" It modernized, diversified, and built up its arsenal of weapons capable of targeting Europe, sometimes violating its treaty obligations to do so. It is thus not surprising that few, if any, NATO allies support a unilateral approach.

If something new is needed, it isn't unilateral disarmament by NATO. In fact, something new is not needed; patience is needed. It was unreasonable to expect a new arms control deal so long as the existing arms control deal is in place. NATO's arms control strategy will finally be put to the test as Washington and Moscow begin to talk seriously about what comes after New START extension. As arms control negotiations generally do not bear fruit before the last minute, we are unlikely to know if NATO's arms control strategy will bear fruit much before the termination of the extended New START Treaty in 2026. It makes no sense to undermine the negotiations as they get started by abandoning that strategy.

Figure by Dr. Brad Roberts

NATO's nuclear policy and posture as extracted from various documents

- Collective defense remains a core task and deterrence and defense are at the heart of the alliance's mission and purpose.
- Deterrence and defense must be based on an appropriate mix of nuclear, conventional, and missile defense capabilities.
- The fundamental purpose of NATO's nuclear capability is to preserve peace, prevent coercion, and deter aggression. Nuclear weapons are unique. Any employment of nuclear weapons against NATO would fundamentally alter the nature of conflict.
- The circumstances in which NATO might have to employ nuclear weapons are extremely remote. If the fundamental security of any of its members were to be threatened however, NATO has the capabilities and resolve to impose costs on an adversary that would be unacceptable and far outweigh the benefits that an adversary could hope to achieve.
- The strategic forces of the alliance, particularly those of the United States, are the supreme guarantee of the security of the allies. The independent strategic nuclear forces of the UK and France have a deterrent role of their own and contribute to the overall security of the alliance.
- NATO's nuclear deterrence posture also relies, in part, on US nuclear weapons forward-deployed in Europe and on capabilities and infrastructure provided by allies concerned.
- Allies will ensure that all components of NATO's nuclear deterrent remain safe, secure, and effective for as long as NATO remains a nuclear alliance. That requires sustained leadership focus and institutional excellence for the nuclear deterrence mission.
- The goal of allies is to bolster deterrence and ensure the broadest possible participation in NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements.
- NATO will continue to seek security at the lowest possible level of forces. It will also continue to try to influence the security environment in positive ways through cooperative security and arms control. NATO will continue to adjust its strategy, including with respect to the capabilities and other measures required for deterrence and defense, in line with trends in the security environment so that it remains fit for purpose.

The cost to NATO's nuclear consultative process

The third cost of a German decision to retire from the nuclear mission – to the alliance's nuclear consultative process – might be modest but could be severe. The consultative process is intended to ensure firm political control over decisions about whether, when, and how to employ nuclear weapons in defense of alliance interests. It was crafted in the 1960s, after a decade of intense debate, to address two concerns. One was the concern of the US to ensure that nuclear-armed allies would not engage in escalatory acts the US would deem unhelpful amidst a nuclear crisis. The other was the concern of European allies to ensure that the United States would not employ nuclear weapons unless absolutely required but would do so if required – and in a manner aimed at rapidly terminating rather than broadening war. To ensure the needed coordination among allies on these sensitive matters, NATO created the Nuclear Planning Group (of defense ministers), formulated guidelines for war-time decision making, developed a joint nuclear planning process to enable effective war-time operation of NATO's fleet of nuclear-armed fighter-bombers, and developed a command structure through SACEUR.

German withdrawal from the NATO nuclear mission would not deprive it of a seat at the table of the Nuclear Planning Group (NPG). But the collapse of NATO's sharing arrangements would call into question this entire structure. If the arrangements were to collapse, NATO members would have to rely on the strategic forces of the alliance's three nuclear-armed members for their nuclear security in crisis and war. The NPG might well remain, but the joint planning and command structure would not, as there would be no NATO capabilities with which to conduct operations. Decisions about the possible employment of strategic forces would necessarily be made in Washington, London, and Paris then. This would cripple the solutions found in the 1960s to basic problems of fair nuclear burden-sharing and effective political control. New solutions are difficult to imagine.

The potential cost of German withdrawal to the consultative process thus must be measured in terms of the impact on the desire to have a seat at the table when the US is considering whether or not to employ nuclear weapons on behalf of an ally whose vital interests are at risk. It is difficult to understand why it's now in Europe's interest to relinquish that seat at the table and put all of its trust in US good judgment. It's equally difficult to understand why Europeans would expect a seat at the US nuclear planning table if they have walked away from their nuclear sharing responsibilities.

The cost to Germany's reputation within the Alliance

The final cost – to Germany's reputation – seems to have captured more attention outside Germany than in. During my service in the Obama administration from 2009 to 2013, when Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle pressed for withdrawal of US nuclear weapons, I heard three main arguments bearing on German reputation. The first came from Germany's long-standing allies, some of whom were privately resentful that the Federal Republic would want to relieve itself of this obligation to their security and sovereignty after they had stood so long in solidarity with Germany in defense of its security and sovereignty. The second argument came from the Federal Republic's newer allies in Central and Eastern Europe, who were privately troubled that Germany appears unwilling to accept any nuclear risk in their defense and thus will let them down in time of crisis. The third argument came from Americans who were resentful that Germany would want the benefits of the alliance's nuclear protection while shifting all of the costs and risks onto the United States. I continue to hear these arguments today. Resentment remains strong. But there is also a new dimension today, as both Europeans and Americans try to make sense of chronic German military underinvestment and the appearance of a drift toward neutralism. Germany's nuclear decision will be seen as part of Germany's larger answer to the question of its future place in the alliance overall.

A lot is at stake for Germany in its nuclear decision. The decision to retire from the nuclear mission may bring some benefits to Germany. It would certainly be appealing to a segment of the German electorate. But frankly, the benefits would likely be modest. The cost savings would be marginal, as the aircraft will be replaced in any case (it is only the nuclear certification of a few new aircraft that is in question). Moreover, while appealing to one segment of the German electorate, such a decision would likely generate opposition from other segments. In addition, such a decision would bring costs to multiple longer-term German interests in a peaceful European order built on the principles of common security and collective defense. Moreover, a lot is at stake for NATO in Germany's nuclear decision. A dozen years ago, faced with tensions with the alliance over the nuclear mission, the Obama administration argued that "decisions about NATO's nuclear deterrent should be made by NATO" and rejected unilateral actions, including of its own (at some domestic and international political cost). The principle remains sound. The logic of NATO's nuclear strategy is also sound. It deserves Germany's support.

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