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No Shortcut to a European Deterrent

Ever since Donald Trump arrived in the White House, European governments have been doubting US security commitments. Yet, to replace US-European nuclear sharing with a purely European alternative is hardly an option.

By Oliver Thränert

The inauguration of President Donald Trump has prompted massive doubts regarding the United States' commitment to providing security for its European allies. So far, the debate has mainly focused on a 'fair' burden sharing arrangement concerning conventional forces. But after former Polish Prime Minister Jarosław Kaczyński raised the possibility of a European nuclear deterrent,¹ the debate has also touched upon the core of transatlantic security: The "nuclear umbrella" provided by the US, and the potential of a European alternative.

Any "European deterrent" – meaning a nuclear force beyond the British and French deterrents, and independent of the US – would face high hurdles and immense costs that might well prove prohibitive. Neither NATO nor the European Union (EU) would remain unaffected by such a development.

A comfortable American umbrella

Europe has lived under the American nuclear umbrella for over sixty years. Through its nuclear deterrent, Washington has provided protection to non-nuclear Alliance members since NATO was founded in 1949. Their national security

consequently depends on Washington keeping its promise to make available and, if need be, use nuclear weapons for the protection of its NATO allies. To make these nuclear ties as strong as possible, the United States has stationed a small part of its nuclear arsenal on the territories of se-

KEY POINTS

- A possible alternative to US extended nuclear deterrence, whose credibility is questioned in European capitals, would be to Europeanize nuclear sharing, based on the nuclear capabilities of France and the United Kingdom.
- Neither NATO nor the EU could provide the necessary political and military framework. Whether an entirely new and reliable institutional framework could be established is doubtful.
- European countries, both nuclear and non-nuclear, would have a hard time convincing domestic constituencies of the need to replace US extended nuclear deterrence with a purely European alternative.
- Europeans should only venture into an alternative to the current US nuclear umbrella if their doubts about US nuclear commitments become structural in nature.

lected Allies since the 1950s. Under the arrangement of “nuclear sharing”, these European nations have provided delivery systems (currently only “dual-capable” aircraft) for deploying US-owned nuclear weapons in case of war. However, in times of peace, access to these nuclear weapons is strictly limited to the US, which closely guards its nuclear weapons arsenals in Europe. Based on this arrangement, US nuclear weapons continue to be stored in Germany as well as at bases in Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy and Turkey.²

No European umbrella

Paris and London do not offer an umbrella. Currently, the United Kingdom and France are the only two European nations to have nuclear weapons of their own. However, while these weapons contribute to the overall security of the Atlantic Alliance, they are mainly intended to boost the national security of these two nuclear powers. Neither the United Kingdom nor France think or act in terms of “extended nuclear deterrence” – meaning extending a nuclear umbrella over Europe. And even if they wanted – they would not have the requisite capabilities either, as their relatively small arsenals (compared to that of the USA) would be inadequate for this purpose. Also, they only have limited credible flexibility, as the French and British nuclear arsenals almost exclusively consist of ballistic missiles tipped with high-yield nuclear warheads stationed on submarines. These weapons are hardly suited for limited nuclear strikes, for example aiming at an opponent’s force concentrations. In other words: if deterrence failed, the only remaining option would be an escalation to the level of an all-out nuclear war.³

Such an approach might credibly suffice in terms of a national nuclear deterrent, especially when such a deterrence strategy is embedded in a context of more flexible nuclear options provided by the US. However, it does not establish any credible basis for an extended nuclear deterrence strategy that also includes the security of non-nuclear partners. A potential enemy could gamble on the French or British governments preferring to take a step back if an Alliance member was attacked rather than escalating to the level of a major nuclear war. At the same time, expanding British and French nuclear capacities to build arsenals comprising a range of nuclear options would most likely be too much of a stretch for both nations – above all financially.

A European nuclear sharing?

Nuclear weapons currently see an unhealthy resurgence. Russia, for example, in its military doctrine emphasizes nuclear forces and appears to be in violation of the INF Treaty, which prohibits intermediate-range nuclear weap-



A military aide, carrying the “football” containing launch codes for nuclear weapons, accompanies U.S. President Donald Trump onto Marine One, February 3, 2017. Europe’s security still is vitally dependent on the US nuclear deterrent. *REUTERS / Kevin Lamarque*

ons, by stationing a new land-based nuclear cruise missile capable of reaching targets in Europe.⁴ In any event, the answer to shaky US security guarantees on the one hand and Russian nuclear re-armament on the other must not lie in developing more “national” nuclear weapons in Europe. All European nations except France and the United Kingdom are non-nuclear members of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and have therefore forever renounced possession of nuclear weapons. Withdrawal from this treaty would legally be possible, but this might trigger a global nuclear arms race, as more nations outside Europe might decide to withdraw from the NPT and build their own weapons. Such a chain of nuclear proliferation would be detrimental to European security interests, in terms of how such interests have been defined and upheld for decades.

Consequently, any attempt to build up European nuclear capabilities must necessarily be based on the capacities currently existing in France and the United Kingdom. However, since it would probably be beyond the means of these two nations alone to extend a nuclear umbrella across all of Europe, the only feasible path appears to be to focus on an intra-European “nuclear sharing”. European nations such as Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium or Italy, which would remain non-nuclear nations in times of peace, could then deploy British or French nuclear weapons with own delivery systems in case of war, rather than the US weapons as is currently foreseen. The distribution of the nuclear burden between the USA and Europe as implemented to date would be fully Europeanized. Additional European nations could support this arrangement by contributing non-nuclear support capabilities, as is already common practice today within NATO.

Neither NATO nor EU?

However, such an approach would raise a number of crucial problems. One is the issue of the respective political and military framework: Any plans and exercises relating to traditional US-European nuclear sharing are currently taking place within NATO. A decisive Europeanization would only make sense if European governments arrived at the conclusion that the USA no longer constituted a reliable Alliance partner in terms of extended nuclear deterrence. However, if this was the case, the Atlantic Alliance would already have suffered such extensive political damage that it would be difficult to conceive of it as a useful framework for providing European nuclear deterrence capabilities. In other words, there will be no purely European nuclear deterrence as part of NATO.

It would therefore only be logical to anchor any purely European nuclear deterrent within the European Union, but this is not possible either, as the United Kingdom is in the process of leaving the EU after the Brexit vote. Also, neutral EU members such as Austria and Ireland have been at the forefront of an international movement towards abolishing all nuclear weapons for many years, and these nations now support negotiations about a convention banning nuclear arms that are set to commence this year.⁵ The considerable differences that exist regarding nuclear weapons between Vienna and Dublin on the one hand and London and Paris on the other have repeatedly caused massive disagreement within the European Union for a number of years, and this background makes it highly unlikely that European nuclear sharing could practically be shifted to the EU. Furthermore, the EU is already confronted with too many other problems such as the Euro Crisis, the refugee problem and different strategic orientations of EU members to be even remotely capable of solving an issue as complex as the shouldering of nuclear responsibilities.

Hence, an entirely new political and military framework outside NATO and the EU would be needed. France and the United Kingdom could participate as nuclear powers, while other nations could provide the delivery systems. Yet, while it may at times be advisable to build a new home rather than fundamentally refurbish an old one, a step that drastic would mean a redesign of the entire European security architecture. Outsourcing European nuclear deterrence and institutionalizing it outside the EU would only make sense if the conventional defense planning of Europe would also take place in the same framework to ensure proper harmonization of nuclear and conventional deterrence. This would mean the end of the EU's common security and

defense policy and would result in a weakening instead of strengthening of the European Union. Moreover, a new framework agreement would be needed to define the extent to which those European nations that neither possess nuclear weapons nor engage in nuclear sharing arrangements would be provided security assurances.

What do the European nations want?

This leaves the question as to whether France and the United Kingdom would be willing to provide Europe's nuclear backbone in the first place. To date, both have rejected this role. Also, neither London nor Paris have so far developed a culture of nuclear cooperation with non-nuclear partners. Extending the protection provided by their own nuclear weapons to other countries would require a revolution of their military and political thinking. This also would need to include a reorientation towards much closer cooperation in nuclear issues, through to creating a joint Franco-British command staff for the deployment of nuclear weapons. However, the UK's deterrent is heavily dependent on cooperation with the US as far as infrastructure maintenance is concerned. France, too, benefits from US nuclear expertise. Finally, looking at the current national populist tendencies in both France and the United Kingdom, it is more than doubtful whether it would be possible to secure the required domestic consensus on such a fundamental nuclear reorientation among the French and British people.

Which European nations would then participate as non-nuclear partners? Certainly Germany would need to be involved. However, this would force any German government to fundamentally redefine the country's role. Ber-

FURTHER READING

French Nuclear Weapons, Euro-Deterrence and NATO

Jean-Loup Samaan and David C. Gompert, Contemporary Security Policy Vol. 30 No. 3, December 2009, pp. 486–504

This article discusses French nuclear forces and doctrines including the possibility of a French extended nuclear strategy for its European partners.

Deterrence at Three: US, UK and French Nuclear Cooperation

Jeffrey Lewis and Bruno Tertrais, Survival Vol. 57 No. 4, August-September 2015, pp. 29–52

An in-depth analysis of nuclear cooperation between the three Western nuclear powers.

The Case for U.S. Nuclear Weapons in the 21st Century

Brad Roberts, Stanford Security Studies 2016

Excellent analysis of the challenges for US nuclear strategy including for its extended deterrence commitments both in Europe and Asia.

lin would become a nuclear junior partner of Paris and London rather than build on its existing nuclear cooperation with Washington. Again, the necessary domestic support may not be forthcoming. Other nations such as Poland, in contrast, would perhaps want to play an active part in European nuclear sharing, but this would run counter to Russian interests and therefore trigger a serious conflict with Moscow.

Finally, there is the question of whether the European nations would even be capable of shouldering independent nuclear deterrence responsibilities without American assistance in terms of their financial, technological, military/political and bureaucratic capacities. In any event, it would not make sense to buy the necessary nuclear delivery systems from the US. As a result, huge European efforts would be needed that would no doubt have to come at a cost to other budget items. Considering the manifold problems Europe is currently faced with in maintaining social security in ageing societies at a time of substantial public debt, it is unlikely that domestic policy legitimization could be secured for such a project.

No rush to independence

Even these brief considerations show that any change in the status quo of nuclear deterrence in and for Europe would not only be expensive, but also a political minefield full of undesirable potential political consequences. Europeans would have to ask themselves whether their concerns are exclusively related to Donald Trump as a person or whether they go deeper. Only if they find that their doubts in the United States' nuclear commitments are structural in nature (that is, if they believe that Trump's eventual successor could not be relied upon as well), should

they even seriously consider the enormous difficulties and problems of European nuclear deterrence. This step would be too significant to be taken in the heat of daily politics.

Other than that it will be about ensuring that President Trump will stand by US obligations as far as possible, while at the same time hoping that his successor will be more cooperative. After all, any half-hearted attempt at nuclear independence would give a massive boost to those in the US who support an American withdrawal from international cooperation, and once a decoupling process of the trans-Atlantic partners will have started, its momentum will most likely be difficult to reverse, even under a new US administration. This could well spell the ultimate end of NATO, which is something the Europeans should only venture into if they have truly sustainable alternatives. There is too much at stake.

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www.css.ethz.ch/ueber-uns/personen/thraenert-oliver.html

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