

# FOREIGN AFFAIRS

July / August 2017  
Volume 96 • Number 4

## Keine Atombombe, Bitte

Why Germany Should Not  
Go Nuclear

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## Why Germany Should Not Go Nuclear

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**T**he election of U.S. President Donald Trump last November confounded Berlin. What, German politicians, policymakers, and journalists wondered, should they make of Trump's vague or even hostile stances toward the EU and NATO or his apparent embrace of Russia? Some hoped that Trump meant to push NATO members to spend more on defense but would, in the end, leave the long-standing U.S. guarantee of European security intact. Others, less optimistic, argued that the days when Germany could rely on the United States for its defense were over—and that the country must start looking out for itself.

Those fears have given new life to an old idea: a European nuclear deterrent. Just days after Trump's election, Roderich Kiesewetter, a senior member of Chancellor Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Union, said that if the United States no longer wanted to provide a nuclear shield, France and the United Kingdom should combine their nuclear arsenals into an EU deterrent, financed through a joint EU military budget. Then, in February, Jaroslaw Kaczynski, the leader of Poland's ruling Law and Justice party, spoke out in favor of the idea of the EU as a "nuclear superpower," as long as any EU deterrent matched Russian capabilities.

Some German commentators even suggested that those proposing a British-French deterrent under the auspices of the EU didn't go far enough. Berthold Kohler, one of the publishers of the influential conservative newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, argued that the British and French arsenals were too weak to take on Russia. He suggested that Germany consider "an indigenous nuclear deterrent which could ward off doubts about America's guarantees." Other

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German analysts, such as Thorsten Benner, head of the Global Public Policy Institute, in Berlin, and Maximilian Terhalle, a scholar of international relations, have come to the same conclusion. “Germany needs nuclear weapons,” Terhalle wrote in *Foreign Policy* in April.

For now, those calling for a German bomb are a fringe minority. For decades, Germany has stood as one of the world’s staunchest supporters of nuclear nonproliferation and global disarmament. In February, a spokesperson for Merkel told the press, “There are no plans for nuclear armament in Europe involving the federal government.” She and others evidently recognize that such plans are a bad idea: a German arsenal would destabilize EU-Russian relations and heighten the risk that other countries would attempt to go nuclear.

But even though Germany’s current nuclear flirtation may reflect nothing more than a passing reaction to Trump’s presidency, it reveals a deeper problem: insecurity in Berlin, caused by years of meandering U.S. policy toward Russia and Europe. To solve this problem, Germany and the United States must work together. Merkel’s government should encourage the EU to coordinate more effectively on defense. The Trump administration, meanwhile, should double down on the U.S. commitment to the success of the EU and NATO while also pushing for broader negotiations with Russia over the future of European security.

## THE SHADOW OF THE PAST

Over the last decade, Europe has experienced a series of intensifying crises, culminating in Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014. Each time, Germany, as the EU’s largest country, has led the response. In 2015, for example, Germany led the negotiations between Russia and Ukraine that resulted in a shaky cease-fire. But every time Germany takes the lead, its neighbors recall history and grow nervous about German hegemony over Europe.

Such fears go back at least as far as the creation of the modern German state in 1871. From then until the country’s partition after World War II, European leaders confronted “the German question,” a simple but unsolvable dilemma. Germany’s size meant that no single European country could ever balance its economic or military power. Yet Germany was never powerful enough to rule over Europe alone. Part of the problem stemmed from the country’s so-called *Mittellage*, its location at the center of Europe, surrounded by potentially hostile coalitions. Germany responded to external threats by pursuing what

historians have called its *Sonderweg*, or “special path,” a term used to describe the country’s affinity for authoritarian rule and attempts to impose that rule throughout Europe. Whenever it did that, the resulting wars devastated the continent.

Germany’s partition—after Hitler led the country’s last and most disastrous attempt to rule over Europe—temporarily solved these problems. West Germany could not dominate Europe during the Cold War since the struggle between the East and the West subsumed European rivalries. And after reunification, in 1990, the institutional bonds of the EU and NATO prevented the German question from recurring. Surrounded only by friends, Germany did not have to worry about its *Mittellage*. At the same time, the U.S. military retained a limited presence in Europe

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(including Germany), and the former western Allies successfully transformed Germany into a peaceful and democratic nation, making the pursuit of *Sonderweg* unthinkable. The U.S. security guarantee also allowed Germans to maintain their largely antimilitaristic stance, reap the economic benefits of peace, and, at times, claim the moral high ground over Washington for its overreliance on military power.

This halcyon era for Germany ended abruptly in 2009. The Great Recession and the subsequent EU debt crisis led many EU countries to demand German leadership. But when Germany imposed its solutions on the rest of the continent—for example, by insisting that southern European countries follow austere economic policies—it triggered accusations of rising German hegemony. In 2015, for example, the ruling Greek Syriza party claimed that Germany had threatened “immediate financial strangulation” and “annihilation” of Greece if the Greek government rejected the harsh terms of the proposed EU bailout.

The first major shock to European security came in 2014, when Russia invaded Ukraine. Merkel’s once pragmatic relationship with Russian President Vladimir Putin deteriorated rapidly. Sidelining the United States, Germany joined France in brokering a shaky truce in eastern Ukraine, led EU efforts to impose sanctions on Russia, and sent German forces to reassure nervous Baltic NATO allies. Years of mercurial U.S. policy toward Moscow that veered back and forth between efforts to repel Russian influence in eastern Europe and

attempts to “reset” the strained relationship left Germany with little choice but to take the lead.

Against this backdrop, Trump’s election heightened the tensions among competing factors: the need for German leadership, the limits of German power, and Europe’s intolerance of German dominance. During the campaign, Trump displayed indifference to the possible breakup of the EU and praised nationalist political movements such as the Brexit campaign, a stance that threatened Germany’s core political identity as the heart of the EU and put pressure on Berlin to defend the union. Worse still, by declaring NATO “obsolete,” Trump undermined the system that has kept Europe safe and Germany restrained for over half a century.

But worst of all, by appearing to cozy up to Putin, Trump put Germany in a new *Mittellage*—this time between the White House and the Kremlin. The effect was not confined to Germany; the prospect of a rapprochement between Putin and Trump has left the entire EU in an uncomfortable position. In January, when Donald Tusk, the president of the European Council, ranked the threats facing the EU, he highlighted not just the traditional menaces of jihadism and Russian aggression but also “worrying declarations by the new American administration.” Across the continent, leaders feared that Trump would support populist forces seeking to break up the EU or trade away the U.S. nuclear guarantee of European security in a grand bargain with Russia.

### **A DANGEROUS IDEA**

Should Europe find itself caught between a hostile Russia and an indifferent United States, Berlin would feel pressure to defend Europe militarily rather than just politically. But then it would face the problem of how to guarantee European security without reviving fears of German hegemony. And if Germany boosted its military power without integrating it into the European project, that might well lead to German isolation and the breakup of the EU.

Nuclear weapons seem to offer Germany a way out of this impasse. In the eyes of their proponents, they would deter existential threats and reduce European dependence on the United States without raising fears of German dominance. “Nuclear power projection on the part of Berlin would be accepted as legitimate,” Terhalle wrote, because “World War II has no real political weight in today’s relations.” Instead,



*Bombs away: at an antinuclear demonstration in Biblis, Germany, April 2010*

it is the “perception of threat from Russia” that determines policy in central and eastern European countries. This claim rests on a shaky foundation. Russia’s actions in eastern Ukraine may be driving European nations together, but the fear of a German resurgence has not gone away entirely. If Germany built nuclear weapons, the EU’s current unity would quickly fracture.

Even if the rest of the EU accepted German nuclear weapons, that would not end Europe’s security woes. Nuclear weapons cannot deter the kind of limited wars Russia has waged so successfully in Crimea and eastern Ukraine, whoever provides the deterrent. Even simply replacing the U.S. nuclear deterrent for Europe with a German- or EU-led one would not be easy. The United States struggled for much of the Cold War to convince the Soviet Union that it would defend West Berlin with nuclear weapons, especially given the Soviets’ conventional military superiority; Germany would face the same problem as it tried to persuade Russia of its willingness to use nuclear force to defend other EU countries, especially the Baltics, which are under the greatest threat from Russia.

Both France and the United Kingdom already possess nuclear weapons. Their experiences offer mixed lessons of the benefits of a

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nuclear arsenal. Both gained some independence from the United States after fielding their own nuclear forces, yet both still relied on the United States to supply conventional military force in Europe,

and neither country's nuclear arsenal could match the Soviet Union's. Nor did their nuclear forces do a great deal to improve NATO's collective defense. Only the United Kingdom pledged to use its deterrent to defend other NATO members, while France stayed outside NATO's nuclear structure. And it took the United Kingdom a great deal of time

and effort to make its commitment credible. Germany should remember that simply possessing nuclear weapons does not automatically make allies more secure.

Regardless of the ultimate effect of a nuclear arsenal, Germany would have to surmount major technical, political, and security hurdles before acquiring one. It would need to either repurpose its nuclear energy infrastructure for weapons production or sprint to the bomb from new military facilities. Either path would take substantial time and effort. Each would involve activities that, if detected, would ring alarm bells. Germany would struggle to keep any effort to build nuclear weapons in military facilities secret given the vast construction work this would involve. Nor could it simply rely on its civil nuclear infrastructure. In the wake of the 2011 Fukushima nuclear accident in Japan, Merkel's government decided to phase out all of Germany's nuclear power plants by 2022. This decision makes it difficult for Germany to take technical steps toward the bomb under the guise of a peaceful program. Even seemingly innocuous moves, such as keeping a few large reactors online past the deadline, would raise suspicions.

In any case, the time would eventually come when Germany could no longer hide its nuclear ambitions. At that point, the German government would face intense domestic political opposition and perhaps even civil unrest from a population that determinedly opposes nuclear weapons. A March 2016 poll found that 93 percent of Germans favor an international ban on nuclear weapons and that 85 percent would like to see the United States remove all its nuclear weapons from Germany. The German population would not back a public nuclear

weapons program, and any leader who authorized a clandestine effort would face political ruin.

Moreover, a German nuclear arsenal would risk bringing down the international nonproliferation regime. Before acquiring the bomb, Germany would have to leave the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, a move that would threaten the continued existence of the treaty itself. Despite the NPT's successful record, the treaty's future already looks uncertain. Under the NPT, states with nuclear weapons agreed to pursue disarmament, but in recent years, progress toward this goal has stalled, and nonnuclear states have increasingly voiced their frustration that the nuclear weapons states have not fulfilled their promise. A foundational goal of the treaty, moreover, was to keep Germany from building nuclear weapons. If Berlin defected, the nonproliferation regime might collapse entirely, because other countries would no longer feel bound by the treaty's collective bargain.

Germany would also need to modify or withdraw from the so-called Two Plus Four Treaty, the agreement on reunification that East and West Germany signed with France, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, and the United States in 1990. In that document, Germany affirmed its "renunciation of the manufacture and possession of and control over nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons." The treaty was meant not only to end the Cold War but also to prevent any future German *Sonderweg*; abrogating it would bring back the German question and deliver an affront to the four countries that paid such enormous costs to defeat Nazi Germany in World War II.

Worst of all, the pursuit of a German nuclear arsenal, rather than deterring aggression, could increase the risk of conflict in Europe, since Russia would likely work to prevent Germany from acquiring the bomb. Moscow could assassinate German nuclear scientists, use cyberattacks to sabotage German nuclear industrial infrastructure, and perhaps go so far as to strike German nuclear facilities from the air. Even covert operations could quickly spiral into outright confrontation.

Even if Germany managed to acquire nuclear weapons, it would then face the daunting task of making sure they could survive a Russian attack. In recent years, Russia has moved its missiles westward, targeting Germany and other NATO members. Now that Russia has allegedly deployed multiple cruise missiles in violation of the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, under which the Soviet Union and the United States agreed to abandon midrange missiles, its



ability to destroy a fledgling German nuclear stockpile is only growing. Unless Germany managed to conceal and protect its nuclear weapons almost immediately, German leaders could, during a crisis with Russia, feel pressure to launch a preemptive nuclear attack against Russia in order to avoid losing the arsenal to a Russian first strike.

These formidable barriers to a German nuclear program have led some to return to the idea of a British-French deterrent. But the United Kingdom's impending departure from the EU leaves Germany with the sole option of reaching out to France. This would not be the first time that France and Germany have considered a joint European nuclear deterrent. In 1957, shortly after the Suez crisis, when tensions between France and the United States were running high and the French government began to doubt the credibility of the U.S. nuclear guarantee, France suggested to Italy and West Germany that the three countries develop nuclear weapons together. The next year, French President Charles de Gaulle took office and quickly canceled the secret negotiations and began an indigenous French nuclear program, only to raise the prospect of nuclear cooperation again with German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer in 1962. And in the 1990s, France offered to extend its nuclear umbrella to Germany after reunification in an attempt to decrease U.S. influence in Europe. All these efforts failed, in part because the French consistently refused to relinquish control over their arsenal, as to do so would have been to give up French autonomy in foreign policy. This calculus has not changed, a fact that should give German policymakers pause today. Moreover, by reviving such talk, Berlin risks giving isolationist elements in the Trump administration exactly what they want: an excuse to disengage.

### **STRONGER TOGETHER**

Nuclear weapons will not solve Europe's current woes, but Washington should not dismiss German nuclear yearnings, as they reflect a growing sense of uncertainty in Berlin. This uncertainty stems from an incoherent U.S. policy toward Russia, which began well before Trump took office. Since 2000, Washington has faced competing policy options: focus only on defending NATO allies and containing Russia; offer indefinite support to former Soviet states, such as Georgia and Ukraine, that struggle under Russian dominance; or cooperate with Russia to tackle global security challenges.

The United States has experimented with all three. It has welcomed new countries into NATO despite dire, if vague, warnings from Russia. Washington continues to keep the door to the alliance open in the hope that former Soviet states will eventually join, but it lacks the resolve to force Moscow to respect the sovereignty of countries such as Georgia and Ukraine. At the same time, successive U.S. administrations have tried to cooperate with the Kremlin on various issues, such as counterterrorism and stopping the Iranian nuclear program.

Three years after the annexation of Crimea and the start of the war in Ukraine, Washington has yet to choose a clear policy. This inconsistency, coupled with Russian aggression, has led Europe to the brink of a new Cold War. Add to this Trump's erratic stances toward Russia and NATO, and it is not surprising that Europeans are asking what Washington's long-term priorities really are and how the United States intends to achieve them.

This crisis in transatlantic relations presents many perils, but it also offers opportunities for leaders in Berlin and Washington. For Germany, that means taking practical steps to increase Europe's ability to provide for its own conventional security, not proposing dangerous nuclear fantasies. Germany should not focus on NATO's blunt spending goal of two percent of GDP but instead seek closer cooperation among national EU militaries; contribute larger and better-equipped forces to the EU Battlegroups; encourage EU countries to avoid duplicating one another's military R & D, production, and procurement; overcome German national pride and work to develop a common European defense industry; and increase the resilience of EU states to Russian propaganda.

For its part, Washington must recognize the limits of U.S. power and focus on strengthening its existing alliances in Europe. To that end, it should send more high-ranking officials to the Baltics and deploy another light battalion to the region to reinforce U.S. security commitments to NATO's most vulnerable eastern members. Washington should also probe whether Moscow's aims are limited to protecting its core interests in the former Soviet states or whether the Kremlin has broader ambitions. To this end, U.S. officials should put the option of ending NATO's open-door policy on the table during future negotiations with Russia over the war in eastern Ukraine. Should this strategy fail to stop the Kremlin from threatening NATO members, the United States could always return to its proven approach of containment.

For this policy to work, Germany must play its well-established role of interlocutor. Washington should take up a long-standing German suggestion to embark on a round of negotiations concerning European security among Russia, the United States, and all European countries. In 1975, a similar meeting in Helsinki improved communication between the Soviet and U.S. militaries and produced a tentative commitment to respect individual rights and freedoms. EU and U.S. officials should aim for an agreement that increases the security of both NATO members and Russia, ends the bloodshed in Ukraine, and helps develop the economies of former Soviet states. Past U.S. administrations have shown few signs that they believe in such a vision. The Trump administration should take this opportunity to rethink U.S. policy.

As the sudden desire for nuclear weapons in Germany demonstrates, even offhand remarks calling into question European security can have serious consequences. So the Trump administration should change its tune and instead buttress the EU and NATO whenever possible. It should also offer a broader vision for Russian and European security. U.S. leadership would allow Germany to delicately balance the EU's need for direction against its fears of German hegemony. Together, Germany and the United States can renew the transatlantic bonds on which Europe is built. 🌐