

Germany and nuclear deterrence: dialogue with France while preserving US guarantees

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In an article published on 13 February in the bimonthly *Foreign Affairs* and in remarks delivered during the Munich Security Conference, Chancellor Friedrich Merz (CDU) confirmed that Germany and France have been engaged in talks on nuclear deterrence. Any potential arrangements in this regard are intended to complement NATO's nuclear sharing programme, remain consistent with Germany's obligations under international law, avoid creating zones of differentiated security in Europe, and contribute to strengthening the European pillar of NATO. President Emmanuel Macron presented details of these discussions in a speech on French nuclear deterrence on the 2 March. Merz has previously stressed that Germany continues to rely on NATO's nuclear deterrence provided by the United States. In the context of the ongoing German debate on this issue, Defence Minister Boris Pistorius has underlined the indispensability of US guarantees and characterised the debate about a European nuclear deterrence as sending the wrong signal. Moreover, a discussion about Germany developing its own nuclear weapons has surfaced in domestic public debate; however, among political parties only some members of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) have expressed support for this idea.

The German debate on nuclear deterrence is driven by concerns over the future of US military engagement in Europe and the Trump administration's animosity towards the EU. The German government will seek to maintain US nuclear and conventional involvement in Europe, while simultaneously exploring avenues for cooperation with France in the field of nuclear deterrence, with a view to strengthening its own and European security.

Commentary

- **For Germany, nuclear deterrence within NATO provided by the United States remains crucial.** Germany is one of five member states – alongside Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy, and Turkey – participating in NATO's nuclear sharing programme, which links US nuclear assets deployed in Europe with delivery systems operated by these European countries. In 2025, the United States redeployed tactical nuclear bombs to RAF Lakenheath in the United Kingdom, having withdrawn them in 2008, and the British government ordered 12 F-35A aircraft to carry them. Büchel air base in Rhineland-Palatinate houses US tactical nuclear weapons (around 20 B61 tactical nuclear bombs), for which Germany provides the required delivery systems. At present, these are ageing Tornado aircraft, which are due to be replaced by F-35s after 2027; the decision to purchase them was taken following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (see: ')

First projects to be financed from the Bundeswehr's modernisation fund'). Previously, parts of the SPD, the Greens, and the Left Party had opposed this move. Had the decision to purchase the F-35 not been taken, Germany's participation in the programme would have been gradually phased out. Like all other NATO members except France, Germany is part of the Nuclear Planning Group, which sets the Alliance's nuclear deterrence policy. However, German society remains sceptical about relying on US-provided nuclear deterrence: 62% of respondents expressed this view in a survey conducted by the Körber Foundation in November 2025, a finding confirmed by other polls.

- **Amid uncertainty over the direction of US security policy, Germany is currently interested in talks with France on the European dimension of French nuclear deterrence.** During the first Trump administration in 2020, France invited its European allies to engage in a debate on this issue but received only a limited response. The discussion included proposals for the participation of allies in exercises of the French nuclear forces, overflights by French aircraft equipped with nuclear weapons over allied territory, and the short-term deployment of such aircraft to air bases in allied countries. There were also calls for greater clarity regarding the European dimension of France's nuclear doctrine. Paris renewed its offer in March 2025, this time generating greater interest, particularly in Berlin. In August 2025, under the auspices of the offices of the French President and the German Chancellor, the two countries launched a strategic dialogue on nuclear deterrence. The talks are expected to cover the aforementioned issues, although Germany may also seek to initiate a more far-reaching debate on European nuclear deterrence. For France, however, maintaining sovereignty over matters related to its nuclear deterrent remains non-negotiable. In a November 2025 survey commissioned by the Körber Foundation, 75% of German respondents expressed support for efforts to place Germany under the French and British nuclear umbrella. Meanwhile, a survey initiated by *Internationale Politik* and conducted by the Forsa Institute found that 64% of Germans believe that Europe should develop its own nuclear deterrent capability.
- **Discussions about developing Germany's own nuclear weapons have formed part of the domestic media debate. However, such a step has been ruled out by German political parties and rejected by public opinion.** A shift in this regard could be triggered by severe destabilisation of international relations, including a collapse of transatlantic ties and the withdrawal of the US nuclear umbrella from Europe, or the erosion of the nuclear non-proliferation regime combined with the absence of viable options for developing a European nuclear deterrent. Germany has been a party to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons since 1968. In the 1990 'Two Plus Four' Treaty, it declared that the unified German state would renounce the production, possession, and control of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons. According to a Körber Foundation survey conducted in November 2025, 82% of Germans are opposed to the idea of their country possessing its own nuclear weapons. At the same time, Germany is described (for example, by the International Institute for Strategic Studies) as a 'threshold state', meaning that it has the technological capacity to acquire nuclear weapons independently within a few years, provided there is sufficient political determination, substantial financial resources, and favourable international conditions. Although Germany has phased out civilian nuclear power, with the last three reactors shut down in 2023, one of the three facilities of the Urenco consortium – owned by the governments of the

Netherlands and the United Kingdom and a holding company of German energy firms – continues to operate in Gronau in North Rhine-Westphalia. The plant produces low-enriched uranium for commercial purposes, supplying fuel for nuclear power stations. Should Germany decide to launch a military nuclear programme, it would face challenges not only in developing nuclear weapons themselves but also in independently constructing delivery systems. German companies do not produce submarine-launched missiles or land-based medium-range ballistic missile systems, while air-to-surface missiles such as the Taurus KEPD 350 are being developed in partnership with other countries, notably Sweden.