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Vallée, Shahin

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Stellungnahme / comment

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Vallée, S. (2020). *France and Germany Need a Dialogue on Nuclear Policy: No More Talking Past Each Other*. (DGAP Kommentar, 7). Berlin: Forschungsinstitut der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Auswärtige Politik e.V.. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-66997-2>

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France and Germany Need a Dialogue on Nuclear Policy

No More Talking Past Each Other



Shahin Vallée

is a senior fellow at the Alfred von Oppenheim Center for European Policy Studies

In February 2020, it was Emmanuel Macron's turn to make the traditional speech given by French presidents on military and nuclear doctrine. Many observers hailed Macron's address as a real breakthrough, offering European partners a strategic dialogue on security, defense, and nuclear policy. Yet compared to French positions voiced in the past, this year's were not a real step forward. To achieve momentum in Europe, a dialogue is first needed within Germany before it can start one with France.

On February 7, 2020, French President Emmanuel Macron gave a speech on France's policy of nuclear deterrence. It was complemented by an extensive interview at the Munich Security Conference on February 15, in which Macron made a strong case for pursuing a strategic dialogue with European partners – one that includes a discussion of the role of nuclear deterrence alongside conventional security and defense policy. His purpose was two-fold. On the one hand, France aims to strengthen Europe's strategic autonomy in a context in which the US is increasingly perceived as an unreliable and unpredictable ally. On the other,

it wants to engage with Germany on security and defense issues rather than merely focusing on areas in which France is perceived to be on the receiving end of Germany's largesse, such as those related to the euro area or European industrial policy.

Macron's speech took place in a very different geostrategic and nuclear context from those of years past. First, concern about proliferation is growing in the face of the failure of the Iran nuclear deal formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and North Korea's return to nuclear testing and armament, as well as the denunciation by the United States of the 1987 Intermediate Range Treaty and its threat not to renew its commitment to the START treaty, which expires in 2021. Second, nuclear technology has surged in both the US and Russia, resulting in supersonic vehicles for nuclear weapons, transcontinental torpedoes, and weapons equipped with radioactive and nuclear components that blur the lines between chemical and conventional warfare – all of which increase the nuclear threat. Finally, while geostrate-

gic instability and risks grow, popular pressure for the abolition of nuclear weapons has been building internationally, particularly since the adoption of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) in September 2017 by 80 countries, two of which – Ireland and Austria – are European.

dependent nuclear strategy. Macron continues to insist that Europe's security must be built on two pillars: on the one hand, NATO and, on the other, Europe's own defense capacity, the latter of which requires both common defense capacity and nuclear deterrence. Given this belief, France has intro-

ic rivalry, as well as their different traditions and varying degrees of attachment to the transatlantic alliance.

It would be a pity if the long-standing Franco-German *dialogue de sourd* ("dialogue of the deaf") would continue for another generation. President Macron's offer to work with Germany might be imperfect in many ways, but it must kick-start a real political debate inside Germany. Roderich Kiesewetter, a Christian Democrat and the German parliament's foreign policy spokesman, has already suggested that the Franco-British pact could form the foundation of a European nuclear deterrence strategy to be financed out of a joint European military budget. Rainer Arnold, a Social Democrat and the Bundestag's spokesman on defense, rebuffed Macron's proposal, suggesting it would amount to a weakening of NATO that would be unacceptable to the United States. While Johann Wadephul, deputy chairman of the parliamentary representatives of the CDU/CSU group, suggested that a nuclear strategy for Europe could be agreeable if placed entirely under the command of NATO, German Defense Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer struck a more conservative line, indicating limited interest for anything beyond NATO. Germany's Greens continue to endorse global nuclear disarmament as a matter of principle and, consequently, have been reluctant to engage more actively on these geo-strategic matters.

In its current form, Macron's offer is unlikely to change such mixed responses. Still, it should be used as an opportunity for the next generation of German leaders to start a dialogue, first within Germany and then with France. Although these discussions promise to be difficult and protracted – as were those around the creation of a single currency, for example – they are unavoidable. These discussions should lead to a coherent and consistent German position. If Germany rejects the principle of nuclear

France continues to view nuclear deterrence as an essential aspect of its and Europe's sovereignty

Given the changing nature of nuclear and geopolitical threats and uncertainty around existing alliances and US engagement, France's doctrine of nuclear deterrence has evolved considerably over the years (see table below). In principal, it remains defensive. Yet while the doctrine was initially developed only to respond to threats of a nuclear nature, it has now been elevated into the continuum of France's conventional military forces. The initial general threat to inflict "inacceptable damage" and destruction on a territory and its population has gradually become a more strategic threat to target economic and political hubs. Moreover, France's definition of its vital interests is evolving to encompass a European dimension and to include the safeguarding of its population in addition to defending its territory.

France continues to view nuclear deterrence as an essential aspect of its and Europe's sovereignty. In fact, the current French government sees the retrenchment of the US that began in the aftermath of the Iraq War and was made more visible under the administration of President Donald Trump as a profound vindication of France's arm's-length relationship to NATO and its in-

duced new multiyear military budgetary planning, which includes spending 37 billion euros between 2019 and 2025 on its nuclear deterrence strategy alone – a commitment that is likely to grow after 2030 to develop new technologies such as hypersonic systems.

So far, the response in Germany and the rest of Europe to Macron's call for a strategic dialogue has been limited. In fact, since the bold nuclear policy speech given by former French Prime Minister Alain Juppé in September 1995, in which France offered to discuss "concerted nuclear deterrence" with its European partners, France and Germany have only talked past each other on these issues. Meanwhile, France has made considerably more progress with the United Kingdom. At a summit in October 1995, the two countries recognized that their vital security interests are inextricably linked. The Lancaster House Agreements of November 2010 further formalized aspects of their cooperation on defense. Although it was certainly easier for two partners of fairly even military capacity to start a constructive dialogue, the positive results of these talks should not be taken for granted given their histor-

A QUICK HISTORY OF THE NUCLEAR POLICY SPEECHES OF FRENCH PRESIDENTS

1994: President Francois Mitterand reveals the approximate number of French nuclear warheads for the first time (less than 500). He also expresses openness to extending the definition of France's vital interests to Europe, but he puts the onus on its European neighbors to open the debate on European political integration: *"Que l'Europe se dote de notions claires en matière d'intérêt vital commun, qu'elle aille assez loin dans sa conscience politique pour estimer que l'intégrité territoriale des uns engage l'intégrité territoriale des autres, bref que d'immenses efforts et progrès soient accomplis par ceux qui entendent poursuivre la construction de l'Europe, et la France acceptera le débat."*

1995: Alain Juppé, French Prime Minister under President Jacques Chirac, gives an important speech in the context of France resuming nuclear weapons testing. For the first time Juppé offers to discuss concerted nuclear deterrence (*"sur la dissuasion nucléaire concertée"*). The move is made not only to secure backing from the UK and Germany for French nuclear tests, but also to start a real dialogue about the possible Europeanization of nuclear deterrence.

1995: The agreement signed by both France and the UK in October is an opportunity for French President Jacques Chirac and British Prime Minister John Major to agree that *"they do not see situations arising in which the vital interests of either Party could be threatened without the vital interests of the other also being threatened,"* thus establishing the foundation for Franco-British nuclear cooperation and a possible model for its extension.

2001: Jacques Chirac gives the impression of upgrading the level of nuclear threat by referring to grossly unacceptable damage (*"dommages absolument inacceptables"*) rather than simply unacceptable damage (*"dommages inacceptables"*). Later, this was revealed to have been a verbal slip. Chirac also affirms the contribution to European security made by French deterrence: *"La dissuasion nucléaire doit aussi, c'est le vœu de la France, contribuer à la sécurité de l'Europe."*

2008: President Nicolas Sarkozy takes a more affirmative line, stating that French nuclear deterrence does include a European dimension and it welcomes a dialogue on the

role of nuclear deterrence in Europe's security: *"S'agissant de l'Europe, c'est un fait, les forces nucléaires françaises, par leur seule existence, sont un élément clé de sa sécurité. Un agresseur qui songerait à mettre en cause l'Europe doit en être conscient. Je propose d'engager avec ceux de nos partenaires européens qui le souhaiteraient, un dialogue ouvert sur le rôle de la dissuasion et sa contribution à notre sécurité commune."*

2015: President Francois Hollande announces the reduction of warheads to 300, but he more precisely defines the focus of nuclear targets to include economic and political hubs, thereby stepping away from the traditional threat to inflict unacceptable damages. He also clarifies the definition of France's vital interest to include not only territorial integrity but also safeguarding its population, which somewhat extends the threats that could be the object of nuclear reaction. Hollande also chooses the interrogative form to make a step in the direction of considering Europe's territory as a whole to be a part of France's vital interest: *"Qui pourrait donc croire qu'une agression, qui mettrait en cause la survie de l'Europe, n'aurait aucune conséquence?"*

2019: Emmanuel Macron confirms France's arm's-length relationship with NATO on nuclear matters (France does not and will not take part in NATO's nuclear exercises), but he opens the door to a strategic dialogue in order to build a common strategic culture with European partners. Macron, however, falls short of offering a path to a common deterrence policy and does not refer to *"concerted deterrence,"* which would entail shared governance. In fact, he stresses that France's ability to make independent decisions is compatible with France's solidarity to Europe: *"Par ailleurs, nos forces nucléaires jouent un rôle dissuasif propre, notamment en Europe. Elles renforcent la sécurité de l'Europe par leur existence même et à cet égard ont une dimension authentiquement européenne. Sur ce point, notre indépendance de décision est pleinement compatible avec une solidarité inébranlable à l'égard de nos partenaires européens. (...) Soyons clairs : les intérêts vitaux de la France ont désormais une dimension européenne. Dans cet esprit, je souhaite que se développe un dialogue stratégique avec nos partenaires européens qui y sont prêts sur le rôle de la dissuasion nucléaire française dans notre sécurité collective. Les partenaires européens qui souhaitent s'engager sur cette voie pourront être associés aux exercices des forces françaises de dissuasion."*

deterrence outright, it should sign and ratify the TPNW as Ireland and Austria did. If, however, Germany accepts the principle of nuclear deterrence in the context of NATO and the US security guarantee, as it does today, it is not clear why it would reject an autonomous European deterrence strategy. If Germany accepts an autonomous strategy in principle, France and Germany would in effect agree that their respective territorial integrity – and populations – are part of each other's vital interests, as the UK and France did in their landmark agreement of 1995 mentioned above. Such a step would mark a quantum leap in the convergence of France and Germany's security interests, which would force both countries to identify common threats and pave the way to greater cooperation.

Subsequently, Germany would need to decide if it simply wants France to de facto extend its nuclear umbrella to Germany or whether it wants to gradually establish a concerted nuclear doctrine, strategy, command, and force shared between the two countries. At the end of this important conversation within Germany, which will certainly be followed by long negotiations with France, the two countries (with or without the UK) could be jointly responsible for Europe's security policy and together command a unified European nuclear deterrence force – although such cooperation could pose legal challenges vis-à-vis the Non-Proliferation Treaty that both France and Germany have signed. France and Germany could then also share a common seat at the UN Security Council, if the Security Council has not been reformed by that time to offer a seat to Germany.

These are ambitious proposals. Some, in fact, are taboo in France; others in Germany. Still, there will be no real strategic dialogue to speak of if both France and Germany are not prepared to have a candid discussion about their respective sacred cows and taboos.

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Rauchstraße 17/18
10787 Berlin

Tel. +49 30 254231-0

info@dgap.org
www.dgap.org
@dgapev

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Publisher

Deutsche Gesellschaft für
Auswärtige Politik e.V.

ISSN 1864-347

Editing Helga Beck

Layout Luise Rombach

Design Concept: WeDo

Author picture(s) © DGAP



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