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Debating the withdrawal of US nuclear weapons from Europe: What Germany expects from Russia*

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The recent debate in Germany about nuclear sharing confirmed the broad support among decision-makers for continued involvement in the political dimension of NATO's sharing arrangements, i. e., participation in the Alliance's nuclear consultative bodies. At the same time, German decision-makers hold divergent views on continued participation in the operational and technical aspects of nuclear sharing. Russia's arsenal of approximately 2,000 tactical nuclear weapons is of great concern to Germany and many in Berlin are worried that Russia is systematically expanding its nuclear arsenal. German decision-makers and the government support NATO's dual-track policy of deterring and engaging Russia. German policy-makers' arguments on the added military value of forward-deployed US nuclear weapons remain vague and there are few specific ideas about what type of arms control would be best suited to reduce the role and number of tactical nuclear weapons in Europe. There are four frameworks in which tactical nuclear weapons could be discussed with Russia, namely the nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT), other multilateral fora, the Russian — US bilateral dialogue on strategic stability, and the NATO — Russia Council. If Russia is serious about reducing the role and number of nuclear weapons in Europe, it should accept the reciprocity paradigm and drop some worn-out demands and positions that have little relevance for political debates around arms control in Berlin and elsewhere.

Keywords: nuclear arms control, tactical nuclear weapons, NATO, Germany.

In spring 2020, a lively debate erupted in Germany on the risks and benefits of the deployment of US nuclear weapons in Europe and Berlin's continued involvement in the operational aspects of NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements.

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In mid-April the Germany's conservative Defense Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer had announced plans to replace Germany's current fleet of Tornado dual-capable aircraft (DCA) with 90 Eurofighter Typhoon and 45 US F-18 fighter aircraft. Thirty of these F-18 would be certified to carry US nuclear weapons.

The leader of the Social Democrat parliamentary group, challenged this decision in a May 2 interview with *Der Tagesspiegel*. Rolf Mützenich called for changes in NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements by stating that "it is about time, that Germany in the future excludes the deployment" of nuclear weapons on its territory. His party's leadership later backed the initiative. The German Social Democrats (SPD) are coalition partners of the conservative Christian Democrat Union (CDU) [1].

The debate about nuclear sharing confirmed the broad support among German decision-makers for continued deterrence of Russia as well as German participation in the political dimension of sharing arrangements, i. e. participation in NATO's nuclear consultative bodies. (The Federal Republic of) Germany has always seen nuclear consultations as an instrument to stay informed about the nuclear policies of nuclear-armed allies in order to prevent changes that it views as detrimental to its own security [2]. This includes particularly German influence on the US nuclear force posture in Europe and associated nuclear doctrines. Germany's involvement in the Alliance's integrated nuclear force planning and standing arrangements for nuclear consultations in NATO's Nuclear Planning Group and High Level Group have been core elements of this policy [3].

At the same time, German decision-makers hold divergent views on continued participation in the operational and technical aspects of nuclear sharing, which currently involves hosting US nuclear weapons and providing dual-capable aircraft as means of delivery.

Opponents of the continued deployment of US nuclear weapons in Germany argue that the forward-basing of nuclear weapons in Europe provides no added military value. They maintain that the Trump administration's unilateral approach to NATO has devalued nuclear sharing arrangements. By contrast, proponents of the NATO nuclear status quo emphasize the need for continued deterrence of Russia and the political importance of burden-sharing arrangements.

German experts and decision-makers debated NATO and Russian nuclear weapons in the context of four broader discussions: first, Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 led to renewed debates about (nuclear) deterrence. Second, since Donald Trump's election in 2016, German analysts and decision-makers have discussed whether Germany (or Europe) needs its own nuclear weapons [4]. Third, there is an ongoing debate on the consequences of the demise of the INF treaty. Fourth, Germans continue to debate the value of German involvement in military and political dimensions of nuclear sharing arrangements. All four discussions are interwoven in various ways and provide the background for how Germany debates nuclear deterrence and possible arms control measures to reduce nuclear stockpiles in Europe.

This article unpacks the Russian aspect of the German debate on tactical nuclear weapons¹. It briefly summarises how Russia's nuclear posture in Europe is perceived by Germans and outlines how German politicians and decision-makers view the role of nuclear deterrence and the prospects for arms control with Russia. The article then looks at

¹ In the context of this article tactical nuclear weapons encompass all non-strategic nuclear weapons with ranges not covered by the (now defunct) INF treaty and the New START accord.

four different settings in which tactical nuclear weapons might be discussed with Russia. It suggests some actions Moscow could take to facilitate progress on reducing nuclear weapons in Europe and argues that a proactive Russian policy of reducing the role and number of nuclear weapons would foster changes in NATO's nuclear posture.

The debate on nuclear arms control does not take place in a vacuum and has to be seen as one element of relations between Germany and Russia. Since 2014, Germany's Russia policy has been hotly debated. Those who have argued that Berlin should pursue a dual-track approach of deterrence and engagement vis-à-vis Moscow have consistently been losing ground. The German government sees the Russian state as responsible for the March 2018 poisoning of former Russian spy Victor Skripal in the United Kingdom, cyber attacks on the German Bundestag, the assassination of a Georgian citizen in central Berlin in August 2019 and the poisoning of Alexei Navalny in August 2020. Such actions have strengthened the hands of those who argue that engagement with Moscow has yielded no results. These developments also influence perceptions of the likelihood and desirability of nuclear arms control with Russia. At the same time, actions by Moscow to reduce nuclear threats can have a positive impact on how Berlin views Russia's role in European security.

Disparities of non-strategic weapons stockpiles

Russia's arsenal of approximately 2,000 tactical nuclear weapons is of great concern to Germany. The German government sees "the systematic expansion of the Russian arsenal of short- and medium-range and the deployment of such systems close to the NATO border" [5, p. 106] as part of a broader trend of Russia increasing reliance on nuclear deterrence. Berlin cites the deployment of nuclear-capable Iskander missile in Kaliningrad and near St. Petersburg, the deployment of Kalibr missiles in the Baltic Sea and the 9M729 cruise missile, which NATO countries believe to be of an intermediate-range, as specific examples why it feels threatened by Russia's nuclear weapons. Moscow's nuclear weapons policy, in Berlin's view, leads to a "constant increase of disparity and a Russian advantage in short- and medium-range missiles" compared to short- and intermediate-range NATO and US nuclear capabilities [5, p. 106]. This trend, the German Defence Minister argues, "severely disrupts the strategic and potentially the nuclear balance in Europe" [5].

The United States presumably has around 230 tactical nuclear weapons, all of which are B61 bombs. About 150 of these are believed to be stationed in Europe and are assigned to NATO as part of nuclear sharing. These free-fall bombs are deployed in Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands (which provide their own aircraft for delivery of these weapons), as well as in Turkey (which presumably does not provide such dual-capable aircraft). About 20 B61 are believed to be stationed at Büchel airbase, in the West of Germany, for delivery by German Tornado aircraft. Under nuclear sharing "[a]llies plan and train together to implement the [Alliance's] nuclear mission in the extremely remote circumstance when escalation has occurred and a decision to use nuclear weapons is taken" [6]. The German government values these arrangements because of their presumed security benefits and because they are expected to provide Germany with influence on NATO's nuclear policy [7, e. g. p. 257]².

² The United States in November 2019 has also begun to deploy low-yield nuclear warheads on Trident SLBMs but it is unclear how many of these new warheads will eventually be deployed and whether any of them will be assigned to NATO.

NATO new dual-track approach and the German debate on tactical nuclear weapons

On August 2, 2019, the INF treaty became history. The United States had withdrawn from the accord because it believes Russia violated it by testing and fielding a ground-launch cruise missile of a range between 500 to 5,500 kilometres, the 9M729. Though some Allies were uneasy with the US decision to nix the treaty, NATO eventually supported the US non-compliance findings and the Trump administration's decision to withdraw [8].

In response to INF treaty's demise, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg has repeatedly emphasized that the Alliance does not want "to mirror" Russian nuclear policies. NATO allies have stated that they do not see a need, and have no intention to deploy additional nuclear weapons in Europe. Details of NATO's agreed military measures remain classified but would include strengthening air and missile defence as well as advanced conventional capabilities, and "additional steps to keep the NATO nuclear deterrent safe, secure and effective" [9]. At the same time, NATO has declared its readiness to engage Russia on arms control.

German decision-makers and the government generally support this approach which broadly resembles the dual-track decision of 1979, with its mix of military steps and diplomatic initiatives to induce Russia to negotiate on nuclear weapons. Thus, Conservative member of the Foreign Affairs Committee in the German *Bundestag*, Nikolas Löbel (CDU), in a June 2019 Parliamentary debate argued that the dual tracks of "dialogue and nuclear deterrence" must go hand in hand with a unified NATO approach on tactical nuclear weapons because "Russia wants to drive a wedge between the United States and Europe, weaken NATO and divide Europeans among themselves. If we were to unilaterally renounce the possibility of nuclear deterrence [sic], we as NATO would not be speaking with one voice and would play into Russia's hands" [10]³.

Deterrence of Russia and forward-deployed nuclear weapons

The German debate on nuclear deterrence has always been characterized by a somewhat artificial distinction between nuclear weapons as "political weapons" of war prevention and a rejection of the notion of such weapons as war-fighting tools, as German analyst Peter Rudolf has aptly observed. This applies to the role of US nuclear weapons deployed in Europe, too. Decision-makers may highlight the value of forward-deployed nuclear weapons in maintaining strategic stability and *preventing conflict*. However, they shy away from discussing what role tactical weapons may play *in conflict*, once deterrence has failed. This separation of arguments reflects an uneasiness of discussing nuclear deterrence more broadly [11, p. 23].

Also, participants on both sides of the debate on nuclear sharing quite often talk past each other, for example by focussing their arguments on different actors. Thus, opponents of the deployment of the continued deployment of US nuclear weapons tend to speak more frequently about US nuclear weapons policies. For example, the Green spokeswoman on disarmament Katja Keul when criticising the lowering of the nuclear threshold

³ All statements and quotes by German decision-makers and experts have been translated by the author, unless indicated otherwise.

in the US 2018 nuclear posture review, argued that “the US President has changed his [sic] nuclear strategy in order to make future nuclear wars manageable and winnable” [12].

Nuclear sharing critics often argue that the actual use of forward deployed nuclear weapons by NATO is not a realistic option. For example, in a May 7, 2020 Parliamentary debate Keul asked whether anybody “seriously wants to explain use of a nuclear weapon between Büchel and Moscow, which would affect us all”. Keul argued that, to her, such an option appears more naïve than “the realism of proponents of a withdrawal” [13].

By contrast, proponents of maintaining current sharing arrangements argue that Moscow’s aggressive policies should be at the centre of the debate⁴. *Analysts* are concerned that Moscow may view nuclear weapons as instruments to win a military conflict in Europe. Nuclear sharing supporters argue that in a potential military conflict with Russia, the US nuclear weapons assigned to NATO would have an important role to play by providing a means of signalling intent and escalation control. Thus, Joachim Krause, director of the conservative Institute for Security Policy at Kiel University, maintains that, together with the new US sea-based low-yield weapons the nuclear weapons deployed in Europe should provide “a serious” capability to deter such a Russian escalation strategy [13].

Occasionally, experts supportive of sharing arrangements spell out what such a role for US nuclear weapons might entail. Thus, former Assistant Secretary General of NATO for defence policy and force planning Heinrich Brauss, argues that *de facto* the principles underlying NATO’s Cold War nuclear strategy of flexible response are valid again today [14]. Flexible response entailed a military role for nuclear weapons in rolling back a Soviet conventional attack in Europe.

While analysts may muse about military missions for nuclear weapons, German *decision-makers* prefer to remain more ambiguous about such requirements for NATO nuclear weapons. The conservative member of the Bundestag’s Foreign Affairs Committee Johan Wadephul, in response to the Social Democrat’s initiative on nuclear sharing said that Russian nuclear threats “are real” and “openly directed at Europe”, and argued that Europe must protect itself against them. “US nuclear weapons”, Wadephul argued, “increase for Russia the risk of retaliation” in case Moscow were to use its tactical nuclear weapons “and therefore result in more security for us in Europe” [15]. Volker Ullrich, deputy member of the Foreign Affairs Committee (CDU/CSU), in a similar vein said that “we need tactical nuclear weapons to define red lines”. Because Russia deploys missiles in Kaliningrad and has changed its nuclear strategy, Ullrich stated “NATO needs a clear potential to say: this is a red line. From here on, we act together to defend freedom and security” [16].

In addition, there is a widespread concern that Russia’s tactical nuclear weapons would provide it with the ability to coerce NATO. For example, Nils Schmid, speaker for the Social Democrats on foreign policy in Parliament, wrote on May 5, 2020 in the German newspaper *Der Tagesspiegel* that “nuclear sharing must be seen in connection with the nuclear weapons deployed in the European part of Russia. We must not ignore this threat and the nuclear modernization strategy of Russia, or Europe will be susceptible to blackmail” [17].

Arms control, tactical nuclear weapons and the reciprocity paradigm

Germany wants to pursue nuclear disarmament through a step-by-step process of reciprocal reductions. This also applies to the goal of reducing disparities in tactical

⁴ The current NATO policy is described in general terms here [12].

nuclear weapon stockpiles in Europe. German decision-makers see an arms control accord based on mutual obligations by Moscow and Washington as the most likely way to achieve reductions of nuclear weapons arsenals in Europe⁵.

Until 2010, there was some ambiguity whether reciprocal steps should be seen as the best basis or precondition for nuclear reductions. After all, the most dramatic cuts of tactical nuclear weapons stockpiles had happened in the early 1990s through unilateral Presidential Nuclear Initiatives⁶. The logic of applying the principle of reciprocal reductions to nuclear weapons in Europe is also not self-evident because

the United States and Russia have never employed their nonstrategic nuclear weapons to counter, or balance, the nonstrategic nuclear weapons of the other side. For NATO during the Cold War and for Russia in more recent years, these weapons have served to counter perceived weaknesses and an imbalance in conventional forces. As a result, there has been little interest, until recently, in calculating or creating a balance in the numbers of nonstrategic nuclear weapons [20, p. 37].

In September 2009, the incoming Conservative-Liberal German government pledged to “advocate within the Alliance and with our American allies the removal of the remaining nuclear weapons from Germany” [21, p. 170]. Initially, the government’s position on the requirement for reciprocal Russian steps was somewhat vague. The government’s programme stated that Germany was “committed to supporting new disarmament and arms control agreements internationally” and wanted “to use the review conference on the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in 2010 to provide new impetus for contract-based regulations” [21, p. 170]. But it did not explicitly make a new arms control agreement with Russia a *precondition* for changes in the Alliance’s nuclear posture.

This ambivalence evaporated once Germany took the issue of a withdrawal of US nuclear weapons to NATO. In discussions among Allies, it soon became clear, that the idea of unilateral steps did not receive unanimous support. Germany backtracked and subsequently the Alliance agreed in the 2010 Strategic Concept that

[i]n any future reductions, [NATO’s] aim should be to seek Russian agreement to increase transparency on its nuclear weapons in Europe and relocate these weapons away from the territory of NATO members. *Any further steps must take into account the disparity with the greater Russian stockpiles of short-range nuclear weapons* [22, para 26].

NATO’s 2012 Deterrence and Defense Posture Review report was even clearer by stating that

NATO is prepared to consider further reducing its requirement for non-strategic nuclear weapons assigned to the Alliance *in the context of reciprocal steps by Russia, taking into account the greater Russian stockpiles of non-strategic nuclear weapons stationed in the Euro-Atlantic area* [23, para 26].

Even if different understandings in Germany and among Allies of what reciprocity might actually entail persisted [24], the paradigm of mutual reductions has since framed the German government’s position and the mainstream debate on nuclear issues. Thus, the 2013 Social Democrat-Conservative government’s programme stated that “successful

⁵ Already in 2010, the Bundestag in a cross-party resolution expressed its hope that Russia and the United States would negotiate a post-New START agreement on the complete and verifiable elimination of substrategic nuclear weapons [18].

⁶ Looking beyond the PNIs, unilateral nuclear cuts have happened quite often [19].

disarmament talks create *the precondition* for a withdrawal of the tactical nuclear weapons deployed in Germany and in Europe” [25], a formula echoed in the 2018 programme⁷.

When the Social Democrat leadership in May 2020 questioned whether Germany should acquire new nuclear-capable aircraft, it put the issue squarely in the context of NATO — Russia relations. Rolf Mützenich wrote:

[W]e are under no illusion when it comes to Russian politics and the destabilisation and dangers to security policy that come from it. Nor are we turning a blind eye to Russian armament and the large number of Russian tactical nuclear weapons that pose a direct threat to Europe. This is why we have been campaigning for a disarmament treaty on tactical nuclear weapons in Europe for many years [27].

The head of the Social Democrat Parliamentary group stated a clear preference for arms control as the way forward to address tactical nuclear weapons:

In light of thousands of tactical nuclear weapons stored in Russia and the stationing of the new Iskander intermediate-range ballistic missiles that led to the termination of the INF Treaty, disarmament and arms control are more important than ever. We need a new multilateral INF Treaty and complete disarmament of all tactical nuclear weapons [27].

The 2020 debate differed from previous discussions on nuclear sharing insofar as many experts and decision-makers distinguished between two concepts, namely the added value of the forward-deployment of US nuclear weapons in Europe on the one hand, and the importance of nuclear sharing consultative mechanisms on the other. Opponents of the continued involvement in the forward deployment argued that the weapons stationed in Europe had lost their political and military significance. But they did not question the value nuclear consultations and emphasized the importance of NATO consensus in deciding on changes to the Alliance’s nuclear posture.

This did not prevent proponents of the nuclear status quo to accuse them of “unilateralism”. Thus, Roderich Kiesewetter in a February 2019 Bundestag debate pointedly said that

Russia is filling its arsenals with new nuclear missiles, refuses any insights into whether these weapons violate the INF treaty, and the Socialist Party [i. e. Die Linke, The Left Party, not Mützenich’s SPD; Oliver Meier] wants the West and NATO to empty the shelves. What kind of disarmament debate is this where one side is increasing nuclear weapons and the other side is expected to disarm? [28]

In line with the reciprocity paradigm, many also see US nuclear weapons deployed in Europe as a bargaining chip in future negotiations with Russia. For example, Karl-Heinz Brunner, convenor of the Social Democrats in the Bundestag’s subcommittee on disarmament, arms control and non-proliferation, compared the nuclear weapons assigned to NATO to a joker in game of cards:

How could Germany [sic] relinquish nuclear weapons and say: “We give up and now have a better negotiating position with the Russian Federation while they have a warhead in Kaliningrad?” I have to have something in my quiver in order to be able to negotiate. [...]

⁷ For example, the 2018 government programme echoes NATO language by stating that “successful disarmament talks create the condition for a withdrawal of the tactical nuclear weapons deployed in Germany and Europe” [26].

If I want to disarm, I have to have capacities to negotiate and to initiate negotiations and that is what nuclear sharing is for [29].

In a similar vein, German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas (SPD) criticised his party colleagues for pushing the debate on nuclear sharing. He argued that Germany is working “with all its power” toward arms control agreements [30], implying that the discussion about withdrawal might be undercutting the government’s arms control efforts.

However, German decision-makers rarely specify which type of arms control agreement on tactical nuclear weapons they would like to see. Thus, it is not clear whether they would prefer a stand-alone agreement on non-strategic nuclear weapons or a more comprehensive arms control accord. The latter approach would be consistent with the Trump administration’s push for a new nuclear arms control accord with Russia and China that would cover all types of nuclear weapons, including tactical nuclear weapons [31].

The German government merely argues that “[e]ffective arrangements like the New START Treaty should <...> be preserved and, where needed, developed further” as the Federal Government’s Deputy Commissioner for Arms Control and Disarmament said at the 2019 NPT Preparatory Committee [32]. In a June 2020 press conference, a Foreign Office spokesperson elaborated that a widening of the arms control agenda should involve China and also “take additional Russian nuclear weapons into focus” [33]. But it remains unclear, when and how tactical nuclear weapons should be brought into the arms control fold⁸.

Frameworks for facilitating progress on tactical nuclear weapons

What are the implications of these views in Germany on Russian nuclear policies, deterrence and arms control for the prospects of facilitating reductions in the number and roles of such weapons? In the short-term, it seems unlikely that Russia and the United States will launch separate talks on tactical nuclear weapons. There are, however, four other frameworks in which transparency, confidence-building and reductions of tactical nuclear weapons could be discussed with Russia, namely

- the nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT);
- other multilateral fora;
- the Russian — US bilateral dialogue on strategic stability;
- the NATO — Russia Council.

Tactical nuclear weapons and the NPT

In the context of the NPT, the nuclear weapon states have promised to “[a]ddress the question of all nuclear weapons regardless of their type or their location as an integral part of the general nuclear disarmament process” and thus are committed to also talk about tactical nuclear weapons reductions [34]. However, Russia and the United States have been mostly arguing that the other side’s tactical nuclear weapons have to be reduced, while showing no willingness to talk about their own stockpiles. Russia views a withdrawal of US nuclear weapons from Europe as a precondition for engaging in talks on its stockpile

⁸ On the different arms control options for addressing tactical nuclear weapons see [20].

of tactical nuclear weapons [35, p. 10f.]. Vice versa, the United States wants to address Russia's numerical advantage in tactical nuclear weapons before it would consider new arms control agreements [36].

Russia for some time has framed NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements also as a legal NPT issue. At the 2019 NPT Preparatory Committee Meeting of NPT States Parties, Moscow described "so-called" nuclear sharing as "[o]ne of the most serious challenges to the nuclear regime" and argued that these arrangements contradict the treaty's spirit and letter. Moscow repeated its long-standing demand that all "nuclear-weapon States should withdraw nuclear weapons to their territories, eliminate any infrastructure in place outside their borders that enables the rapid deployment of such weapons, and discontinue preparations for such deployment that involve non-nuclear-weapon States" [37, para 15].

This framing of NATO nuclear sharing does not resonate in Berlin. German governments have steadily subscribed to the view that nuclear sharing arrangements are consistent with the NPT because they existed before the treaty was concluded and that states parties were well aware of them when they joined⁹. Opposition parties and the peace movement at times have taken a different position on the legality of nuclear sharing arrangements. Their arguments, however, rarely made it into the political mainstream¹⁰.

By contrast, the question of whether nuclear sharing fosters or hampers nuclear proliferation is occasionally debated in Berlin. In 2010, the then-German government did see its initiative to advocate withdrawal of nuclear weapons from Europe as a way to prop up the NPT. But since then, officials have tip-toed around the question of whether changes to NATO's nuclear posture would strengthen the non-proliferation regime¹¹. Many, however, believe that nuclear sharing and the forward-basing of nuclear weapons have prevented and do prevent nuclear proliferation in Europe. Historically, West-Germany's 1975 ratification of the NPT went hand-in-hand with a decision to forego the option of developing its own nuclear weapons. NATO nuclear sharing enabled NPT proponents to argue that such arrangements provided Bonn with an alternative way of influencing the Alliance's nuclear policies.

There is a corresponding concern that changes in nuclear sharing arrangements could lead to a relocation of US nuclear weapons to other countries. Thus, Roderich Kiesewetter in October 2018 maintained that host nations take on a special responsibility by providing security guarantees for other European countries. He argued that "nuclear sharing prevents the spread of nuclear weapons" citing the scenario that US nuclear weapons deployed in Germany could be relocated to Poland in case Germany were to unilaterally terminate basing arrangements with the United States [40].

There is a concern about the implications of such proliferation on NATO — Russia relations. For example, Heinrich Brauss warned that a relocation of nuclear weapons deployed in Germany to Poland would likely spell the end of the NATO — Russia Founding Act [14].

⁹ A more interesting question is whether similar European arrangement on nuclear weapons would be compatible with the NPT. On both questions see the report of the Bundestag's research service [38].

¹⁰ See for example [39].

¹¹ Experts and observers sometimes mentioned this in the context of preventing a possible nuclear sharing between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia or preventing the deployment of Russian nuclear weapons in Belarus but these arguments have rarely made it into the political sphere.

Tactical nuclear weapons and other multilateral fora

Tactical nuclear weapon reductions can be discussed in a range of other multilateral fora including during meetings of the Creating the Environment for Nuclear Disarmament initiative (CEND), the United Nations First Committee or the Conference on Disarmament. Russia, while participating in these frameworks, appears to have a preference for discussing nuclear weapons issues with its nuclear weapon states peers, for example in meetings with the permanent members of the Security Council (P5).

Germany participates in several groups of like-minded states which have at times addressed tactical nuclear weapons-related issues. More transparency on tactical nuclear weapons postures and nuclear doctrines has been one of Berlin's consistent goals in these discussions. Nuclear risk reduction has recently moved up Germany list of priorities.

From a German perspective, the Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Initiative (NPDI) remains the most important initiative of like-minded states. The cross-regional group, consisting of 12 states, was founded in 2010 to facilitate agreement at the NPT Review Conference¹². Initially, progress on tactical nuclear weapons was one of the key issues for the NPDI. For example, at the 2015 NPT Review Conference, NPDI members called on possessor states to include such weapons in the arms control process, review deployment postures and provide more transparency [41].

NPDI members have taken up these issues in their dialogue with the P5. Apparently, they have had only limited success in eluding disarmament commitments from this group and the "interaction has not gone beyond *ad hoc* discussions" [42, p. 14]. Nevertheless, the P5 among themselves would be the logical forum for agreeing on reciprocal steps related to tactical nuclear weapons. Such an agreement, for example on transparency measures, would be noted in Berlin and might pave the way for NATO to discuss further arms control measures.

Berlin sees nuclear weapons postures increasingly from a risk reduction perspective. Decision-makers are worried about the dangers of accidents or unintended use of nuclear weapons, particularly in Europe. In November 2019, the CEND participants agreed on a two-year programme of work and decided to set up three working groups. One of these working groups, co-chaired by Finland and Germany, is looking at potential interim measures to reduce risks related to nuclear weapons. This could be a useful setting for the 42 participant states to discuss and agree on specific measures such as separation of warheads from delivery vehicles, and other risk reduction measures related to tactical nuclear weapons [43]. Risk reduction is also seen as an important issue by the 15 members of the Stockholm Initiative, who have outlined a number of steps to "[minimize] the risk of conflict and accidental nuclear weapon use" [44].

Tactical nuclear weapons and the Russian — US Strategic Stability Talks

Germany has encouraged Russia and the United States to make progress in their bilateral nuclear arms control discussions. Berlin would like to see Moscow and Washington extend the New START Treaty, as a basis for addressing tactical nuclear weapons. The United States, however, has linked New START extension to a broadening of the strategic

¹² The NPDI members are Australia, Canada, Chile, Germany, Japan, Mexico, Netherlands, Nigeria, Philippines, Poland, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates.

arms control remit. Specifically, the Trump administration wants China to join the Russia — US arms control process and aims for a new agreement to cover all types of nuclear weapons which would include Russia's new types of nuclear weapons and tactical nuclear weapons.

Russia, by contrast, has offered an unconditional extension of New START, putting Berlin and other NATO allies in the politically uncomfortable position of being closer to Moscow than Washington on this question.

Russia has deflected calls for reductions of its own arsenals by instead calling for the inclusion of France and the United Kingdom into a future arms control debate [45]. Few in Berlin, however, would expect London or Paris to join multilateral arms control talks any time soon [4].

The Russia — US strategic arms control dialogue could, however, become a venue for addressing tactical nuclear weapons. Moscow and Washington agreed on June 22, 2020 to establish three working groups in the context of the Strategic Stability talks, namely military capabilities and doctrines, transparency verification and space security. Technical experts in these three groups started actual discussions and in principle the first two groups could address issues related to tactical nuclear weapons.

In the future, the scope of such talks could be broadened to address concerns of both sides, including strategic offensive arms, non-strategic systems, space security and missile defence and risk reduction. Such “multitrack negotiations would open up opportunities to link changes in NATO's nuclear posture to measures on reducing nuclear risks” which might include geographical limits on deployments [46, p. 7].

Tactical nuclear weapons and the NATO — Russia dialogue

Until 2014, the NATO — Russia Council had been a key venue for discussions between the Alliance and Russia on nuclear confidence-building and arms control. Both sides made some progress on issues such as nuclear doctrines and definitions, nuclear safety and security [47]. NATO members suspended these interactions when Russia annexed Crimea, though the NATO — Russia Council Ambassadors still meet occasionally¹³.

Many in Berlin would prefer to see the NATO — Russia dialogue to be expanded beyond its current format. Thus, Foreign Minister Heiko Maas in a June 2018 keynote highlighted that he personally had pushed for a resumption of discussions with Russia at the political level and argued that the NATO — Russia Council “needs to continue to place a strong focus on matters of risk reduction and transparency” [49]. He argued in April 2019 that “[a]ll the criticism of Russia does not mean that we don't need dialogue, too. A dialogue to manage those difficult relations and prevent unintended escalation. That's why we need not only the NATO — Russia Council, but also direct channels of communication between our militaries” [50].

Russia could facilitate such a move by specifying its offer of increased transparency in the context of discussions of a post-INF deployment moratorium [51]. Thus, Moscow could underpin its commitment to the central storage of warheads for tactical nuclear

¹³ The NATO — Russia Council website remains frozen in time. The state of affairs in early 2014 can be viewed at [48].

weapons by making these sites subject to monitoring or verification. This might resonate with Parliamentarians who have shown interest in the concept of a deployment moratorium for nuclear weapons in Europe but have made such a moratorium dependent on strict verification¹⁴.

Conclusion

Russia and the United States need to move beyond finger-pointing in order to prevent a new arms race in Europe on tactical nuclear weapons and reduce the risks associated with the continued deployment of these weapons in Europe. The German debate on nuclear sharing has shown that there is a willingness in Berlin to reconsider the current NATO practice of forward deployment of nuclear weapons. However, any changes to NATO's nuclear posture would likely happen only if agreed upon by all Alliance members and would be more likely in the context reciprocal actions by Russia¹⁵. A close reading of the German debate shows that unilateral changes to NATO's nuclear posture remain unlikely.

Russia frames NATO nuclear sharing arrangements as incompatible with the NPT, thus suggesting unilateral steps by the Alliance to change its nuclear posture. If Moscow were to frame the issue of nuclear reductions in Europe in the reciprocity paradigm, would increase the likelihood that Germans would be receptive to the idea. Otherwise, Russia runs the risk of appearing to raise worn-out demands and positions that have little relevance for political debates around arms control. The argument that sharing arrangements are at odds with the spirit and letter of the NPT does not gain any traction in European debates and is unlikely to do so in the future.

Russia could also consider providing more transparency on the storage of its tactical nuclear weapons. Many in Germany worry about possible nuclear deployments close to NATO borders. Kaliningrad is of particular concern because Central and Eastern European countries, including parts of Germany, are within the 500 km range of nuclear-capable Iskander missiles deployed there. It can be assumed that under normal operating procedures, nuclear warheads are not deployed at forward bases such as Kaliningrad. Russia itself has stated that in peacetime it stores warheads away from nuclear delivery vehicles and a NATO official has recently acknowledged this separate storage [12]. President Putin's 26 October 2020 proposal to agree on verification measures "to confirm the absence of ground-based intermediate- and shorter-range missiles" at certain sites, including in Kaliningrad and NATO missile defense sites is a useful step in this direction [54].

Finally, Russia and the United States should brief non-nuclear weapon states more regularly on (the lack of) progress made in their bilateral Strategic Stability Talks and on discussions they are having among nuclear weapon states within the scope of P5 talks. Such engagement would be an indication of Russia's willingness to be more open concerning its nuclear weapons policy and live up to its commitment to reduce the role and number of tactical nuclear weapons [55].

References

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¹⁴ See for example [52].

¹⁵ For a comprehensive proposal see for example [53].

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