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Switching Umbrellas in Berlin? The Implications of Franco-German Nuclear Cooperation

In light of increasing doubts about US security guarantees, the idea of a greater role for the French nuclear deterrent in European security has gained a certain amount of traction, including among German politicians and citizens.¹ According to a 2019 poll by the Körber Foundation, a mere 22 percent of Germans “support their country’s reliance on America’s nuclear umbrella. Two out of five Germans would rather see their country seeking nuclear protection from France and the UK.”² In 2017, a report by the French Senate concluded that increasing US isolationism weakened American security guarantees.³ French President Emmanuel Macron’s long-awaited speech on nuclear deterrence in February 2020 also spurred that debate.⁴ Such statements on nuclear issues are, of course, embedded in a larger debate about whether Europe needs a “plan B” in case the United States decides to reduce its engagement in European security.

When it comes to alternatives to US-provided extended deterrence, the focus is generally on France rather than on the United Kingdom—the other European nuclear power—for at least three potential reasons. First, the United Kingdom could be busy with domestic concerns such as Brexit rather than European security. Second, the British deterrent is not really seen as a viable alternative to the American one due to its own dependence on the United States. Third, the United Kingdom relies solely on submarine-launched nuclear missiles,

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automatically taking traditional extended deterrence options implying land-based missiles abroad off the table.

That Europe can no longer count on the United States has been a core element of French security and defense discourses for years and constitutes the starting point for much of French strategic thinking under Macron; a European dimension to the French deterrent is nothing new. Since 1974, NATO has officially recognized the contribution of France and Britain's nuclear deterrent "to the overall strengthening of the deterrence of the Alliance."⁵ That France's "vital interests"—the protection of which is the very *raison d'être* of the French bomb—cannot be dissociated from those of its European allies' has also been part of official language for quite some time. Yet, analysts tend to agree that further "Europeanization"—however defined—of the French bomb is unlikely and hardly feasible.⁶

One level below "Europeanization," an old idea that has resurfaced in this context, is that of some sort of Franco-German nuclear cooperation. France carefully followed the German pseudo-debate on a German deterrent that essentially started after Donald Trump was elected president in the United States.⁷ The 2019 Aachen Treaty between France and Germany, intended to renew the original 1963 Elysée Treaty on Franco-German friendship in a large number of policy fields, also contributed to nuclear speculation due to the bilateral security guarantees it comprises.⁸ Bilateral security guarantees may indeed seem odd, given that both France and Germany are already part of a web of security guarantees through NATO's article 5 and the European Union's Article 42.7 of the Lisbon Treaty. Some consequently have interpreted it as an opening for bilateral nuclear cooperation.

Two options seem to be available to Berlin and Paris, both of which may jeopardize European security

What the exact modalities of such bilateral nuclear cooperation could look like, of course, remains utterly unclear. Nor is it clear whether it is meant as an addition to US engagement in European security or as its replacement—what Washington would think of this cooperation is, thus, another open question. European partners such as Poland are also concerned by what they perceive as the bilateralization of multilateral security guarantees, similar to how the traditionally close Franco-German cooperation is at times met

with skepticism in the rest of Europe. This skepticism is mostly due to fears of Franco-German domination accompanied by concerns that France and Germany would focus only on their own interests, disregarding those of others.⁹

Two options would, in any case, seem to be available to Berlin and Paris. They could either go for true cooperation, which would not only imply that Germany

would co-fund the French deterrent,¹⁰ but also that Germany would have a say in actual decision-making on that deterrent. Alternatively, Germany could transfer from the American umbrella to a French one, taking an extended deterrence approach with Paris similar to the one currently practiced with Washington. This approach would imply that France—as is today the case for the United States—retains the exclusive right to decide over the nuclear weapons' use without Germany having a say.

Besides all kinds of severe legal and political obstacles, particularly on the German side,¹¹ the problem is that both options have potential ramifications that may turn out to jeopardize European security rather than enhance it. A Franco-German bomb has all kinds of implications at the global, regional, bilateral, and national levels in both France and Germany. Most notably, France's medium power status compared to the United States' great power status creates completely different bilateral dynamics between Paris and Berlin than between Berlin and Washington. While Germany behaves like a small state vis-à-vis the United States, the Franco-German relationship is characterized by entirely different dynamics that would play out in various aspects of nuclear policies as well as in European security more generally.

Why Is a Nuclear Deterrent Needed in the First Place?

When thinking through any type of Franco-German nuclear cooperation, there is a clear first question to ask: what would a nuclear deterrent be needed for? What would its role be in the larger context of European security? Charles de Gaulle envisioned the French deterrent “*tous azimuts*” (in all directions), against any state threatening France. In the same vein, the 2017 French Strategic Review does not define any enemy against which the country's nuclear deterrent would be directed. Rather, it declares that the bomb is the “cornerstone” of French defense strategy. Simply by existing, nuclear deterrence “contributes to Atlantic security and to [the security] of Europe.”¹² In other words, the bomb serves as general life insurance. To the extent that the rationale for Germany's nuclear protection, or more concretely Franco-German nuclear cooperation, is at all debated in Berlin, general life insurance is also what Germans are looking for. Officially moving from the US to the French nuclear umbrella would consequently amount to changing insurance providers. Needless to say, the matter is a lot more intricate.

Assessing risks is key when getting insurance. It goes without saying that a US retreat from European security affairs would have tremendous—and mostly challenging—consequences for the entire continent. Doing without the United States may, however, be a safer option in one sense: Western Europe would no

longer be entangled in the United States' security dilemmas, in particular the one with Russia. In that sense, decoupling US security from European security may be viewed as isolating the European regional system from the international system and its global security dynamics. If, moreover, President Macron's plans at a reset of relations with Russia were to work, that European system could theoretically be more stable without US involvement. Since the summer of 2019, France is indeed pursuing a different approach to Russia, seeking to engage Moscow in a strategic dialogue on, *inter alia*, arms control and strategic stability.¹³ Yet, besides the fact that prospects for Macron's Russian reset look bleak, given that only the United States really matters to Moscow when it comes to strategic stability, at least three reasons speak against these assumptions.

First, with or without US (nuclear) security guarantees, Europe's geographic location would obviously remain unchanged. Europeans would therefore continue to find themselves right between the United States and Russia. The dynamics of US-Russian security relations will therefore continue to be extremely relevant to European security.

Second, it seems highly doubtful that the European system can remain impermeable to global dynamics. Linked to the first point, US security trilemmas (such as missile defense officially directed against Iran but upsetting the Russians) will continue to affect European security. Developments such as increased tensions between the United States and China in the South China Sea may also have global ramifications. Conflicts emerging in other policy fields such as trade may also spill over into security rather quickly, for example, when maritime lines of communication are involved.

Third, and most importantly, although nuclear deterrence may be publicly described as general life insurance directed against no one in particular, the key addressee of a Western European or Franco-German nuclear deterrent is nevertheless likely to be Russia. The "West" (and thus Western Europeans) and Russia are in fundamental disagreement over the very rules of the game, as illustrated by Moscow's 2014 annexation of Crimea. Discourse that all of this is the United States' fault—mostly for expanding NATO and not respecting Russia's sphere of influence—may be popular in some quarters, particularly in France,¹⁴ but the fact remains that many European capitals have issues with Vladimir Putin's foreign policy. President Macron's recent attempts at relaunching a strategic dialogue with Russia are unlikely to yield game-changing results any time soon. Yet, if the so far low-profile French nuclear deterrent (relative to the United States') were to play a more prominent role in European security, it seems highly likely that Moscow would start to care much more about French (or potentially Franco-German) nuclear posture and policies. The preconditions for European security and stability would consequently change. In other words,

a Franco-German bomb would probably create an entirely new security dynamic between France, Germany, Western Europe, and Russia.

All of these aspects would need to be handled by France and Germany, ideally jointly but at least not in contradictory ways. On the most general level, Paris and Berlin would need to pursue common approaches to multilateral arms control and disarmament. So far, their different nuclear statuses and different attitudes vis-à-vis nuclear weapons have clearly stood in the way of better understanding in this field.¹⁵ The most challenging aspects yet would be managing security dynamics with Moscow, which would require Paris and Berlin to share the exact same strategic nuclear security outlook. Should France and Germany engage in nuclear cooperation going beyond “simple” extended deterrence, they would also need to be highly reactive in order to adapt doctrine and operational plans in accordance with their joint strategic objectives and the dynamics at hand. All these things would require establishing appropriate, so far obviously non-existent, governance structures—both political in order to define strategy and doctrine as well as military in order to define command and control structures and the like.

Structural Incompatibility

In this context, a look at the track record of Franco-German defense cooperation can be rather sobering. Defense cooperation is traditionally among the more complicated areas of Franco-German cooperation, if not the most difficult one.¹⁶

France and Germany, despite being close in almost all other matters of European politics, have never shared the same strategic outlook, and they pursue different defense and security priorities. Consequently, defense cooperation between the two countries generally does not stem from shared visions and strategic interests. Rather, it is about incorporating that highly symbolic domain into the otherwise very important and unusually close general bilateral relationship that covers literally every imaginable policy field ranging from education to cross-border cooperation to economics—with concrete projects often being a matter of what Paris and Berlin can agree on, rather than being derived from shared strategic priorities.

Upon closer examination, then, Franco-German defense cooperation has rarely been a true success story since its inception after World War II, even in its flagship endeavors, despite the ambitions originally expressed in the 1963 Elysée Treaty on Franco-German friendship. For example, Paris and Berlin so far cannot even agree on the role for their bilateral Franco-German Defense and Security Council,

A look at the track record of Franco-German defense cooperation can be rather sobering

founded in 1987. Nor have they been able to bring themselves to equip the Franco-German Brigade's respective French and German components with the same rifle. The Brigade, created in 1989, was once meant to be a symbol of close bilateral cooperation. In reality, France and Germany could never agree on joint deployment of its French and German components. In Mali, they serve in two distinct operations: the French in their unilateral anti-terrorist operation Barkhane, and the Germans in the United Nation's peacekeeping mission MINUSMA.

The gap between France and Germany has arguably even been widening in recent years, notably due to diverging regional priorities resulting in different defense priorities, different preferences when it comes to the Atlantic alliance, and, more generally, different assessments of the likely future trajectory of transatlantic relations and the conclusions to be drawn therefrom.¹⁷ Beliefs that Paris and Berlin would suddenly be able to agree on issues such as command-and-control structures for the use of nuclear weapons consequently seem far-fetched. Joining forces on nuclear deterrence would, in effect, require both France and Germany to make U-turns on their respective strategic cultures—long known to be essentially mutually incompatible.¹⁸

That France and Germany are largely incompatible in terms of strategic culture is not only Germany's fault, even though some in Paris like to think so (albeit mostly behind closed doors).¹⁹ Especially when it comes to the nuclear dimension, France has a tradition of splendid exceptionalism. The notion of national strategic autonomy is at the heart of French strategic thinking, making independence a priority. The key features of strategic culture derived from this independence make any kind of cooperation challenging, if not conceptually impossible. With the conditions to resort to nuclear weapons being tied to the deliberately undefined (in order to preserve strategic ambiguity) notion of "vital interests," only the French president currently has the authority to decide whether and when these interests are threatened. If Germany were to receive nuclear assurances from France, and even more so if it were actually involved in designing nuclear doctrine and operations, Berlin would have to be involved in determining when and whether Germany's and France's vital interests were threatened. This determination would obviously presuppose a shared understanding of what these vital interests are.

On the other hand, the idea of French nuclear protection for Europe squares well with France's regained self-assurance under President Macron. Under Macron since 2017, the traditional "Gaullo-Miterranean"²⁰ foreign policy discourse emphasizing France's independence and status as a P5 power has made a return. This discourse rests, in many ways, on France's status as a nuclear power, intended to ensure both the country's room for maneuver and its rank on the global stage. In light of rather traditional French ideas of "Europe-puissance,"

i.e., Europe/the European Union as a power independent from the United States, European nuclear protection without the United States makes perfect sense, while also bolstering France's role in Europe. The question that remains is whether the scenario to be pursued is the Europeanization of France or the Francization of Europe: should French protection simply be extended to the entire continent, with Paris taking care of Europe's nuclear deterrence? Or should the so-far national French deterrent be incorporated in a wider European approach to nuclear deterrence?

For Germany, in addition to all the obvious legal and political obstacles to going nuclear and to any type of nuclear cooperation given the topic's explosiveness in domestic politics, the key question is somewhat simpler (though not necessarily easier to answer): is German strategic culture mature enough to handle nuclear deterrence? The temptation to just move from one nuclear umbrella to another without thinking much further is at times palpable in Germany, while the implications of such a move, as described below, are not discussed.

The general German debate on security and defense—and in particular the fact that this debate is reactive in nature—seems to indicate that the required maturity is not there. Rather than being about defining ends and means of German security and defense policies, the debate tends to be about whether Germany should live up to outside expectations: mostly the United States' on defense spending and, to some extent, France's on military engagement in Africa. These expectations, however, have little to do with a mature strategic culture based on a clear understanding of national priorities.

Is German strategic culture mature enough to handle nuclear deterrence?

Paris Won't Offer Free Rides

The sheer asymmetry in German-US relations has one advantage for Germany: the United States is not dependent on Germany paying or contributing its share. In that sense, a German tendency to free ride hardly ever had real security implications. The situation is different with France, given that Paris needs support, notably in Africa. This need is the main reason why the dynamics of Franco-German relations differ from those of German-US relations in the fields of security and defense.

French and German Burden-Sharing

It is thus not only the United States and Germany that have a burden sharing issue with each other, but also France and Germany. Yet between Paris and Berlin, the

debate is less about financial aspects than about Paris' perception of a lack of German contributions to French military endeavors with troops and material. This issue is one reason why, even in terms of bilateral dynamics, France and Germany would do well to think through the implications of a joint nuclear deterrent. If nuclear deterrence were added to the menu of Franco-German defense cooperation, it could hardly be isolated from that larger context. With both options—co-decision-making and extended deterrence—Germany would consequently have to think about burden-sharing and the investments it is ready to make in return for French security guarantees.

With the United States, the debate is essentially about financial aspects: Washington wants Berlin to spend 2 percent of its GDP on defense, as Berlin itself once pledged it would do. If Germany would move under France's nuclear umbrella, the issue might be very different with the price tag unlikely to be calculated just in monetary terms. Paris wants to see more actual military engagement on Germany's part. France's armed forces are completely overstretched. This overstretch primarily results from its engagement against terrorism, with little or no substantial help from partners, allies, and friends. France's biggest military operation continues to be *Sentinelle*, with about 10,000 soldiers engaged in national territory defending and protecting France against terrorist attacks. This operation alone puts heavy strain on the forces. In addition to several other international operations, France's external key priority is the unilateral *opération Barkhane* in the Sahel: 5,100 troops with the task to fight terrorists and stabilize a region the size of Western Europe. As the situation in the Sahel deteriorates—rather than being contained—terrorist movements spread across borders, and France's cries for support are getting louder and louder.²¹

Germany is present in Mali, but not alongside the French within the framework of *Barkhane* (where Berlin merely provides logistical support). It is with the French in the framework of United Nations (MINUSMA) and European Union (EUTM Mali) missions, but these are not combat operations intended to actively fight terrorism. As seen from Paris, France is thus essentially alone to bear the burden of protecting Europe from instability in Africa and resulting terrorism and migration flow. While Berlin does make some contributions, many in France consequently believe that the Germans prefer to sit on their high moral horses while French soldiers pay the blood price for European security.

If Germany were to officially benefit from French nuclear protection as well, it seems highly improbable that Paris would not expect quid-pro-quo. In fact, this expectation is all the more likely given that, in recent years, French policies intended to secure support for endeavors in the South have become very openly about quid-pro-quo. For example, the presence of French troops in Estonia within the framework of NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence is often linked

with the expectation that Estonia supports *Barkhane* with a detachment of 50 soldiers.²²

Western Europe's Conventional Defense Problem

Given the present context of tensions with Russia, Western Europe's biggest defense problem is, in fact, conventional. The hidden key question of Europe's defense debate, although it is hardly posed this way, is what will happen if the NATO tripwire in the Baltics fails. This may not be France's key preoccupation, but it certainly is that of what may be labeled the European mainstream in current debates. This mainstream even includes Germany, at least on paper. In 2018, Berlin officially re-centered its defense focus on territorial defense with its new *Konzeption der Bundeswehr*, while the previous version from 2011 had a stronger emphasis on expeditionary operations for peacekeeping. In reality, however, and in present-day Western Europe, the solution to the above question depends on American conventional forces; Europe simply lacks the capabilities required.²³

The German armed forces, once the backbone of European conventional defense, are in particularly bad shape, as, for instance, the annual reports by the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Armed Forces establish year after year.²⁴ And if European conventional forces are poor and the Americans are no longer there (or can no longer be relied upon), a Franco-German nuclear deterrent is unlikely to be of great help in any kind of scenarios involving a failed trip wire given that a nuclear response to any Russian move seems utterly unlikely. Even Paris, as Western Europe's most militarily capable nation, lacks any credible answer. A Franco-German deterrent does not, in other words, solve Europe's primary problem.

At the political level, if the nuclear umbrella over Germany were to become French, Berlin's current approach to defense would therefore be an increasingly big problem. Paris is much less likely to tolerate German free-riding than Washington is, just as other European capitals would be less likely to patiently meet Berlin's reluctant stance when it comes to investing and engaging in defense matters, given that it would have actual security implications without the United States in the background. This unwillingness obviously also applies if the United States were to withdraw from European security affairs without any sort of Franco-German nuclear cooperation emerging. Yet, if Paris were to officially link its survival to Berlin's, it would more than likely accelerate the debate on Germany's responsibilities for the continent's security.

What will happen if the NATO tripwire in the Baltics fails?

Clash of Superiorities

As explained above, a truly joint Franco-German nuclear deterrent would require a degree of strategic alignment between Paris and Berlin that is unlikely today. A nuclear-sharing option, similar to existing arrangements between Germany and the United States, would best circumvent many of these issues because France and Germany would not be required to always share strategic outlooks, given that defining doctrine and managing nuclear diplomacy would be handled by Paris. Yet, it probably makes sense to remember that one of the key reasons France got its own bomb in the first place is that de Gaulle did not believe in receiving, much less giving, foreign security guarantees. More importantly, German-US relations are highly asymmetric at almost all levels, with Germany clearly playing the part of the junior partner. The same does not apply to Franco-German relations, where Germany is extremely unlikely to adopt the behavior of a small state vis-à-vis France.

If one of two European key players—Germany—were essentially dependent on the other one—France—for its survival, this would also imply consequences for general Western European security dynamics. The issue may not matter tremendously under present circumstances, where military threats to survival are hardly on the agenda. Yet, as this article has argued so far, should scenarios materialize in which survival is effectively at stake, implications may be far-reaching because strategic incompatibilities between France and Germany would potentially be fully revealed, thus paralyzing decision-making and joint actions. Pointing to the improbabilities of such scenarios materializing is not a valid argument in this context: why, then, think about a nuclear deterrent in the first place?

One way of seeing Franco-German relations is to describe them as a clash of superiority complexes. Germany's view of France is indeed characterized by a

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well-hidden sense of German superiority. The same applies vice-versa. The reason these clashing superiority complexes do not result in open competition is that these complexes have different sources on opposite sides of the Rhine: the French sense of superiority stems from the country's status on the international scene (of which the nuclear bomb is a key element, the permanent seat on the UN Security Council another). Germans, in turn, derive their superiority from economic success. In

times when survival is not at stake, this clash of superiority complexes may be more of a folkloristic element rather than a serious problem, but that may

change under less benign circumstances. With security in that case coming to the fore, the balance between Paris and Berlin may be disrupted.

This balance is more fragile than many may suspect, and disrupting it may have unpredictable consequences. There is, of course, no risk of armed conflict whatsoever, but beyond bilateral dynamics, these developments are also driven by domestic ones. Franco-German reconciliation is not irreversible and requires political will and sustained investment on both sides.

To this day, anti-German themes work reasonably well in a French context. In the first round of the 2017 presidential elections, Jean-Luc Mélenchon (extreme left) and Marine Le Pen (extreme right) obtained over 40 percent of expressed votes. Despite representing opposite ends of the political spectrum, they have several commonalities, including the systemic use of anti-German rhetoric. For instance, Mélenchon published an anti-German pamphlet in 2015 (entitled *Le hareng de Bismarck* and dealing with “the German poison”), while Le Pen declared during the final TV debate against Emmanuel Macron that she did not intend to be “Merkel’s vice-chancellor.” Other examples of Germanophobic rhetoric abound such as fake news spread on the 2019 Aachen Treaty, which was—falsely, of course—said to “return” Alsace-Lorraine to Germany.²⁵

In a German context, outright anti-French resentment is a scarcer phenomenon, but that may well have to do with Germany’s more favorable economic situation. Suffering less from inferiority complexes than their French neighbors do, Germans nevertheless fear for their wallets. The German taxpayer having to pay for “lazy Southern Europeans” is a recurrent theme in the German debate, and these Southern Europeans include the French.

From a French perspective, the most interesting aspect of sharing nuclear deterrence with Germany is the German financial contribution, so this rhetoric matters. Further in the future, economic developments in Germany—notably in light of the country’s dependence on international trade and its old-fashioned key industry, cars—may also lead to Germany’s relative decline and a much less benign domestic climate. With the right-wing populist *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) party scoring at 12.6 percent in the 2017 national elections, there is room for more right-wing populist success. Although the AfD’s foreign policy agenda remains underdeveloped, it seems fair to assume that a right-wing populist party’s ascension to power would have implications for German foreign policy and thus have consequences for Germany’s role in Europe and its relationship with France.

Germany’s Real Responsibility

The single most important question for European security is the future of US engagement. Will there be such engagement? If so, in which form and to what

degree? And if the United States wishes to remain engaged in European security, how should Europeans handle potentially unpredictable American policies? It is against the backdrop of these uncertainties that the debate on the future of European security is taking place.²⁶ Switching nuclear umbrellas is just one aspect of

The single most important question for European security is the future of US engagement

this debate, and not even a major one—much of this strand of the debate remains vague and superficial. The exact circumstances under which such a move would take place are unknown, as are its exact consequences.

In particular, whether Germany's switching from US to French nuclear protection would lead to US disengagement is an open question. Nor is it in any way clear what this would mean for NATO. At the end of the day, the vague-

ness about the German nuclear debate—and proposals to receive security guarantees from Paris—reflects the widespread uncertainty about the future of European security in light of wavering American security commitments.

The nuclear debate is just a subset of this larger one: what will happen next for European security? What role will the United States play?

It would seem wise to not forget the role the United States played in the inception of European integration and, hence, Franco-German reconciliation since the 1950s. Where these processes may go without a benign hegemon playing the role of an offshore balancer is perhaps the biggest question for Europe's future. If security dynamics and competition among European countries suddenly forced to ensure their own security after the demise of NATO were to return to Western Europe, France and Germany may not necessarily end up in the same camp. Given the two countries' diverging defense priorities, there is no guarantee that their views on how to best ensure their respective national security as well as that of the entire continent would automatically converge.

If such a post-Atlantic Europe were to emerge, Germany would have a particular responsibility for the continent's security. This responsibility is not only a consequence of its central location and economic weight; Germany also occupies a political middle ground in terms of defense priorities among other Europeans. While France is keen on leading on European security, it effectively lacks followers due to its focus on the South. With most Europeans rather preoccupied by the East, it is Germany who has the potential followers behind it. Yet as it stands, Germany is neither willing nor able to lead. This problem will not be solved by merely switching nuclear umbrellas.

Consequently, the real issue to be debated is not where Germany should seek nuclear protection, but how Germany can live up to its responsibilities for European security. The debate on nuclear issues, in effect, stands in the way of a

debate on European security that starts with the right questions: what are the threats and challenges Europe is facing? How can Europe respond? Will this European response have to take place without the United States, and, if so, what is the best way for Europeans to cooperate in order to compensate for waning security guarantees? It is only when these questions are answered that nuclear matters become relevant: what should be the role of nuclear deterrence in ensuring European security, and, if there is any role for it, who should provide it?

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