



# In Germany, Long-Standing Deal to Host US Nuclear Weapons is Now in Question

*Debate about US nuclear weapons in Germany flares up for the first time since the 1980s*

By Bojan Pancevski,  
*Wall Street Journal*

The [German] center-left Social Democrats, or SPD, have appointed a commission to re-evaluate their positions on strategic, foreign and security policy, including the merits of “nuclear sharing,” a Cold War-era agreement under which German warplanes would be used to launch US nuclear weapons in case of a Russian attack on Europe, a senior party official said.

The deliberations came partly as a result of President Trump’s withdrawal from a treaty with Russia that regulates the presence of nuclear missiles in Europe, according to SPD officials. The US plans to withdraw from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty after accusing Russia of violating it for years.

After Mr. Trump’s repeated criticism of the military alliance and its members, the SPD move shows NATO’s cohesion is now also under threat from a backlash among center-left forces in Europe that had long stopped questioning the alliance.

[German Chancellor Angela] Merkel’s party is continuing to back the agreement. Nevertheless, a decision by its junior coalition partner to oppose nuclear sharing would be momentous, putting into question an institution that is as old as Germany’s 1955 membership of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

Consecutive US administrations have criticized Germany for what they called insufficient military spending, but the dispute has escalated under Mr. Trump, who has put Berlin under notice to boost its defense budget.

Parties critical of Mr. Trump tap a rich political vein in Germany. A 2018 Pew Research Center survey for the Munich Security Conference, a global security forum, showed only 10% of Germans thought the US president was doing the right thing regarding world affairs, compared with 35% for Russian President Vladimir Putin and 30% for Chinese President Xi Jinping.

The appointment of the SPD commission will also put additional stress on Ms. Merkel’s fractious co-

alition. The chancellor’s conservatives back higher military expenditure and want to renew the ailing German Air Force with an order of US-made aircraft that are certified to carry US nuclear weapons. Leading SPD figures have said they would block the recently proposed purchase of up to 45 Boeing Co.-made F/A-18 jets by Ms. Merkel’s defense minister.

A spokesman for Ms. Merkel said the government would continue to back nuclear sharing, adding that it saw “no reason to debate this aspect of NATO deterrence. We continue to fully support the defensive nuclear strategy of NATO.”

A NATO spokeswoman said the alliance relied on the capabilities and infrastructure of its members in Europe. “Allied aircraft supporting NATO’s nuclear deterrence mission are central to this effort and we welcome the broadest possible participation in our nuclear burden-sharing arrangements,” she added.

Asked about the policy review, US Ambassador to Germany Richard A. Grenell said, “NATO’s nuclear forces are there for deterrence and defense. This is a commitment the alliance has made together. Germany should live up to its commitment.”

Germany is part of NATO’s so-called nuclear-sharing agreement that goes back to the 1950s. While exact numbers are secret, experts believe the United States has around 180 B61 tactical nuclear bombs on the continent—some 20 in Germany and the rest spread across Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands and Turkey.

“We don’t think that the nuclear-sharing agreement is fit for the times anymore,” said Ralf Stegner, Vice Chairman of the SPD, following a meeting of the party leadership on [February 11]. He said the SPD was extremely unlikely to support the F/A-18 purchase.

The procurement would be a key step in maintaining nuclear sharing in coming decades. The only aircraft in the German fleet currently certified by the US to carry nuclear weapons are the

German-made Tornados. But some of those are 40 years old and are being retired.

Mr. Stegner added that the mounting US pressure on Germany meant that the country was headed toward a fundamental debate about nuclear armament and military spending of a kind that hadn’t taken place since 1982, when a rebellion within the SPD over the stationing of nuclear weapons in Europe contributed to the ouster of Chancellor Helmut Schmidt.

“Nuclear sharing doesn’t necessarily mean we need to host nuclear weapons,” said Rolf Mützenich, the SPD’s deputy floor leader and speaker on defense policy. Mr. Mützenich said Germany could follow the example of Canada, a NATO ally that doesn’t keep US nuclear weapons on its soil.

Mr. Mützenich said he believed a majority of SPD lawmakers would reject any proposal to purchase new US aircraft, partly because of the large cost. Growing animosity between NATO and Russia and the likelihood of a renewed arms race were all arguments against nuclear sharing, Mr. Mützenich added.

The looming dispute about military doctrine, military spending and procurement is just one of many now rocking Ms. Merkel’s coalition—a government many analysts think could unravel as early as this year.

Peter Beyer, Ms. Merkel’s coordinator for trans-Atlantic cooperation and a member of her conservative party, said nuclear sharing was indispensable. Failure to revamp Germany’s aging fleet of nuclear-capable bombers would make a farce of the country’s commitment to the NATO nuclear deterrent, he said.

“How we can get Putin to disarm if we fail to confront him in any way,” Mr. Beyer said. “This does not help peace but creates instability. Our allies, including the smaller states in Europe, would then have to wonder whether they can still rely on Germany.”

—Bojan Pancevski ([bojan.pancevski@wsj.com](mailto:bojan.pancevski@wsj.com)) wrote this for the February 12, 2019 edition of *The Wall Street Journal*.

## How the *Wall Street Journal* Gets it Wrong

*The Wall St. Journal’s* claim that the current debate in Germany about US nuclear weapons stationed there is “the first since the 1980s” is in error. Here are just a few examples of the debate.

- In 2008, five former armed forces chiefs from the US, Britain, Germany, France and The Netherlands published a manifesto that declared in part that a “first strike” nuclear option remains an “indispensable instrument” since there is “simply no realistic prospect of a nuclear-free world.” The paper was signed by a former chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Germany’s former top soldier and ex-chairman of NATO’s military committee, a former Dutch Chief of Staff, a former French Chief of Staff, and former Chief of the General Staff in the UK.

- In 2009, then German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier said the US B61 arsenal in Germany was “militarily obsolete” and urged the US to remove it.

- On March 26, 2010, following nationwide grassroots campaigning and demonstrations, the German parliament adopted a widely popular, cross-party (nonpartisan) resolution demanding that the federal government see to the removal of US weapons.

- After it was reported that disarmament activists had gotten far inside the Büchel Air Base and occupied the top of a potential nuclear weapons bunker July 16, 2017, Green Party parliament Deputy Tabea Rössner openly criticized the base’s security, prompting an August 7 headline that read, “Is Air Base Büchel just as safe as an amusement park?”

- On Aug. 22, 2017, Martin Schulz, the Social Democrat Party candidate for Chancellor in September’s national elections, unexpectedly called for the ouster of the US nuclear weapons. Reuters, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The New York Times*, Politico and major German media reported: “German rival of Chancellor

[Angela] Merkel vows to remove US nuclear weapons from the country”; “Searching for another point of difference, Schulz pledged on [August 22] to have US nuclear weapons withdrawn from German territory if, against the odds, he defeats Merkel”; and “Germany’s Schulz says he would demand US withdraw nuclear arms.”

*The LA Times* reported that Schulz said at a campaign rally, “As chancellor, I’d push for the ejection of nuclear weapons stored in Germany.” The debate continued as conservative politicians and editorials attacked Schulz as unrealistic about military matters.

- On Aug. 29, 2017, German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel made a surprise endorsement of Schulz’s proposal during a press conference with then US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson in Washington, DC. Gabriel’s statement included his bold admission that, “I agreed with Mr. Schulz’s point that we need to get rid of the nuclear weapons that are in our country.”

Media around the world reported, “Foreign Minister joins call to withdraw US nukes from Germany,” and “German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel has supported Social Democrat (SPD) leader Martin Schulz’s pledge that he will push for the removal of US nuclear warheads from Germany if elected Chancellor.”

- On Aug. 31, 2017, *International Business Times* and *The Financial Tribune* online declared, “Top German Politicians Want US Nuclear Weapons Out.” The reports noted, “Germany’s top diplomat has backed the suggestion of SPD leader and Chancellor hopeful Martin Schulz, who has pledged to rid his country of US nukes. Washington, meanwhile, is pressing ahead to modernize its nuclear stockpile.”

- Headlines and radio waves were buzzing again in July 2018, after five separate groups of activists

clipped the fence around Büchel Air Base in broad daylight, gaining entry to the base and again occupying the top of a hardened aircraft shelter. Court cases stemming from these civil resistance actions always push the issue and the debate into the public square. —*JL*



A Sandia National Laboratories mechanical engineer adjusts a microphone for an acoustic test on a prototype of the new B61-12 nuclear bomb, scheduled to go into production by 2020. Photo by US Energy Dept.