

NATO Nuclear-Sharing: Options for the New German Coalition

By Robert G. Bell | 9 November 2021

Key Issues

- Will President Biden commit the United States to a “no first use” nuclear policy? Would Dual Capable Aircraft (DCA) have any military logic or utility as only a retaliatory option?
- If the US continues to support DCA as a key element of Alliance nuclear deterrence, would a German withdrawal diminish its influence with Washington on nuclear issues?
- Would a German decision to withdraw from DCA lead to a “domino effect”?
- Instead of a DCA, would the new German coalition be attracted to French President Macron’s invitation for European air forces to participate in exercises with the *force de frappe*?
- Could NATO find a “dual track” arms control offset should Germany demand a *quid pro quo* for staying in DCA?

In November 2021, four significant nuclear policy-related events are converging on Berlin. A new German coalition is being established following the September elections; NATO is negotiating a new Strategic Concept to guide its policies through to 2030; anti-nuclear sentiments are running strong; and the U.S. President, Joe Biden, is committed to reducing the role of nuclear weapons in deterrence. As negotiations between the leaders of the Social Democrats (i.e., Olaf Scholz) – who won the elections – Liberals (i.e., Christian Lindner, FDP), and Greens (i.e., Annalena Baerbock and Robert Habeck) proceed, will history repeat itself?

In November 2009, these same four significant nuclear policy-related events had also converged on Berlin. A new German coalition was being established, NATO was negotiating a new Strategic

Concept, anti-nuclear sentiments were running strong, and the U.S. President, Barack Obama, was giving high priority to reducing the role that nuclear weapons play in deterrence policy. In the inter-party agreement that outlined the policies of the coalition of Christian Democrats and Liberals (CDU/CSU-FDP) that emerged from elections earlier that year, Chancellor Angela Merkel yielded to the demand of her FDP Foreign Minister, Guido Westerwelle, and agreed that ‘in the course of developing a NATO Strategic Concept, we will, both in the alliance and towards the American allies, pursue the withdrawal of the remaining nuclear weapons from Germany’.

This was not to happen. Despite Obama’s global endeavours, Washington’s response was forcefully negative. In April 2010, Berlin abandoned its initiative in the face of a demand from

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton that NATO agree 'Five Principles' to govern NATO's future nuclear posture and policies under the new Strategic Concept, including one that stated: 'as a nuclear Alliance, sharing nuclear risks and responsibilities widely is fundamental'.

Germany has continued since 2010 to contribute *Tornado* fighter bombers to NATO's Dual Capable Aircraft (DCA) nuclear posture, and U.S. nuclear gravity bombs have continued, according to open sources, to be forward-deployed in Germany and other allied countries in Europe. As the three-party negotiations proceed, it is important to examine the implications for Germany, NATO, and the transatlantic relationship of the options on this crucial nuclear-sharing issue that they might conceivably consider.

Option 1: Back to the Future

The new 'traffic-light' (red-yellow-green) coalition could once again agree to propose that the new NATO Strategic Concept end DCA. Since this would require consensus, the key to this option is whether, unlike in 2009, Berlin could expect this time to win Washington's support. Some proponents might argue that Biden would be an ally, pointing to his declaration in January 2017 (reaffirmed in his 2020 presidential campaign) that he (and Obama) had come to 'strongly believe' that given enhancements in U.S. conventional capabilities, the 'first use' of nuclear weapons made 'no sense' and therefore the 'sole purpose' of U.S. nuclear weapons should be 'detering – and if necessary retaliating against' an adversary's use of these weapons.

This U.S. doctrinal change would, if implemented, arguably rule out NATO's long-held policy – which outgoing CDU Defence Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer ('AKK') recently embraced as 'the core idea of NATO' – that it is prepared to use nuclear weapons first if an ally's 'fundamental integrity' were threatened, i.e., even if the aggressor had not yet used its nuclear weapons. This, in turn, would seem to effectively undermine the much-debated deterrent credibility of the DCA mission and hence lend support to a proposal by the new coalition to end it. Given the small number of air bases at which U.S. nuclear bombs are stored in Europe, DCA

fighters deployed to these locations in the course of a conventional conflict would be highly vulnerable to Russian tactical nuclear strikes. Since they could not be viewed as providing a 'secure second strike' retaliatory option, they would in theory only have utility in a NATO first-strike scenario.

But can Germany assume Washington would be supportive, whatever Biden's personal views on the 'sole purpose' issue? In a March 2021 White House strategy document, Biden pledged that his Administration would ensure 'that our extended deterrence commitments to allies remain strong and credible.' This commitment buttresses the role of DCA and will presumably be incorporated in the forthcoming U.S. Nuclear Posture Review, which some arms control proponents are worried will be too 'hawkish.' The March statement is also consistent with the June 2021 Brussels Summit Communiqué in which Biden agreed that 'NATO's nuclear deterrence posture also relies on United States' nuclear weapons forward-deployed in Europe and the capabilities and infrastructure provided by Allies concerned'.

Biden would likely face opposition within his Administration to implementing the 'sole purpose' doctrine, as was the case when he and Obama favoured codifying it late in their second term. Republican blow-back from Capitol Hill would be fierce and carry over to Germany's detriment on other issues (e.g., Nord Stream 2 and Germany's inability to meet NATO's 2% of GDP defence spending goal). Not only Republicans would object. Obama-era officials from Michele Flournoy to Jim Townsend to Frank Rose have starkly warned that as a major power in NATO, Germany must not shirk its burden-sharing responsibilities.

Even if Biden overruled opposing advice from within the inter-agency, the Baltic states and Poland, among others, would be intent on exercising a veto. They would argue that in the face of Russia's continuing military intervention in Ukraine and its violation of the Intermediate Nuclear Forces treaty, far-ranging theatre nuclear modernization and threatening military exercises, removing the only remaining NATO ground-based in-theatre nuclear counterweight would be a grievous mistake. Thus, securing a consensus in the Strategic Concept to end

DCA would require an all-out diplomatic campaign by the Biden Administration, which might well fail. Even if such arm-twisting succeeded, it would come at the price of a further loss for some allies of trust and confidence in U.S. leadership. That in turn would translate into less U.S. leverage in achieving its other priorities for the Strategic Concept, e.g., a stronger NATO position on China. In sum, this option would seem to be highly problematic, but pursuing it would allow the new German coalition to show its anti-nuclear constituencies that it had tried.

Option 2: Unilateral Opt-Out

A unilateral withdrawal from DCA by Germany would not be subject to allied vetoes and is favoured by

on nuclear-related issues. Finally, there is the likelihood that a German DCA opt-out would have a domino effect within NATO. In a June 2021 PhD dissertation by the author, *NATO Nuclear Burden-Sharing: What Constitutes 'Free-Riding?'*, 100% of the senior NATO and U.S. officials interviewed said that a German opt-out would prompt other DCA nations to withdraw. Nuclear weapons opponents in other allied nations that participate in DCA would be emboldened, especially in Belgium and the Netherlands. Even if those two allies held, the current nuclear posture might not be militarily sustainable, due to Germany's central geographical location. Consequently, some argue that an opting-out by Germany could force NATO to take a step it has to date rejected: to allow allies that became

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many in the Left wing of the SPD. This includes the party's leader in the Bundestag, Rolf Mützenich, who denounced AKK's recent endorsement of NATO's 'first use' doctrine as 'irresponsible.' The Greens also favour ending Germany's DCA role, although the Party is vague on the timeline. Proponents of this option cite the precedent established by Canada and the UK, each of which unilaterally withdrew from its role in DCA at different times after the end of the Cold War. Proponents also emphasise the option's cost savings, public support, and putative contribution to the broader 'eliminate nuclear weapons now' goals of the Nuclear Ban Treaty that was adopted by 122 nations in the UN in 2017.

That said, the U.S. reaction cannot be predicted with confidence. For all the reasons enumerated in Option 1, it might well be quite negative. In addition, by forfeiting its place in the NATO High-Level Group's elite 'Small Group' of DCA participants, Germany would clearly lose influence within NATO

NATO members after the Cold War (e.g., Poland) to join DCA, thereby moving the forward deployment of U.S. nuclear bombs eastward. This argument was advanced by Belgian Ministry of Defence officials in Belgium's parliamentary debate on DCA in December 2019, emphasising that such a decision would predictably be portrayed by Moscow as highly provocative and destabilising.

Option 3: Opt-In to a French-led Nuclear Deterrence Posture

The FDP and the Greens are on record as favouring greater EU 'strategic autonomy', and the FDP has even supported the creation of an EU Army with headquarters in Brussels. Many German leaders' trust and confidence in the U.S. within the Alliance have been shaken by the unilateral and unpredictable nature of U.S. decision-making under both Trump and Biden, including recent U.S. decisions on Afghanistan and the new UK-Australian-U.S. alliance

(AUKUS). These developments have arguably created an opening for greater German receptivity to French President Emmanuel Macron's proposal, first unveiled in his 2020 *École de Guerre* speech, for European allies to participate in French nuclear exercises and engage in a 'strategic dialogue' on nuclear deterrence.

Under this option, the new German coalition could announce that it will maintain its DCA role until the *Tornado* fighter reaches its effective retirement date sometime between 2025 and 2030, but afterwards the Luftwaffe will use its non-nuclear capable Eurofighters to assist French nuclear-armed *Rafal* fighters should they be required to execute a nuclear strike in an extreme crisis in Europe. Although Macron has not spelled out any details, Bruno Tertrais has suggested it could include allowing non-nuclear European aircraft to participate by taking on suppression of enemy air defence or fighter escort roles, as NATO already practices in a similar manner during its DCA exercises. Under Macron's concept, all French nuclear gravity bombs would presumably remain in France, and France would retain exclusive control over any decision to employ them.

This option would avoid the high costs of *Tornado* replacement and give Germany some basis (however weak) to argue that it still takes NATO nuclear deterrence seriously. In its June 2021 Brussels Summit Communiqué, NATO leaders again acknowledged that France's independent strategic forces (as well as those of the UK) 'contribute significantly to the overall security of the Alliance' by providing a 'separate center of decision-making', thereby 'complicating the calculations of potential adversaries'. Thus, proponents of this option could argue it supports stated NATO nuclear policy. However, by withdrawing from DCA, Germany could, as noted, put the overall forward-deployed posture at risk. More fundamentally, it would be seen in Washington and elsewhere within the Alliance as a broader geostrategic shift by Germany towards a conception of EU defence and security that embraces a near-term level of ambition for 'strategic autonomy' duplicative to NATO across the mix of deterrence capabilities. This would certainly anger the United States and be fiercely criticised by many other European allies. Finally, Germany could not be sure that France would continue to be receptive

to Germany's participation in its *force de frappe* if Macron is no longer President after French elections next year.

Option 4: Stay the Course but Demand an Arms Control Quid Pro Quo

If Washington strongly opposes German adoption of any of the aforementioned options and continues to uphold NATO's first use doctrine, the new German coalition will likely reluctantly conclude it must stay in DCA. That would mean it must replace the *Tornados* in their nuclear role with a new nuclear-capable aircraft, presumably by implementing the 'preliminary decision' of the Ministry of Defense last year to buy 30 'nuclear-wired' F-18F *Super Hornets*. To try to limit the backlash from within the SPD and Greens anti-nuclear constituencies, it would need to insist that NATO agrees, consistent with its traditional allegiance to the balanced, 'dual-track' approach enshrined in the 1967 Harmel Report, to engage Russia in a parallel arms control initiative.

This option would maintain allied solidarity and put the new German coalition in a better position vis-à-vis Washington to exert influence on other issues of priority interest. The main disadvantage is that it is not clear whether there is a new arms control engagement mechanism available. Most arms control treaty fora involving Russia are either moribund or hopelessly stalemated. That leaves the ongoing U.S./Russian 'Strategic Stability' talks on negotiating a treaty to replace New START, which the United States insists must address non-strategic nuclear weapons (as well as Chinese systems).

In his annual arms control speech this year, NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg suggested that the Alliance establish a new 'platform' to allow structured consultations between the United States and its allies if this new bilateral negotiation gets underway. Whether this could provide a sufficient *quid pro quo* for the new German coalition remains to be seen, since it is clear Russia is strongly opposed to including anything on non-strategic systems in a new treaty other than requiring their mutual withdrawal to 'national' territory. While that might be appealing to the new German coalition, it is presumably antithetical to Washington and most NATO allies.

Conclusion

Traditional security and defence issues were not salient issues in the 2021 German election, and the temptation to postpone any decision on the nuclear-sharing question will be strong. However, the looming *Tornado* retirement deadline requires immediate action, and failing to act would be tantamount to 'disarmament by default'. Moreover, NATO is determined to agree on the Strategic Concept, including its nuclear components, at its Summit in Madrid in June next year. On this issue, then, Germany's future is now.



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Robert G. Bell's 45-year US Government career included 7 years as the U.S. Defense Advisor at NATO (2010-2017), 3 years as NATO Assistant Secretary General for Defense Investment (1999-2003), 7 years at the White House as President Clinton's NSC Senior Director for Defense Policy and Arms Control (1993-1999), 18 years on the staffs of the Senate Foreign Relations and Armed Services Committees and the Congressional Research Service (1975-1992), and 6 years as an Air Force officer (1969-1975). From 2003-2010, he was a Senior VP at SAIC, directing business development activities in Europe. Mr. Bell has a BS in International Affairs from the U.S. Air Force Academy (1969) and a MA and PhD in International Security Studies from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy (1970 and 2021). He is currently a Distinguished Professor of the Practice at Georgia Tech.

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