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Breaking the taboo: why it is so hard to lead a strategic nuclear dialogue with Germany

It was a long-awaited speech: on the morning of February 7, French president Emmanuel Macron delivered his *discours sur la dissuasion nucléaire* (nuclear deterrence speech) at the *École de Guerre* (War College). Historically, every French president has made public solemn speeches about this question. The *discours* is seen as a guiding principle of the *force de frappe* and it lays out objectives and orientations that are at the heart of France's nuclear policy. But beyond its function as a benchmark for defense and security policy in the upcoming years, the speech gives Europeans a flavor of Paris' assessment of its responsibility towards EU and NATO allies, and what role it potentially assigns to its nuclear forces beyond a purely national context. Albeit being scarce in information and far from outlining concrete commitments, the *discours* has the potential to offer points of reference for European partners, among which Germany counts as an important, if not the most important, one.

In Berlin, presidential nuclear speeches are not likely to get a lot of attention beyond expert circles. However, this year's speech was given at a moment of heightened sensitivity for nuclear matters. That week in particular, a public statement by Johann Wadephul, the vice-chair of the CDU/CSU parliamentary group in the Bundestag, attracted attention. In an interview with the *Tagesspiegel* on February 2, he called for a dialogue on a possible europeanization of the French nuclear forces, thereby suggesting that Paris should consider an integration of the *force de frappe* into either NATO or EU structures. Berlin, he added, should consider its own contribution to European deterrence.

This does not resonate with everyone in the CDU/CSU, not even speaking about the coalition partner, SPD. Yet, despite Mr Wadepuhl's clear overestimation of the French appetite to share command and control over its nuclear arsenal within a NATO or European context, his call, seeking to move Berlin towards the strategic discussion that decision-makers have always sought to avoid, came at the right time. During the past years, there has been a striking discomfort in Germany to enter into a nuclear strategic dialogue with France, many opportunities have been missed and French propositions of dialogue have remained unanswered. Or, to put it in the words of the French President at the Munich Security Conference 2020: "this is a permanent story between our two countries". At the same time, the future of nuclear deterrence in Europe and how it fits into a common security and defense culture within the EU remains an open, and increasingly pressing, question.

Probably aware of the fact that Berlin owes Paris answers to a number of other open issues, German leaders very quickly displayed a willingness to start a conversation with their French counterparts. In Munich, CDU minister of defense, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, showcased an openness to enter into a strategic dialogue with Paris and to "discuss concrete points". Being very cautious at the same time not to upset their transatlantic partners, she emphasized that the security of many European states is guaranteed by NATO and the US nuclear umbrella, and that the latter one is not to be replaced by a European solution. Any strategic dialogue, she added, had to include the question of how to connect the cornerstone of NATO's nuclear deterrence with the "new proposals coming from France". The German minister of foreign affairs, Heiko Maas (SPD), did not hesitate either to support the idea of having a strategic dialogue with France, while his own interpretation of the *discours* was obviously different. He emphasized that "Macron's initiative in particular includes disarmament steps".

This short and non-exhaustive summary of reactions and expectations already shows that a strategic dialogue with Berlin over nuclear matters remains difficult. That is something Paris knows very well. The German stance towards strategic nuclear discussions is probably best summarized in a 2019 study published by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) that marked the country as a "conflicted state", referring to the German dilemma of hosting around 20 US-owned B61 free-fall bombs as part of nuclear sharing commitments within NATO, while at the same time facing a public opinion that is hostile to nukes in their own country and favors a withdrawal of nuclear weapons from the Büchel Airbase. On the other hand, a survey conducted by Körber Stiftung in 2019 reveals that with respect to nuclear deterrence in the form of a nuclear umbrella, 40 % of the respondents prefer a European solution over the US' nuclear protection (22 %), which has apparently lost credibility under the Trump presidency. Only 31 % of the survey participants want to forego the concept of a nuclear umbrella.

Going back to the question of nuclear sharing, many members of the German Bundestag tend to question the sensibility of this concept. In 2010, under the SPD-Green coalition, there was a bipartisan decision by all parties, except for the Left, to urge the government to remove the US B61 nuclear bombs from the Büchel airbase. It did not resonate with the Chancellor's office, and the weapons are still there. The Bundestag Subcommittee on Disarmament, Arms Control and Non-Proliferation therefore continues to point out on its website that its work includes consultations on "parliamentary motions like those for a withdrawal of nuclear weapons from Germany". On the other hand, the *Weißbuch* (White Paper) 2016, a key document outlining Germany's defense and security priorities, acknowledged the dilemma by stating that "Germany remains, through nuclear sharing, an integral part of the nuclear policy and related planning.

This comes along with Germany's commitment to the goal of creating the conditions for a nuclear weapons free world".

Germany's ambivalence and the different drivers behind diverging standpoints can be difficult to grasp, especially as they cannot simply be categorized by party affiliations. However, these circumstances explain why Berlin has always been hesitant to have a strategic discussion, especially one that goes beyond conventional capabilities in Europe. Another reason might be that, going back in history, the proposals made by French presidents did not go as far as the Macron proposal, which emphasized a lot more on the aspect of European security and defense, and offered more substantive dialogue than previous speeches.

However, to understand why German leaders were cautious in answering Macron's talk offer, it is worth looking at some of the key points of past *discours*.

The first *discours* after the Cold War was delivered by President François Mitterrand, who formulated the concept of a common European nuclear doctrine¹. In 1995, then-foreign minister Alain Juppé offered the sophisticated concept of a *dissuasion concertée* (concerted deterrence). Some Conservative German politicians were obviously attracted by the idea of having a kind of *Mitspracherecht* (right to say), but a real discussion with Paris never kicked off. One year later, the Franco-German Defence and Security Council's notion that "our countries are ready to engage in a dialogue concerning the function of nuclear deterrence in the context of a policy of European defense" proved futile.

In 2001 and 2006, President Jacques Chirac issued two succeeding *discours* in which he addressed a possible European role of the *force de frappe*. While his speech in 2001 referred to the contribution of the French nuclear arsenal to European security in an unspecified sense², in his 2006 speech he recurred to the 1995/96 idea of a *dissuasion concertée*, albeit in an unassertive manner that implied a "European reflection on the subject matter" as a necessary first phase³. This was widely ignored by Berlin.

One year later, President Nicolas Sarkozy may have come up with a more straightforward strategy as he reportedly confronted the German Chancellor Angela Merkel and then-foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier with a sharing option. According to an article in *Der Spiegel* written by a journalist who later became head of the Foreign ministry's Policy planning staff, the Chancellor and the minister immediately refused, baffled, referring to Germany's non-nuclear role in the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)⁴. In his 2008 *discours*, M. Sarkozy henceforth acted a lot more cautiously, offering an "open dialogue" to "those of our European members who wish

¹ Allocution de M. François Mitterrand, Président de la République, notamment sur la modification de la constitution et la ratification du traité de Maastricht, Paris le 10 janvier 1992, <http://discours.vie-publique.fr/notices/927001200.html>. Explicitly, M. Mitterrand said: "Ce début de défense pose des problèmes qui ne sont pas résolus, qu'il faudra résoudre. Je pense en particulier à la puissance nucléaire. Seuls deux des Douze sont détenteurs d'une force atomique. Pour leur politique nationale, ils ont une doctrine claire. Est-il possible de concevoir une doctrine européenne ?".

² Discours de M. Jacques Chirac, Président de la République, sur la politique de défense de la France, la stratégie militaire, le désarmement nucléaire, la défense européenne, la réforme du système de défense, les interventions militaires extérieures de la France et la force de dissuasion française, Paris, le 8 juin 2001, <http://discours.vie-publique.fr/notices/017000120.html>.

³ Déclaration de M. Jacques Chirac, Président de la République, sur la politique de défense de la France, notamment la dissuasion nucléaire, à Brest, le 19 janvier 2006, <http://discours.vie-publique.fr/notices/067000234.html>.

⁴ There is no other public evidence of this alleged Sarkozy proposal than the article written by Ralf Beste.

to”⁵. It did not resonate with Berlin officials. In 2015, President François Hollande alluded to the European dimension of French vital interests but did not leave much room for dialogue in his nuclear speech, thereby ruling out German ambitions for *Mitspracherecht* by declaring that “our deterrence belongs to us; we are the ones to decide, we are the ones to define our vital interests”⁶.

The very fact that the German government has reacted to the French talk offer this time is a good sign, but the willingness and ability of both sides to jointly move into one direction should not be overrated either. Apart from the German dilemma already described, expectations among Berlin decision-makers of what the French side should deliver will probably sharply differ from what Paris *wants* to commit itself to. Macron’s popularity might make it easier for Germany to enter into a strategic dialogue, besides the pressure to give more concrete thoughts on European security and defense, even in this particular sensitive field. And the French-German Aachen Treaty of 2019 has provided a solid base, even though there seem to be different interpretations of how to read the *Beistandsklausel*, the mutual Franco-German defense clause and whether it includes the nuclear aspect⁷.

Regardless of this latter question, if the conversation ought to be a meaningful one, both sides would have to let go some of their key presuppositions and considerations. Looking at the German side, some preconditions have to be fulfilled. First of all, the government needs to develop a clear and coherent understanding of the country’s strategic priorities and “red lines”, while at the same time maintaining a reasonable degree of flexibility, depending on where the conversation with Paris goes. Also, Berlin has to rethink concerns over France’s ulterior motives (i.e. whether the sole purpose of French talk offers is to find a financial contributor to the *force de frappe* (something, to be fair, that no French leader has ever mentioned). It probably also requires a realistic assessment – and acceptance – of the fact that Paris is not likely to share its nuclear command and control with a European entity. On the French side, concessions will be inevitable when it comes to acknowledging the security interests of the most Eastern countries of the EU, especially when it comes to the forming threat coming from Russia. This is a huge concern for Berlin, and German decision-makers are likely to raise their concerns over having different levels of security in Europe.

In any case, an essential first step, if French decision-makers want to be heard by Berlin, needs to include a reassurance that any conversation takes place between like-minded and equal partners in order to dispel German concerns of being taken advantage of. To put it in the words

⁵The paragraph reads: “Tirons-en, ensemble, toutes les conséquences logiques : je propose d’engager avec ceux de nos partenaires européens qui le souhaiteraient, un dialogue ouvert sur le rôle de la dissuasion et sa contribution à notre sécurité commune”. See Déclaration de M. Nicolas Sarkozy, Président de la République, sur le Livre blanc sur la défense et la sécurité nationale, la dissuasion nucléaire et sur la non-prolifération des armes nucléaires, à Cherbourg, le 21 mars 2008, <http://discours.vie-publique.fr/notices/087000943.html>.

⁶ *Ibid.* The paragraph reads: “Qui pourrait donc croire qu’une agression, qui mettrait en cause la survie de l’Europe, n’aurait aucune conséquence ? C’est pourquoi notre dissuasion va de pair avec le renforcement constant de l’Europe de la Défense. Mais notre dissuasion nous appartient en propre ; c’est nous qui décidons, c’est nous qui apprécions nos intérêts vitaux”.

⁷See Wissenschaftliche Dienste des Bundestags, Die Beistandsklausel im Aachener Vertrag über die deutsch-französische Zusammenarbeit und Integration, 22 March 2019, <https://www.bundestag.de/resource/blob/645868/dc4693de6aaff54d814b7a4e9a4a524c/WD-2-036-19-pdf-data.pdf> (in German). Additionally, on the website of the French government, 22 January 2019, “Traité d’Aix-la-Chapelle : qu’en est-il vraiment ? Le vrai du faux”, <https://www.gouvernement.fr/traite-d-aix-la-chapelle-qu-en-est-il-vraiment-le-vrai-du-faux> (in French).

of Alain Juppé, who acknowledged the problem already back in 1995 when he explained why the concept of *dissuasion concertée* might sound less paternalistic to the German audience than the previous idea of *dissuasion élargie*: “What does this formula mean? It expresses first and foremost the necessity to have a dialogue between two equal partners, about a subject matter that affects their future existence”.

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