

European leadership in nuclear arms control

Opportunities for UK-Germany cooperation

Introduction

In the past three years, German debates on nuclear issues have swung between two extremes. In 2017, a group of Parliamentarians suggested Germany might acquire an independent nuclear deterrent or rely on France for an extended deterrent.¹ But in May 2020, the leader of the SPD, Angela Merkel's coalition partner, called for Germany to end its participation in NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements and for the removal of nuclear weapons from Germany.² Conversely, the United Kingdom has remained steadfast in its commitment to nuclear deterrence. In 2016 Parliament approved funding to replace the UK's nuclear delivery platform, and its nuclear deterrent is committed to NATO's nuclear mission. Why, and how, might these dissimilar European leaders cooperate on nuclear weapons issues?



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Consideration of UK-Germany nuclear cooperation is particularly timely given recent events in the global nuclear order. Russia and China continue to modernise and develop their nuclear arsenals, with Russia engaging in adventurist behaviour, such as attempting to invade UK airspace in March 2020.³ Nuclear arms control agreements including the 1987 Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, are crumbling and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), the foundation of the global nuclear order, is particularly weak at present. Similarly, NATO is under strain because of US withdrawal from arms control agreements, and Donald Trump's Presidency has raised broader questions about America's commitment to European allies.

This policy paper focuses on nuclear cooperation in two buckets. The first bucket includes deterrence-related activities, such as contributing to NATO's nuclear mission and responding to Russian nuclear adventurism. The second bucket focuses on arms control, such as cooperation on the Iran Nuclear Deal. After examining the current nuclear policies of the UK and Germany, this policy brief will then examine UK-Germany cooperation in these two buckets, with an emphasis on identifying specific opportunities for further collaboration.

This policy brief makes the following key arguments:

- The UK and Germany have limited opportunities for nuclear cooperation. This is mainly because such activities predominantly fall under NATO's remit; however, the UK and Germany are also under significant domestic pressure on nuclear issues and therefore have limited scope for expanding nuclear activities.
- Cooperation on deterrence-related issues could include expanding their roles in NATO nuclear exercises and enhancing Europe's "deterrence IQ".
- Cooperation on arms control is particularly timely and important. Specifically, the UK and Germany should partner to lead a European security-driven approach to arms control.

Commitments to deterrence, arms control and disarmament

The UK nuclear deterrent relies on continuous at-sea deterrence (CASD), whereby it will always have at least one nuclear-armed submarine on patrol at all times. To achieve this, the UK requires four submarines to rotate through patrol, maintenance, training, and patrol overlaps among other activities. In 2016 Parliament voted for "like-for-like" replacement of the current Vanguard-class submarine, typically referred to as "Trident" in reference to the missiles on-board. The next generation submarine, Dreadnought, is expected to cost £31 billion over the life of the programme. The British deterrent is unique in many ways. The UK and the United States maintain a special nuclear relationship, largely rooted in a 1958 Mutual Defence Agreement, which includes, for example, development of a common missile compartment and the UK's Trident missiles are stored in a shared missile pool in King's Bay Georgia. Nonetheless, the UK maintains independent nuclear decision-making and any instruction to fire would use only UK codes and equipment.⁴

The deterrent is committed to NATO's nuclear mission and the UK is the only country whose entire deterrent force is committed to the alliance.⁵ In a 2020 statement announcing a replacement warhead programme, UK Minister of Defence Ben Wallace noted, "Our independent nuclear deterrent is essential to defend the UK and our North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) allies against the most extreme threats to our national security and way of life."⁶ And in 2019 NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg commended the UK for 50 years of CASD and contributing to NATO security.⁷ Brexit, however, raises questions about the future of Britain's role in NATO.⁸

The UK has been an international leader in nuclear disarmament while still maintaining a credible minimum deterrent. Most recently in 2010 it reduced from 160 operationally available warheads to 120, and is committed to reducing the overall stockpile to 180 by the mid-2020s, the smallest nuclear stockpile of the five recognised Nuclear Weapon States (NWS).⁹ In addition to its unilateral nuclear reductions, the UK is also active in numerous multilateral arms control efforts, including the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran, and in the NPT. A 2019 House of Lords inquiry called for further UK leadership in strengthening these and other institutions,¹⁰ and in 2020 the UK hosted a "P5 process" meeting to promote transparency and dialogue among the nuclear possessors within the NPT.¹¹



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While the UK’s most important nuclear partnership is with America, it also has a close relationship with France, such as the 2010 Lancaster House Treaty.¹² The Treaty committed both sides to cooperate on nuclear safety and security, stockpile certification, countering nuclear and radiological terrorism and construction of joint radiographic–hydrodynamic facilities.¹³ Following the UK Brexit vote, this relationship with France has become increasingly important. In an op-ed, former former NATO Secretary General George Robertson and former French Prime Minister Bernard Cazeneuve said: “Our alliance is fundamental to Europe’s security. Our two countries are the only true military powers on the continent...They are the only European countries with nuclear weapons...and the only ones willing to show leadership on the global stage in line with their responsibilities as permanent members of the United Nations security council.”¹⁴ The UK, therefore, is a European leader on deterrence and arms control, but that role is at risk because of the changing nature of the relationship with Washington and Brexit.

Germany’s nuclear leadership is a bit more complicated. Germany is one of five NATO members with dual-capable aircraft (DCA) that contribute to NATO’s nuclear mission. According to Hans Kristensen of the Federation of American Scientists, Germany is also one of five NATO members to host nuclear weapons and their facilities, warheads and means of delivery are all undergoing modernisation.¹⁵ As noted above, however, Germany’s nuclear role has been questioned in recent years, particularly as the German public is strongly opposed to nuclear weapons.¹⁶

Germany also must strike a more delicate balance in its relationship with Russia, as Berlin and Moscow often see themselves as partners rather than adversaries, although that may be changing with increased Russian information operations in Germany.¹⁷ Nonetheless, Germany has consistently supported NATO deterrence operations and leads a NATO force of 1,200 troops in Eastern Europe and has committed 110 million Euros through 2021 to modernise military bases in Lithuania, in response to Russian aggression in Ukraine.¹⁸

Where Germany has shown leadership in recent years is in the area of arms control. Specifically, in 2019 Foreign Minister Heiko Maas launched a new initiative, “Capturing Technology: Rethinking Arms Control.” In his opening remarks, Maas pointed to the need for the initiative because of great power rivalry, “new players” including China and “new theatres of conflict”, including space and cyberspace.¹⁹ While the initiative has yet to produce any major results, it signals an important shift in arms control dynamics – as the major powers reject arms control agreements, European states are stepping up to assume a greater role in promoting cooperation and arms control. The UK played a similar leadership role in hosting the P5 meetings in February 2020, but more can still be done.

Current areas of cooperation and challenges

The United Kingdom and Germany currently cooperate on nuclear issues both relating to deterrence within NATO and on arms control. Within NATO, both regularly participate in NATO exercises, including the annual nuclear exercise, Steadfast Noon. This exercise includes nuclear-capable aircraft and, according to experts, “involves practicing how to safely transport US nuclear weapons from underground magazines to the aircraft and mounting them to the fighter jets.”²⁰ They also partner in non-nuclear

exercises, such as the submarine-hunting June 2020 Exercise Dynamic Mongoose in Iceland, which also involved Canada, France, Norway and the United States.²¹

With regards to arms control, the United Kingdom and Germany regularly partner in multilateral initiatives; however, London's close relationship with the United States occasionally creates tension. Germany and the UK are both parties to the JCPOA with Iran, which places limits on the Islamic Republic's nuclear development under tight international restrictions. Despite US withdrawal from the agreement in 2018, Germany, the UK and France remain committed to its implementation. On 19 June 2020, foreign ministers from the three EU countries expressed regret at the US withdrawal, reaffirmed their commitment to the deal, and called on Iran to, "reverse all measures inconsistent with the agreement and return to full compliance without delay."²² In addition to the JCPOA, the UK and Germany regularly collaborate on multilateral efforts such as the International Partnership for Nuclear Disarmament Verification and issue joint statements as part of NATO and, until recently, as part of the EU in the NPT calling for strengthening the nuclear regime.



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One area where they differ slightly is with regards to US-Russia bilateral agreements. The United Kingdom is one of the few NATO members to not explicitly call for the extension of the New START Treaty. The 2010 bilateral agreement between the United States and Russia requires both to reduce their strategic arsenals to 1550 warheads and 700 DVs with extensive verification and on-site inspections, but is due to expire on 5 February 2020. The Treaty has a five-year extension option, and while Washington and Moscow have engaged in dialogue about an extension, this has not yet been resolved.

Both France and Germany have openly called on the United States to extend New START. For example, German Ambassador Peter Beerwerth stated, "We call on the US and Russia to show leadership by extending New START and subsequently adjusting it to new developments."²³ In a more muted message, the UK expressed its intention to protect New START and commended the US for engaging with Russia.²⁴ While the extension decision ultimately falls to President Trump, as important allies, a unified position on a key arms control decision would be an important symbolic gesture and might carry weight with other US domestic actors.

These areas of *current* cooperation point to potential challenges for future endeavours. First, largely because of Britain's special relationship with the United States and anxiety about protecting that post-Brexit, it is somewhat sceptical of European security and defence initiatives. It has expressed opposition to anything resembling a "European army" and instead prefers to focus security and defence efforts in NATO. An additional pressure is anti-nuclear sentiment in both countries, but particularly in Germany. This limits opportunities for high profile nuclear engagement, such as anything that might highlight Germany's role in NATO's nuclear mission. For these reasons, UK-Germany cooperation on nuclear issues is likely to be limited; however, opportunities for more nuanced collaboration exist, particularly in the realm of arms control.



Leading on arms control: recommendations for UK-Germany nuclear cooperation

With these limitations in mind, the United Kingdom and Germany can cooperate on nuclear issues in at least three ways. First, they can continue to participate in NATO nuclear exercises. These exercises not only strengthen the Alliance's preparedness, but also play an important symbolic function. They demonstrate unity at a time when Russia intends to create a wedge among the allies, and send a strong deterrence signal to Moscow as it increases its nuclear adventurism. Many of the exercise activities remain classified, but the UK could potentially play a greater role such as through red-teaming and other activities that tests and challenges plans, rather than making Germany and other DCA countries the main focus of the exercise, if they aren't already doing so.

Second, they can work with other European partners to enhance Europe's "deterrence IQ." As one of only two European nuclear powers, the UK has unique experience in analysing and understanding the role of nuclear weapons as a means of deterrence and Germany has similar expertise as an essential component of NATO's nuclear mission. But not all NATO members have similar experiences or insights into the role of nuclear weapons within the Alliance. In a recent article for the *NATO Review*, Jessica Cox, Director of Nuclear Policy at NATO, addressed the need for greater understanding within the alliance on the role of nuclear weapons: "Given this changing security environment – and until our competitors and potential adversaries are ready and willing to forgo nuclear weapons themselves – NATO must be able to deter nuclear threats and respond to nuclear use by Russia in order to safeguard the security of the almost one billion people who live under the NATO umbrella."²⁵ The UK and Germany can promote "deterrence IQ" by speaking openly about the deterrent value of nuclear weapons and restating their commitment to NATO's nuclear mission, though this will require a delicate balance due to domestic attitudes. But there is also a role for non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society to play in this effort, and the UK and Germany can support and encourage academics and experts to more deeply engage with these issues and conduct independent research into NATO's contemporary deterrence challenges.



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And finally, and perhaps most importantly, the UK and Germany can jointly lead on a European security-driven approach to arms control. To be sure, there are a lot of European arms control initiatives floating around at the moment. Many of these, however, are more focused on disarmament and potentially undermine deterrence. What is needed is a European approach to arms control that maintains NATO's nuclear mission and Alliance unity, with a focus on strengthening strategic stability.

Specific steps for leading on European arms control include the following:

- The UK should publicly call on the United States and Russia to extend New START immediately, while continuing to pursue opportunities to include China in future arms control agreements;
- The UK should be a partner on the German arms control initiative, such as by hosting a follow-on meeting and supporting both government and NGO expertise to the discussion;

- As part of this initiative, develop a European concept of arms control rooted in the security context with an emphasis on crisis management and risk reduction; and
- In the context of the NPT, the UK and Germany should continue to oppose the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, which aims to undermine deterrence and ignores the role of nuclear weapons in national security and NATO.

In summary, UK-Germany nuclear cooperation will have limits. Because of the UK's special relationship with the United States and nuclear cooperation with France, it may not be amenable to expanding its partnerships. Already the UK has expressed a preference for keeping European security and defence discussions rooted in NATO, for example. But also, German domestic pressure limits its ability to expand its nuclear activities. The middle ground option where UK-Germany cooperation is both possible and could have a significant impact is in the area of leading on European arms control. Specifically, they can shape dialogue on NATO's nuclear deterrence mission while also exploring opportunities for arms control that strengthen the Alliance's security. This may not be the most ambitious form of cooperation, but at a time of waning arms control agreements, it would certainly be significant.

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