

# US-Germany Missile Agreement: Deterrence or Escalation?

by Polina Sinovets

This October was marked by a statement by the Head of the German Foreign Service Intelligence, Bruno Kahl, who claimed that by the end of this decade at the latest, Russian troops could “carry out an attack” against NATO.<sup>1</sup> The defence chief could hardly be accused of hyperbole. His comments took place at the time of Russia’s ongoing war against Ukraine, the Kremlin’s growing nuclear blackmail of the West and regular threats to use some measures<sup>2</sup> against any NATO country whose military deployments might potentially affect Russian missiles’ striking capabilities.

<sup>1</sup> Angela Skujins, “Russia Could Attack NATO by End of Decade, German Intelligence Chief Warns”, in *Euronews*, 15 October 2024, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/10/15/russia-could-attack-nato-by-end-of-decade-german-intelligence-chief-warns>.

<sup>2</sup> Darya Tarasova and Benjamin Brown, “Putin Says Planned US Deployment of Long-Range Missiles in Germany Is ‘Reminiscent’ of Cold War”, in *CNN*, 28 July 2024, <https://www.cnn.com/2024/07/28/europe/putin-us-missiles-germany-cold-war-intl>.

Against this backdrop and with the new US administration coming to power in 2025 under the slogan of turning all its attention to China, Europe will have to care much more about its defence and security than before 2022. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine revealed the weak spots of the European NATO pillar in terms of arms production, military budgeting and general preparedness for a large-scale war in European territory, which turns out to be critical for the security of the continent.

## *NATO’s deployments in Germany amidst Zeitenwende*

In this context, the US-German decision to deploy US-made SM-6 launchers, conventional Tomahawk cruise missiles and the new intermediate-range hypersonic missiles (LRHW) in German territory by 2026 on an “episodic” basis<sup>3</sup> appeared to signal a

<sup>3</sup> Xiaodon Liang, “U.S. Deploy Intermediate Range Missiles in Germany”, in *Arms Control Today*, Vol. 54, No. 7 (September 2024), <https://www.armscontrol.org/node/14271>; US and Germany,

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strong commitment from NATO states to boost the US extended deterrence against Russia.

The decision was especially notable as it involves Germany, one of the most liberal NATO states, famous for its pacifist movements and anti-nuclear initiatives. While German public opinion strongly opposed nuclear weapons use by NATO in the past (about 77 per cent in 2007), Russia's war on Ukraine has drastically boosted support for Germany's nuclear sharing and the benefits of NATO's nuclear deterrent (about 62-64 per cent after 2022).<sup>4</sup> In parallel, in 2022, reacting to Russia's war on Ukraine as the "turning point in European history"<sup>5</sup> Chancellor Olaf Scholz also announced the *Zeitenwende* defence policy centred on a 100-billion-euro investment, which included additional funding for the German armed forces and a commitment to nuclear sharing.<sup>6</sup>

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*Joint Statement from United States and Germany on Long-Range Fires Deployment in Germany*, 10 July 2024, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/07/10/joint-statement-from-united-states-and-germany-on-long-range-fires-deployment-in-germany>.

<sup>4</sup> Michal Onderco, "German Public Opinion on Nuclear Weapons. Before and After Russia's Invasion of Ukraine", in Ulrich Kühn (ed.), *Germany and Nuclear Weapons in the 21st Century. Atomic Zeitenwende?*, London/New York, Routledge, 2024, p.136-154 at p. 139 and 142, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003341161-9>.

<sup>5</sup> Bernhard Blumenau interview with Isabel Muttreja, "How Russia's Invasion Changed German Foreign Policy", in *Chatham House Interviews*, updated 30 November 2022, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/node/30655>.

<sup>6</sup> Moritz Kütt, "Germany's Nuclear Weapons Policy and the War: Money for Nukes, Words for Disarmament", in *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 27 October 2022, <https://thebulletin.org/?p=101125>.

Russia put an end to Berlin's post-Cold War illusions regarding the impossibility that a large-scale conflict may return to Europe. Germany, despite having been widely regarded as one of the economic giants of the post-Cold War era, had underspent on defence issues, mostly relying on the US for its security. Therefore, the *Zeitenwende* represents the first clear attempt by Berlin to strengthen its own national deterrence. Some efforts within that programme have already been made to purchase F-35 aircraft and heavy transport helicopters from the US, as well as to digitalise the military forces.<sup>7</sup> The rest of the funds are still stuck within the complexities of Germany's military procurement.

### *The German paradox*

The main paradox of contemporary German defence policy is that, while striving to boost its deterrence, its weak stance over Russia and its nuclear signalling and, simultaneously, a deep distrust of future US nuclear commitments<sup>8</sup> have weakened Berlin's overall position, leaving it exposed to Russia's nuclear coercion. In particular according to German sources, Putin reportedly used nuclear threats against Germany in the spring 2022 conversations with Chancellor Scholz, which, in the end, made Berlin very cautious regarding its support

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<sup>7</sup> Ben Knight, "What Happened to the German Military's €100 Billion Fund?", in *Deutsche Welle*, 28 February 2023, <https://www.dw.com/en/a-64846571>.

<sup>8</sup> Carnegie Endowment, *Germany Disarm or Proliferate? Germany's Nuclear Choices in the Age of Zeitenwende* (video), 26 March 2024, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lxKVLmu\\_ocY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lxKVLmu_ocY).

of Ukraine.<sup>9</sup> Compared with the UK or France, Berlin has not provided Ukraine with its long-range missiles (the Ukrainian military has long requested the 'Taurus' missiles), nor has it lifted the ban on Ukraine on targeting Russian territory.

To some extent, this cautious behaviour can be explained by the deep historical and economic ties between Russia and Germany, which can be observed for example in Moscow's support for German unification in 1990 and the recent partnerships based on energy, in particular gas supplies.<sup>10</sup> Needless to say, Putin started his professional career as a KGB officer based in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) during the 1980s.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, President Putin has exploited these close ties, using his understanding of German strategic culture to intimidate Berlin with the fear of nuclear escalation. Although the Russian leader has regularly hinted at nuclear retaliation in public, he has reportedly made more direct threats in communications with Chancellor Scholz.<sup>12</sup> As a result, Germany is one of the NATO states where fears of nuclear escalation are strongest. In particular, in mid-March 2022, over 90 per cent of interviewed Germans expressed 'some' or 'severe' fear of a nuclear war.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Author's interview with a Bundestag member.

<sup>10</sup> Emma Liu, "German-Russian Relations: A History and the Way Ahead", in *The Pardee Atlas Back2School Initiative*, 6 May 2024, <https://sites.bu.edu/pardeeatlas/?p=1529>.

<sup>11</sup> Chris Bowlby, "Vladimir Putin's Formative German Years", in *BBC News Magazine*, 27 March 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-32066222>.

<sup>12</sup> Author's interview with a Bundestag member.

<sup>13</sup> André Hajek, Benedikt Kretzler and Hans-Helmut König, "Fear of War in Germany: An

The situation is aggravated by future uncertainty about the US's resolve to defend Europe under the incoming Trump administration and intense speculation over the possibility that the US may withdraw from its extended deterrence commitments to Europe due to its concerns about the People's Republic of China (PRC).<sup>14</sup>

### *The rationale behind missile deployments*

The recent US-German bilateral agreement to deploy conventional intermediate-range missiles in Germany provides a perfect balance between the strategic need to boost German deterrence and, considering the historical sympathies to nuclear disarmament and fears of Russian escalation in the country, a certain restraint regarding nuclear deployments.

From the perspective of deterrence, there are two considerations that follow. On the one hand, there is the capability issue: most of the missiles will be able to reach Russian missile deployments in Kaliningrad, while the Tomahawk and LRHW missiles will be able to strike Moscow. To be sure, Poland or the Baltic states may appear to be a better fit for such deployments. However, the Kremlin would see such a move as further Western provocation as it would breach NATO's pledge not to

Observational Study", in *Heliyon*, Vol. 9, No. 11 (November 2023), Article e21784, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2023.e21784>.

<sup>14</sup> Adérito Vicente, "Why Europe Needs a Nuclear Deterrent: A Critical Appraisal", in *Martens Centre Research Papers*, October 2024, <https://www.martenscentre.eu/?p=11471>.

deploy striking assets in the territories of new members of the Alliance. In contrast, deployments in the territory of a longstanding NATO member like Germany would not be interpreted as a direct breach of NATO's earlier pledges given to Russia.<sup>15</sup> To be sure, Moscow's reaction remains condemning, but it is mostly based on a demonstrative nostalgia for the INF Treaty, which Russia, according to NATO, breached first.<sup>16</sup>

Historically, US/NATO conventional deterrence capabilities have always been impactful on Russia, as the flight time of any missile from Germany to Moscow is less than ten minutes.<sup>17</sup> Such concerns arguably informed Russia's arms control proposals prior to its full-scale invasion in Ukraine, which attempted to combine the US's precision-guided munitions (PGMs) and nuclear arms reduction in one package.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> NATO, *Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation Signed in Paris, France*, 27 May 1997, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official\\_texts\\_25468.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_25468.htm).

<sup>16</sup> NATO, *Statement on Russia's Failure to Comply with the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty*, 1 February 2019, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_162996.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_162996.htm).

<sup>17</sup> Reuters, "Putin Warns US against Deploying Long-Range Missiles in Germany", in *The Guardian*, 28 July 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/xv5pp8>. This point is important as the shorter the flight time of a missile, the less minutes a state leader has to make up their decision for a retaliatory strike on the enemy.

<sup>18</sup> Andrei Zagorski, *Russia's Tactical Nuclear Weapons: Posture, Politics and Arms Control. Executive Summary*, UNIDIR and Institute for Peace and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg, Geneva, 22 February 2011, [https://unidir.org/files/conferences/pdfs/executive-](https://unidir.org/files/conferences/pdfs/executive-summary-a-zagorski-eng-0-325.pdf)

Overall, the suggested deployments will increase the credibility of NATO's deterrence without creating such a strong security dilemma as in the case of nuclear deployments. Likewise, the use of the term "episodic deployments" in announcing the agreement<sup>19</sup> is probably designed to reassure Russia that such deployments may have a temporary character depending on the situation.

On the other hand, the deployments are also an attempt to reinforce the US's commitment to defending its NATO allies, primarily Berlin. As mentioned, with Germany increasingly vulnerable in the face of continuing Russian nuclear threats, the new intermediate-range missile deployment would also serve an additional 'tripwire' function, as in the case of the US's tactical nuclear weapons stationed in Europe, the so-called 'wedding rings of Europe'.

### *Fears of escalation*

While the US-German agreement has not been a subject of public discussions, some German MPs have already declared that missile deployments will raise the risk of military escalation.<sup>20</sup> There is a certain logic behind this position. First, Russia has already warned that it will take "mirror measures" in response to the

[summary-a-zagorski-eng-0-325.pdf](https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/muetzenich-gegen-mittelstreckenraketen-in-deutschland-19870037.html).

<sup>19</sup> US and Germany, *Joint Statement from United States and Germany on Long-Range Fires Deployment in Germany*, cit.

<sup>20</sup> Peter Carstens, "Mützenich gegen Stationierung von Mittelstreckenraketen", in *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, 21 July 2024, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/muetzenich-gegen-mittelstreckenraketen-in-deutschland-19870037.html>.



deployment of US intermediate-range missiles in Germany.<sup>21</sup> What exactly this means has become a matter of debate. This might mean the deployment of a land-based version of Kalibr (which could be ready by 2026) or of the 9M729, the missile being one of the reasons for the collapse of the INF Treaty. Of course, those missiles are expected to carry a conventional payload, but since Russians are producing most modern arms in two versions, conventional and nuclear, this may become the subject of speculations as well.<sup>22</sup>

That said, similar 'measures' were taken by Russia long before the current US-German agreement. Since 2018, Russia has been deploying nuclear-capable Iskander missiles in Kaliningrad Oblast with a range of 500 km, which are capable of striking large parts of Europe, including Germany.<sup>23</sup> In a further escalation, the Kinzhal hypersonic missile was deployed by MIG bombers during the initial stages of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.<sup>24</sup> In May 2022, Moscow also simulated nuclear strikes from its western exclave of

Kaliningrad on the EU's border,<sup>25</sup> which later became part of Putin's nuclear signalling to Scholz. So, although the potential deployment of a nuclear-capable land-based Kalibr may mark the start of a new intermediate missiles' arms race, Germany remains vulnerable in any case as it can still be targeted by the other Russian missiles from the Kaliningrad Oblast or the Baltic Sea. With air defence systems in Europe being relatively weak, even in the case of conventional war, the only possible alternative to such an imbalance is to boost deterrence.

### Looking ahead

The missile deployment in Germany can be considered one of the strongest steps taken by the US to boost NATO's deterrence credibility in the face of an increasingly assertive Russia. Although Germany will remain the focus of discussions, the future security of the whole Alliance is at stake. By deploying intermediate-range missiles on German soil, the US is attempting to fill the deterrence gap, something the former UK Defence Secretary Denis Healey once defined as 95 per cent of the extended deterrence credibility – that is, the reassurance of the allies.<sup>26</sup> Germany is obviously key to this, as Europe's largest economy and facing the greatest vulnerability in the face of Russian nuclear coercion.

<sup>21</sup> Russian Presidency, *Address by the President at the Main Naval Parade to Mark Russia's Navy Day*, 28 July 2024, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/74651>.

<sup>22</sup> Linus Höller, "Will Russia Deploy Offensive Missiles Capable of Striking Europe?", in *DefenseNews*, 30 July 2024, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2024/07/30/will-russia-deploy-offensive-missiles-capable-of-striking-europe>.

<sup>23</sup> "Russia Deploys Iskander Nuclear-Capable Missiles to Kaliningrad - RIA", in *Reuters*, 5 February 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN1FP22B>.

<sup>24</sup> Paul Kirby, "Russia Claims First Use of Hypersonic Kinzhal Missile in Ukraine", in *BBC News*, 19 March 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60806151>.

<sup>25</sup> "Russia Simulates Nuclear Strikes Near EU", in *The Moscow Times*, 5 May 2022, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/05/05/a77586>.

<sup>26</sup> David Santoro and Brad Glosserman, "Healey Is Wrong: It's Deterrence, Stupid", in *War on the Rocks*, 14 October 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/?p=13541>.

It remains to be seen whether Germany, as well as the new US administration, will remain committed to the missile agreement by 2026. There are lots of speculations on whether the US is going to keep the same level of support for NATO allies under the Trump leadership – but considering the fact that the German *Zeitenwende* may be seen as converging with Trump's demands towards NATO members to increase their defence expenditure, the deal may survive. Moreover, should the new US President implement his peace plan regarding Russia's war on Ukraine, sacrificing a part of Ukraine to Russia, this might embolden the latter to threaten Europe – and its NATO members – further.<sup>27</sup> In the end, the United States would have to strengthen its defence commitments to Europe, and here the US missiles in Germany might play a reassuring role.

Therefore, the missile deployments represent a timely and rational attempt by the US to fix its extended deterrence in the face of upcoming challenges. The inclusion of Germany, one of the most vulnerable members of NATO, both reassures a key ally and signals the US's commitment to the defence of Europe more generally, as well as sending a signal, of course, to Russia.

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<sup>27</sup> Alessandro Marrone, "Trump, Ukraine and NATO: Two Crossroads for Europe", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 24|67 (November 2024), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/19154>.

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