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# **GERMANY'S UPCOMING ELECTION AND THE FUTURE OF NUCLEAR SHARING**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The United States has long deployed nuclear weapons in Germany under “programs of cooperation” in which the weapons are maintained under U.S. custody but, in a conflict, and with proper authorization, could be turned over to the German military for use. The current delivery system is the German Air Force’s Tornado aircraft, which is dual-capable — it can deliver both conventional and nuclear weapons — but nearing the end of its service life.

Participation in this nuclear role is often referred to as “nuclear sharing” in Germany. However, the presence of U.S. nuclear weapons is not popular with the German public. With national elections which will determine who replaces long-serving chancellor Angela Merkel to be held September 26, two of the three leading political parties have called for an end to nuclear sharing and the withdrawal of U.S. nuclear arms — although with some ambiguity regarding timing. The issues of nuclear sharing and replacement of the Tornado with another dual-capable aircraft may not arise as major questions in the campaign, but these issues will figure in the coalition negotiation between the parties that will form the next government. This paper describes the views of the major German political parties regarding nuclear sharing and the presence of U.S. nuclear weapons and how the possible coalition negotiations might address these issues.

The United States has an interest in how that negotiation turns out. At a minimum, the U.S. government does not want a German policy that seeks to end nuclear sharing in a unilateral manner, which could unravel NATO’s current deterrence and defense posture. Given the contribution of U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe to extended deterrence and, in particular, to assurance of allies across the continent regarding the U.S. commitment to NATO’s defense, changes to the alliance’s nuclear posture should come about as the result of an alliance process, not as the result of one country’s unilateral decision. Washington can take steps in the coming months, such as articulating its approach to nuclear arms control, that could help shape how the coalition negotiation in Berlin addresses the nuclear sharing issue.

## BACKGROUND: NUCLEAR SHARING AND GERMANY

Since the 1950s, the United States has deployed nuclear weapons in Europe, including in Germany (West Germany until German reunification in 1990). Those weapons have provided a core element of NATO's deterrence and defense posture and have been described as linking or coupling U.S. strategic nuclear forces to the protection of NATO. Some nuclear weapons in Europe were for use by U.S. delivery systems, while other nuclear weapons were designated under programs of cooperation for use by NATO allies.<sup>1</sup> Part of the rationale for these programs was to share the responsibility and risk of the nuclear element of NATO's deterrent and defense posture. They were also seen as a means to reduce any pressure for allies to acquire their own nuclear arms.

Under programs of cooperation, the weapons themselves were (and are) maintained under U.S. custody. In a conflict, and with proper authorization, they could be turned over to the host nation for use by its delivery systems. The U.S. military deployed a large number of nuclear weapons in Europe during the Cold War for delivery by land- and air-based systems, peaking at 7,304 nuclear warheads in 1971, with 2,821 designated for use by NATO allies' delivery systems.<sup>2</sup> A significant number of these weapons were based in Germany.

With the end of the Cold War, the United States dramatically drew down the number of its nuclear arms in Europe, withdrawing all ground-launched weapons, such as artillery shells and warheads for short-range surface-to-surface missiles. The U.S. military went on to eliminate all land- and sea-based non-strategic nuclear weapons from its stockpile. This process and the elimination of intermediate-range missiles under the terms of the 1987 U.S.-Soviet Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty meant that, from the early 1990s, the only U.S. nuclear weapons that remained in Europe were gravity bombs for delivery by aircraft.<sup>3</sup>

U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe play an important part in NATO's current deterrence and defense posture and, through nuclear sharing, in ensuring broad participation in the nuclear role. In their Brussels summit communiqué last month, NATO leaders reiterated that "As long as nuclear weapons exist, NATO will remain a nuclear alliance" and, with regard to nuclear sharing, elaborated:

"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. National contributions of dual-capable aircraft to NATO's nuclear deterrence mission remain central to this effort."<sup>4</sup>

While only a small number of NATO allies now host U.S. nuclear arms, all allies with the exception of France take part in the alliance's Nuclear Planning Group. Berlin could, like other allies who do not host U.S. nuclear weapons, still participate in NATO planning and consultations regarding the possible use of nuclear weapons without itself hosting nuclear arms or maintaining dual-capable aircraft for their delivery.

By 2010, the estimated number of U.S. B61 nuclear bombs in Europe had been reduced to 150-200 by one estimate; a U.S. official reportedly referred to 180 at a NATO briefing.<sup>5</sup> As of 2021, the estimated number had reportedly declined further to 100, based at air bases in Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Turkey, designated for use by the U.S. Air Force and for allied air forces under programs of cooperation. (This number has not been officially confirmed.) The B61 bombs in Germany are deployed at Büchel Air Force Base in the Eifel mountain range in the western part of the country.<sup>6</sup>



The B61 bomb is undergoing a life extension program that is taking earlier variants of the B61 and will result in the B61-12. The B61-12 will have variable yields ranging from 0.3 kilotons to 50 kilotons (about three times the size of the weapon dropped on Hiroshima), and a new tail kit will enhance its accuracy. The first B61-12 production unit is expected to be finished in 2022.<sup>7</sup> The life-extended weapon will arm U.S. strategic bombers (the B-2 and, in the future, the B-21) as well as be designated for use by U.S. and allied fighter bombers such as the F-35.

The German Air Force bases dual-capable Tornado aircraft of the 33rd Fighter Bomber Squadron at Büchel. The U.S. Air Force's 702nd Munitions Support Squadron is located there and believed to have custody of the B61 bombs, which are stored in underground vaults within protective shelters that can house aircraft as well. Büchel reportedly has the capacity to store as many as 44 nuclear bombs, but the estimated number is significantly less (perhaps 10-20).<sup>8</sup>

The German Tornados have been flying since the 1980s, are becoming increasingly expensive to maintain, and are nearing the end of their useful service life. The German Air Force has a program underway to extend the life of the Tornados until at least the end of 2030.<sup>9</sup> However, some believe a decision on a replacement aircraft by 2025 is essential, as keeping the Tornados in flying condition may become too difficult and expensive after 2030. In April 2020, Defense Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer took a preliminary decision to replace the Tornados with a mix of Eurofighters (not nuclear-capable) and F/A-18 Super Hornets, 30 of which would be an E/F version capable of delivering nuclear as well as conventional weapons.<sup>10</sup> The defense ministry termed this a “bridge solution” to sustain a nuclear delivery capability for the German Air Force until a sixth-generation fighter — the Future Combat Air System that Germany is developing with France and Spain — is ready in the 2040-2045 timeframe.<sup>11</sup> That aircraft will have a nuclear delivery capability.

However, the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), the junior partner in the current government with Merkel's Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and their Bavarian allies, the Christian Social Union (CSU), objected. SPD parliamentary group leader Rolf Mützenich led the charge in the Bundestag (the German federal parliament), arguing that “nuclear weapons on German territory do not heighten our security, just the opposite” and stating that “the time has come for Germany to rule out future stationing.”<sup>12</sup> A unilateral German decision to end nuclear sharing would be inconsistent with the 2018 coalition agreement between the CDU/CSU and SPD, which stated:

“As long as nuclear weapons play a role as a deterrent instrument in NATO's strategic concept, Germany has an interest in participating in the strategic discussions and planning processes. Successful disarmament talks create the conditions for the withdrawal of the tactical nuclear weapons stationed in Germany and Europe.”<sup>13</sup>

Foreign Minister Heiko Maas, himself an SPD member, rebuked Mützenich and warned that unilateral steps “weaken our alliances,” while Gabriela Heinrich, a deputy leader of the SPD parliamentary group, said “it is important to bring this debate to the European level and discuss it with NATO partners.”<sup>14</sup>

The SPD prevented Bundestag approval of Kramp-Karrenbauer's preliminary decision. The Tornado replacement issue will not be taken up again until after a new government is formed following the September election.

## POLITICAL PARTIES' VIEWS ON NUCLEAR SHARING

Nuclear weapons are not popular with the German public. While some may be concerned about the anti-nuclear bias of the organization's polling process, a poll commissioned by the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) showed that 83% of Germans wanted an end to nuclear sharing and withdrawal of U.S. nuclear bombs.<sup>15</sup> Another opinion survey commissioned by the Munich Security Conference showed that 66% of German respondents favored abandoning nuclear deterrence altogether.<sup>16</sup> Opposition to nuclear weapons has long been a widely-held sentiment of the German public, even when the country was divided and West Germany was on the front line with the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact.

Today's arguments in Germany on hosting nuclear arms tend to focus on NATO alliance considerations and arms control/disarmament. Proponents of maintaining nuclear sharing are apt to argue first for the need for Germany to be a good NATO partner and show sensitivity to the perspectives of allies to Germany's east — particularly the Baltic states and Poland, which directly border Russian territory and support U.S. nuclear arms based in Europe. They also assert that nuclear sharing means that Germany has a voice in NATO nuclear planning and cite the 2018 coalition agreement, which linked withdrawal of U.S. nuclear weapons to an arms control agreement. Some opponents largely reject the concept of nuclear deterrence. Others advocate signing the 2017 Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, which would ban Germany from hosting or providing delivery systems for U.S. nuclear bombs. The debate, however, does not focus much on the particulars of nuclear deterrence or the contribution that nuclear sharing makes to it.<sup>17</sup>



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Indeed, a number of German experts privately comment on the dearth of understanding about deterrence and, in general, weak strategic thinking in their country. One researcher gave Chancellor Merkel some of the blame for not making the security arguments for nuclear weapons to the broader public; Kramp-Karrenbauer strongly supported the case for nuclear sharing but could not speak with Merkel's authority.<sup>18</sup>

Germany's political parties are preparing to contest the September 26 federal election. Seven parties currently hold seats in the Bundestag: the CDU and CSU, the SPD, Alliance 90/The Greens (Greens), the Free Democratic Party (FDP, sometimes also referred to as the Liberals), the Left Party (Die Linke), and the Alternative for Germany (AfD). The current governing coalition of the CDU/CSU and SPD together hold 399 out of the 709 seats in the parliament. The parties hold differing views regarding the nuclear sharing question, and all appear likely to make it into the next Bundestag.

**CDU/CSU.** The CDU/CSU is a traditional Christian Democratic political bloc that under Merkel's leadership has shifted toward the center. It has held the chancellorship for nearly 52 of the 72 years since 1949, when the Federal Republic of Germany (then also known as West Germany) was established in the aftermath of World War II. Merkel has served as chancellor since 2005. The CDU is present in all German *Länder* (states) except for Bavaria, which is the preserve of its sister party, the CSU. The two join together in national

elections and in the Bundestag. Armin Laschet, minister-president of the state of North Rhine-Westphalia, was elected leader of the CDU in January. He was chosen to be the CDU/CSU candidate for chancellor in April after a longer-than-expected and somewhat messy contest with Markus Söder, minister-president of Bavaria and head of the CSU.

The CDU/CSU is strongly committed to maintaining nuclear sharing, described by one CDU Bundestag member as “an essential part of the German security architecture.”<sup>19</sup> This is the party that sees nuclear sharing most directly in deterrence terms, believing that it binds German and American security interests together and keeps the U.S. strategic nuclear deterrent – the ultimate guarantee of NATO security – coupled (or linked) to NATO’s security. The CDU/CSU favors replacing the Tornado with a dual-capable aircraft to sustain Germany’s nuclear sharing role (Kramp-Karrenbauer is a member of the CDU and led the party before Laschet). Although all NATO members except France take part in the alliance’s Nuclear Planning Group, those in the CDU/CSU tend to see nuclear sharing as a way to ensure that Germany is closely consulted on NATO nuclear policy and nuclear weapons issues.

A 2016 German white paper on defense (largely drafted by the CDU-led defense ministry) encapsulates the CDU/CSU view on nuclear sharing: “NATO remains a nuclear alliance. Through nuclear sharing, Germany continues to be an integral part of NATO’s nuclear policy and planning. At the same time, Germany is committed to the goal of laying the foundations for a world without nuclear weapons.”<sup>20</sup> Johann Wadephul (vice chairman of the CDU/CSU parliamentary group, with responsibility for security and defense) laid out the CDU/CSU’s view in detail in May 2020 following Mützenich’s call for an end to nuclear sharing:

“For the CDU/CSU parliamentary group, the continuation of nuclear sharing is beyond question. It is written into the coalition agreement for good reason. It’s not negotiable. Nuclear deterrence is essential to the security of Europe... [Nuclear sharing] is not only supported by Germany, but also by Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy, and Turkey. But if nuclear sharing is to be convincing, then it must also be operationally feasible in an emergency. For this reason, a further stationing of U.S. nuclear weapons in Germany is necessary.”<sup>21</sup>

This past February, CDU Bundestag member Andreas Nick addressed the parliament on the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons and stated:

“...nuclear deterrence works and serves our national and European security interests. Because as long as nuclear weapons are also aimed at German cities, we would do well to hold on to the deterrent in the context of nuclear sharing. It is therefore right that the German government is coordinating our position on disarmament multilaterally in NATO instead of relying on national solo efforts, even if leading figures in the coalition partner [the SPD] now seem to want that.”<sup>22</sup>

On June 21, the CDU/CSU issued its election platform, which makes explicit reference to support for nuclear sharing:

“As long as there are states with nuclear weapons that actively challenge our community of values, Europe continues to need the nuclear protective umbrella of the USA, and German participation in nuclear sharing within the framework of NATO remains an important part of a credible deterrent in the alliance. We stand for Germany’s resolute commitment to continuing its nuclear sharing within NATO and providing the necessary funds for this.”<sup>23</sup>

**SPD.** The SPD usually has been the second strongest party in postwar Germany and held the chancellorship for 20 years since 1949, most recently from 1998-2005, when it was the senior partner in a coalition with the Greens. Olaf Scholz, serving as minister of finance and vice chancellor in the current government (in which the SPD is the junior partner), is the SPD's candidate for chancellor. The SPD's election platform states:

"The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, which was adopted within the framework of the United Nations and has now entered into force, brings further momentum to efforts for a world free of nuclear weapons. Germany should, as an observer at the conference of the parties to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, constructively support the treaty's intentions. We are also committed to starting negotiations between the USA and Russia on verifiable, complete disarmament in the sub-strategic area with the aim of finally withdrawing and destroying the nuclear weapons stationed in Europe and Germany."<sup>24</sup>

Some in the SPD support the approach of the 2018 coalition agreement, that is, that nuclear weapons should be withdrawn from Germany and Europe as the result of an arms control agreement (which implies that nuclear sharing could continue, at least for a time). However, a fair number of German experts believe the SPD is moving to the left on nuclear issues as on other questions, with Mützenich's view — that it is time to end the basing of U.S. nuclear weapons on German territory — holding increasing sway within the party. Observers see Mützenich — "a disarmer at heart" in the words of one — as having pushed out SPD centrists with expertise on security and defense issues.<sup>25</sup> Two SPD Bundestag members noted the party's long but unsuccessful stance against nuclear arms, which were "no longer acceptable."<sup>26</sup> Some researchers believe the SPD will try to make nuclear sharing a campaign issue.<sup>27</sup>

One observer noted that, while many in the SPD favor removal of U.S. nuclear weapons, the party's candidate for chancellor, Scholz, was more centrist and had not embraced that position. He will have to decide how to handle the issue and manage his party's message.<sup>28</sup>

**Greens.** Formed in 1980, the Greens entered the Bundestag in 1983 holding ardent pro-environment and anti-nuclear views, including fierce opposition to the deployment of nuclear-tipped U.S. Pershing II and ground-launched cruise missiles. The Greens merged with the former East German Alliance 90 party in 1990 following German reunification and were the junior partner in the governing coalition with the SPD from 1998-2005, with Joschka Fischer serving as foreign minister. While still holding strong pro-environment views and expressing support for an end to nuclear sharing, the Greens have moderated their positions and moved toward the center on a number of issues.<sup>29</sup> They currently have the smallest representation in the Bundestag of the six national parties, but their popularity has increased significantly over the past four years; opinion polls now place them second behind the CDU/CSU. The Greens participate in coalition governments in 11 of the 16 German states, in various combinations with the CDU, SPD, and the Left Party. They have chosen party co-leader Annalena Baerbock as their candidate for chancellor.

In the view of many Germans, the nuclear sharing question divides the party's realist wing, which is eager to return to government, more trans-Atlanticist, and potentially prepared to reach an accommodation on the nuclear sharing issue in a coalition government, and its left wing, which take a less compromising anti-nuclear view. Green party members candidly acknowledge the internal back-and-forth over the issue; researchers comment

on how open-minded Green Bundestag members are in discussions of these issues.<sup>30</sup> On paper, the realists' view seems to be prevailing. The party's November 2020 "Manifesto of Principles" stated:

"A strict set of rules on disarmament and the ban on chemical, biological and nuclear weapons of mass destruction is needed. Germany's accession to the U.N. Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons and the strengthening of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty are part of this. To achieve this, we must work together with our international and European partners toward the goal of a Europe free of nuclear weapons. This requires a Germany free of nuclear weapons and thus a swift end to nuclear sharing. The aspiration is nothing less than a world free of nuclear weapons."<sup>31</sup>

As one Greens advisor noted, the manifesto could have called for an "immediate" end or an "end within the term of the next government" instead of a "swift" end to nuclear sharing, suggesting that "swift" allowed time and could permit a compromise in the event of a coalition with the pro-nuclear sharing CDU/CSU. The stated need for Germany to work with international and European partners clearly implied that the views of Germany's NATO allies had to be taken into account. Moreover, as the advisor put it, the Greens "cannot put the opportunity to lead Germany into a climate-neutral future at risk for the debate over nuclear sharing."<sup>32</sup> A think-tank researcher commented that the Greens have carefully positioned themselves so that they would not be vulnerable to the charge of advocating unilateral disarmament.<sup>33</sup>

The party's election platform, released in early April, also treats the nuclear sharing issue in a nuanced manner. It makes no explicit mention of nuclear sharing and, while noting the goal of a Germany free of nuclear weapons, pays deference to allies' concerns:

"Our claim is still nothing less than a world free of nuclear weapons... A world without nuclear weapons can only be achieved through intermediate steps: international initiatives to reduce the number of nuclear weapons, NATO renouncing first strike, and a broad public debate about obsolete Cold War deterrence doctrines. This includes a Germany free of nuclear weapons and Germany joining the U.N. Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. We know that this requires numerous talks in the alliance, also with our European partner states, and above all the strengthening of the security and reassurance of our Polish and Baltic allies."<sup>34</sup>

Baerbock in the past has called for the withdrawal of U.S. nuclear arms and for signing the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.<sup>35</sup> However, she took a far more cautious approach in an April 24 press interview, her first following her selection as the Greens' candidate for chancellor. Asked about the immediate removal of U.S. nuclear weapons and remaining under the U.S. nuclear umbrella, she replied:

"A world free of nuclear weapons is a safer world; this also applies to Europe and Germany. But mere trumpeting of visions will not make Germany any safer. In order to move forward, you have to know how, and a time window is opening up for important first steps. The new U.S. government and Russia have just extended the New START Treaty on nuclear disarmament by five years. We want to build on this and, in the process, talk about American nuclear weapons in Europe. A new German federal government must also get involved from the start, but that can only be done in a NATO process... Germany is only strong in terms of foreign policy if it acts in



concert in Europe. Our Eastern European neighbors in particular have the situation in Ukraine in mind. Therefore, the security and protection of these states must be central to any disarmament effort.”<sup>36</sup>

Baerbock placed the decision on nuclear sharing firmly in the NATO context, with particular attention to Germany's eastern neighbors. One Green Bundestag member noted that, while the Greens had long argued against nuclear sharing, they could not disregard their neighbors' views and say “remove the bombs now,” in part because the CDU/CSU would frame the question as a test of responsibility.<sup>37</sup> A Greens advisor noted that the Greens leadership favored a policy that could change things in a realistic way, in a step-by-step manner, to get nuclear weapons out of Germany.<sup>38</sup>

At the same time, the Greens leadership cannot ignore the views of the party's left wing, who on issues related to nuclear sharing are likely closer to the party's base — and any final coalition agreement will require the party's approval. The Greens, who won 8.9% of the vote in 2017, appear on course to at least double, and possibly triple, that result. That would bring a flood of new Green Bundestag members, whose views at this point are not clear (though their influence on a coalition negotiation would be limited). Both the realist and left wings appear to share an interest in not letting nuclear sharing become an issue during the campaign. One Green Bundestag member linked to the left on nuclear issues downplayed the division within the parliamentary party while noting that the base held stronger anti-nuclear views.<sup>39</sup> The question within the parliamentary party was setting realistic goals to move toward nuclear disarmament.

**Other parties.** The FDP is currently the fourth largest party in the Bundestag. It has often served as the junior coalition partner (in coalitions both with the CDU/CSU and SPD) and was last in government in 2009-2013. Generally trans-Atlanticist on foreign policy, the FDP supports nuclear sharing. Its 2021 election platform calls for modernizing and providing proper financing for the German military and commits to the long-term objective of a world free of nuclear arms, while noting that the threat of nuclear weapons is increasing. It does not make explicit mention of nuclear sharing or the presence of U.S. nuclear weapons.<sup>40</sup> An FDP Bundestag member commented that Germany needed a dual-capable replacement for the Tornado. Germany should continue nuclear sharing, but it was “possibly endangered,” in part because most Germans perceived no external threat and favored ending it.<sup>41</sup>

The Left Party is the fifth largest party in the Bundestag. It traces part of its roots back to the Socialist Unity Party, the ruling party in East Germany prior to reunification. Reflecting that history and its name, the Left Party is the Bundestag's most left-wing party. It favors ending nuclear sharing, the immediate removal of U.S. nuclear weapons, and the dissolution of NATO. In a draft motion put to the Bundestag in January, the Left Party called on the government:

“to contribute to the success of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference by clearly advocating the agreement's goal of achieving a nuclear-weapon-free world through the complete disarmament of the arsenals of the nuclear-weapon states... and to end its adherence to Germany's nuclear sharing and, in accordance with the Bundestag resolution of March 26, 2010, to initiate the withdrawal of nuclear weapons from Germany.”<sup>42</sup>

The AfD is an extreme right-wing populist party that exploited an anti-immigrant stance to place third in the 2017 Bundestag elections. Although it currently polls around 10%, it has zero chance of taking part in the next government, because its extreme views mean that no other political party will work with it. Strongly nationalistic, the AfD's 2016 party manifesto stated:

“the renegotiation of the status of Allied troops in Germany should be put up for discussion. The status of Allied troops needs to be adapted to Germany's regained sovereignty. The AfD is committed to the withdrawal of all Allied troops stationed on German soil, and in particular of their nuclear weapons.”<sup>43</sup>

The AfD's election platform states that the AfD “advocates the global abolition of NBC [nuclear, biological, and chemical] weapons. The aim must be the withdrawal of all nuclear weapons from Germany, but also the nuclear short-range weapons aimed at Germany. This would make nuclear sharing in the Federal Republic obsolete.”<sup>44</sup>

## POLLS AND THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN

The election campaign is now moving into high gear. Opinion surveys over the past year have generally shown the CDU/CSU in the lead, putting their support at between 35% and 40% through mid-February, when their numbers began to decline, falling to 25% in late April. The decline reflected various factors: growing unhappiness with the government's management of COVID-19, the long and somewhat tortured process to determine the CDU/CSU candidate for chancellor, a spate of corruption scandals, and the CDU's poor showing in two state elections in March. The Greens saw their support, which had earlier hovered between 15% and 20%, rise to 23% toward the end of April, and early May polls even showed the Greens overtaking the CDU/CSU by a small margin. However, the CDU/CSU soon returned to the top spot. At the end of June, it polled 29% to the Greens' 20%; the SPD drew 15%, the FDP 12%, the AfD 10%, and the Left Party 7%.<sup>45</sup>

The CDU/CSU rebound likely reflects the growing availability of COVID-19 vaccines in Germany and the fact that the nationwide lockdown began to ease at the end of May. The traditional tendency of the German electorate to abjure change and prefer stability also appears to be benefiting the CDU/CSU.

Germany's elections, like America's, will be decided primarily on domestic issues — the handling of COVID-19, the economy, and, increasingly, environmental issues. Most observers doubt that the nuclear sharing issue and presence of U.S. nuclear arms will figure prominently in the campaign. One journalist noted that nuclear weapons “popped up” every now and then in the German political debate (as they did in spring 2020, when the defense ministry offered its preliminary decision on the successor to the Tornado).<sup>46</sup> Whether they will pop up again before the election remains to be seen. As the campaign heats up, the SPD could seek to exploit the issue to try to win votes from the Greens, but there are doubts that the SPD would make much headway. (That said, a Green party member expected that, if the Greens ended up in government and the SPD in opposition, the SPD would press the Greens hard on the nuclear sharing question.)<sup>47</sup>

## POSSIBLE COALITIONS AND THE NUCLEAR ISSUE

A mix of questions related to nuclear sharing will undoubtedly be on the agenda for the next governing coalition, including the continuing presence of U.S. nuclear weapons; whether to replace the Tornado with a new dual-capable aircraft; and Germany's stance on Biden administration arms control positions and the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.

While things could change between now and September, observers see two combinations of political parties as most likely in the next governing coalition: a CDU/CSU-Greens coalition and a Greens-SPD-FDP coalition (sometimes referred to as the “traffic light” coalition, because the party colors are green, red, and yellow). Many expect the CDU/CSU-Greens to be the more likely. It is taken virtually as a given that, whatever coalition emerges in the fall, the Greens will be part of it, and possibly its leader.

Views differ on how difficult it would be for the CDU/CSU and Greens to find common language on the nuclear sharing issue. Some believe this would be problematic, in part because the influx of new Green deputies could pull the party leadership toward the left.<sup>48</sup> Others argue that the Greens would not want to cause problems within NATO; while maintaining the aspirational goal of withdrawal of U.S. nuclear weapons, they would be prepared to “stomach” continued nuclear sharing for the time being.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, the CDU/CSU would take a hard line on nuclear sharing, and the Greens likely would not make the kinds of concessions on economic and environmental issues that the CDU/CSU would demand for a coalition agreement with a near-term goal of ending nuclear sharing. As one researcher commented, the Greens might be more interested in making the CDU/CSU pay a high price on other issues for the Greens' consent to continued nuclear sharing.<sup>50</sup>

CDU members and outside observers believe there is a good chance that a CDU/CSU-Greens coalition could find a pragmatic compromise that, while maintaining the removal of U.S. nuclear weapons as an ultimate goal, would not require that in the near term. That said, a Green Bundestag member asserted that the coalition agreement would need more than just ending nuclear sharing as an ultimate goal, suggesting observer status in the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.<sup>51</sup>



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Some government officials also expect observer status in the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons to become a question in the coalition negotiation.<sup>52</sup> The Green Bundestag member also suggested that the coalition agreement should set out a roadmap toward ending nuclear sharing, perhaps including a date for decision on the future of the B61 bombs. Greens-proposed Bundestag motions over the past year have called for “a Germany free of nuclear weapons by withdrawing from operational nuclear sharing,” and “no longer providing delivery systems” for nuclear arms.<sup>53</sup>

Some observers think it possible that a CDU/CSU-Greens coalition might agree on a dual-capable replacement for the Tornado (if the Greens agreed to this, the decision would almost certainly be taken early in the life of the new government, to put time between the decision and the next Bundestag election).<sup>54</sup> However, a Green party

member said they would oppose buying a new dual-capable aircraft; while the German Air Force needed a new fighter bomber, that should be considered separately from the nuclear sharing question.<sup>55</sup>

If the CDU/CSU and Greens place first and second but do not achieve a majority, they might invite the FDP to join the coalition negotiations. That would add a second party to the negotiation that favors maintaining nuclear sharing. There might, however, be some wariness on the part of the CDU/CSU and Greens about engaging with the FDP, whose walk-out in 2017 ended negotiations on a CDU/CSU-Greens-FDP coalition.<sup>56</sup>

The traffic light coalition would likely produce the Greens as the senior partner (and Baerbock as chancellor), with the SPD second and FDP third. The FDP would be the one party unambiguously in favor of maintaining nuclear sharing. The key would then lie largely in the hands of the Greens. In this case, several researchers commented that the Greens, particularly with the realist wing in ascendance, would not seek immediate removal of U.S. nuclear arms.<sup>57</sup> Baerbock would come under pressure from NATO allies, especially the Baltic states and Poland, to maintain nuclear sharing and not take a unilateral decision to end it. In that case, the Greens and FDP presumably could prevail in a negotiation with the SPD. Observer status in the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons would be a much more likely element of a coalition agreement in this combination.

In the case of the traffic light coalition, however, the prospect for agreement on procuring a dual-capable aircraft to replace the Tornado would seem less possible than under a CDU/CSU-Greens coalition. If the next Bundestag does not approve a replacement, as a practical matter, the Tornados could quietly age Germany out of the nuclear sharing role or force the German Air Force to consider more costly ways to keep at least some Tornados capable of flying.

One other coalition appears mathematically possible: a Greens-SPD-Left Party combination. While this coalition is not totally ruled out and has precedent at the state level, observers tend to dismiss it, saying that Left Party is too radical for either the Greens or SPD at the federal level.

It should be noted that previous German governments have maintained nuclear sharing, despite its unpopularity with the broader public and even when coalition agreements have called for its end. For example, the FDP secured a point in the 2009 coalition agreement with the CDU/CSU reflecting the adamant view of its then-leader Guido Westerwelle, who became foreign minister, that the nuclear weapons in Germany should be removed. The 2009 agreement provided that the German government:

“will work to support the conclusion of new disarmament and arms control agreements internationally... In this context and in the course of developing a strategic concept for NATO, we will work in the alliance and with our American allies to ensure that the nuclear weapons remaining in Germany are withdrawn.”<sup>58</sup>

The Bundestag supported that objective in a cross-party parliamentary motion in 2010. However, Westerwelle ran into strong opposition within NATO and did not make progress on ending nuclear sharing, even though his party entered government at a time of optimism regarding prospects for nuclear arms control — U.S. President Barack Obama had endorsed the idea of a world free of nuclear weapons in spring 2009 in Prague,<sup>59</sup> and U.S.-Russian nuclear arms negotiations were underway (the coalition



ended with the 2013 election, before Russia's military action against Ukraine sent West-Russia relations plummeting downwards). Some in the Greens and SPD ranks note these past failures and believe that, their next time in government, more must be done to move toward the removal of U.S. nuclear arms.<sup>60</sup>

Finally, in German coalition governments, the junior coalition party traditionally has the foreign ministry and vice chancellorship (the current foreign minister is an SPD member, though, in a departure from tradition, Finance Minister Scholz, who is also the SPD's candidate for the chancellorship, is currently vice chancellor). In a CDU/CSU-Greens coalition, the Greens could head the foreign ministry, which has the lead in the German government on arms control questions. Some observers wondered whether the Greens might be tempted to trade the foreign minister's position for a greater say on environmental, energy, and/or economic questions, though one Green Bundestag member believed they would want the foreign ministry, given the say the foreign minister would have on questions such as the deployment of the German military abroad.<sup>61</sup>

## U.S. INTERESTS AND POLICIES

The Biden administration intends to conduct a nuclear posture review, perhaps as a part of a broader security review, and has not articulated a position regarding U.S. nuclear weapons in Germany or Europe. Secretary of State Antony Blinken has said, however, that the United States intends to seek a negotiation with Russia that would cover all nuclear arms, not just the deployed strategic weapons limited by the 2010 New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START).<sup>62</sup> That negotiation presumably would include U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe.

The U.S. government has traditionally seen the presence of nuclear weapons in Europe as serving two purposes: first, extended deterrence of aggression against NATO (in practical terms, deterrence of the Soviet Union, then Russia) and, second, assurance of NATO allies regarding the U.S. commitment to their defense, including, if necessary, with nuclear arms. The basing of U.S. B61 bombs in Europe and the active participation of allies in the nuclear mission is seen as coupling the U.S. nuclear commitment — including U.S. strategic nuclear forces — to Europe's defense. That said, the specific military contribution of a small number of nuclear bombs in Europe in the context of a U.S. stockpile numbering some 3,800 nuclear weapons has been questioned by some. In 2010, the then-vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff was asked whether he saw “a military mission performed by these aircraft-delivered weapons [B61 bombs in Europe] that cannot be performed by either U.S. strategic forces or U.S. conventional forces.” He replied simply “no.”<sup>63</sup>

The contribution of the B61 bombs in Europe to extended deterrence and assurance may be as or more important in political than military terms. In peacetime, they serve as symbols of the U.S. commitment to NATO and to the alliance's defense. If used in a conflict, they would certainly have a military effect and would, as NATO policy notes, “fundamentally alter the nature of a conflict,” but their use would likely be intended more for its political effect: to signal to the aggressor that things were spinning out of control and could escalate, including to strategic nuclear exchanges. NATO's 2012 Deterrence and Defense Posture Review “stressed that the fundamental purpose of Alliance nuclear forces is deterrence, which is essentially a political function.”<sup>64</sup>

Were NATO to reach a consensus — or perhaps even a large majority short of a consensus — on asking the United States to withdraw its nuclear weapons, Washington most likely would not resist. But such a consensus — or anything remotely close to it — does not currently exist among NATO members, and the U.S. government is sensitive to the views of those allies who see the weapons as important for deterrence and assurance purposes, particularly allies in the most exposed position, such as the Baltic states and Poland.

The U.S. government would be concerned by a unilateral decision by a new German government to end nuclear sharing and seek withdrawal of the B61 bombs at Büchel. That could trigger similar unilateral decisions by the Netherlands and Belgium, where nuclear sharing is also debated and where a German decision to end it and ask for the withdrawal of the B61 bombs would have major impacts. This in turn could call into question the sustainability of the presence of B61s in Italy and Turkey. The upshot could be a major change in NATO's nuclear posture as a result of unilateral national decisions, not an alliance decision process, leaving NATO divided on a core deterrence and defense issue.

If there is to be a change in the U.S. nuclear presence in Europe, it would best result from an alliance decision in concert with a new arms reduction agreement that reduced the threat posed by Russian non-strategic nuclear weapons and/or after steps taken by the alliance to bolster other deterrence and defense capabilities to offset removal of the B61 bombs. The Biden administration has already indicated its desire to engage Russia in a negotiation that would cover non-strategic nuclear arms. More broadly, the United States and NATO might consider steps such as increasing the size of the multinational units that are currently deployed in Poland and each of the Baltic states. More “boots on the ground” could offer one way to compensate if NATO decided on changes that would alter the presence of U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe.

This is not to suggest that the new German government will unilaterally abandon nuclear sharing. As noted above, a CDU/CSU-Greens coalition would quite probably sustain it, and even a Greens-SPD-FDP coalition might well find a way to do so. On this issue, the Germans pay a lot of attention to Washington, and U.S. pronouncements regarding nuclear weapons in Europe will reverberate strongly in Berlin. The U.S. government can take steps in the coming months that could influence the coalition negotiation and increase the chances that the new German government would continue the nuclear sharing role and take the position that that should change only on the basis of a NATO decision. Those U.S. steps would provide a degree of political cover for the Greens (and perhaps the SPD) to back away from seeking an early end to nuclear sharing. Some possible U.S. actions:

**Nuclear posture.** The Biden administration intends to conduct a nuclear posture review beginning this summer. Blinken in March stated that the review:

“is to look at our own nuclear weapons policy to make determinations about what we need to sustain deterrence and defense but also to look at how we can continue to reduce reliance on the role of nuclear weapons in our strategy. This is something we made as a significant progress during the Obama-Biden administration...”<sup>65</sup>

While the review almost certainly will stretch into next year, Germans will look for early indications of its overall tone. Preliminary signs — that is, prior to the coalition negotiation in the fall — that the review is moving in the direction of seeking to reduce

U.S. reliance on nuclear arms would be widely welcomed in Germany and could make it easier for German parties to find a compromise on the issues of nuclear sharing and U.S. nuclear weapons.

**Arms control approach.** Germans inside and outside of government said U.S. moves to advance nuclear arms control would make the nuclear sharing issue easier for the government to manage.<sup>66</sup> That could be, for example, an elaboration of Blinken's comment that the United States would seek to limit all U.S. and Russian nuclear arms. If U.S.-Russian strategic stability talks or (less likely) nuclear arms negotiations were to get underway before the fall, so much the better. As one researcher commented, anything that Washington did that was seen to reduce reliance on nuclear weapons or open an arms control/disarmament path would play well with the German public and offer political cover for accepting a compromise preserving nuclear sharing.<sup>67</sup> If the U.S. proposal were to cover non-strategic nuclear weapons, presumably including the B61s, some might also see them as potential bargaining chips to seek Russian concessions on non-strategic nuclear arms, which could alleviate pressure for an early end to nuclear sharing.

**Sole purpose.** As vice president in January 2017, Joe Biden endorsed the idea of making deterrence of a nuclear attack on the United States, U.S. allies, and partners the sole purpose of U.S. nuclear arms.<sup>68</sup> Were the Biden administration to consider adopting a sole purpose policy, that would resonate positively with the Greens and SPD as well as many in the German public. Some German observers believe that could help smooth the way for the Greens to compromise with the CDU/CSU on nuclear sharing.<sup>69</sup> Foreign office and defense ministry officials expressed caution, however, noting in particular the possible concerns that the prospect of such a policy would raise in countries to Germany's east.<sup>70</sup> (Interestingly, when the sole purpose question arose in many conversations, the first point made touched on the need for sensitivity to the concerns of Poland and the Baltic states; it was unclear whether Berlin has its "own" view on sole purpose apart from that of its allies.) If the issue of sole purpose were to arise, one researcher expected that the CDU/CSU and FDP would take the view that it was a U.S. decision.<sup>71</sup> Another suggested that Berlin would wait and see how sentiment at NATO developed before defining its stance.<sup>72</sup>

**The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.** The Greens and SPD support the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons and Germany's eventual accession to it and have incorporated that into their election platforms. Members of both parties have proposed that Germany take on observer status (it would be the first NATO ally to do so). Some German officials and researchers suggested that this could likely be part of a compromise that preserved nuclear sharing. It is difficult to see Washington endorsing this — after all, one Green Bundestag member described observer status as the first step toward German accession.<sup>73</sup> However, while the Biden administration likely will continue to oppose the treaty, a less overtly hostile stance toward the treaty than that taken by its predecessor would be noticed in Berlin.

**The value of consultations.** As U.S. thinking develops on nuclear issues and possible arms control, the German government is eager to hear those thoughts and would very much welcome consultations, bilateral as well as at NATO. U.S. readiness to engage with Berlin and hear out German views would be welcome and could affect the outcome of the coalition negotiation. Though not now in government, the Greens are very open to discussion on these questions.

As the next German government forms after the September 26 Bundestag elections, the primary U.S. interest regarding nuclear sharing in Germany is that Berlin not take unilateral steps but that any change in the posture of U.S. nuclear weapons be the result of a NATO process, one that takes full account of allied views. It seems quite possible the new German governing coalition will not favor a unilateral decision to end nuclear sharing, though the question of replacing the Tornado could be more difficult. As noted above, Washington can take steps in the coming months to help shape a coalition agreement that would avoid a unilateral German approach.



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