

# Arms Control: For and By Europe

The nuclear arms control architecture that underwrites European security is crumbling. Europe cannot achieve global nuclear disarmament or build its own credible deterrent, but it can clear the path for the next generation of arms governance through joint action.

By Alex Bollfrass and Mariana Budjeryn

Europe is unprepared for the resurgence of great power politics. As Russia, China, and the United States intensify their global competition, they show little care for preserving the residual security architecture built on agreements accumulated over the past half-century to limit weapons and offer transparency.

European security strategies over the past three decades consciously shifted away from military and defense toward transformative engagement with its neighbors. These strategies were made possible by European integration, the American security guarantee within NATO, and the legacy of US-Soviet agreements.

Most of these agreements have collapsed, or are about to. The last two years saw the United States pull out of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty and Open Skies Treaty. This comes on the back of the US withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty in 2002, and Russian abrogation of the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty in 2007. The last standing US-Russian arms control treaty, New START that limits deployed strategic nuclear arms, is due to expire in February 2021. Prospects for its extension are uncertain.

Unrestrained power politics also subvert the broader post-Cold War international order. Russia shed legal inhibitions in its seizure of Crimea, military involvement in Eastern Ukraine, and nefarious lethal, cyber, and disinformation activities in Europe and the United States. While amassing conventional forces along NATO borders, Russia has been modernizing its nuclear arsenal, including a large cache of non-strategic weapons.

The Trump presidency, though it might prove an exception to the US long-term commitment to its allies,

## Key Points

- Cooperative strategic nuclear arms control, key to Europe's post-Cold War security, has become hostage to returning great power competition.
- A European diversity in nuclear weapons status and NATO affiliation makes the pursuit of a nuclear ban or a credible pan-European deterrent untenable.
- An institutionalized European coalition for arms control will amplify European capacity to influence nuclear arms reductions and shape multilateral non-nuclear arms governance.

exposes Europe's vulnerability to Washington's whims. Further, the fate of the INF Treaty showed how the US focus on containing China's rise could imperil European security. While the US withdrawal from the Treaty was driven by Russia's noncompliance, it was also helped along by the US' desire to counter China's INF-range missiles in East Asia.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, Europe is now exposed to Russia's unconstrained deployment of INF-range missiles.

### Considering Europe's Options

As the continent's security deteriorates, European capitals are seeking to ameliorate the US–Russian nuclear competition that degrades their security, but to which they are not parties. Formulating a unified security policy is challenging because Europe is heterogeneous in its nuclear relations. There are the two nuclear powers, France and Britain; NATO allies that host American nuclear arms on their territory; the non-nuclear members of the nuclear alliance; and those outside NATO without nuclear arms. Given these differences, how can Europe provide for its security without undermining its unity?

*One option* is to pursue Europe's security through armed autonomy that relies on a French-operated nuclear deterrent. If such a deterrent could be made credible, it would wean Europe off America's tutelage and allow it to balance against Russia. A *second option* is to pursue nuclear abolition, heeding European public opinion and political preferences for lesser, not greater reliance on nuclear weapons.<sup>2</sup> This would entail joining the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), opened for signature by the Secretary-General of the United Nations in September 2017, which grew out of justified frustration with the nuclear powers' inadequate arsenal reductions.

While strategic autonomy from the United States might be a tempting prospect for some European nations, and nuclear abolition is the right long-term goal for all, in the foreseeable future neither option provides a tenable answer to the European security predicament. Both options threaten to drive a fatal wedge into the transatlantic security architecture and Europe's own political and security cohesion.<sup>3</sup>

A *third option*, best calibrated to advancing European security, is a formalized European coalition for arms control and disarmament with an assertive and coherent agenda to pressure Moscow, Washington, and eventually Beijing. Unlike abolitionism or *Eurodeterrence*, an effective arms control and reductions agenda is that common security policy denominator behind which all European states can rally, no matter their nuclear and NATO affiliations. While the exact

composition of the European arms control coalition is secondary, it should be led by European middle powers to include both NATO allies and like-minded partners with a stake in the continent's stability and state capacity to match it. German and French support is particularly crucial to the coalition's success.

### Europe's Arms Control and Disarmament Coalition

The European arms control coalition would be built on the mutual recognition of three basic facts about European security. *One* is that Russia is a threat, and that geopolitics are particularly unfavorable to Europe's north and east. Until Russia shows a serious interest in re-imagining its objectives and methods in its relations with other states, US extended deterrence will continue to benefit the security of not only European NATO allies, but also non-allied partners like Switzerland, Sweden, and Finland.

*Two*, a nuclear-weapons-free world is an imperative but remote goal. Until then, nuclear deterrence remains a necessity, although nuclear powers must strive for strategic stability through engagement, transparency, and arms reductions. The pledge of the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) to work toward nuclear disarmament is thus a critical linchpin that reconciles the practice of deterrence with the goal of abolition.

*Three*, intensifying great power competition is not an impediment, but an impulse for stepping up arms control efforts. Europe's own security hinges on a robust bilateral and multilateral arms control architecture. Verified US–Russian arms limitations stabilize relations and reduce the risk of inadvertent or intentional escalation of tensions between the two into a conventional and ultimately nuclear conflict. Moreover, in order to shore up the NPT re-

#### Further Reading

Johanna Möhring, **"Three Elephants of European Security,"** *War on the Rocks*, 28.01.2020.

As power politics return, the author outlines the ineffectiveness of European efforts to preserve multilateral security arrangements.

Andrew Futter / Benjamin Zala, **"Emerging non-nuclear technology and the future of the global nuclear order,"**

in: Bard Nikolas Vik Steen / Olav Njolstad (ed.),

*Nuclear Disarmament: A Critical Assessment* (London: Routledge, 2019), pp. 209–223. The authors argue that new non-nuclear technologies will reshape strategic deterrence.

William Walker, **"Nuclear Order and Disorder,"**

*International Affairs* 76:4 (2000).

An overview of the tensions and contradictions in global nuclear weapons governance.

gime, the European coalition must adopt an understanding of arms control not only as cooperation between adversaries for the sake of strategic stability, but as reductions leading to disarmament.

A European arms control coalition must contend with formidable obstacles that include a tradition of deference to the United States, uneven threat perceptions across Europe, and an unwillingness to make costly trade-offs. That European exhortations on arms control seem not to affect nuclear states' policies exacerbates the feeling of powerlessness, as when Russia ignored NATO complaints about INF-banned weapons and the United States could not be persuaded to remain in the agreement. European calls for New START extension have had no effect, either.

While appreciation of the importance of arms control is growing, current European approaches to revitalizing arms control are largely fragmented and aspirational. Debates are driven by nostalgia for the positive arms control momentum of the late Cold War and immediate post-Cold War US-Russian rapprochement, rather than an honest assessment of new geostrategic realities. Europe needs more effective means to pursue its arms control ends.

### From Stepping Stones to Firm Foothold

Banding together and speaking in a united voice would amplify European capability to shape the arms control agenda. Some productive efforts have already been broached. Germany looks poised to take the European lead in arms control: foreign minister Heiko Maas set arms control, nonproliferation, and disarmament as one of Berlin's foreign policy priorities. In 2019, Sweden launched the so-called *Stockholm Initiative on Nuclear Disarmament* comprising 16 states, including Germany, Switzerland, Norway, Finland, Spain, and the Netherlands. At its meeting in February 2020, members of the Stockholm Initiative outlined 22 'stepping stones' for nuclear disarmament, mainly urging nuclear powers to advance the arms control agenda.<sup>4</sup>

These initiatives need to be taken further and institutionalized into a coalition that combines into a coherent and persistent pressure group in multilateral fora, as well as in Beijing, Moscow, and Washington. To start, Europe's arms control coalition must emphasize the importance not only of the arms control outcomes, the treaties and agreements, but also of the arms control process – institutionalized dialogue in bilateral and multilateral fora – as a necessary precondition for achieving these outcomes. With this in mind, the coalition's task would be the development of a roadmap to prioritize and sequence arms control endeav-



Europe is not powerless against the collapse of arms control. Wolfgang Rattay / Reuters

ors, as well as launch a standing forum for multilateral arms governance. The agenda should include the following:

*New START Extension.* The priority must be New START's extension before it expires on 5 February 2021. The Trump administration's policy of using the extension as leverage to bring China to the strategic arms control table is misguided. The coalition must mobilize all European NATO allies to clearly and forcefully favor the Treaty's extension without China, especially now that the administration appears to be softening its insistence on China's inclusion in the next round of arms control talks.<sup>5</sup>

*P5+ Strategic Transparency Dialogue.* US concerns about the opacity of China's nuclear forces and its strategic modernization have merit. To this end, France and the UK, leaning on a broader European coalition, should host a strategic transparency dialogue that, instead of singling out China, involves all five NPT nuclear states and, eventually, also India and Pakistan. While such dialogue may not achieve the exchange of sensitive data, it would provide a forum for nuclear states to discuss their military doctrines, the structure of nuclear forces, expound strategic modernization plans, share perceptions, and dispel misperceptions.

*'Next START' Follow-on Treaty.* Any further strategic arms reductions will likely remain in the bilateral US-Russian domain. The European-led arms control coalition should impress on both the United States and Russia that negotiations to this end should commence as soon as possible, whether or not New START is extended. It should also demand that the next treaty limits all nuclear warheads, including Russian non-strategic nuclear weapons that pose a particular threat to Europe. A transparency dialogue involving China should help mitigate any insistence on China's inclusion in the next round of strategic

arms talks. The coalition should also seek to ameliorate political impediments to such a treaty. For instance, a sustainable solution to the Ukraine conflict would remove a thorny issue in US-Russian relations.

*Multilateral strategic arms governance.* The most important contribution of the European arms control coalition would be to advance strategic non-nuclear arms control. Old and new weapons categories, such as missile technology, high-precision conventional arms, cyber, space, AI, and drones can disrupt nuclear strategic stability, and are emerging as loci of strategic competition in their own right.

One area of particular security concern for Europe is INF missiles, with ranges between 500 and 5,500 kilometers. While any limitation of nuclear-tipped INF-range missiles would remain the purview of bilateral US-Russian and US-Chinese arms control endeavors, the European coalition should muster urgency for limiting conventionally-armed INF missiles in the European and Middle Eastern theater. Another area where European NATO allies and front-line states like Finland can contribute is the expansion of protocols for avoiding dangerous incidents during military exercises and regular maneuvers by NATO and Russia. Ultimately, this can be extended to new domains like AI, drones, cyber, and space.

Because new technologies develop quickly, are often of dual civilian and military use, and involve multiple actors, arms governance is unlikely to take the shape of formal, verifiable treaties. Rather, a European-led arms control coalition, some members of which will be peer actors in these domains, should lead the development of conventions, rules of engagement, and mutual understandings in these areas through ongoing multilateral dialogue and standing working groups.

In the space domain, for instance, such endeavors could focus on mobilizing all space-faring nations to compile a complete database of man-made objects in space, their characteristics and orbit, to avoid close encounters and collisions.<sup>6</sup> Since space-based infrastructure supports both commercial and critical military communications, this effort could help avert accidents and inadvertent escalations, as well as support strategic stability with a possible future regime to monitor and regulate the deployment of destabilizing space-based weaponry. Europe's nations with significant space-based infrastructures can leverage their

assets and expertise in the aerospace domain to push for space governance arrangements that would otherwise have to be negotiated between the great powers. This logic applies to the cyber domain, too.

### Joint Action for Common Security

Europe's efforts to strengthen strategic multilateral arms control governance in non-nuclear domains would clear a path for nuclear diplomacy to unfold. The coalition's non-nuclear arms control initiatives would create conducive conditions to pursue nuclear arms control by galvanizing positive cooperative momentum, fostering networks of arms control experts and negotiators versed in new technologies and strategic realities, and removing auxiliary irritants to strategic stability.

In an international environment where great power positive-sum diplomacy is scarce, improving Europe's security is no easy task. Fortunately, Europe can become more than a hapless, pleading bystander to arms control. By acting together to apply pressure on nuclear powers and to leverage their expertise in emerging non-nuclear strategic technologies, European states can shape global nuclear governance, advance the cause of disarmament, and buttress their own security.

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2. Anne-Kathrin Sonnenberg, "Ein Drittel der Deutschen ist gegen den US-Truppenabzug aus Deutschland," *YouGov*, August 2020.
3. Oliver Thränert, "No Shortcut to a European Deterrent," *CSS Policy Perspectives* 5/2 (February 2017).
4. Embassy of Sweden, "Press Release of the Ministerial Meeting of the Stockholm Initiative for Nuclear Disarmament," 27.02.2020.
5. "Remarks by President Trump Before Marine One Departure," 29.07.2020.
6. See, for instance, *ASTRIAgraph* led by Dr. Moriba Jah at the University of Texas, Austin.

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