Was There a German Nuclear Question?

A CRITICAL REAPPRAISAL

Andreas Lutsch

Stanton Nuclear Security Postdoctoral Fellow
CISAC, Stanford University
Assistant Professor (Modern History, 19th & 20th Cent.)
University of Würzburg, Germany
"Vietnamisierung" und "kontrollierte" Kriegsführung wird. Daß in dieser Situation die einzig richtige Reaktion wäre, mit dem Aufbau eines Mittelstreckenraketensystems für Europa zu beginnen, ändert leider nichts an der Tat- sache, daß unsere Verbündeten bei ihrer gegenwärtigen Nonproliferationspsychose und Entspannungseuphorie einem solchen Ansinnen massiv entgegentreten würden. Wir
I. Topic, Contribution, Questions

• **Topic:**
  West Germany and the origins of the NPT, 1962-1966

• **General Contribution:**
  - reappraisal and deep-history of West German nuclear policy in the 1960s and 1970s
  - history of the making and the preservation of the global nuclear order and its U.S. led components

• **Questions:**
  1) How can we describe and how can we explain West German ambitions and policy since the mid-1950s in terms of security policy in its nuclear dimension?
  2) How did West German governments perceive non-proliferation policy and the nascent NPT regime?
II. Competing Narratives

“the German question was at the heart of almost all discussions over what to do about proliferation”


(1) Bonn worked towards transforming non-nuclear West Germany into an atomic power and had the capability to do it

Ariel Levite: “Nuclear reversal refers to the phenomenon in which states embark on a path leading to nuclear weapons acquisition but subsequently reverse course, though not necessarily abandoning their nuclear ambitions.”


→ accession to NPT 1969/1975: German nuclear question ‘solved’
(2) West Germany: “renunciation”

Jeffrey Knopf defines “renunciation”: “when a country considers but decides against initiating a nuclear weapon program”


Weaknesses of available accounts:

- German Nuclear Question ‘solved’ in 1969
- Lack of evidence, esp. declassified files
- Limited grasp of level, dynamics and changes of/in West German nuclear ambitions
(3) The German Nuclear Question redefined

- **not** about whether or not West Germany would become an atomic power under the circumstances of the Cold War
- **but** whether West Germany felt sufficiently assured by the U.S. nuclear umbrella in order to sustain its given ties to the West or whether it would consider an alternative security policy (the national nuclear option excluded), because U.S. extended deterrence appeared as incredible and/or dangerous in light of German interests.
III. Explaining West German Nuclear Ambitions

The Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) never became an atomic power, it never controlled whosoever nuclear weapons, it never attempted to attain the national control of nuclear weapons and it pursued a *limited nuclear revisionism*.

Until the late 1960s, the political core function of this *limited nuclear revisionism* was to fortify the FRG’s ties to ‘the West’ *(Politik der Westbindung)*.
Def.: limited nuclear revisionism

As an ‘umbrella state’ and as a protégé within the framework of U.S. extended deterrence and NATO, West Germany was

- discontent with the status quo and continuously sought to achieve
- incremental enhancements to Germany’s position and influence within the nuclear order – but on a limited scale,
- without becoming an atomic power under the conditions of the Cold War, and while referring to and thus
- sheltering behind its legal status as a NNWS.

Comment 1: U.S. protection indispensable

Comment 2: greater credibility of U.S. extended deterrence than often assumed; uncertainty-factor, “threat that leaves something to chance” (T. Schelling, The Strategy of Conflict [1960])
Comment 3:

- expansion of
  - (a) FRG’s institutional position in ‘nuclear NATO’
    (participation in NATO nuclear arrangements like nuclear sharing)
  - (b) influence within these structures of NATO

- Full stop closely below the level of achieving national, independent control of nuclear weapons
  - production of nuclear weapons = non-option
  - no direct transfer of any NWS’s nuclear weapons to FRG

- Which level of influence?
- **MRBM**s vs. Soviet IR/MRBM-belt
The United States Government should undertake to grant or order the release of the nuclear explosives allocated to NATO in Europa if

(1) the government of the country attacked so requests, and

(2) this request is supported by SACEUR.
Comment 4:

- West Germany as ‘umbrella state’
- Escapes binary coding: nuclear (1) vs. non-nuclear (0)
- Essential:
  - Operating in the gray area
  - Sheltering behind legal status as NNWS
IV. Germany and Non-Proliferation 1962-1966

West Germany supported non-proliferation policy in the sense that it objected to an increase in the number of atomic powers with independent, national control of nuclear weapons.

At the same time, West Germany opposed the NPT-concept until late 1966.
1) Government: spread = undesirable vs. ‘more may be better’?

2) Rejection of NPT: no reduction of legal options beyond waiver of 1954 (no production of ABC-weapons on German soil)
   a. German question: bargaining chip
   b. NATO as a nuclear alliance: no limitations
   c. Means of power politics in favor of beati possidentes

3) Alternative to NPT-approach (March 1966): regional NATO/WP-regime

4) NPT: no non-proliferation effect regarding West Germany, but “powerful constraint” (Gavin)
V. Conclusion

First, the story that West Germany attempted to become a nuclear power under the circumstances of the Cold War is not supported by the evidence, it is implausible and unconvincing. This story is a myth. West Germany acted as an ‘umbrella state’ and pursued a limited nuclear revisionism.

Second, the function of West Germany’s nuclear policy until the late 1960s was to fortify its ties to ‘the West’, its Westbindung.

Finally, Germany opposed the NPT, but not non-proliferation policy. The NPT had no non-proliferation effect with regards to West Germany. And the so-called German nuclear question was not ‘solved’ when the country acceded to the NPT in 1969/1975.