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**The German Nuclear Question, 1955-1975  
– Conceptual Reflections on a Historical Reassessment**

**Andreas Lutsch**

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Tokyo, Japan 106-8677

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### Abstract

The article offers conceptual reflections on the history of West German nuclear security policy and the German Nuclear Question between 1955 and 1975. It illuminates the changing meanings of the German Nuclear Question during this period, explains West Germany's nuclear ambitions and policy with a concept called limited nuclear revisionism and traces major trends in the evolution of the FRG's stance toward the emerging Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) from the early 1960s to 1975. The essay advances three key arguments, one of which holds that the German Nuclear Question was not 'solved' when the country acceded to the NPT.

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# The German Nuclear Question, 1955-1975

## – Conceptual Reflections on a Historical Reassessment

GRIPS Discussion Paper

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During the interwar years, nuclear physicists and radiochemists achieved path breaking innovations at universities and research institutes in Germany. During World War II, the prospect that Germany might acquire nuclear arms had a massive impact. This prospect greatly accelerated British and American efforts in mastering their nuclear programs and the joint Manhattan Project in pursuit of the bomb. However, the former West Germany remained a non-nuclear weapons state and so did unified Germany after the Cold War. The Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), particularly ‘the old Federal Republic’ until 1990, was a case of has been called the proliferation puzzle. This puzzle alluded to a general question: Why does a state not become a nuclear power if it is, or seems to be, ‘nuclear-capable’? This general question also applies to the case of the former West Germany. Some of its features, such as West Germany’s emerging reputation of being ‘nuclear-capable’, indicate that West Germany may lend itself at least in some ways to comparison with other states, for example. with Japan. Nevertheless, this essay also assumes that the case of the former West Germany was unique in world history for a variety of reasons. This uniqueness, in turn, represents a major constraint for any effort that attempts to compare this case with others. Moreover, former West Germany, and later also re-unified Germany, was willing to accept the codification of its status as a non-nuclear weapons state according to international law. Over time, a system of mutually reinforcing international legal arrangements emerged which gradually

consolidated the non-nuclear status of Germany to greater degrees, though these legal instruments were international in their scope and claim. At least five international legal arrangements stand out:

1. the so-called Paris Accords of 1954/55, within which West Germany waived the right to produce atomic weapons on its soil;
2. the Limited Test Ban Treaty of 1963;
3. the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) of 1968;
4. the so-called 2+4 Treaty of 1990, which is widely seen as a kind of surrogate for a peace treaty with Germany which was never accomplished, and
5. the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty of 1996.

It is the history of the German Nuclear Question in the period between 1955 and 1975 that this essay focuses on. This period culminated in the FRG's ratification of the NPT in 1975. The latter completed the process of West Germany's accession to the treaty that had begun with Bonn's signing of the NPT in late November 1969. This twenty-year period is usually viewed as being critical in the case of (West) Germany, with subsequent agreements, such as the 2+4 Treaty of 1990, essentially re-confirming the FRG's status as a Non-Nuclear Weapons State (NNWS). This essay offers conceptual reflections on a reassessment of the history of West German nuclear security policy which the author presents elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> It does not attempt to provide a fully adequate, let alone systematic, narrative on the basis of evidence, though it is informed by multi-archival research and makes occasional use of a few pieces out of a large corpus of evidence. Likewise, making reference to the scholarly literature in more than very selective fashion is not an aim of this discussion paper.

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<sup>1</sup> Andreas Lutsch, *Westbindung oder Gleichgewicht? Die nukleare Sicherheitspolitik der Bundesrepublik Deutschland zwischen Atomwaffensperrvertrag und NATO-Doppelbeschluss (1961-1979)* (Munich: de Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2018). This monograph will be published in the series "*Sicherheitspolitik und Streitkräfte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*" edited by the Center for Military History and Social Sciences of the Bundeswehr, Potsdam (*Zentrum für Militärgeschichte und Sozialwissenschaften der Bundeswehr*).

The purpose of this essay is a threefold one. It seeks to raise readers' awareness for the changing meanings of the German Nuclear Question between the mid-1950s and mid-1970s. It offers a structured reflection on basic elements of the author's attempt to introduce a conceptual framework for reassessing West Germany's nuclear ambitions and policy during the Cold War. And it traces major trends in the evolution of the FRG's stance toward the emerging Non-Proliferation Treaty between the early 1960s and 1975. The essay concludes with a brief résumé.

Three interrelated arguments will be advanced and discussed consecutively in three sections of the paper.

First, the meanings of the German Nuclear Question changed profoundly over the course of the twenty years addressed in this essay. One way to illustrate this is to highlight how sharply concerns of top U.S. policy makers with the German Nuclear Question shifted. This question was gradually seen less through the *initially* predominating lens of how to inhibit a West German policy of 'going nuclear' and more and more through the *finally* prevalent lens of how to inhibit geopolitical change, detrimental to Western and U.S. interests, abetted by German feelings of insecurity.

Second, in contrast to 'orthodox' narratives and 'alarmist' or 'revisionist' accounts, West Germany's nuclear ambitions and policy since the mid-1950s are explained here with an analytical concept called *limited nuclear revisionism*. This research suggests a middle ground perspective and thus seeks to promote what may tentatively be called a 'post-revisionist' understanding of West German nuclear ambitions and policy. This understanding also permits two specific insights: The Non-Proliferation Treaty had no non-proliferation effect with regards to West Germany, and the German Nuclear Question was not 'solved' when the country acceded to the NPT.

Thirdly, as NPT negotiations progressed from 1961/62 on until they culminated in the conclusion of the treaty in mid-1968, which entered into force in 1970, West Germany's stance toward the treaty shifted in far-reaching manner. Initial opposition against the NPT concept, though *not* against

the policy of non-proliferation, was in the end transformed into a policy of welcoming the NPT as a means to promote the détente process and create a more stable nuclear world order.

## I.

In the late 1950s and early to mid-1960s, West Germany's status as a non-nuclear weapons state seemed to many to be less than firmly established both in a legal and in a practical sense. At times, Germany's status even seemed to be under political pressure to be revised by a West German state which, so related concerns implied, might *radically* shift its national security policy. It was this impression, and the *hypothetical* scenario of Germany seeking nuclear weapons on the basis of an indigenous program, which caused some concern, and at times great concern, at the top levels of decision-making in a range of countries. These included:

- Germany's Western allies: the U.S., Britain, France, and smaller NATO allies,
- the Soviet Union, East Germany, Poland and other Eastern European countries,
- as well as neutral countries near to and far from Europe.

In the words of Francis J. Gavin, “the German question was at the heart of almost all discussions over what to do about proliferation”<sup>2</sup>. Particularly in the early and mid-1960s, many, if not most, ‘Western’ policy-makers at top levels assumed, assessed, believed, or did not rule out that different types of pressures pushed West German policy-makers towards considering whether their country was well-advised not to pursue a national nuclear capability. This was a *real* problem, many of these policy-makers believed. The concern rested on the assumption that proliferation pressure had a *real* effect in the West German context – whatever German interlocutors said. Typically, they denied having an interest in a national nuclear force. These signals were *prima vista* reassuring. In the

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<sup>2</sup> Francis J. Gavin, “Nuclear Proliferation and Non-Proliferation during the Cold War,” in Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd A. Westad (eds.), *The Cambridge History of the Cold War. Vol. II: Crisis and Détente* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 395-416, quote: p. 401.

margins of the ‘famous’ meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Athens in early May 1962, for example, and being asked frankly by U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara about “pressure from the Germans to have nuclear weapons of their own”, Minister of Defense Franz Josef Strauß answered:

“Germany does not want to own nuclear weapons. The Germans realize that in nuclear matters they should not be on the same level as France and the U.K. (...) if there were agreement on guidelines, if there were an adequate exchange of information and if Germany had pre-determination on use of nuclear weapons from German soil and were assured that nuclear weapons would be available if needed, no one except fanatics would want more.”<sup>3</sup>

Strauß’ basic “signal” – “Germany does not want to own nuclear weapons” – seemed to be rather straightforward. However, his list of ‘ifs’ was hardly “noise” which merely surrounded the “signal”<sup>4</sup>. Every single condition which Strauß mentioned could well be understood in different ways and this also pointed to the question whether ‘the conditions of West Germans’ could be met. With the benefit of hindsight it seems fair to say that Strauß’ rather straightforward message was somewhat ambivalent.

In clear contrast, French Ministre des Armées Pierre Messmer suggested in a conversation with McNamara just a day after the latter’s conversation with Strauß that German denials could not really be relied on. According to McNamara’s summary, Messmer made the following point:

“The Germans, along with other Europeans, are unhappy with their inability to control nuclear weapons essential to their survival. They will not feel secure until they possess a force their own.”<sup>5</sup>

Given repeated German denials of the quoted kind, one way for Western officials to redirect the attention to proliferation pressures allegedly working in the German scene and to de-emphasize the value of German denials was to raise questions about the ways in which German officials spoke about nuclear issues. For example, a senior U.S. official noted in late 1965:

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<sup>3</sup> MemCon, McNamara-Strauß-Nitze, 3 May 1962, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park MD, RG 200, Robert S. McNamara Papers, Box 133, MemCons with Germany I-II, Vol. I, Sect. 1.

<sup>4</sup> On the distinction between “signal” and “noise” and the great difficulties of discerning both see Roberta Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1962).

<sup>5</sup> Memorandum McNamara on Conversation with Messmer, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library (JFKL), Boston MA, Presidential Papers, National Security Files, Countries, Box 71, France-General -5/18/62.

“The Germans are too bemused by their own history. They are too accustomed to be telling us what they think we would like to hear to be thoroughly straightforward. They are too conscious of the cloud they are under to be willing to admit to nuclear ambitions – and too concerned about alarming the world to acknowledge the currents of nationalism under the surface.”<sup>6</sup>

In other words, it had to be assumed that there were distinct limits to what German officials were willing to talk about when it came to nuclear issues and that these limits applied in particular to conversations with their allies even in highly confidential settings.

One among those concerned about German nuclear ambitions was U.S. President John F. Kennedy. Particularly during the first two years of his Presidency, so it appears, Kennedy typically asked probing questions when he met with German leaders such as Chancellor Konrad Adenauer or Minister of Defense Strauß. Apparently, Kennedy sought to confront them directly in confidential, personal contexts, smoke out German reactions, and create an atmosphere in which his interlocutors could be insistently invited to re-confirm that the endurance of West Germany’s non-nuclear status was a shared interest. One example was a tête-à-tête conversation between Kennedy and Adenauer during the Washington summit of late November 1961. According to the U.S. protocol, which shall be quoted here at length because of its importance, Kennedy

“inquired about the Chancellor’s opinion on the desirability of Western Germany continuing to adhere to the declaration that the Federal Republic renounce experimenting with nuclear, biological and chemical weapons - - how did the Chancellor feel about this?

The Chancellor pointed out that he was the one who had made this declaration. He had done so at a conference in London, at which time he said that Germany renounced the production of ABC weapons. The occasion had been the establishment of the Western European Union. After he had made this statement, Mr. Dulles had come up to him and said that this declaration was of course valid only as long as circumstances remain unchanged. Nevertheless, the Chancellor said, Germany had not undertaken anything in this respect as yet.

The President expressed the opinion that as long as the NATO organization existed as presently constituted, and as long as the US had its weapons stationed in Western Germany with agreement on how and when these were to be used in the defense of Europe and West Germany, he felt that it was highly desirable for conditions to continue as stated in the Chancellor’s declaration. He feared that if Western Germany

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<sup>6</sup> Memorandum George W. Ball, 27 October 1965, Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library (LBJL), Austin TX, Papers of Lyndon B. Johnson President, National Security File, Agency File, Box 39, NATO-George W. Ball Analysis of a Collective Nuclear System.

were to begin nuclear experimentation, the danger of war would sharply increase without providing additional security compared to what we have at present.

The Chancellor stated that Germany was not considering any nuclear experimentation.”<sup>7</sup>

Western, and particularly U.S., concerns about German nuclear ambitions sharply came into focus in the early 1960s. In this context, particularly in premier policy circles in the United States of America, the sensitive question of what might or should be done to *inhibit* a potential drive by West Germany to become a nuclear power became more politically pressing.<sup>8</sup> It seemed beyond dispute, particularly in the U.S., that Bonn’s Western friends should work towards this end and also accept greater risks vis-à-vis the Soviet Union in support of such policies. Yet, the question was which types of action might or would really be effective to hinder, restrain, or perhaps even prevent the Germans from moving into ‘wrong’ directions. This sensitive and complex question was not congruent with the no less important question of what might or should be done to effectively *assure* American allies, notably Germany, of the robustness of U.S. protection, particularly U.S. nuclear protection. And the question of assurance was, in turn, not congruent with the question of what might or should be done to effectively *deter* the Soviet Union from engaging in destabilizing and aggressive behavior. The deterrence question had become, in itself, increasingly convoluted and problematic since the late 1950s, not least due to increasing U.S. vulnerability in the face of a rapidly growing Soviet nuclear arsenal. From the ‘Western’ point of view, the deterrence question was moreover less of a question about deterrence at the central strategic level between the two superpowers because both of them sought to deter each other by the threat of using thermonuclear weapons in self-defense. The deterrence question was much more of a question how to generate stable deterrence simultaneously to the benefit of the U.S., the territory of its allies (at least in

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<sup>7</sup> MemCon, Adenauer-Kennedy-Weber-Lejins, 21 November 1961, JFKL, PP, NSF, Countries, Box 79A, Germany, Subject, Adenauer Visit 11/61 (declassified in full in 1999, see also the sanitized version in FRUS 1961-1963, XIV, doc. 219). Note that Kennedy inaccurately summarized the German “declaration”. This declaration was made verbally by Adenauer on 3 October 1954 during the so-called London Nine-Power-Conference, became a formal part of the Paris Accords of 1955, to put it generally, and contained a pledge not to produce atomic, biological, and chemical weapons in the territory of the FRG.

<sup>8</sup> On the concept of “inhibition”: Francis J. Gavin, “Strategies of Inhibition. U.S. Grand Strategy, the Nuclear Revolution, and Nonproliferation,” *International Security*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (Summer 2015), p. 9-46.

NATO and East Asia), and the exclave of West Berlin (where the U.S., France, and Britain stationed military forces), while at the same time assuring the Soviet Union of the 'West's' non-belligerent intentions, thus enhancing strategic stability in relation to the Soviet opponent. In other words, the deterrence problem was to a great degree an extended deterrence problem. Yet, policies and preferences regarding the extended deterrence problem had great repercussions on the assurance problem. It was one thing to reach conclusions about the requirements of extended deterrence and quite another thing to reach consensus among nuclear and non-nuclear allies about such conclusions. And, if the insurmountable gap between related views of the U.S. as the great nuclear protector and her allies widened, the allies would be less assured. An increasing lack of assurance, in turn, particularly assurance of the quality of American nuclear protection, was detrimental to the policy of inhibition which reflected an attempt of at least seeking to reduce the incentives of the American allies to develop and control their own nuclear weapons.

The above-mentioned example, the *tête-à-tête* conversation between Kennedy and Adenauer in late 1961, is only one among many which strongly indicate that there were tight nexus of distinct problems in forms of U.S. extended deterrence, the assurance of non-nuclear West Germany, and seeking to inhibit the emergence of a political preference in the minds of key decision-makers in Bonn to transform West Germany into a nuclear power.

About a decade later, West Germany was in the process of acceding to the NPT. It was thus about to consolidate its non-nuclear status, including a dyadic relationship of asymmetric nuclear vulnerability vis-à-vis the Soviet Union – asymmetric in the sense that Soviet nuclear threats against Germany were not countered by German nuclear threats against the Soviet Union. This was great news to those who adhered to the view that West Germany's accession to the NPT essentially 'solved' the perennial German Nuclear Question. Yet, the problem with non-nuclear Germany did not seem to have gone away. It merely seemed to have changed, and actually quite drastically – at least from the point of view of key U.S. policy makers. The policy of assuring West Germany was now much less, if at all, linked to the task of inhibiting a hypothetical West German 'drive' towards

nuclear weapons. It was much more related to preoccupations with inhibiting geopolitical change detrimental to Western and U.S. interests in a new and more confusing security environment, such as a kind of settlement between West Germany, the Soviet Union and other states within the Soviet sphere which would require West Germany to compromise her policy of *Westbindung* in some way or the other. This environment was shaped by strategic nuclear parity between the superpowers and its vexing and hardly predictable implications for U.S.-led alliances, the détente process, the ostentatious West German policy of reinforcing the country's status as a non-nuclear power, deeply-rooted West German feelings of insecurity which persisted at least latently on different levels, and West Germany's pursuit of a revised type of Eastern policy in the name of the national German interest to make progress towards re-unifying the country in some way and at some point.

In this context, a *significant weakening* of U.S. extended nuclear deterrence or of the NATO defense and deterrence apparatus – for example, by deep cuts in the U.S. troop presence in Europe or by an incurable erosion of allied confidence in U.S. nuclear protection – was viewed at least at the top level of the U.S. government as being equal to a weakening of German feelings of security. This, in turn, was associated with an estimate that the U.S. – in Henry Kissinger's words – might “soon experience the gradual ‘neutralization’ of Western Europe”.<sup>9</sup> In other words, if and when Western European states, particularly the more vulnerable non-nuclear states and especially West Germany, faced worsening security problems and gradually lost confidence in U.S. military power, they might set in motion policies of seeking some sort of settlement with the Soviet Union at the expense of their Western orientation or ultimately even of their NATO membership. This estimate seemed to be informed by the view that, with ‘nuclear equality’ compared to Britain and France being deliberately withheld from the Germans, there was a price to pay. The West Germans, in particular, were now much less preoccupied with achieving a more integrated ‘Western’ political and nuclear system, including an ‘equal’ position of West Germany therein. They were more directed to

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<sup>9</sup> Quote from Henry A. Kissinger's briefing memorandum to the President to prepare him for the NSC meeting on 19 November 1970: FRUS 1969-1976, XLI, doc. 53, p. 225.

thinking anew about how to make progress in the German question. The effect of such process, if it ensued, was expected to loosen rather than strengthen West Germany's ties to 'the West'.

The assessment of U.S. President Richard Nixon was quite gloomy when he revealed the following to the National Security Council in late 1970 (and this passage is also worthy of being quoted at length):

“It is clear (...) that any strategy without a credible deterrent would mean the Soviet domination of Europe. (...) When in the 1960s we accepted nuclear parity, it became no longer credible that a conventional force attack would result in a tactical or strategic nuclear attack – but at the same time it is not now credible that a conventional attack could be met with a purely conventional response. (...) This discussion must center on the effect on the Germans of what we do. Their response will not necessarily be rational; probably it will be emotional. They are a vigorous people, denied the use of their own weapons, who will make a deal with whoever is Number One. *If they reach the conclusion* that the U.S. is withdrawing, they will go into a psychological frenzy. It is not insignificant that the Russians always emphasize that they think they are superior to the US in nuclear forces. They say this to get France, the UK, Germany and Japan to have doubts about the credibility of the US nuclear deterrent and also to show who is Number One.”<sup>10</sup>

As these exemplary assessments from Kissinger and Nixon in late 1970 indicate, the German Nuclear Question was transformed profoundly – at least in the minds of top U.S. policymakers. By then, the primary concern was not the hypothetical prospect of a German policy of acquiring a German nuclear force. By and large, this type of problem rather seemed to be a problem of the past. A primary concern was now that, with the FRG's non-nuclear status being fortified by her accession to the NPT in an age of détente and strategic nuclear parity, feelings of increasing nuclear insecurity in particular might gradually tempt West Germans to fundamentally reconsider their foreign policy priorities in the name of the German national interest. In short, Willy Brandt did not seek nuclear weapons, but he was interested in the German question writ large and knew that he had to work *also* with the Soviets. Once more, it was assumed, U.S. policy played a central role and the overall situation was a less than stable one. It was not quite a volatile situation, but a situation that remained in flux, just like the Cold War in general. And, as it appeared, at least to Nixon and Kissinger, the U.S. position in Europe was fundamentally weaker than during most of the time

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<sup>10</sup> Minutes of a NSC Meeting, 19 November 1970, FRUS 1969-1976, XLI, doc. 53, p. 232. Italics added.

since the end of the Second World War. Ultimately, this was due to the state of strategic nuclear parity between the superpowers which fundamentally shaped the ways in which Americans, Western Europeans, other U.S. allies such as Japan, as well as competitors like the Soviet Union assessed the credibility of U.S. extended nuclear deterrence.<sup>11</sup>

It seems paradoxical that, just at a time when West Germany overcame its resistance against acceding to the NPT, coming out strongly in favor of fortifying the FRG's reliance on nuclear deterrence provided by America, top American policy-makers raised fundamental questions about how robust U.S. nuclear protection would be under crisis conditions. Very early in his Presidency, for example, Nixon had told the NSC:

“They [Soviets] used to know American President might react. But not now. (...) [The NATO strategy of] Flexible response is baloney. (...) Nuclear umbrella no longer there. Our bargaining position has shifted. We must face facts.”<sup>12</sup>

Against this background, the German Nuclear Question mainly seemed to circle around concerns about *potential* German feelings of increasing insecurity, particularly nuclear insecurity, vis-à-vis the Soviet Union which, in turn, would have fundamental implications for the geopolitics of the Cold War and the U.S.-led security order in Europe.

It is important to note that this general type of concern was not a new one. It had framed key U.S. officials' understandings of the German Nuclear Question since well before the early 1970s. One alarmist example was U.S. Under Secretary of State George W. Ball, who championed the idea of establishing a 'multilateral force' in NATO to inhibit West German ambitions for a national nuclear force. Ball noted in October 1965:

“There is no ambiguity about this. The Germans know that at the end of the road the Russians must be dealt with. The question has always been when and on what terms.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Marc Trachtenberg, “The Structure of Great Power Politics, 1963-1975,” in Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd A. Westad (eds.), *The Cambridge History of the Cold War. Vol. 2: Crisis and Détente* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 482-502.

<sup>12</sup> Notes of a NSC Meeting, 14 February 1969, FRUS 1969-1976, XXXIV, doc. 7, p. 20f.

<sup>13</sup> The Dangers from a psychotic Germany, attachment to Memorandum Ball, 27 Oct. 1965, LBJL, Papers of Lyndon B. Johnson President, National Security File, Agency File, Box 39, NATO-George W. Ball Analysis of a Collective Nuclear System.

As these shifts in concerns of top U.S. policymakers with the German Nuclear Question between the early 1960s and early 1970s illustrate, the meanings of the German Nuclear Question changed drastically over time. In leading U.S. circles at least, this question was gradually seen less through the *initially* predominating lens of how to inhibit a West German policy of ‘going nuclear’ and increasingly through the *finally* prevalent lens of how to inhibit geopolitical change detrimental to Western and U.S. interests, abetted by German feelings of insecurity. Both types of concerns were viewed as *hypothetical* paths of how future events might unfold, especially in the absence of a prudent U.S. policy. These hypothetical paths did not emerge. Yet, their silhouettes were always present in the minds of policymakers who – under conditions of uncertainty and conscious of the openness of historical processes – identified them as potentialities which were deemed more or less likely and, in any case, less than completely unlikely. These concerns had a powerful impact in that they informed particularly U.S., and, more generally, ‘Western’ policies of how to manage and take care of relations with West Germany. They can be seen as a reflection that ‘Western’ analysts, officials, and policy-makers felt more or less at any time that, in a fundamental sense, West Germany’s political class and policy elites were discontented with the situation their country faced in a divided Europe and the nuclear order.

## II.

The notion that West German discontent with Germany’s situation in a divided Europe and the nuclear order<sup>14</sup> was, at some level, and be it implicitly or explicitly, reflected in views of ‘Western’

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<sup>14</sup> There is no standard definition of what nuclear order means. Walker, for example, proposed to understand “nuclear order” as a “grand enlightenment project”: “The 1960s and 1970s therefore brought concerted efforts to construct an international nuclear order meriting that title. (...) it was founded on two interlinked systems: a managed system of deterrence and a managed system of abstinence.” According to Walker, the NPT was a crucial component of the “managed system of abstinence”: William Walker, “Nuclear Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment,” *International Affairs* Vol. 83, No. 3 (May, 2007), pp. 431-453, qu. p. 435f.; see also William Walker, *Weapons of Mass Destruction and International order, Adelphi Paper 370* (London: International Institute of Strategic Studies, 2004). Walker’s understanding elicited rigorous and superior analytical criticism. Several scholars repudiated Walker’s understanding, including most of the assumptions and hypotheses it rests on. In a sharply contoured, perceptive, and historically well-informed article, David S. Yost stated: “Walker’s account deserves critical assessment as a myth-making oversimplification of a complex historical reality.” David S. Yost, “Analysing International Nuclear Order,” *International Affairs*, Vol. 83, No. 3 (May

observers of the German scene, is an element that helps to make sense of West Germany's nuclear ambitions and policy since mid-1950s.

In the scholarly literature, West Germany's nuclear ambitions and policy have received much attention, including scholarship published since the early 2000s. Most accounts are concerned with the late 1950s and early 1960s. The mid- and late-1960s are also rather well covered despite many shortcomings. Although there remains a rather large gap pertaining to the first half of the 1970s, scholars have also been interested in the pre-history of the so-called NATO dual track decision of 1979 and its implementation. Historical scholarship has only begun to re-assess processes of the 1980s. Accounts vary greatly in terms of their empirical depth and analytical quality. Moreover, the German Nuclear Question plays a role in one way or the other, or is at least simply referred to, as a fundamental issue in almost every historical account on the history of the Cold War, Europe, Germany, and NATO.

There is no consensus in the historical and political science literature about West German nuclear ambitions and policy particularly through the mid-1960s. A review of the scholarly literature suggests that there are basically two camps, if accounts are compared on the basis of their implicit and explicit assumptions, arguments, and findings.

The first may be called the 'orthodox' camp.<sup>15</sup> Though accounts subsumed under this category vary in their appraisals of various specifics, they share the (explicitly stated or implicitly assumed)

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2007), pp. 549-574, qu. p. 551. He asserts, see *ibid.*, pp. 572f.: "International nuclear order is but a subset of international political order, and one of the great merits of Walker's work is to raise fundamental questions about international political order (...)". In reference to Robert Osgood's and Robert Tucker's view that order on the international level requires "that force be restrained by countervailing force within a balance (equilibrium) of power," Yost adds: "The relationships among major powers are never more than comparatively stable, however, and their commitment to a sense of belonging to an international society with shared duties is always in competition to some extent with more self-centred priorities, including national or collective interests that do not encompass the whole of international society." See also the other excellent critiques of Walker's approach in the same issue of *International Affairs*, especially the articles by Pierre Hassner, Joseph F. Pilat, Joachim Krause, Michael Rühle, and Brad Roberts.

<sup>15</sup> For example: Helga Haftendorn, *Deutsche Außenpolitik zwischen Selbstbeschränkung und Selbstbehauptung 1945-2000* (Stuttgart; Munich: DVA, 2001); Hans-P. Schwarz, "Adenauer und die Kernwaffen," *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (1989), pp. 567-593; Catherine McArdle Kelleher, *Germany and the Politics of Nuclear Weapons* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975); Hans-G. Pöttering, *Adenauers Sicherheitspolitik 1955-1963. Ein Beitrag zum deutsch-amerikanischen Verhältnis. Mit einem Vorwort v. Hans-A. Jacobsen* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1976); Horst Mendershausen, *Will West Germany try to get Nuclear Arms – Somehow?* (Santa Monica CA: RAND, 1971).

presupposition that West Germany was not a case of “nuclear reversal”, but a case of “forbearance” or “renunciation”. According to one definition, the concept of “renunciation” means “a country considers but decides against initiating a nuclear weapon program”<sup>16</sup>. Within this camp, there is variation in the ways scholars have presented their understandings of what ‘considering’ a ‘nuclear weapon program’ means. Particularly rigid accounts within the ‘orthodox’ camp make (implicit or explicit) use of concepts such as ‘renunciation’ or ‘forbearance’ while dismissing the idea that, in the German case, the policy of ‘renunciation’ presupposes ‘consideration’ of a ‘nuclear weapon program’. In other words, particularly strict ‘orthodox’ accounts suggest that, in the West German case, ‘renunciation’ did not require such ‘consideration’ at all or that ‘consideration’ was completely, or almost ‘naturally’, absent because the national nuclear option was out of the question per se. Thus, the question as to whether West German policymakers might have felt compelled under certain circumstances to seek to acquire nuclear weapons appears as a widely overblown, if not irrelevant, international security problem.

The second camp may be called the ‘alarmist’ or ‘revisionist’ one.<sup>17</sup> Central presuppositions in such accounts are: (a) The German government deliberately worked towards transforming non-nuclear West Germany into an atomic power and this applied in particular to the last years of the Chancellorship of Konrad Adenauer (1949-1963). (b) West German policymakers initially held on to the conclusion that the benefits of controlling a national nuclear capability outweighed the costs of acquiring such capability. (c) Ultimately, it was coercion, especially coercion applied by the U.S.,

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<sup>16</sup> Jeffrey W. Knopf, “Security Assurances: Initial Hypotheses,” in Jeffrey W. Knopf (ed.), *Security Assurances and Nuclear Nonproliferation* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2012), p. 13-38, quote: p. 21f. “A nonproliferation outcome can result from reversal, when a country gives up a nuclear arsenal it has acquired; abandonment, when a country shuts down a nuclear weapons development effort it has begun but not completed; or renunciation, when a country considers but decides against initiating a nuclear weapon program.”

<sup>17</sup> For example: Gene Gerzhoy, “Alliance Coercion and Nuclear Restraint. How the United States Thwarted West Germany’s Nuclear Ambitions,” *International Security*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (2015), pp. 91-129; Alexandre Debs and Nuno P. Monteiro, *Nuclear Politics. The Strategic Causes of Proliferation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 394-417; Jonas Schneider, *Amerikanische Allianzen und nukleare Nichtverbreitung. Die Beendigung von Kernwaffenaktivitäten bei Verbündeten der USA* (Baden-Baden: NOMOS, 2016); Harald Müller, “Germany and WMD Proliferation,” *The Nonproliferation Review*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (2003), p. 1-20; Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace. The Making of the European Settlement, 1945-1963* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Matthias Küntzel, *Bonn und die Bombe. Deutsche Atomwaffenpolitik von Adenauer bis Brandt* (Frankfurt: Campus, 1992).

that enforced West Germany's alleged "nuclear reversal"<sup>18</sup>. All in all, there was a fundamental change in West German nuclear ambitions and policy because Bonn 'reversed' its preferred course of action, which was hitherto supposed to lead towards nuclear weapons acquisition. Besides other coercive tools ('sticks') such as threats of some sort of American abandonment of West Germany, the NPT appears as a central and necessary means to enforce West Germany's alleged "nuclear reversal". In consequence, the German Nuclear Question seems to have been 'solved' when West Germany acceded to the NPT. Apparently, a kind of dark-age in German history after the Second World War was over.

To be sure, the distinguishability between 'orthodox' and 'revisionist' assumptions, arguments, and findings is not as obvious or straightforward as it may seem. The basic dichotomy, applied here for clarification purposes, may also not necessarily reflect scholars' own views about where their respective accounts fit into the spectrum of the literature. Clearly, there are also accounts which combine assumptions, arguments, and findings from both camps. For example, one perceptive account concludes that the "German experience presents perhaps the clearest case of nuclear weapons renunciation becoming a permanent policy". Apparently referring to the 1950s and 1960s, it also claims that "Bonn's initial renunciations were the product less of internal decision than of external pressure," applied by a variety of actors in the international system.<sup>19</sup> The term coercion is not used here. However, "external pressure" is arguably not far from what other scholars mean with the word coercion. To sum up, in this account the view that some sort of external pressure (or coercion) played a crucial role in the German context is mixed with the basic explanation of the FRG being a case of nuclear renunciation (as opposed to being a case of nuclear reversal).

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<sup>18</sup> According to one definition "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". See: Ariel E. Levite, "Never Say Never Again. Nuclear Reversal Revisited," *International Security* 27, no. 3 (2002-2003), p. 59-88, quote: p. 61.

<sup>19</sup> Jenifer Mackby and Walter B. Slocombe, "Germany: The Model Case, A Historical Imperative," in Kurt M. Campbell, Robert J. Einhorn, and Mitchell B. Reiss (eds.), *The Nuclear Tipping Point. Why States Reconsider Their Nuclear Choices* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2004), p. 175-217, quotes from p. 209.

In contrast to ‘orthodox’ narratives on the one hand and ‘alarmist’ or ‘revisionist’ accounts on the other, the author’s research explains West Germany’s nuclear ambitions and policy since the mid-1950s with an analytical framework called *limited nuclear revisionism*. In so doing, this research searches for middle ground and seeks to advance a new and ‘post-revisionist’ understanding of the German Nuclear Question and West German nuclear ambitions and policy. This understanding is much closer to ‘orthodox’ accounts than to ‘revisionist’ ones. It shares the basic presupposition of ‘orthodox’ accounts that the West German case has to be seen as a case of nuclear renunciation: The Federal Republic of Germany never became a nuclear power. It learned to live in an uncomfortable position of strategic dependence on the U.S., it never controlled any nuclear weapons whatsoever, and it never attempted to attain the national control of nuclear weapons. Yet, the author’s understanding departs fundamentally from ‘orthodox’ accounts in important respects, merely two of which are mentioned here: (1) the question of how to assess the relevance of a *hypothetical* German policy of acquiring nuclear weapons as an international security problem, particularly in the context of the Berlin Crisis between 1958 and 1961/62; (2) the question of how to assess the strategic consequences of a given N<sup>th</sup> country, and potential West German nuclear proliferation within U.S.-led alliances.

An important epistemological point is to clarify what the conceptual framework of *limited nuclear revisionism* does not amount to. It is not a product of deductive reasoning. An attempt to apply or test a deductively-designed and thus more ‘theoretical’ model would run the risk of forcing incomplete, partly fragmentary, and often ambivalent empirical data into a straightjacket while potentially working around conflicting evidence in order to undergird the validity of the theory.<sup>20</sup> The concept introduced by the author instead amounts to a conceptual framework in relation to how this author, to the best of his knowledge, based on systematic multi-archival research, with careful consideration of existing narratives, and with the benefit of hindsight, proposes to think

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<sup>20</sup> On a similar critique: Marc Trachtenberg, “Theory and Diplomatic History,” *Historically Speaking* Vol. 8, No. 2 (2006), pp. 11-13.

about and interpret the fundamental contours of West German nuclear ambitions and policy across administrations, legislative periods, and the dynamically changing history of the Cold War.<sup>21</sup> The concept can be compared to what is called a “mindset” in intelligence analysis.<sup>22</sup>

Given the limitations of this essay, this analytical framework shall be presented here together with succinct comments on four key parameters. *Limited nuclear revisionism* is defined as follows:

*West Germany was a protégé and umbrella state within the frameworks of U.S. extended nuclear deterrence and NATO. It was discontented with the status quo. West Germany sought to achieve incremental enhancements in its position and influence within the nuclear order – but on a limited scale – without changing its alliance with the U.S. and other Western Powers in the framework of NATO and without becoming an atomic power, even though it sought to hold the option of becoming a nuclear power open until its accession to the NPT. In its declaratory policy it referred to, and thus also sheltered behind, its legal status as a non-nuclear power.*

#### *Protégé and umbrella state*

The first key parameter in this definition is that West German policy makers realized that reliance on U.S. nuclear protection could not be substituted. This realization was coupled with a view which had become increasingly clear by the early 1960s that reliance on U.S. nuclear protection could, at most, be supplemented by small national contributions of European U.S. allies to what may subsequently be called, or even loosely pooled together, as the ‘Western nuclear deterrent’. With or without nuclear weapons, West Germany had to remain an ‘umbrella state’ under the conditions of the Cold War, that is a state whose survival depended on the U.S. ‘nuclear umbrella’. West German security was based on nuclear deterrence. The control of nuclear weapons, particularly of those U.S. nuclear weapons which were stored on German soil, was a crucial and increasingly important, but nevertheless subordinate issue, even if total reliance on U.S. nuclear protection (without a supplement of nationally controlled nuclear forces) was fundamentally different, and

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<sup>21</sup> This concept is introduced and discussed more fully in my upcoming book (see fn. 1).

<sup>22</sup> “Mindsets are neither good nor bad; they are inescapable. They are, in essence, a distillation of all that we think we know about a subject.” Richards J. Heuer, “Limits of Intelligence Analysis,” *Orbis* 49,1 (Winter 2005), pp. 75-94, quote p. 86. In intelligence analysis the term “mindset” relates primarily to thinking about the present and the future in light of historical experiences. The term is used here to refer to retrospective, historical reasoning.

perhaps worse in terms of deterrence, than reliance on U.S. nuclear protection mitigated by a supplement of national nuclear forces.

#### *Discontent*

The second key parameter is that West Germany never ceased to be “discontented with the status quo”. This discontent applied both to the division of Germany and Europe and to West Germany’s position in the nuclear order. The nuclear dilemma which the Federal Republic faced – as a potential battlefield in a war – comprised of an existential threat posed by the Soviet Union, strategic dependence on the U.S., and the unavailability of national nuclear weapons. This dilemma generated persistent pressure towards restlessness, deficient feelings of security, and strains on confidence in the existing security arrangements to protect West Germany.

#### *Limited incremental enhancements*

The third key parameter is that West Germany sought “incremental enhancements to its position *and* influence within the nuclear order”, while enhancements were supposed to be *inherently limited* in two respects: (a) Germany’s Western alliances (particularly with the U.S.) had to be maintained; (b) West Germany did not prefer to acquire nuclear weapons, even though it sought to ‘hold this national nuclear option open’ before it acceded to the NPT. It exceeds the scope of this discussion paper to analyze what ‘holding open the national nuclear option’ meant to different policy-makers at various times.

At this point, it is more important to note the following: In the autumn of 1966 the superpowers agreed on Articles I and II of the later NPT. This agreement paved the way towards the conclusion of the NPT in 1968. And these first two articles represented the core of the treaty. Until the autumn of 1966, Bonn’s limited nuclear revisionism aimed at

- a) enhancing West Germany’s *institutional position* in ‘nuclear NATO’, as measured against Germany’s participation in so-called NATO nuclear arrangements (such as ‘nuclear sharing’ or ‘nuclear consultation in the framework of the NATO Nuclear Planning Group), and

- b) expanding West Germany's *influence* within these structures, and in the nuclear order more generally, as much as possible below the level of achieving independent control of nuclear weapons.

The country's power-position was supposed to be augmented, the credibility of U.S. extended nuclear deterrence was supposed to be enhanced, and a more favorable balance of risks and burdens within the alliance was supposed to be achieved.

The overall function of nuclear security policy at that time was to fortify West Germany's ties to 'the West', its so-called *Westbindung*, without relinquishing the national interest in the re-unification of Germany. In retrospect it is clear, though it was by no means certain at the time, that, once the first two articles of the NPT were agreed upon by the superpowers in the autumn of 1966, West Germany had accepted its given institutional position within 'nuclear NATO' and the nuclear order as delineated by the NPT regime. But this did not put an end to Bonn's policy of seeking "incremental enhancements to its influence within the nuclear order". This part of German nuclear security policy continued assertively.

#### *Declaratory policy*

The fourth key parameter refers to a central feature of West German nuclear security policy: As a matter of principle, this policy was communicated with recourse to West Germany's status as a non-nuclear weapons state. This declaratory policy not only reflected the country's support of nuclear non-proliferation. It was also supposed to function as a political-diplomatic shield against polemics, criticism, and propaganda of sorts that West Germany pursued a type of nuclear security policy which was in tension, or inconsistent, with its status as a non-nuclear country. Taking shelter behind this shield was also beneficial to Bonn's effort of conducting ambitious nuclear security policies in the alliance context.

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The ‘post-revisionist’ understanding this research seeks to advance also makes for two specific insights regarding the effects of the NPT. First, the Non-Proliferation Treaty had no non-proliferation effect with regards to West Germany. Second, the German Nuclear Question was not ‘solved’ when the country acceded to the NPT.

A systematic and in-depth discussion of these rectifying insights cannot be offered here, but a brief elaboration addressing each of them shall be undertaken. The emerging NPT and the general expectation of allies, opponents, and neutrals alike that West Germany accede to this treaty affected potential West German considerations of the costs, risks, and benefits of a hypothetical policy of producing and acquiring nuclear weapons marginally at best. The NPT merely added yet another component to an already long list of costs and risks. As it appears, even at the most crucial time as far as pressure towards German nuclear proliferation was concerned, namely in the early 1960s, this pressure had not tipped the balance towards changing the minds of West German leaders that their country needed to control nuclear weapons in the medium term, assuming that it would at least take considerable time and a very demanding effort to field a nuclear force which would have to meet the criterion of being strategically exploitable vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. West Germany, to stress it again, was a case of nuclear renunciation. Thus, the NPT was unnecessary to keep the Federal Republic non-nuclear. No good arguments have been advanced so far as to why West Germany would have been more likely to seek national nuclear forces in the absence of an NPT-like agreement. It should thus be assumed that the NPT failed to exert a non-proliferation effect with regards to Germany,<sup>23</sup> even though the conventional wisdom suggests the contrary, namely

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<sup>23</sup> Contrary to Walker’s provocatively euphemistic understanding that “the NPT and associated agreements amounted to a grand political settlement and contract among states great and small,” – see Walker, *Enlightenment*, p. 437 – the assessment of the West German case presented here strongly undergirds Yost’s clear-eyed analysis which greatly relativizes the effects of the NPT as tool of nuclear non-proliferation. Yost argued that the “abstention” of non-nuclear weapon states from the acquisition of nuclear weapons “may be explained by several factors other than devotion to an ideal of ‘international nuclear order’ and the legal commitment in the NPT not to acquire nuclear weapons.” He mentions four other factors: “First, many nations party to the NPT lacked (and still lack) the technical and financial capacity to obtain nuclear arms. (...) Second, some nations with the capacity to acquire nuclear weapons may have refrained from doing so because they found (and still find) it prudent and sufficient to rely on the nuclear protection offered by allies.” Third, states may have assessed that gaining security within their specific regional context did not require nuclear weapons. “Fourth, some nations may have concluded that it is possible to accomplish a great deal in the pursuit of nuclear weapons – including the mastery of enrichment and reprocessing technologies – under NPT auspices, even in the context of continuing IAEA inspections.” He concludes: “If factors other than the NPT and its

that West Germany's accession to the treaty really made a fundamental difference and somehow 'solved' the German Nuclear Question.

In fact, West German nuclear ambitions and policy were all about acting within a large gray-area while taking shelter behind the country's non-nuclear status. This gray-area accrued from the frameworks of U.S. extended deterrence and 'nuclear NATO'. It opened up a spectrum of possibilities to act below the level of an autonomous nuclear power and well above the level of a 'puristic' non-nuclear state (which would *not*, for example, build its national security on nuclear deterrence, allow nuclear weapons to be stationed on its territory, or seek to exploit nuclear technologies for energy and research purposes etc.). This realization, in turn, supports the second insight resulting from the 'post-revisionist' understanding advanced by this research. The policy of acting within an indeed large gray area did not come to an end when West Germany acceded to the NPT. To repeat the definition of limited nuclear revisionism, Germany continued to seek "incremental enhancements to its influence within the nuclear order". Moreover, as was argued in the first section of this essay, the German Nuclear Question was not 'solved' in the assessment of top U.S. policy makers at the time either, while the meanings of this question fundamentally shifted over the course of the 1960s and early 1970s.

### III.

As the NPT negotiations progressed from 1961/62 until they culminated in the conclusion of the treaty in mid-1968 which entered into force in 1970, West Germany's stance toward the treaty shifted profoundly. All in all, initial opposition against the emerging treaty, though not against non-proliferation policy, was finally transformed into a policy of welcoming the NPT as a means to promote the détente process and create a more stable nuclear world order.

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declared purposes play more significant roles than the NPT itself in accounting for nuclear restraint in various cases, the NPT may take on the appearance of an epiphenomenon (...)": Yost, *Analysing*, p. 558. This last-mentioned conclusion certainly applied in the case of the Federal Republic of Germany.

This section explores this complex history<sup>24</sup> in three brief sub-sections. Readers shall once again not be left in doubt about the limited scope of this discussion paper, which has to concentrate on sketching out major trends in a disciplined and concise way. As the first sub-section highlights, West German governments practically opposed the NPT concept until the autumn of 1966. But it is usually little appreciated that these governments also supported non-proliferation policy. The second sub-section emphasizes that, after a change of government in late 1966, a new coalition government grudgingly witnessed the successful establishment of the NPT regime, sought to work constructively towards a more balanced treaty, and was incapable of deciding whether and, if so, when and under what conditions West Germany should accede to the treaty. The final sub-section traces the process of West Germany's accession to the NPT between October 1969 and May 1975.

*Phase one: 1961-1966*

In this first phase and in the face of persistent Soviet pressure to work towards a weakening of NATO as a 'nuclear alliance', which included stiff Soviet opposition against schemes for a collective nuclear force in NATO (permitting NNWS like West Germany to exercise some kind of 'shared' control of these forces), West German governments amassed many arguments for why they practically opposed the emerging NPT concept. Yet, it is important to note that this practical opposition was couched in a conditional promise to accede to such a treaty if it ever materialized.<sup>25</sup> A bundle of arguments pertained to narrow aspects of security such as NATO nuclear arrangements and West Germany's role therein, including the project of a collective MRBM force in NATO, or the policy of 'holding open' the national nuclear option.

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<sup>24</sup> A classical study is Uwe Nerlich, *Der NV-Vertrag in der Politik der BRD. Zur Struktur eines außenpolitischen Prioritätenkonflikts* (Ebenhausen: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 1973).

<sup>25</sup> A key point regarding this presentational feature is that conditions were in all likelihood impossible to fulfill. Thus, the conditioned promise was practically a way to reject the NPT concept. See, for example, the condition that all other non-nuclear states of the world had to accede to such a treaty: telegram Werz, 3 Sep. 1962, AAPD 1962, III, doc. 345. At that time, it was also assumed in Bonn that at least China and Israel were committed to acquiring nuclear weapons. It was a rhetorical question whether they would be willing to accede to an NPT-like agreement as NNWS. Measured merely against this *one* condition, Germany would even today not be able to accede to the treaty.

Besides, a central argument emphasized by German governments throughout this phase was the following one. In contrast to waiving the right of producing nuclear weapons on German soil vis-à-vis Western European allies (as had happened in the framework of the Paris Accords of 1954/55), legally eschewing nuclear options vis-à-vis the Soviet Union, as implied by the multilateral NPT concept, would be unacceptable if this was detached from a broader framework of negotiations on the German question with the principal aim of overcoming the division of Germany. Such detachment was, of course, the case with the NPT concept. However, the détente process between the superpowers, and between NATO and Warsaw Pact countries more generally, which emerged more clearly after the great crises in relation to Berlin and Cuba, made this general condition politically less and less bearable. This problem was felt particularly in 1965 and 1966, when the pace of international non-proliferation diplomacy accelerated. It seems important to explain why this was actually the case.

The profound trend, especially since 1963, was that a *modus vivendi* between East and West politically solidified.<sup>26</sup> In 1957, for example, NATO countries had still identified the ongoing division of Germany as a “continuing threat to world peace”.<sup>27</sup> This understanding implied that, if and when progress to overcome the division of Germany and Europe became tangible, the threat to world peace would decrease. Yet, within the crystallizing *modus vivendi*, the ongoing division of Germany and Europe plus West Germany’s non-nuclear status were viewed internationally as fundamental ingredients of strategic and political stability in Europe *for the time being*, though to many, particularly in both German states, the division of Europe still seemed to be too unnatural to endure forever despite increasingly plausible inklings to the contrary. Tools to manage this *modus vivendi* became manifest particularly in the field of arms control. Measures to reduce tensions, increase stability, and promote détente, such as the NPT negotiations, were increasingly detached by NATO states from their original assignment to a much larger negotiation framework

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<sup>26</sup> An excellent account on this process is Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace*.

<sup>27</sup> North Atlantic Council communiqué of May 2-3, 1957, in *Texts of Final Communiqués, 1949-1974* (Brussels: NATO Information Service, 1975), p. 106.

aiming at a peace treaty with Germany, free elections in a reunified Germany, and a fundamental improvement of East-West relations through free elections in Eastern Europe and the reversal of the Soviet imperial system. Thus, the profound trend was that “issues of political order in Europe began to be clearly subordinated to arms control and the pursuit of East-West détente”.<sup>28</sup>

After years of tough NPT negotiations in an enormously complicated, multi-faceted setting consisting of formal and informal as well as multilateral and bilateral venues, a series of American-Soviet negotiations between the summer and late autumn of 1966 broke the deadlock between the superpowers.<sup>29</sup> This breakthrough cleared the way for the superpowers’ agreement on Articles I and II of the later NPT, which also included a mutual understanding of the many specifics that these articles implied, particularly for nuclear arrangements in NATO and so-called ‘European nuclear options’. The package agreement was supposed to form the foundation of the NPT and structure the future global nuclear order. It was thus also fundamentally important regarding the German context, and most of all so from the Soviet point of view. From the Soviet perspective, non-proliferation was certainly not all about West Germany. But Soviet leaders and officials were, if not obsessed therewith, at least determined to create enough political pressure to make West Germany buckle and comply with Soviet-Russian non-proliferation demands without getting anything in return regarding the German question, while at best unsettling NATO as a ‘nuclear alliance’.<sup>30</sup>

Besides reinforcing the non-nuclear status of West Germany if the country acceded to the treaty in due time, the superpowers’ package agreement envisaged a much more specific, finely delineated,

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<sup>28</sup> David S. Yost, *NATO’s Balancing Act* (Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2014), p. 6.

<sup>29</sup> Roland Popp, Liviu Horovitz, and Andreas Wenger (eds.), *Negotiating the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Origins of Nuclear Order* (London; New York: Routledge, 2017); Hal W. Brands, “Non-Proliferation and the Dynamics of the Middle Cold War: The Superpowers, the MLF, and the NPT,” *Cold War History* Vol. 7, No. 3 (2007), p. 389-423; Hal W. Brands, “Progress Unseen: U.S. Arms Control Policy and the Origins of Détente, 1963-1968,” *Diplomatic History* Vol. 30, No. 2 (2006), p. 253-285; Francis J. Gavin, “Blasts from the Past. Proliferation Lessons from the 1960s,” *International Security* Vol. 29, No. 3 (2004/2005), p. 100-135; Leopoldo Nuti, “Negotiating with the Enemy and Having Problems with the Allies. The Impact of the Non-Proliferation Treaty on Transatlantic Relations,” in Basil Germond et al. (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Transatlantic Security* (London; New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 89-102.

<sup>30</sup> A classic paper on this is Gerhard Wetig, “Soviet Policy on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons, 1966-1968,” *Orbis* Vol. 12, No. 4 (1969), p. 1058-1084.

and also curtailed position for West Germany in the emerging nuclear order as it was supposed to be codified by the prospective NPT.

An important takeaway regarding the evolution of West Germany's stance vis-à-vis NPT diplomacy in the first phase is that West German governments under chancellors Adenauer (1949-1963) and Ludwig Erhard (1963-1966) practically rejected the NPT concept while supporting non-proliferation policy. There was obviously a strong tension here, but, in fact, not a contradiction. Practically objecting to the NPT concept as *one* potential non-proliferation instrument was one thing. But objecting to non-proliferation policy was a fundamentally different position which the government did not subscribe to. An expression of this rather special position could be discerned in a formal proposal which the Erhard government put forth in March 1966. As this initiative displayed, the government was by then prepared to make its own proposal for an *alternative* to the NPT, namely a non-proliferation regime within an Atlantic-Eurasian framework (which ought to be open to accession by other states outside these geographical boundaries).<sup>31</sup> The situation was complicated by the fact that West Germany was neither a member of the United Nations (only since 1973), nor of the Eighteen-Nation Committee on Disarmament (ENDC), where NPT negotiations were conducted. As it appears, this German proposal had not even a slight chance to be seriously considered by the addressed states, especially because many states, including the superpowers, were politically invested in promoting the NPT concept. But the proposal documented Germany's preference of non-proliferation policy, and more precisely, of a type of non-proliferation regime which would not impair the country's more important interests regarding

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<sup>31</sup> This initiative (the so-called "peace note" or "*Friedensnote*") amounted to a bundle of German offers to all Warsaw Pact states except the German Democratic Republic, including offers to conclude bilateral agreements to mutually renounce the use of force, to exchange maneuver observers to build confidence, to control the export of fissile materials, and to establish a regional non-proliferation regime. See: note by the federal German government, 25 March 1966, *Europa-Archiv* 1966, p. D174. Basically, the non-proliferation regime was to be constructed as follows: All non-nuclear states in NATO and the Warsaw Pact were asked to renounce the production of nuclear weapons, while the four atomic powers of both alliances – the U.S., Britain, France, and the Soviet Union – would renounce the option of transferring nuclear weapons into the national control of non-nuclear states. Other states outside these alliances should likewise be invited to join this non-proliferation regime. Yet, the core of this regime would be constituted by the assemblage of NATO and Warsaw Pact states' declarations. The legal obligations of NATO and Warsaw Pact states within this regime would be legally binding only vis-à-vis respective alliance partners (so as to make it possible for West Germany to ensure that its pledge not to produce nuclear weapons would not be legally binding vis-à-vis the Soviet Union).

the German question and collective nuclear defense in NATO. In the autumn of 1966, the superpowers' breakthrough to Articles I and II of the later NPT rendered the non-proliferation section of the German proposal of March 1966 void.

*Phase two: 1966/67-1969*

As mentioned above, autumn 1966 brought a transformation of Germany's limited nuclear revisionism in that West Germany acquiesced in its pre-designated position in the nuclear order as codified by the prospective NPT while Bonn kept on seeking to expand its influence in nuclear matters, particularly within the newly established NATO Nuclear Planning Group (NPG). This is not to say that this transformation was evident or inevitable at that time, nor that its outcomes would have been immune to change if history had progressed differently than it did. Nor is it to say that there were no voices in the late 1960s and early 1970s demanding that West Germany refuse to accede to a NPT-like agreement or make its willingness to accede conditional, for example, on the preceding establishment of some sort of 'European nuclear force'. Rather, the aforementioned view reflects an historian's assessment with the benefit of hindsight of how West German nuclear security policy had evolved since that time. This policy evolved within the parameters of a *specifically tared institutional position* of West Germany in the nuclear order as structured by Articles I and II NPT:

- West Germany remained a NNWS,
- it remained an umbrella state, the security of which was dependent on the frameworks of U.S. extended nuclear deterrence and NATO,
- it hosted U.S. (and from the early 1970s also some British) nuclear weapons,
- it hosted nuclear-capable delivery vehicles of several NATO allies such as the U.S., Britain, or the Netherlands,
- its army (*Heer*) and airforce (*Luftwaffe*) participated in NATO nuclear sharing, while the control of nuclear weapons involved in this arrangement, and of nuclear weapons in general,

was acknowledged as belonging exclusively to the sovereignty of the concerned nuclear power owning and controlling these weapons,

- German officers were involved in nuclear deterrence-relevant NATO command structures and, to a certain limited degree, in nuclear targeting,
- West Germany sought to pursue its interests in the fields of nuclear deterrence and nuclear arms control in confidential consultation channels, including
  - bilateral frameworks, particularly with the U.S., subordinately with Britain or France, and from the late 1970s also to a certain degree with the Soviet Union,
  - occasionally, trilateral frameworks with the U.S. and Britain in NATO NPG contexts
  - from the mid-1970s, quadripartite frameworks with the three Western nuclear powers,
  - multilateral frameworks, for example the North Atlantic Council, the NATO Nuclear Planning Working Group (NPWG) in 1965-1966, the NPG since 1967, and the so-called *Petrignani Group* of European specialists on the *Strategic Arms Limitation Talks* (SALT) in the 1970s.

Recognizing that the Federal Republic was embedded in the nuclear order as sketched above, a new coalition government rather grudgingly witnessed the establishment of the NPT regime. This government was established in late 1966 with the participation of Christian Democrats (CDU), Social Democrats (SPD), and Bavarian Christian Social Democrats (CSU). Despite much rivalry and mutual suspicion within this coalition, the German government for the first time took a more constructive position vis-à-vis the emerging NPT. With energetic diplomatic initiatives in 1967 and in the first half of 1968, the new government, led by chancellor Kurt-Georg Kiesinger, sought to work towards achieving a more balanced NPT and increasing the chances that the NPT regime might be successfully established. Considering the FRG's non-membership in the United Nations, this diplomatic activity was surprisingly successful, even though the core of the NPT – Art. I and

II NPT plus a related understanding between the superpowers on how to interpret these articles – remained sacrosanct.

Within the federal German cabinet, a consensus on the NPT did not emerge until the end of the legislative period in the autumn of 1969. The new foreign minister in particular, Willy Brandt, who also served as the chairman of the SPD, represented a much more positive attitude toward the NPT from the very beginning. Brandt worked towards West Germany's accession to the treaty – just like most fellow Social Democrats who were supported in this respect by liberals of the *Freie Demokratische Partei* (FDP). Yet from the very beginning, others pushed back hard on various levels of government, particularly those who continued to reject the NPT in principle – and not only during a fiery domestic debate about the treaty in early 1967.<sup>32</sup> At that time, for example, Minister of Finance (and former Minister of Defense) Franz Josef Strauß, one of the most ardent and loudest opponents of the NPT in Germany, informed chancellor Kiesinger in a letter that he would “fight against the Yes (...) with utmost emphasis”. Strauß declared:

“A German government, for which the terms nation or history still bear a meaning, cannot and must not sign this treaty. A government which signs this treaty has abandoned the most essential right of sovereignty out of weakness or blindness (...).”<sup>33</sup>

Given this general background, only most basic contours of which can be sketched here, the government proved incapable of deciding whether and, if so, when and under what conditions West Germany should accede to the NPT.

#### *Phase three: October 1969 to May 1975*

The election of the *Bundestag* on 28 September 1969 resulted in an incisive shift in West German domestic politics. Twenty years after the foundation of the Federal Republic, this election created

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<sup>32</sup> See, for example, Peter Hoeres, *Außenpolitik und Öffentlichkeit. Massenmedien, Meinungsforschung und Außenpolitik in den deutsch-amerikanischen Beziehungen von Erhard bis Brandt* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2013), p. 261-302; Tim Geiger, *Atlantiker gegen Gaullisten. Außenpolitischer Konflikt und innerparteilicher Machtkampf in der CDU/CSU 1958-1969* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2008), p. 485-494.

<sup>33</sup> Letter Strauß to Kiesinger, 15 Feb. 1967, Archiv für Christlich-Demokratische Politik, St. Augustin, Germany, (ACDP), I-226-285. Translation by the author. The original reads as follows: “Ich werde gegen das Ja (...) mit letztem Nachdruck kämpfen. (...) Eine deutsche Regierung, für die es noch den Begriff Nation und Geschichte gibt, kann und darf diesen Vertrag nicht unterzeichnen. Eine Regierung, die diesen Vertrag unterzeichnet, hat das wesentlichste Recht der Souveränität aus Schwäche oder aus Blindheit (...) preisgegeben.“

an opportunity to execute the first ‘real’ change of government on the federal German level. After twenty years of West German politics under Christian-Democratic chancellors, Chancellor Willy Brandt established a new coalition government in late October 1969 on the basis of a parliamentary majority of the SPD and FDP. As is well known, this change of government had a profound impact on a variety of processes, both domestic and international, such as the evolution of the Cold War, the apex of détente, and the stabilization of the global nuclear order.

After three years of highly intense, multi-faceted, very fine-grained, tedious, and deeply specialized German NPT-diplomacy, and in light of the many NPT-related adaptations and improvements which also helped to secure West German interests in view of NPT membership, West German policy makers in the corridors of power were now committed to signing the NPT as soon as possible. West Germany signed the NPT in Washington, London, and Moscow on 28 November 1969. This step was certainly the most crucial one within the unfolding process of West Germany’s accession to the NPT, which was completed by the deposition of ratification instruments on 2 May 1975.

Throughout this process, the immediate and long-term security implications of accession were deemed acceptable by the government. As it declared on the occasion of the signing of the NPT, the government understood that

“the security of the Federal Republic of Germany and its allies shall continue to be ensured by NATO or an equivalent security system.”<sup>34</sup>

Basically, this was meant to say that the persistence of NATO represented the basis (*Geschäftsgrundlage*) for West Germany’s accession to the NPT. A systematic discussion of the ways in which this *Geschäftsgrundlage* was understood cannot be provided here. But it should in any case

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<sup>34</sup> Note of the Federal Government on the occasion of the signature of the NPT on 28 November 1969, in *Vertrag über die Nichtverbreitung von Kernwaffen. Dokumentation zur deutschen Haltung und über den deutschen Beitrag. Veröffentlicht durch das Presse- und Informationsamt der Bundesregierung* (Bonn: Druckerei H. Köllen, 1969), p.64; quoted from the translated version: <http://disarmament.un.org/treaties/a/npt/germany/sig/london>. In a separate “declaration“ of the same day, the government referred to its understanding that the “security of the Federal Republic will be guaranteed by NATO”. Reference to an “equivalent security system” was not made: *Dokumentation [...]*, p. 67. The same held true for a statement by chancellor Brandt on the same day, *ibid.*, p. 63.

be noted that “NATO” ultimately meant NATO as a ‘nuclear alliance’, an alliance protected by U.S. extended nuclear deterrence. In West German assessments the following combination proved crucially important: related American assurances over the years, disclosure of specific American NPT interpretations in the U.S. Senate by the Johnson and Nixon governments in 1968 and 1969,<sup>35</sup> comparable British interpretations, and absence of public comments on, or contestation of, these Western interpretations by the Soviet Union.

A most important point regarding the third phase between late 1969 and mid-1975 is that this now principled attitude towards the NPT was only one component, and arguably not the most important one, in a revised and holistic West German approach to foreign and security policy. The broader frame in which West Germany’s accession to the NPT was understood reflected a conversion of thinking at premier levels of government about the basic structure of the FRG’s *raison d’état*. The question to what extent *raison d’état* as a category of thinking directly shaped the ways in which West German officials and decision-makers conceptualized their policies (in terminological, mental, or practical senses), is an interesting one. But it is not of central importance from an analytical point of view. An astute observer described the mentioned conversion of thinking as an extension of the hitherto predominating concept of *Westbindung*, that is, the concept of the Federal Republic being ‘bound to the West’. After the change of government in 1969, according to this analysis, the *raison d’état* reflected a concept of *Westbindung plus Ostverbindungen*.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Cf. the statements of U.S. Secretary of State Dean Rusk on 10 July 1968 and of Deputy U.S. Secretary of Defense Paul H. Nitze the day after: *Non-Proliferation Treaty. Hearings before the Committee on Foreign Relations United States Senate. 90th Congress. Second Session on Executive H. Part 2. July 10, 11, 12, and 17, 1968* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1968), p. 5f. and 56. Regarding NATO as a ‘nuclear alliance’ Rusk said: “The Treaty deals only with what is prohibited, not with what is permitted. It prohibits transfer to any recipient whatsoever of nuclear weapons or control over them, meaning bombs and warheads. It also prohibits the transfer of other nuclear explosive devices (...). It does not deal with, and therefore does not prohibit, transfer of nuclear delivery vehicles or delivery systems, or control over them to any recipient, so long as such transfer does not involve bombs or warheads. It does not deal with Allied consultations and planning on nuclear defense so long as no transfer of nuclear weapons or control over them results. It does not deal with arrangements for deployment of nuclear weapons within Allied territory as these do not involve any transfer of nuclear weapons or control over them unless and until a decision were made to go to war, at which time the treaty would no longer be controlling.” Cf. also the statements of U.S. Secretary of State William P. Rogers on 18 February 1969 and U.S. Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird and Gen. Earle Wheeler on 20 February 1969: *Non-Proliferation Treaty, Hearings before the Committee on Foreign Relations United States Senate, Ninety-First Congress. First Session on Executive H, 90th Congress, second Session, Part 2. February 18 and 20, 1969* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1969), p. 306 and 383ff.

<sup>36</sup> Werner Link, “Die außenpolitische Staatsräson der Bundesrepublik Deutschland. Überlegungen zur innerstaatlichen Struktur und Perzeption des internationalen Bedingungsfeldes,” in Manfred Funke et al. (eds.), *Demokratie und Diktatur*.

That is, the well-established policy of *Westbindung* was continued, including European integration, NATO membership, and the position of West Germany as an umbrella state dependent on U.S. extended nuclear deterrence. But *Westbindung* was supplemented by more dynamic, ‘more realistic’, and ‘less ideologized’ types of policies vis-à-vis the German Democratic Republic (*Deutschlandpolitik*) as well as the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe (*Ostpolitik*).

Accession to the NPT was seen by leading figures of the Brandt government as a means to help foster a world political environment in the heyday of détente, in which the new government sought to implement its so-called *Neue Ostpolitik*. The latter would indeed culminate in a series of treaties, abet the conclusion of arrangements pertaining to Berlin, and stimulate the initiation of multilateral conference diplomacy, especially in the framework of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe. West Germany’s accession to the NPT seemed to be crucially important, first and foremost to the Soviet Union. At its most basic level, West Germany’s willingness to accede to the NPT signaled a clear-cut West German disinterest in acquiring nuclear weapons, even if Bonn had not secured anything noteworthy in return to reduce the Soviet nuclear threat to Europe. Moreover, the *Neue Ostpolitik* signaled a West German de facto acknowledgement of borders in Europe as they practically existed. This was yet another element which West German governments had originally associated with a comprehensive negotiation framework to overcome the division of Germany. Just like Germany’s assurance not to produce, acquire, or control nuclear weapons vis-à-vis Moscow, the complex border issue had been peeled off from its original locus and ‘consumed’ politically to further stabilize the *modus vivendi* between East and West.

As mentioned above in the first subsection on the years between 1961 and 1966, West German governments had been preoccupied throughout with questions relating to how, in which negotiation framework, and out of which negotiating position the division of Germany and Europe might or should be overcome some day if and when domestic conditions in the Soviet Union, and

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*Geist und Gestalt politischer Herrschaft in Deutschland und Europa. Festschrift für Karl D. Bracher* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1987), p. 400-416.

in Soviet-dominated parts of Europe more broadly, changed for the better and allowed for acceptable negotiations. In the grand scheme of things, this preoccupation also continued in the détente years of the early 1970s, despite a general impression on the international level that the prospect of making progress towards achieving the German national interest was more somber than ever before, especially in consequence of the *Neue Ostpolitik*.<sup>37</sup> This preoccupation, however, also remained visible in the process of West Germany's accession to the NPT, though in a very low-key manner. Thus, even when the Federal Republic of Germany joined the NPT, her acceptance of her non-nuclear status appeared politically linked with her claim for achieving "the unity and freedom of Germany in free self-determination",<sup>38</sup> a claim which was still supported in principle by Germany's allies. It is quite another issue whether Western leaders assumed that 'the West' would ever (or perhaps never) have to honor this promise, when the NPT came into force for West Germany in 1975, considering that the division of Germany and Europe at that time seemed to be more firmly established than ever since 1945.

#### IV.

This discussion paper has sought to offer conceptual reflections on a reassessment of the history of West German nuclear security policy which this author has systematically developed elsewhere. Three major arguments were advanced and discussed. First, the meanings of the German Nuclear Question changed profoundly between the mid-1950s and mid-1970s. Second, this research seeks

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<sup>37</sup> See, for example, Andreas Rödder, *Deutschland einig Vaterland. Die Geschichte der Wiedervereinigung* (Munich: C.H.Beck, 2009), ch. I and the epilogue.

<sup>38</sup> *Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany. Translated by Christian Tomuschat [...]* (Berlin: German Bundestag, 2015), p. 13. The linkage between the German question and the FRG's accession to the NPT became visible in the following two ways, for example. First, a "note", handed over on the day the FRG signed the NPT, stated that "signature of this Treaty does not imply recognition of the GDR under international law" and that "no relations under international law with the GDR shall arise out of this Treaty for the Federal Republic of Germany", see: *Dokumentation [...]*, p. 65. Second, the NPT was also meant to apply in the "Land Berlin", though this was not meant to affect the rights and responsibilities of the Four Powers, see: *Gesetz vom 4. Juni 1974 [...]*, in *Bundesgesetzblatt 1974, Teil II, Nr. 32*, Bonn, 8 June 1974, p. 785. To put it in general terms, the official use of the term "Land Berlin" reflected the West German position that the Federal Republic was the only legitimate German state. West Germany also sought to maintain political, economic, and cultural bonds to Berlin, or, more precisely, to the free parts of Berlin, meaning West Berlin.

to promote a 'post-revisionist' understanding of West German nuclear ambitions and policy, makes the case for an explanatory framework called *limited nuclear revisionism*, and yields two specific insights. To wit, the Non-Proliferation Treaty had no non-proliferation effect with regards to West Germany, and the German Nuclear Question was not 'solved' when the country acceded to the NPT. Thirdly, initial West German opposition against the NPT concept, but not against non-proliferation policy, was in the end transformed into a policy of welcoming the NPT as a means to promote the détente process and create a more stable nuclear world order.

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