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German Views on Defense Undergo Radical Shift

By Josef Joffe

Most West Germans adore Gorbachev and hate nuclear weapons, do they want to ease out of NATO and send the Americans packing? Public opinion says yes and no. There are dramatic shifts, and yet solid rocks of continuity, too.

When it comes to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the U.S. military presence, Germans vote for the status quo with a vengeance.

COMMENTARY

Three-quarters of the population want to stay in; a mere 8 percent wants to get out.

U.S. troops get an astounding approval rate, too: 79 percent, up from the 1970s when only 60 percent were against their withdrawal. The same kind of rising approval rate holds true for the Bundeswehr, the West German armed forces.

So much for the good news. The status quo begins to waver once the pollsters go beyond NATO, U.S. soldiers and the Bundeswehr, which are probably the German equivalent of the flag, motherhood and apple pie.

Change, indeed profound change, emerges on two levels. One is threat perceptions. The other is the premium West Germans are willing to pay for the insurance policy written by NATO, the Americans and their own armed forces.

Take the Soviet president, Mikhail S. Gorbachev. Seven out of 10 West Germans like him. This is an astounding rate normally accorded only to the West German president, a largely ceremonial figure of authority above the fray of political battle. By contrast, only four out of 10 had such a high opinion of Ronald Reagan.

The "red peril"? Three-quarters of the population believe that the "Communist threat is not so great/not to be taken seriously." And as far as the computer can tell, the West Germans have embraced Mr. Gorbachev's Soviet Union more rapidly and readily than the French or the British. Seventy percent have a "very good" or "rather good" opinion of the Soviet Union; while 40 percent of the French and 59 percent of the British are more skeptical.

Yet computers — and respondents — can only say what they are asked. If you don't confront them with the ideologically tired question about the "Communist threat" (in the 1980s, people no longer worry about Stalin and the Comintern), but ask instead about the *military* threat, much more sober replies surface.

Thus, 55 percent of West Germans believe that the mere existence of the Warsaw Pact's armies poses a threat and that the Soviet Union will use its arsenals against the West if "this is possible without much of a risk."

So the average German voter tends to become more sophisticated as the queries do. To like Mr. Gorbachev is one thing, but to ignore his massive

military arsenals is quite another.

Still, waning threat perceptions have taken their toll. Nuclear weapons are the foremost victims, and 51 percent no longer subscribe to the statement: "We owe more than 40 years of peace to nuclear weapons." A bare fifth of the population believes that nuclear weapons are "absolutely essential" for deterrence.

No wonder then that a staggering majority of 79 percent want to "eliminate all nuclear weapons from Western Europe." And when it comes to the vexing topic of "modernization" — a replacement for the aging Lance missile — 63 percent say no.

Would the Germans then pay more for a strictly conventional defense? No. Almost seven out of 10 are against spending "more money for a defense without nuclear weapons."

ESSENTIALLY, West Germans are signaling: We like the good things in life — like NATO and our U.S. protectors — but we are no longer willing to pay as much for them as we once did. We want safety but we don't want nuclear arms, let alone low-level training flights or large-scale maneuvers on home ground.

How does this dovetail with persisting worries about the sheer existence of vast military power across the Elbe River? The answer, more and more West Germans seem to think, is disarmament. A few years ago, only one-third of the respondents backed unilateral disarmament. Today, almost one-half believes in the statement: "Progress on disarmament will only happen when one side begins on its own." This is the best road to "peace and détente."

Do such percentages make policy? Theoretically, they do not for a simple reason. Military issues, least of all the theology of nuclear deterrence, do not normally determine elections. They make for fierce battles among experts, but they are too arcane to twist traditional voter allegiances out of shape.

In 1983, few Germans were happy about the impending arrival of Pershing-2 and Cruise missiles, and yet Helmut Kohl's conservatives handily won the national election — as did their Tory colleagues in Britain. Strategy is a "low-salience issue," as the pollsters call it, and as such much less important than domestic items when it comes to concrete electoral choice.

So governments have a large margin of maneuver. Will Chancellor Kohl then consent to missile modernization? He could, but he won't — not now. He has postponed choice until 1991 or even 1992, because he has more grating problems on his hands. His Christian Democratic Union is being battered on the left and on the right; the party has sustained heavy losses in two recent local contests, in Berlin and Hesse.

Hence, there is little that the United States and Britain can do to prod him into modernization at the NATO summit meeting in May. He can resist

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abroad because he is so weak at home. The unspoken threat to his allies is: "If you push me too hard, you might soon have to try your luck with a red-and-green government in Bonn."

Will Mr. Kohl modernize if he survives the 1990 election? Even odds are that he won't. He might go against public opinion, as he did in 1983, but he cannot go against his junior coalition partner Hans-Dietrich Genscher, who fought for the Pershing deployment in 1983, but is against Lance modernization.

Without Mr. Genscher and his Free Democrats, Mr. Kohl could not possibly form a new government; yet with Mr. Genscher, he will hardly be able to modernize. This shows what every sophisticated pollster knows: Politics is more important than public opinion.

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