

In Germany, plan to deploy US cruise missiles draws opposition

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BERLIN — In the months leading up to the deployment of American Pershing II and cruise missiles in West Germany in the early 1980s, the country erupted in mass protest.

Anti-missile demonstrators blockaded U.S. military installations and some turned their ire directly at American troops, carrying banners reading, “Ami [Yankee] go home” and shouting “We don’t like you” at Americans driving to Ramstein Air Base, according to Stars and Stripes reporting at the time.

Now Germans are grappling with another divisive deployment: the return of U.S. longer-range cruise missiles to German soil for the first time since the 1990s. Last month’s announcement of the stationing, set to begin in 2026, has stirred painful memories of the Cold War and raised anxiety among some of the possibility of a new arms race with Russia.

Surveys show a narrow majority of Germans are against the plans, with negative attitudes especially pronounced in states of the former East Germany. Half of Germans said they fear the missiles will escalate conflict with Russia, findings by the opinion research company Civey show.

Falko Drossmann, a German lawmaker with the ruling Social Democratic Party and a former air force officer, said detractors have legitimate concerns but cautioned that nerves are particularly on edge ahead of regional elections next month in three eastern German states.

“At the moment, it’s not a very fact-based discussion, it’s a very emotional discussion,” he said. “I can’t condemn the people because they just see what it costs, how many people can get killed and they don’t want to be a part of a poker game.”

The party’s executive committee on Monday sought to calm nerves with a lengthy explanation of why Germany needed to bolster its security architecture in the wake of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

“This deployment is not a confrontational armament, but rather a strengthening of our country’s defense and the alliance capability of NATO and the EU with weapons systems that Russia has had at its disposal for years,” the committee wrote.

It vowed to take a “comprehensive look” at the issue when Germany’s parliament, the Bundestag, returns from summer break in September.

Political objection to the deployment so far has mostly come from Germany’s fringe parties on the left and right.

Alternative for Germany, the far-right party that opposes weapon deliveries to Ukraine and has been accused of cozying up to Russia, said the stationing plans made Germany “a target” while leftists argued it could lead to an arms race under the guise of deterrence.

Some members of Chancellor Olaf Scholz’s Social Democratic Party, a center-left group with longtime ties to Russia, have also expressed worries.

Lawmaker Ralf Stegner told the Funke media group that “this will not make the world safer. On the contrary, we are entering a spiral in which the world is becoming increasingly dangerous.”

Russia has warned of irreparable damage to German-Russian relations if the deployment goes through. President Vladimir Putin last month threatened to place similar missiles within striking distance of the West and he pointedly evoked the Cold War, specifically mentioning the controversial Pershing deployments.

Analysts say comparisons to the arms buildup of the 1980s are overblown.

“The deployment is very small, it’s non-nuclear,” said Liviu Horovitz, a researcher at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs. “The only similarities is that the missiles reach similarly far.”

The deal includes Tomahawk cruise missiles with a reach of up to 1,550 miles, SM-6 ballistic missiles and developmental hypersonic weapons that can probably fly more than 1,800 miles, according to an analysis by the think tank.

Germany does not have long-range missiles that launch from the ground and NATO's longest-range ground-based weapon now is the Army Tactical Missile System, which can fly up to 190 miles.

A 1987 treaty between the Soviet Union and the U.S. banned ground-based missiles with a range of more than 310 miles but the U.S. withdrew from the agreement in 2019, accusing Moscow of violations.

None of the planned missiles will be equipped with nuclear warheads, though that has not stopped Russia from raising the alarm that they eventually could be.

"It's not like it's impossible to adapt them to nuclear use," said Horowitz. "From the Russian perspective, the fact that you can is already potentially problematic."

The Social Democratic Party said there are no plans for nuclear armament of the arriving weapons systems, which will be stationed at existing U.S military facilities in western Germany.

As such, the public backlash that accompanied the deployment of nuclear-capable Pershing II ballistic missiles in the 1980s is unlikely to materialize this time around, said Timothy Wright, a research associate at the International Institute for Strategic Studies in Berlin.

"The security threat that Russia poses to Europe is evident and the requirement for European countries to better manage their own security may have reduced such qualms," he said.

German military officials have pointed out that Russia has already upended weapons norms by stationing Iskander missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads in Kaliningrad, a Russian exclave bordering NATO members Poland and Lithuania.

Drossmann, the lawmaker, said the U.S. deployment will give Germany time to develop its own weapons and convince a skeptical populace of their value.

"We all want a world where [these missiles] are not necessary but Putin brought us here and that's why we have to defend ourselves," he said.

Much of the persuasive work will have to be done in eastern Germany, where 75% of citizens said it is "not right" to deploy U.S. missiles in their country, according to a recent survey by the opinion polling firm Forsa.

Drossmann said people in the former East Germany, a Soviet-allied Communist country, doubt the military and the U.S. more than in the former West Germany, where American and British soldiers were ubiquitous and a normal part of life.

But Drossmann believes those differences can ultimately be overcome with education and outreach.

“We have to explain to them, we have to convince them, we have to be more out in the country and talk to people,” he said. “In my opinion, if you explain it to the people, the vast majority will support it. But that’s what we still have to do.”