Introduction

No other atomic weapons system unsettled Germans in the last century more than the Pershing missile—though only about twenty years after its first appearance in the Federal Republic.

Soldiers who operated it and politicians who championed its deployment liked to invoke their role as a kind of peacekeeper. This, however, was at best a byproduct of the paradoxical logic of the Cold War, in which peace was supposed to be secured through the threat of mutual annihilation. In reality, they were weapons of mass destruction like many others—with unimaginable destructive potential and short reaction times.

More and more people became aware of this, and in the course of the NATO Double-Track Decision in the early 1980s, this weapons system moved the people of the Federal Republic to an extent comparable to the anti-nuclear movement of the late 1950s (Campaign Against Nuclear Death).

Back then, people in the Federal Republic protested against the equipping of the new Bundeswehr with nuclear delivery systems. This took place within the framework of the massive retaliation strategy propagated by NATO at the time. Any military conflict would have escalated more or less automatically into a nuclear war.

The strategists' calculation—from the US perspective—was simple: Instead of pouring ever larger sums into building up conventional armies, an adequate destructive potential could be realized with nuclear weapons at a significantly lower cost. "Bigger Bang for the Buck" was the catchy thesis that Charles Erwin Wilson, Secretary of Defense under President Dwight D. Eisenhower, put into the world in 1954, and which the governments of Western Europe, groaning under the burden of defense costs, gladly embraced.

The Planned Nuclear War

Before financial relief could materialize, however, a new, costly round of armament was due first. The nuclear counterstrike was to be carried out with all types of weapons, particularly jet aircraft, but also with missiles of various ranges, artillery systems of various calibers, and even with a kind of atomic mortar (Davy Crockett), which, due to its short range, would have harmed friendly and enemy troops alike.

The US led by example and, starting in 1954, equipped its troops with various manned (F-series jets) and unmanned aircraft (Matador/Mace) and converted its conventional divisions into Pentomic divisions equipped with nuclear weapons.

From 1957 onward, the European allies were also to benefit from nuclear firepower for their troops. Corresponding NATO decisions (MC 70) laid down the details. The US offered the required equipment for purchase and stored the appropriate nuclear warheads in special depots in Europe.

They naturally did not give up control of the keys, and fearing that these weapons might fall into the wrong hands, they even equipped them with electronic safety devices (PALs)

starting in the 1960s. The arsenal of nuclear warheads reached dizzying proportions during these years: around 7,000 nuclear warheads were in Europe by the mid-1960s.

Nuclear Weapons for NATO

The newly created Bundeswehr was also converted into a nuclear strike force in this way, albeit with limited authority: nuclear weapon delivery systems - yes, nuclear warheads - no. The Air Force acquired the F-104 Starfighter as a nuclear bomber, nuclear anti-aircraft missiles (Nike Hercules) were added, and finally, the focus turned to a long-range unmanned aerial vehicle. The Americans had already been operating such a system in the Federal Republic since 1954.

The Matador cruise missile was a further development of the V1 developed by the Wehrmacht. The US 38th Tactical Missile Wing kept around 72 Matador missiles ready for action at three locations in Rhineland-Palatinate (Hahn, Bitburg, and Sembach) until 1962. From that point on, they were replaced by 96 systems of the further-developed Mace with greater range.

Then-Defense Minister Franz-Josef Strauß, a fervent supporter of the "Massive Retaliation" strategy, had also set his sights on the Matador. The purchase of these systems was fiercely debated domestically until, finally, 24 systems were ordered in an initial tranche, and the first missile group for this weapons system was established in Kaufbeuren in the Allgäu region.

Matadors for the Bundeswehr

However, the buildup of this unit never really got off the ground, partly because the weapons system was already becoming obsolete at that time, and partly because the Bundeswehr was struggling with massive financial, organizational, and personnel problems due to the rushed pace of its establishment.

Nevertheless, the plan for a long-range standoff weapon for the Bundeswehr continued to be pursued. The successor model, the Mace, briefly came into the sights of German armaments planners, but the Americans displayed noticeable reluctance at that point. A nuclear weapons system with a range beyond Moscow in the hands of the Bundeswehr was probably not an option for the Americans.

As an alternative, the US offered the Germans their latest development in the field of rockets and missiles—the Pershing missile. This was introduced by the US Army in the Federal Republic from the mid-1960s and was intended to round off the Bundeswehr's nuclear arsenal at the upper end. But hardly had the missile arrived in the country when new problems arose.

Since John F. Kennedy took office as the 35th President of the United States of America on January 20, 1961, he did everything to steer NATO away from its rigid nuclear course. In view of the growing Soviet nuclear arsenal, he considered the strategy of massive retaliation to be a disastrous wrong turn, especially for the US itself. In the following years, his Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara tried with great commitment to convince the

European allies of the new strategy of flexible response with an emphasis on conventional arms. Not everyone was enthusiastic about it.

The Germans offered delaying resistance, pointing to the exorbitantly expensive acquisitions made to implement the massive retaliation strategy. The French partner said goodbye to NATO altogether, at least as far as the military alliance was concerned. In 1966, de Gaulle withdrew his troops from NATO, kicked all NATO institutions out of the country, and pulled his officers and soldiers from the integrated staffs.

This was a hard blow for NATO, but it cleared the way for the new NATO strategy "Flexible Response," laid down in documents MC 14/3 and MC 48/3. Yet the question remained: What to do with the bloated nuclear infrastructure of the massive retaliation era?

Not only did around 7,000 nuclear warheads in Europe need to be securely stored and maintained, but a large part of NATO's air fleets had been designed and trained for nothing other than to take off for a nuclear counterstrike in the minutes after an attack by the Warsaw Pact. The system was called Quick Reaction Alert (QRA) or Victor Alert. A new task also had to be found for the newly acquired Pershing missiles, which had already been introduced by the Americans.

For McNamara, the matter was clear: All aircraft with a nuclear mission should adopt a conventional role and transfer their nuclear mission to the Pershing missiles. A compromise was finally reached: All aircraft, their pilots, and the entire infrastructure should henceforth be capable of both a nuclear and a conventional role. Some wings were completely denuclearized, and the gap this tore in NATO's nuclear deterrent was to be filled by the Pershing missiles.

The necessary infrastructure for the QRA mission naturally had to be created first, and the armada of first-generation Pershing missiles, predominantly mounted on tracked vehicles, proved not particularly suited for this task. Studies were commissioned, and extensive field tests were conducted. The result was a complete re-equipment and restructuring of the German and American Pershing units. Wheeled vehicles replaced tracked vehicles, and the total number of missiles in operational units rose to 180 (108 with the US Army and 72 with the Bundeswehr).

The step was logical, however. A major advantage of the Pershing over aircraft like the F-104 Starfighter as a nuclear delivery system was its mobility. NATO's fighter-bombers were dependent on airbases with mile-long runways, which presented themselves to enemy air attacks on a silver platter. In contrast, the Pershing columns, thanks to their mobility, could quickly move from one camouflaged position to another. Loud track noise would have been rather counterproductive in this game of hide-and-seek.

However, it took until the 1970s for the phase of restructuring and experimentation to be completed. In particular, the planning and construction of the readiness positions intended for the envisaged QRA service dragged on. The Federal Archives are full of planning documents for Pershing positions from North Rhine-Westphalia to southern Bavaria. Ultimately, only four new ones were built. Until then, they made do with decommissioned Nike Hercules positions or even primitive field positions in vast military areas. The main thing was to guarantee the number of Pershing missiles ready to launch at any time, as demanded by the NATO Supreme Commander.

Hardly had the Pershing force in the Federal Republic been somewhat consolidated when the next major restructuring loomed. From the mid-1970s, NATO watched with suspicion the steadily growing intermediate-range nuclear forces (INF) potential of the Soviet Union. This potential had existed in the past but had not been particularly addressed in any of the periodic arms rounds. Only the appearance of the mobile SS-20, equipped with three warheads, prompted NATO to take countermeasures.

After a lengthy discussion within the alliance, the so-called NATO Double-Track Decision was reached in December 1979. Its content: From 1983, NATO was to station a total of 572 intermediate-range systems (108 Pershing II and 464 Cruise Missiles) in Europe as a counterweight to the Soviet intermediate-range systems.

Simultaneously—and this was the second part of the Double-Track Decision—arms control talks were to be conducted with the Soviet Union, aiming to achieve the elimination or at least a significant reduction to equal levels of intermediate-range weapons.

Geneva Arms Control Talks

The talks failed due to the different objectives of the negotiating partners, but ultimately because both sides had no interest in a constructive outcome. Although there were situations during the negotiation phase where the painstakingly balanced NATO decision threatened to fail, NATO began deploying its new intermediate-range systems at the end of 1983. Neither the growing peace movement, on which the Soviets had pinned great hopes, nor the emerging wavering of some NATO partners could change that.

One Pershing II missile train after another achieved operational readiness at the German sites, and the Cruise Missile wings in Germany and the other European stationing countries grew steadily. In the armaments deal, Germany had stipulated that the German front-line state could not be the only stationing location. Thus, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Great Britain were at least involved regarding the Cruise Missiles. The 108 Pershing II, however, came exclusively to Germany, specifically to the sites in Neu-Ulm, Schwäbisch Gmünd, and Heilbronn/Neckarsulm. These had a long tradition of hosting the predecessor models Pershing I and Pershing Ia. By the end of 1985, the conversion of the three Pershing battalions from Pershing Ia to Pershing II was completed, and "business as usual" could begin.

However, things did not run entirely smoothly. In January 1985, a Pershing II missile exploded during assembly at Camp Redleg on the Heilbronn Waldheide, killing three GIs and seriously injuring 16 others. Hardly any military convoy could leave or re-enter the Mutlangen site, the Missile Storage Area (MSA) of the Schwäbisch Gmünd garrison, without being blocked by a crowd of peace demonstrators.

Whether in the Swabian Forest, the Northern Black Forest, the Hunsrück, or Middle Franconia, wherever Pershing units deployed for exercises, the demonstrators were already there, harassing the training troops with all sorts of elaborate disruptive actions.

Celebrity blockades, judges' blockades, Mother's Day blockades, writers' blockades—the number of demonstrations and events at the gates of the MSA seemed endless. Mutlangen, the small town above Schwäbisch Gmünd, mutated from the early 1980s into

the secret capital of the peace movement. Celebrities of all stripes bypassed Cannes and Venice and showed up in Mutlangen to manifest their protest against the NATO Double-Track Decision on site.

In principle, the peace movement could prevent nothing, except that the Pershing's operational principle—namely, to move as silently and undetectedly as possible from one position to the next, thus evading enemy detection—was rendered absurd. Driving to an exercise with flashing lights and sirens or undergoing a tactical evaluation attracted the attention of friend and foe alike.

The INF Treaty

However, real existential fears among the Pershing and Cruise Missile units were caused by developments elsewhere. Towards the end of his first term, American President Ronald Reagan mutated from a staunch warrior against communism into a misunderstood prince of peace, and in Moscow, the lineup of ailing gerontocrats as General Secretaries was replaced by the young and dynamic Mikhail Gorbachev.

These developments led to the end of the superpowers' mutual silence and the resumption of the Geneva arms control talks from early 1985. And then things moved very quickly. One summit meeting followed another, and by mid-1987, the treaty on the global elimination of all US and Soviet intermediate-range missiles was essentially ready. The episode of the NATO Double-Track Decision was replaced by the episode of the double zero option. All missiles and cruise missiles with a range between 500 and 5,000 kilometers were to be eliminated.

In the summer of 1987, just before the goal was reached, there was one last major hitch in the arms control talks. It concerned the 72 Pershing Ia missiles of the Bundeswehr, which the Soviet side also wanted eliminated. An influential group within the governing coalition under Helmut Kohl stubbornly insisted on keeping the German missile force, well aware that the Pershing Ia was already an obsolete model anyway, scheduled for retirement by 1991 at the latest. A successor model from the US was not available due to the restrictions of the INF Treaty. Ultimately, however, no one in Bonn wanted to risk being responsible for the failure of the Geneva arms control talks, and a directive from the Chancellor in August 1987 ended the debate. After the implementation of the INF Treaty, the Federal Republic would also part with its Pershing missiles.

With the same precision with which both sides had carried out their buildup of intermediate-range nuclear forces, their dismantling now took place. Under the eyes of inspectors from the other side, the MSAs of the Pershing II missiles and the GLCM Alert and Maintenance Areas (GAMA) of the Cruise Missile wings emptied. By 1991, the issue was concluded, and at least the sphere of influence of NATO and the Warsaw Pact was free of ground-launched missiles with a range between 500 and 5,000 kilometers. Not entirely: France and Great Britain insisted on keeping their missiles.

The End of the INF Treaty

The era of mutual missile abstinence lasted just over a quarter of a century. It took Reagan and Gorbachev a few years to bring the INF Treaty into being; it took just a few days to bury it. On August 2, 2019, termination came from US President Donald Trump, and a day later from his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin. The "historic step forward in our efforts to reduce the threat of nuclear weapons and increase security for all nations" (as Ronald Reagan said after signing the treaty) was history. Needless to say, both sides cited serious treaty violations by the other side as justification. With a little good will, such problems could have been resolved.

More likely, the powers with the largest nuclear arsenals did not want to live in a world where any minor power could flaunt intermediate-range missiles while they stood empty-handed, bound by the INF Treaty. In light of the emerging new Cold War, the absence of such an important segment in the weapons spectrum proved to be a handicap that needed to be quickly eliminated.

And the Americans went one step further: In a ceremony at the Lucius D. Clay Kaserne in Wiesbaden on November 8, 2021, the 56th Artillery Command was reactivated—the very unit that had commanded the US Army's Pershing missiles in Europe for around 30 years. The command, led by a general and stationed in a reactivated barracks in Mainz-Kastel, will not receive Pershing missiles but will get other intermediate-range systems of the latest generation from 2026 onward—presumably, once again, missiles for peace.