Berlin arms policy risks 'German-free' defense projects

Germany's latest restrictions on arms exports risk making Berlin a pariah in Europe's defense industry, threatening future collaboration on weapons development and its own ambitions to foster a common European defense policy. Germany's decision to unilaterally halt all shipments of military equipment to Saudi Arabia in November after the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi has brought long-standing differences between Berlin and its European partners over arms controls to a tipping point.

The move has put a question mark over billions of euros of military orders, including a $10 billion deal to sell 48 Eurofighter Typhoon jets to Riyadh, and has prompted some firms such as Airbus to strip German components from some of their products. With British defense contractor BAE Systems, the company behind the Eurofighter Typhoon, warning that the German embargo would weigh on its financial performance, London and Paris are racing to convince Berlin to lift it.

The Social Democrats (SPD), junior partners in Chancellor Angela Merkel's government, want to keep the arms freeze against Saudi Arabia in place and reach agreement on a more restrictive export policy, keen to avoid further losses among German voters who are cautious on arms sales. Merkel's conservatives, keen to smooth the rift with France and Britain, are piling pressure on the SPD by accusing them of jeopardizing German industry and jobs.

But the SPD notes that the coalition parties agreed last year to halt future arms sales to any countries involved in the Yemen conflict, which includes Saudi Arabia. Paralyzed by domestic political squabbling, Berlin on Friday put off a decision about extending the embargo beyond its current March 9 deadline till the end of the month, fuelling concerns among European allies and industry. "We see no way to resolve the issue at this point," said one European industry official. "There's a complete stalemate."

Partnership with France

Germany, which has tightened controls on arms sales in recent years, accounts for just under 2 percent of total Saudi arms imports. But its role in making components for other countries' exports means that Berlin can still derail lucrative European projects. In addition to the Eurofighter Typhoon contract, Germany's Saudi arms ban is also holding up shipments of Meteor air-to-air missiles to Saudi Arabia by MBDA, which is jointly owned by Airbus, BAE Systems and Italy's Leonardo, since the missiles' propulsion system and warheads are built in Germany.

Two sources familiar with coalition discussions said the parties could agree to a partial lifting of the freeze for a number of patrol boats being built for Saudi Arabia by privately-held Luerssen, and the Meteor missiles, since neither system is being used in the Yemen war. However nothing was decided, and the Eurofighter sale was still in question. Agreements covering the Eurofighter and the Meteor missile were meant to prevent any country unilaterally halting exports but they were framed as memorandums of understanding to safeguard confidentiality, not binding formal treaties.

Berlin's failure to abide by these agreements and its lack of coordination with France on the Saudi arms embargo have Paris convinced it needs a binding agreement before moving ahead on joint weapons programs with Germany valued at tens of billions of euros over the next decades. Paris and Berlin have drafted a bilateral paper spelling out that the two countries will only block each other's exports when "direct interests or national security are compromised", excluding something like the Khashoggi case.

But discord within Germany's ruling coalition has stalled its completion, according to two sources familiar with the issue. It also remains unclear if the bilateral pact needs German parliamentary approval. The SPD had no immediate new comment on the issue, but party leader Andrea Nahles last month said her party would insist on agreement on tighter German export guidelines before moving forward on other issues such as Franco-German defense ties.

Eric Trappier, chief executive of Rafale-maker Dassault Aviation, said last week it was watching the process closely. "It is obvious that if we are really going to launch a Franco-German fighter program, the export rules need to be defined as soon as possible," he told reporters. Dirk Hoke, head of Airbus Defence and Space, told Reuters an agreement was imperative before the two countries could move ahead on the new warplane, or sign a contract as expected by year's end for joint work on a new European drone. "This will harm Germany's partnership with France in the longer-term if no serious, long-term solutions are found," he said.

The spat over arms also impedes German and French efforts to more closely integrate European defense procurement and programs, and ultimately build a European army. Exports are critical to ensuring the success of any jointly developed programs because they make them more economical. "Germany's export policies are the main reason behind France's decision to develop a successor to the Franco-German anti-tank weapon of the 1970s," said Matthias Wachter, a senior official with the BDI Federation of German Industry. "We in industry have the impression that the German government is paralysed when it comes to military procurement and export." Asked whether Berlin's policy was isolating it in Europe, Germany government spokesman Steffen Seibert said: "We know that this issue is a topic for several of our most important allies and that a decision is required. That is why we are carrying on intensive discussions inside the German government, and will make decisions in March." —Reuters

A plaque is displayed next to the former office of the inventor of the World Wide Web Tim Berners-Lee (on the right) at the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN) on Jan 29, 2019 in Meyrin near Geneva. —AFP

Is the Web an 'out-of-control monster'?

Thirty years ago this month, a young British software engineer working at a lab near Geneva invented a system for scientists to share information that would ultimately change humanity. But three decades after he invented the World Wide Web, Tim Berners-Lee has warned that his creation has been "hijacked by crooks" that may spell its destruction. Berner-Lee's old office at Europe's physics lab CERN now looks no different than the others lining the long, nondescript corridor within the expansive compound.

The only indication that history was made here is a small commemorative plaque and a page from an old CERN directory hung on the door, with "MOMENTARILY OUT OF OFFICE!" written in jest next to Berners-Lee's name. "Tim worked a lot," said technician Francois Fluckiger, who took charge of the web team after Berners-Lee left for the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in 1994. "The lights were always on in his office," Fluckiger told AFP.

History in the making

Berners-Lee was responsible for CERN's internal directory but was interested in ways to allow the thousands of scientists around the world who cooperated with the lab to more easily share their work. His vision for "a decentralized information management system" soon gave birth to the Web. Primitive forms of the Internet - a network linking computers - had previously existed, but it was the World Wide Web that allowed Web pages to be collected and accessed with a browser. "Very early on, we had the feeling that history was in the making," Fluckiger said.

In 1990, Belgian scientist Robert Cailliau came onboard to help promote the invention, which used Hypertext Markup Language, or HTML, as a standard to create webpages. They created the Hypertext Transfer Protocol, or HTTP, which allows users to access resources by clicking on hyperlinks, and also Uniform Resource Locators, or URLs, as a website address system. At the end of 1990, Berners-Lee set CERN's first web navigator server into action.

The browser was released outside of CERN in early 1991, first to other research institutions and later to the public. Fluckiger, now retired, hailed the Web as one of three major inventions in the 20th century that enabled the digital society, alongside the Internet Protocol (IP) and Google's search algorithms. But he lamented the "online bullying, fake news, and mass hysteria" that flourish online as well as threats to privacy. "One has to ask oneself if we did not, in the end, create a completely out-of-control monster."

'Crooks and trolls'

Berners-Lee has launched his own campaign to "save the Web". At the Web Summit in Lisbon last November, he called for a new "Contract for the Web", based on access for all and the fundamental right to privacy, among other things. "The Web has been hijacked by crooks and trolls who have used it to manipulate people all over the world," Berners-Lee warned in a New York Times op-ed in December, citing threats ranging from the dark web, to cybercrime, fake news and personal data theft.

In January, the man dubbed the "father of the web" urged the global elites at the World Economic Forum in Davos to join the fight against the "polarization" of online debates. He called for discussion platforms that connect people with different opinions and backgrounds, contrary to today's common practice of creating online ghettos, filter bubbles and feedback loops where people rarely encounter opinions different from their own.

United Nations chief Antonio Guterres also voiced concerns at Davos over the direction the web was taking. He warned of the impact "of the dark web and the deep web and all the problems of cyber security", and called for the creation of "soft mechanisms" to help rein in countries using this technology to violate human rights.

Open source

Back in 1989, no one could have foreseen the importance of the emerging Web. CERN has held onto only a few souvenirs from the early days: the first memo that Berners-Lee drafted about his invention, his black NeXT computer station and his keyboard. But while CERN may not have preserved many keepsakes to memorialize the historic invention, it has strived to prevent the web from falling into the wrong hands.

In 1993, the organization announced it was putting the web software into the public domain, which could have allowed any individual or business to claim it as their own and control its development. But destiny, with a little help from Fluckiger, helped avert potential disaster. After discussions with CERN's legal service, Fluckiger decided in 1994 to launch a new open source version of the web.

That proved a crucial move that allowed CERN to retain the intellectual property rights to the invention while giving access to anyone to use and modify the web freely and without cost. In 1995, the intellectual property rights were transferred to a consortium set up by Berners-Lee based out of MIT, called W3C. "We were lucky that during those 18 months, no one seized the web," Fluckiger said. "Otherwise, there might not have been a web today." —AFP

With worries of war and upcoming election, support surges for Modi

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has slammed opposition parties for demanding evidence about last week's military strike inside Pakistan, and support for him is rising, pollsters say, despite the questions about how successful it was. It's very tricky to be seen questioning the armed forces in India, particularly when there is conflict with arch-enemy Pakistan. But that hasn't stopped opposition leaders from raising doubts about the government's official claims that a "very large number" of members of an Islamist militant group were killed in the strike by Indian warplanes early on Feb. 26.

The government has rejected the demand for proof. "At a time when our army is engaged in crushing terrorism, inside the country and outside, there are some people within the country who are trying to break their morale, which is cheering our enemy," Modi said at an election rally on Sunday. "I want to know from (the opposition) Congress and its partners why they are making statements that are benefiting the enemies."

With tensions at fever-pitch with nuclear rival Pakistan, and India's general election due by May, the stakes are high. Pakistan responded with an air strike of its own, but no one was killed in that operation. The situation is slightly calmer but remains fraught: the two armies continue to regularly trade artillery fire at places along the frontier. "If (the opposition) continues this campaign on ... national security, I'm afraid it is not going to stick and it's only going to help Modi," Yashwant Deshmukh, the founder of polling agency C-Voter, told Reuters. "Modi's is a presidential campaign, and this is going to help him." The agency has not published any poll after the military strike, but Deshmukh said Modi's approval rating has soared to levels not seen since mid-2017, according to C-Voter's estimates.

Opinion polls conducted before the tensions with Pakistan broke out mostly predicted Modi's Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) would struggle to win a majority because of a slowing economy, low rural incomes and the government's inability to provide more jobs. But pollsters and political analysts say Modi's support is now rising, mainly because rightwing parties like the BJP typically have an advantage over others on national security issues.

"It doesn't matter what India did or what Pakistan is doing, at least from the electoral perspective," said Rahul Verma, a fellow at the New Delhi-based think-tank, Centre for Policy Research. "What matters is what kind of perception the media and the BJP and Modi can create. If they can create it like a crisis, 'we did something, we need a strong guy leading the country', they have an advantage. So the details don't matter." Indian air force planes carried out last week's strike in retaliation to a suicide attack in the disputed Kashmir region that was claimed by the Pakistan-based Jaish-e-Mohammad militant group. At least 40 paramilitary troopers travelling in a convoy were killed, the worst such attack in three decades of insurgency in Kashmir, a Muslim-majority region claimed by both Hindu-majority India and Islamic Pakistan.

'Terrorists or trees?'

A top government official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said last week that at least 300 suspected militants were killed in the retaliatory Indian air strike, while the president of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Amit Shah, put the figure at more than 250. Pakistan has said the Indian bombs hit a largely empty hillside near the northeastern town of Balakot without hurting anyone.

"300 terrorists dead, yes or no?" Navjot Singh Sidhu, a leader of the Congress party, asked in a tweet yesterday. "What was the purpose then? Were you uprooting terrorists or trees? Was it an election gimmick? Deceit possesses our land in guise of fighting a foreign enemy. Stop politicising the army, it is as sacred as the state."

But pollsters say opposition parties may be making a mistake by questioning Modi on national security when emotions are running high. They say that instead the opposition needs to get back to focusing on the BJP's poor record on creating jobs and tackling farm distress. Those issues helped Congress oust the BJP from power in three states late last year. "It is deeply regrettable and politically immoral on the part of the BJP to make political capital out of military endeavors during cross-border tensions with Pakistan," Congress spokesman Sanjay Jha said. "PM Narendra Modi and BJP President Amit Shah are singularly responsible for lowering the political discourse in our country."

Mehbooba Mufti, who governed the state of Jammu and Kashmir in alliance with the BJP until they split last year, agreed that it was important for the opposition to not let Modi make the election all about the strikes. —Reuters

EU girds for cyberthreats to parliament vote

With campaigning for May's European Parliament elections shifting into high gear, security officials are preparing for potential attempts by Russia-linked hackers to sway the vote - and potentially deepen divisions in the bloc. "There's a strong likelihood that people will try to manipulate the debates and falsify the European election results," the EU's security commissioner Julian King told France's Alsace newspaper last week.

The vote is shaping up as a continental clash between populist and eurosceptic movements on the one hand, and pro-European internationalists on the other. "It is already clear this will be the most consequential parliamentary vote in the EU's history," the European Council on Foreign Relations wrote in a recent report. Moscow has long denied allegations of hacking and meddling in foreign elections through social media disinformation campaigns thought to be piloted by Russia's GRU military intelligence agency. But suspicions are rife that Russia has much to gain by helping populist and eurosceptic movements, some of which want to end EU sanctions on Moscow over its annexation of Crimea from Ukraine. The biggest threat, officials say, is a three-pronged attack seen in other high-stake votes: the hacking of a political party; targeted leaks of any sensitive data, either raw or manipulated; and surreptitious social media campaigns to keep the information in the headlines.

That was the scenario that played out in the US presidential election of 2016, when Russian hackers are suspected of trying to tilt the outcome by hacking the Democratic Party. Russian hands were also seen behind an 11th-hour hacking of Emmanuel Macron's party ahead of the 2017 French presidential elections, when thousands of files were leaked online. So-called "state actors" are also thought to have been involved in Britain's Brexit vote, and in the hacking of Australian political parties last month. "We stand a good chance of being hit with something big" ahead of the May 23-26 election, said a source in the French security services, who requested anonymity to discuss the risks.

Bogus accounts

In January the European Commission urged platforms like Google and Twitter, but also advertising firms, to make more progress on their pledge to fight "fake news" by removing bogus accounts and curbing suspect sites. "Several actions are being taken or already implemented to allow the EU and member states to react quickly, efficiently and in coordination in case of attacks," according to an internal report by a European security service seen by AFP. "But for now they are mainly declarations of intent that have yet to be tested," it said.

One cyber-spying group in particular - known as APT28, Pawn Storm, Fancy Bear or other monikers - is thought to have staged many of the recent attacks targeting European institutions and political groups, including NATO and the German parliament. The common thread in all these attacks "is the exfiltration of information without being detected," said Loic Guezo of the Japanese IT security firm Trend Micro. "The group suspected in these operations always targets Western institutions involved in elections or political decision-making in Western countries that could have an impact on Russian government policy," Guezo said.

The stolen data is then strategically leaked to discredit their target. "The advantage is that because it's intercepted information, it gives people the impression that they have access to the 'truth', to raw, unfiltered information," according to a recent report by the French foreign and defense ministries. While that may indeed be the case, often the stolen data is first tweaked or manipulated before being leaked and spread by viral social media campaigns.

"Russia has developed an information arsenal, with manipulation strategies that use bots and fake accounts" to propel the disinformation into the mainstream media, said Kevin Limonier, a researcher at the French Geopolitical Institute in Paris. Media outlets and personalities are then charged with amplifying the leaked data or misinformation into the mainstream. Limonier described "an ecosystem revolving around a few structures in Russia, hidden behind shell companies, that lead to Yevgeny Prigozhin," a businessman with close ties to Russian President Vladimir Putin. —AFP