

EU defence**US pullback on long-range missiles leaves Europe exposed**

Cancelled deployment of weapons battalion as continent is re-arming threatens Nato deterrence against Russia



German Chancellor Friedrich Merz and US President Donald Trump in the Oval Office in March © Win McNamee/Getty Images

Laura Pitel in Berlin and **Henry Foy** in Brussels

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Europe already knew it had to develop its own long-range missiles. The Pentagon's announcement on Friday that it will no longer send a battalion bringing the critical weapons as a stopgap has suddenly made that task even more urgent.

A spat between US President Donald Trump and German Chancellor Friedrich Merz over the war in Iran led Washington to cancel the deployment of a US contingent armed with several types of long-range weapons.

Its abandonment, announced at the same time as a US decision to withdraw 5,000 troops from Germany, has left the continent with a glaring security gap — one that analysts say will be met with glee in Moscow.

“The message it sends to the Kremlin is that the US is backtracking from its central role as Europe’s security guarantor,” said Carlo Masala, a professor of international politics at the Bundeswehr university in Munich. “We already knew that. But now it’s materialised in terms of capabilities.”

Due to arrive in Germany some time this year, the Biden-era deployment plan had been aimed at strengthening Nato’s deterrence against Russia while six European nations worked on developing their own systems.

Trump’s abrupt decision to cancel that plan has deepened a major fear in European capitals: that the US will withdraw weapons faster than Europe can develop alternatives.

Long-range missiles, referred to as deep precision strike (DPS) capabilities, are one of the critical weapons systems that European nations must produce themselves after decades of relying on the US for such platforms.

The Pentagon has also refused to provide Nato with a detailed timeline of planned withdrawals from Europe of other critical systems such as air and missile defence platforms, strategic airlift capabilities and satellite intelligence, spooking European capitals that need to know which investments to prioritise, according to defence officials.

If Trump were to withdraw other capabilities on an ad hoc basis it could create large and dangerous gaps in Europe’s security for years while governments strive to develop, test and deploy domestic replacements, the officials said.

“The signalling of this is absolutely terrible . . . it’s a nightmare,” said Ulrike Franke, senior policy fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations. “This was a military gap identified by Nato and Germany, a piece of a puzzle and it all made sense . . . And now this is Trump using wrecking ball policy to take it all down.”

“Doing this, ad hoc and without a plan . . . it’s very Trump,” Franke added. “There is a capability gap that now isn’t going to be plugged anytime soon.”



A Biden-era deployment plan had been aimed at strengthening Nato's deterrence against Russia © US Navy/Reuters

The plan to temporarily deploy an American battalion armed with long-range missiles in Germany dates back to a carefully choreographed announcement at a Nato summit in Washington in 2024.

Then-president Joe Biden and his German counterpart Olaf Scholz said sending the troops — equipped with Tomahawk cruise missiles with a range of more than 1,500km, SM-6 ballistic missiles and a new long-range hypersonic weapon called Dark Eagle — would “demonstrate the United States’ commitment to Nato and its contributions to European integrated deterrence”.

The following day, Germany, France, Poland, the UK and Italy announced their intent to work together on developing an array of mid- to long-range cruise and ballistic missiles under a programme called ELSA. Sweden also later joined.

The decision to station US long-range weapons on German soil for the first time since the end of the cold war was delicate for Scholz, who during his three years as chancellor was deeply cautious about anything that might be seen in Moscow as an escalation by Berlin.

Russian President Vladimir Putin, who last week spoke by phone with Trump, always hated the Biden-era plan. He described it as a provocation that would trigger a cold war-style missile crisis.

But the US and Germany billed the move as a response to Putin's own decision to station nuclear-capable Iskander missiles — and fighter jets equipped with Kinzhal hypersonic air-to-surface missiles — in the Baltic Sea enclave of Kaliningrad, putting Berlin within reach.

Officials said the aim was to show a potential aggressor that, were they to attack western European cities, their own command facilities, airfields and missile launch sites would not be safe from a counterattack.

Washington and Berlin also presented it as a “bridging” solution until European nations had their own deep precision strikes capabilities that they could use without Washington's blessing.

“We need to take responsibility ourselves for developing systems like these,” said defence minister Boris Pistorius at the time, but warned that it would take at least five years for Europeans to develop their own similar missiles.

“Until then, the Americans are supporting us,” he added.

German officials sought to downplay Friday's announcement that jeopardised that entire strategy, saying it had been clear for some time that the deployment was at risk as the US has shown growing ambivalence towards Europe. The war in Iran has also put a heavy strain on US missile supplies.

In an interview on Sunday night, Merz said that “the Americans themselves don't currently have enough” missiles, adding that there was “hardly any scope” for the US to send the weapons to Germany at this time.

Nonetheless, the German chancellor left open the possibility the weapons could arrive in the future, saying that “the train has not left the station”.

German officials said that Nato leaders would discuss further how to avoid security gaps at the alliance's annual summit in Ankara in July.

German defence minister Boris Pistorius said the decision to withdraw 5,000 US troops was 'foreseeable' © Sean Gallup/Getty Images

The impact of Trump's decision is wide-reaching. "It's not about Germany — it should be assessed in terms of impact on Nato deterrence and defence," said one western military official.

European countries are developing an assortment of land-based cruise missiles, plus a small number of projects to make ballistic missiles. But many of these remain stuck at early stages of design and development.

That includes a British-German plan, announced in 2024, to co-develop their own deep precision strikes capabilities with a range of more than 2,000km "within a decade". Two years on, there is still no industrial contract in place.

Berlin in 2025 made an official request to the US to buy its own Tomahawk missiles and Typhon launch systems in an attempt to have its own stopgap solution but there are long delivery times. Germany's defence ministry was not able to confirm on Sunday whether or not it had even signed a contract.

Masala, of the Bundeswehr university, said plans to update existing systems could offer a quicker timeline than some of the projects starting from scratch. But he warned: “The problem is that we have only a few systems in Europe which can reach Kaliningrad or other places in Russia.”

Fabian Hoffmann, an expert on missile technology at the University of Oslo, said he was less pessimistic than some officials and analysts on the implications of Trump’s latest decision. Writing on X, he said it was always “questionable” whether the president would have been willing to use the US’s Germany-based battalion as a tool to manage possible escalation with Russia.

“In the end, there is no alternative to a European solution for Europe, independent of American presidential decision-making,” he said. “What Germany and Europe need are missiles, missiles, and more missiles.”

Additional reporting by Anne-Sylvaine Chassany in Berlin

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