

2022 Carnegie International Nuclear Policy Conference

The Hyatt Regency Washington on Capitol Hill, October 28, 2022

A Keynote Conversation with German Minister of State Katja Keul

Speaker

Katja Keul
Minister of State, Federal Foreign Office,
Germany

Moderator

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James Acton: -was first elected to the Bundestag in 2009. We were particularly delighted to have her as a speaker today because she really does have a genuine, long, and abiding interest in nuclear weapons and in disarmament. In 2017, she became the disarmament spokesperson for Alliance 90 and The Greens. In 2019, she jointly founded the cross-party parliamentary group on the Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. As I've mentioned at the beginning, she's now the minister of state in the Federal Foreign Office. Scott, Minister Keul, over to you both.

Scott Sagan: Thank you for joining us, State Minister Keul. It's a great pleasure to have you here today. Can you hear us all right?

Katja Keul: Yes, I can hear you. It's my pleasure to be with you tonight. First of all, congratulations to the award you just received. It was great to listen to the speeches. Congratulations.

Sagan: Well, thanks. I'm going to ask a few questions to get us going, the warmup portion, and then we're going to open it up. I have a device that will let me see all the questions coming from the audience. I want to start just by asking you, very frankly, how has the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine influenced Germany's thinking and your own personal thinking about nuclear deterrence and NATO's nuclear policy?

Keul: Well, first of all, let me say what it felt like just after taking over office on December 8 to experience the 24th of February. Now, there are people saying that they always knew that it was going to happen, but to tell you the truth, for the most people and just also for me, it was a surprise that he really did what he did. It really made us look completely new at our security policy.

You asked me about the nuclear question. Well, let me put it this way, I see that the existence of nuclear weapon obviously didn't prevent us from having this crisis that got us in a situation where we never really should have gotten into. It makes clear that with all the implications, nuclear disarming, there's still no alternative to it on the long term, even though now we are in a situation where this is not the moment that we can sit down at a table because all the trust has been destroyed, all the European security architecture has been destroyed.

We don't have somebody on the other side that we could sit down with and talk about nuclear disarming. The whole situation makes clear that on the long term, there is no alternative because the situation that we go into it shows us that nuclear weapons are not the solution, but they're putting more danger to it. Also, I would even go further and say that the person that is or the leader that is not respecting international law, is not respecting humanitarian rights is the one profiting, at least he's trying to profit from it more than we can because he's playing with us with the nuclear threat and trying to split our societies.

We have to stick together to make sure he's not able to split us and split our societies by trying to put that fear into us [inaudible 00:04:05] about the nuclear threat. It's clear that on the long term, someday we have to go back to it. There's few things we can hold onto. On the disarmament architecture, there's not much left. We have to keep [unintelligible 00:04:24] to be able to rebuild it after the war.

Sagan: Well, if I could follow up on that, NATO foreign ministries and defense ministries never really publicize what exact countries and what bases NATO nuclear weapons are stationed at, but it has been widely reported that at highest levels there are sometimes disagreements about who should hold nuclear weapons and where they should be. That was a common phenomenon in the post-Cold War era. Is your answer about the unity that comes after the Russian invasion, does that suggest that the debates within NATO about nuclear forward stationing are over and that there's unity on current NATO policy?

Keul: I would say that that's the most important thing of that unity right now, to say, "Well, this is not the moment to talk about war." There's no opportunity right now actually to change things. Unity in itself is very high value right now. I would say yes, there is need for unity on our side now to make all of us, especially our eastern neighbors, to reassure, to invest in their reassurance, but we don't have to lose out of sight what's going to come some day after the war.

Sagan: Well, thank you. Let's move away from the nuclear question for a moment and ask how the war in Ukraine has changed your personal views about the future of the German military? This a conventional military question.

Keul: Well, there's no question that we need military, that we need to invest in it. We had that before the 24th of February, but of course, it changed the need and the amount of investment because we have to do two things at the same time. The last years, it was mostly-- well, military has two main tasks. There is defense on the one side and then we want to be part in our multinational structures in the United Nations UN missions. Now it's clear on the defense side there is more to do than we thought we would.

I would say it didn't change about-- The Green position towards the military has been that before, but the amount of investment that needs to be taken, of course, the size has increased a lot. There's a lot more support now with the budget to try to get into it and to see that we need to do more to reassure our eastern neighbors.

Sagan: What are the domestic politics of this now? How's the war affected the German people in terms of their views towards national defense and NATO?

Keul: Well, I think so far we have still a broad support for what we do at the government, a broad support for supporting Ukraine, getting out of fossil energy, getting independent from Russian gas, and also from delivering weapons to Ukraine. There is broad support. Of course, this is the beginning of winter and things are not going to be very easy. The economic numbers and the social needs of the people are definitely increasing.

Of course, we see the campaigns, the fake news trying to really push the extreme political part, so we are expecting rough times. What we do as a government, as politicians, as parliamentarians, everybody's trying to tell, "Let's stay together. Let's not fall apart as a society, people. The one that is trying to harm our society, that would be on his positive side. We need to stay together." It's not going to be very easy because, of course, the gas bills, they're extremely-- it's four times, five times as much as it used to be.

Sagan: Four times.

Keul: For the economy, it's difficult, but also for the people, it's very difficult. We have a really warm day today here in Germany. When the weather's warm, everybody's thinking, "We can do it." If this is going to be a cold winter, then a lot of people are going to be in trouble.

Sagan: Well, thank you for that candid answer. I want to encourage people in the audience who have their phones out, don't text home, but rather text your question for State Minister Keul and I'll be picking them up on the iPad momentarily. You come from the Green Party background. Can you tell us about the evolution of your views on the role of nuclear energy in the future?

Keul: We don't see any role for nuclear energy in the future in our country. We made the decision two times to get out of nuclear energy and we are at the end of the process. Now we have three power plants left, so they are not really relevant. In the question of electricity, we have a problem with the price of electricity, which that price doesn't depend on the amount of electricity. We had an enormous debate on these last three plants, whether they should run until April or not.

There's been a decision made now that instead of being at zero, that was the usual timeline, was at the end of December these last three would have been turned off. Now we are letting them go until April. That's not the big issue, but what we are never going to do is that we are going to start reinvesting into new uranium, what do you call it? You know what I mean. To start by new uranium because that is definitely coming from Russia too.

We have a lot of European neighbors depending on that energy. That's why in sanctions we couldn't include the uranium in the sanctions because too many European partners depend on it like we depend on gas. That will be our red line and that that will not happen. If it helps to make everybody feel safer for the winter and for the next three months, then we are very practical about it.

We also see what kind of trouble France is. The reason that we might have difficulties in Europe with the electricity is because France depends so much on the nuclear power plants and they're not running. They have 54 and they only have 50%

of their capacity on. Now with our renewable energy from Germany, we're helping out our French neighbors, but there is no real solution. We don't know how they're going to solve those problems. That shows that when their 54 nuclear power plants run out of lifetime, there's not really a perspective for rebuilding 54 new ones.

The future is renewable and there's nothing really that changed about that. The situation with the war makes it more complicated because we have to do several things at the same time. Anyway, we lost a lot of time into building up the renewables, and now at the same time, we're trying to get out of Russian gas. This is making it really tricky because we don't have any, really, time for all the procedure. If we have more time, then it goes more smoothly, but of course, if you do everything at the same time, then it's tricky. On the long term, there's no alternative. For now, we are using coal plants for the next months to go through the winter, but then on the long term, we want to get out of it.

Sagan: Great. I have one last question before we turn to the audience. It's one that's quite different from the others I've been asking. We had a superb panel earlier today about diversity and inclusion and efforts to have state departments and defense departments and nuclear organizations more diverse in many, many dimensions. I know that that's been something that has been of interest to you. Can you talk to us about how the foreign ministry and other important organizations in Germany are dealing with efforts to have more diversity and inclusion in terms of gender and other forms of diversity today?

Keul: That's one of the interesting issues worth about the feminist foreign policy that we declared in our program. Before we even really knew ourselves what we are going to do is as feminist foreign policy, it really developed a strong dynamic because everybody was asking now what it's about. It was in the center on the debate. That already makes it quite efficient, because even for ourselves, when we look at our work, our papers, our speeches, all of a sudden everybody thinks there's feminist foreign policy. Did we think about everything? It's a cross-topic policy that really influences our whole work. It's so prominent, so that already helps including it in our work and our thoughts.

Of course, there's different levels to it. The foreign policy means, of course, also in the ministry itself to look at the gender equality and we as foreign ministry realize we are not doing very good. Obviously, we are just at the beginning of our term, but we saw there's a lot to do. It's not enough to have the first female foreign minister of the German Republic. This is already one good thing, but it's not enough. Of course, we need to look at our whole personal structure, so that's what we're doing.

Of course, also, in our work abroad in other countries, the networking between powerful women, me personally I'm responsible for Africa and I meet all these really powerful women that have a really good network already, where we can learn from how they're doing it. The women African leadership network is very impressive, so we can learn from each other. Of course, also in foreign policy to look at what women are doing at the base of everything the lawyers, the female workers in all the countries work against the violence and the access to justice for women, for children, and for vulnerable groups to support them. That's another part. I would say all these levels where we look at how we can progress.

Sagan: Thank you. I'm going to turn to the audience now. I have a first question from James Acton who has been co-leading this conference. I feel he should at least be able to ask one question. James asked, "The minister said that NATO is currently unified around the need for non-strategic nuclear weapons in Europe. Under what political and security conditions, if any, should NATO be willing to negotiate with Russia about their status and potential removal? Would you favor negotiations with Russia today and what conditions would permit you to have more support or less support for entering into arms control negotiations over the weapons in Europe?"

Keul: I think right now at the moment, we don't have somebody that we can talk to about it. That's the problem about the timing, but besides that timing, of course, that's a very fundamental question when it comes to nuclear disarming, is the strategic weapons. Of course, that's what we all plan to talk about and what also your administration and your president wanted to talk about. There were proposals and there was hope and then all this was stopped.

I don't know what it's going to look like and I don't know the timing when we will be able to sit down again and continue these talks. As I said before, I don't see an alternative. This board needs to be over and we need to have somebody. To be honest, I can't imagine Putin being the one that will sit down again and have any kind of trust rebuilding because this trust has been destroyed, so effectively then I don't see that he can be the person that we talk to about it.

Sagan: Thank you. From Oliver Meyer, "What is the goal of Germany's constructive engagement with the TPNW, Treaty for Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons? How can it be taken forward at the meetings of the NPT and the TPNW member states next year? How does Germany want to support assistance for victims of nuclear weapons and remediation of the environmental damage done by nuclear weapons production and testing?"

Keul: That was very important to us as Greens in the coalition treaty to have a possibility to be an observer to the TPNW. I think it was quite successful because we don't want to split the countries, but we want to build a bridge between the TPNW countries and the nuclear states and trying to aim for the long-term goal, but not to let us being split apart, but work together.

[unintelligible 00:21:03] we have been observing together with our friends from Belgium and Netherlands. Now we're just about to look in what we can do about the initiatives for the victim protection and the environmental consequences. We are open for it, but we need to find a frame that works since we are not members and we will not be members of the TPNW. We need to find a frame where we can wrap together on these topics.

The proposals that have been made absolutely make sense. I think none of us would put that to question that we need to continue working on the humanitarian consequences of nuclear arms. We want to be part of it, but we still have to find out how we can do it as observers without being members of the TPNW.

Sagan: Thank you. **[unintelligible 00:22:12]** ask, "At the outset of the Ukrainian war, many people of African descent were denied entry to NATO nations for safety while white people were being invited in large numbers. What happened to these

people, and how is NATO holding their constituents accountable, especially given your concerns about DEI in mind as a potential nuclear policy? How is NATO ensuring that all people in the world are safe?"

Keul: The question is about people coming from Ukraine- [crosstalk]

Sagan: Originally coming from Ukraine. People of African descent were treated differently than white people coming out of Ukraine. What has happened since that time and has anyone been held accountable for some of the difficulties that occurred in the early months?

Keul: We heard about it and I heard about it too personally, but legally, I can assure you that we tried everything to make sure that everybody is treated the same, and legally, they were. The decision that the EU made about the refugees from Europe was clear that everybody that had a legal statute in Ukraine on the 24th of February was allowed to enter into the European community and stay and get a permit.

We tried to hear and to listen and to see if there was any really practical happenings. I cannot confirm cases where this happened because we would have gone after it. This is all I really can say about it. We were worried to hear it, but of course, there's also news from parts that are interested in giving us negative news. It was hard to verify is there really something true about it, how many cases do we have, and is it really a problem? Legally, the decision made by the EU was definitely the same for everybody that had a legal statute.

Sagan: Thank you. Your comments about arms control sparked a number of people asking about the conditions under which Germany would support arms control. Is peace in Ukraine, for example, a precondition for having new arms control negotiation? Does Germany support US-Russian nuclear dialogue under the current circumstances? Have you thought through, given the comments you said about the practicality of negotiating with Vladimir Putin, about what conditions in the future might make it more or less likely that Germany through NATO, that NATO could enter into some kind of arms control agreement?

Keul: I would be the last one saying there's a precondition before we talk about any kind of de-escalating arms control. If the United States government sees any possibility, for example, concerning the New START Treaty to get into talks that prevent from it getting worse or from saving New START, that would be would be in all our interest. I don't see a precondition to think about arms control.

What I was saying is if you want to have NATO and Russia talking about non-strategic arms reduction, that's what I don't see with somebody like Putin happening again. It has to happen, but I don't know when and I don't know with whom. Anything we can do on the nuclear question and if United States can save us from losing New START after losing so many other treatments, that it would be in all of our interest.

We're doing the same on other levels, for example, the little Treaty of Open Sky. I want to mention because I've been there. On Monday we just started the certification of the German observing airplane. We've been fighting for this capacity for so many years in parliament. Now we have it. Now this plane is ready to work. It's tragic because Russia and the United States left the treaty. It's still worse because it is a

mechanism where we work together. It's a little bit of hope that we try to save for better times.

Sagan: You're going to keep the plane and keep it ready?

Keul: Yes.

Sagan: Good. I knew that this question would come up from a number of people, but I want to read Toby Dalton's because it's so well put. "At our conference, we had a debate about how to get out of the potential cycle of escalation with Russia that could end up with nuclear weapons use. What are the best ideas that you've heard about how to help Putin find an off-ramp without compromising Ukraine's sovereignty?"

Keul: If I had one, I would be really happy, and if somebody can give me one. [chuckles] So far, we don't see us as Germans or as Europeans in the role of telling the Ukrainians when is the right moment to give up territory. That is absolutely their sovereignty. We're just clear that we're going to support their defense politically and humanitarian and also militarily as long as it's needed.

We are not the one to tell them, "Would you consider now please give up territory?" We cannot do this, not as Europeans, but especially not as Germans with the history also we have in Eastern Europe. We are supporting them to be able when they want to be on an eye level to be able to have ceasefire talks or whatever comes up too, but they need to define the moment.

Sagan: I have a question for you as a lawyer but also as a German who, as you just mentioned, has an unusual history because of the Second World War. There have been some discussions in the UN and elsewhere about creating a special prosecutor to issue a completed, or to have a trial in absentia of Vladimir Putin for the war crime of aggression.

Most war crimes trials are about jus in bello, that is the conduct of soldiers, but both at Nuremberg and at the Tokyo war crimes trials, leaders were put on trial for the act of going to war in an act of aggression. Most members of the General Assembly of the United Nations believe that Vladimir Putin is exactly that, a war criminal for starting a war of aggression against Ukraine. Have you or have others in Germany thought about this issue and how it could have long-term positive consequences, but short-term complicated consequences for all the reasons that you're mentioning?

Keul: Yes, there is a debate about it and I don't think there is much of a question that Putin has committed the war crime of aggression, but since the Nuremberg trials, many things have happened and we have strong institutions and we have meanings to investigate in war crimes on different levels. We have to be careful that we don't look too much like one single question and then weakening what we really have as institutions.

What we can do is we have the ICC that is investigating and we are supporting those investigations, and we have our German national investigations that can also look into cases with no German connection. This is what you call the world principles. Our investigators are also putting war crimes from Syria to trial in German courts and

also war crimes committed in Ukraine in German courts. They are looking into it. Of course, the third part is Ukraine themselves investigating and we are supporting them as well.

We have strong means and we do it very early in this war that we are already investigating and trying to make sure that we have all the material we need for the trials to come. This is something I would say is the priority in my eyes. There is this one question-- and we can't put Putin on a trial in front of the ICC for war crimes. It's just the war of aggression, we can't do it because the states didn't agree on it. We can't put him to trial in Germany for the crime of aggression if he doesn't have immunity anymore. Because he has the immunity in Germany and because the ICC cannot try on work aggression, there is this little loophole, I would say.

I don't want to weaken the institutions we have, especially the ICC to try to have a lot of investment into a special tribunal that in the end cannot be the answer, because realistically, as long he has immunity, we won't get Putin in front of such a trial. If he doesn't have immunity anymore, then we can get him in other ways. That's what I would say to that. This debate has not ended, it's still going on.

Sagan: I'm very glad that we had a lawyer to explain that to us, so thank you. I'm very pleased to know that you're thinking about this.

Keul: I hope I managed to-- It's difficult to explain it when it's not your mother language.

Sagan: It's difficult for a native speaker to explain these legal complications in English. It's wonderful to have a non-native speaker do so well in explaining this complicated situation. I have a great question from Beatrix Geaghan-Breiner who says, "After Russian's invasion, we saw many European nations stepping up to enhance defense, pledging to increase defense spending and forge a more autonomous and active role for Europe as a geopolitical actor. You've talked a lot about NATO, but that's not all of Europe, and you've talked a lot about US and Germany, but not all of Europe. Does Germany hope to follow through," she says, "On the turning point in Olaf Scholz's words for Europe?"

Keul: We are trying for years and years to be better in our European defense cooperation. That's the question, right?

Sagan: Right.

Keul: I'm in parliament since 2009, I've been on the defense committee and looking at the European cooperation question, so I know how difficult it is. We really wanted, yes, because as 27 nations in Europe, we are spending a lot more money on defense. We're spending three times as much as Russia, but of course, we are having problems with the efficiency if every nation is developing their own systems.

Of course, we do have an interest to be better in it and to cooperate better. Well, first of all, when it comes to defense, especially the defense industry, a lot of national serenity is always involved. It's really hard when it comes to the question, who is going to give up a capacity in order to have somebody else's partner have that capacity?

The most important thing for us Europeans, I think, is before we focus too much on the industrial side and on the defense industry's capacities, we need to be clear on our foreign policy, we need to talk about what we want to use our military forces for. What is our strategy? The idea needs to be clear. If you try to develop weapon systems together without having a clear idea what you want to use them for, then you're not going to be efficient in the process. I think the most important thing for us as Europeans is that we sit together and we talk about our foreign policy, to have really a common foreign policy.

Sagan: Well, this next question from Ankit Panda does take you even further, which is, "What lessons are there from the Ukraine conflict today that might be applicable in Asia in the future?"

Keul: That might be a what?

Sagan: Applicable to Asia. For example, what are the Chinese saying or thinking about the Ukraine conflict, and how might this influence thinking of states in Asia regarding the utility or lack of utility of the use of force?

Keul: Yes. Well, I'm not an expert on the Chinese, but of course, we see that the Chinese are watching the situation very closely to see how are we going to react towards Russia aggression. It's not only important for our European security, but it's also important for Asian security how we react and how we stand this question because the situation in Asia is getting tighter too. I think the Chinese are in the waiting position observing and they're not yet going to the Russian side because they still need us as well. With everything we do in Europe concerning the Russian War, we need to be conscious that, of course, also China and Asia are watching us very close.

Sagan: I have what may be an unfair question, but I think it's an important one. The great strategist Tom Schelling once said that people are very bad at making a list of things that they haven't thought about before. My question here is, when you're looking out over what's going to happen in the winter and what's coming up, are there surprises that you're worried about? Are there things that that you're thinking about that you wish you had answers for?

Another way of asking this is, some people say, what's keeping you up at night? If you can be more specific about that, what are the kinds of surprises or the kinds of things that that you're worried about that we haven't seen thus far in this conflict between Russia, Ukraine, and with NATO, obviously, helping out so much in terms of our armaments and other activities?

Keul: First of all, again, the worst surprise was the 24th of February because even in seeing the situation, the threats before, I need to realize that I wasn't really thinking that he would really do it. I think I was not the only one in that situation. You already asked all the questions that put it to the point, how are we going to get out of it again? Of course, without having more escalation. As somebody, like most of you, that I have been worrying about nuclear escalation for years while other people didn't even think about nuclear escalation, of course, that worries me.

On the other side, I see that Putin tries to put that fear in our population to make them say, "Well, it's too dangerous. Let's just stop it and let Ukraine give up their territory so we can live in peace." It's not working with the mainstream in Germany. It's not working for him. People like us, we see the nuclear escalation and the risk because the more you're into it, the more you know the risks.

I think on the broader level, in Germany, the nuclear risk seems quite abstract and quite far away. We're more worrying, really, about how can we get over the winter cold? How can I pay my gas bill? Companies, how are they going to survive with all the energy costs? That's what's mainly on people's minds. You ask me personally, and, of course, I wish I had an answer to that question about how do we get out of the cycle of escalation? To me, that's the most important question.

Sagan: Are you worried about future pipeline attacks or chemical or biological weapons use? Those are things that people mention, but no one has good senses of probabilities or, frankly, solutions.

Keul: Yes. We've been putting cyber on the agenda since we've been in power. My minister tried really to prove that point that we need cyber defense really desperately. We had some really strange events in Germany about our trains, the Deutsche Bundesbahn. There were some really, really strange attacks, where you think, "Okay, it's not just somebody playing with us, somebody is really knowing what they're doing." It is something that really we're trying to invest in, we call it catastrophe protection for the civil population. We neglected that for many years. After the cold war, nobody thought they would need it. Now we are investing in it again. We need really to worry about cyber protection, cyber defense.

Sagan: One last question is from Francesca Stark, "What is Germany's approach towards future non-nuclear weapon state, nuclear weapons state, bridge building efforts, like the Stockholm Initiative?"

Keul: Already the last government was really pushing the Stockholm Initiative, and we're going to follow up to this. We're doing everything that we think can build bridges and can help nuclear disarmaments getting restarted again.

Sagan: State Minister Keul, I want to thank you for staying with us in the evening, your time. You've had a large group here in Washington paying attention to every word and really appreciating you taking the time to speak with us today. Thank you.

Keul: Thank you.

[applause]

[00:50:51] [END OF AUDIO]