

‘Tactical’ Nuclear Weapons: A dangerous anachronism

It is estimated that there are about 2,500 weapons designated as ‘tactical’, of which Russia possesses over 2,000. The United States has fewer than 500, and deploys around 200 of these on the territory of five European countries in accordance with agreements between the United States and its NATO allies. To describe these as ‘tactical’ or ‘theatre’ nuclear weapons (TNW) is misleading outside the context of the Cold War, when over 10,000 were deployed. Though China, France, Israel, India and Pakistan also have short to intermediate range weapons in their arsenals, it is unlikely that these would be classified as ‘tactical’ and considered distinct from these countries’ longer range (strategic) nuclear arsenals. Nowadays it is understood that any crossing of the threshold to use nuclear weapons would have strategic consequences.

US Tactical Nuclear Weapons in Europe

Country	AirBase	US TNW	Nato TNW	Total
Belgium	Kleine Brogel	0	10 - 20	10 - 20
Germany	Büchel	0	10 - 20	10 - 20
Italy	Aviano	50	0	50
	Ghedi Torre	0	40	20 - 40
Netherlands	Volkel	0	20	10 - 20
Turkey	Incirlik	50	40	50
US B61s	In Europe			150 - 200

Tactical nuclear weapons are portable, vulnerable and readily usable. They are potentially destabilizing and create additional risks and insecurities, including possible acquisition and use by terrorists. The risk of terrorist acquisition should not be over-stated, and the bombs are protected by a variety of timers, switches, mechanical and electronic locks and procedural safeguards against any attempt to bring about an unauthorised nuclear explosion, but the possibility of detonating at least a radiological ‘dirty’ bomb cannot be discounted.

NATO’s nuclear bombs in Europe are all owned by the United States and are stored under the control of the US Air Force, in specially constructed underground vaults. According to policy, it is intended that they would be transferred to the host nations only at the point of use, assuming that to be when NATO is at war. When the NPT was being negotiated in the 1960s, US lawyers made the case that these nuclear sharing arrangements between a nuclear-weapon state and non-nuclear weapon states did not breach the NPT because ‘general war’ would end the validity of the Treaty. In 1985, the NPT Review Conference agreed as part of its Final Document that the Treaty remains in force ‘under any circumstances’. Though not made explicit, this language was the result of concerns raised about NATO’s nuclear sharing policy.

NATO’s 1999 Strategic Concept states that war prevention requires ‘widespread participation by European Allies involved in collective defence planning in nuclear roles, in peacetime basing of nuclear forces on their territory and in command, control and consultation arrangements’. As Presidents Obama and Medvedev hailed the follow-on START Treaty, Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov reiterated Russia’s long-held proposal that nuclear weapons must only be deployed in the territory of those countries to which they belong. Russia currently deploys more tactical nuclear weapons than NATO along its western borders close to many European countries. Notwithstanding this fact, the United States and NATO would enhance European security by removing the anachronism of US nuclear weapons deployed in countries that are non-nuclear-weapon states parties to the NPT, and should leverage such a decision to achieve deep reductions in Russian TNW as well.

The withdrawal of nuclear weapons from Europe might be only a modest step – a confidence building measure rather than a major disarmament or non-proliferation measure. But it would save money, reduce the risk of nuclear terrorism, lessen the salience of nuclear threats in war planning and help to ‘reset’ strategic relations with Russia. It would be likely to go down well with the public in most, if not all, of the host countries, and the time is now ripe for NATO to demonstrate some leadership in this area.

NATO nuclear policy

NATO nuclear policy emerged in a series of guidelines between 1967 and 1972, under the general rubric of flexible response, coupled with the adoption of a policy of first use of nuclear weapons by NATO if and when conventional defences were overwhelmed. Air forces were equipped with free-fall and guided bombs and air-to-surface guided missiles. Navies, in addition to aircraft bombs, developed nuclear depth charges and anti-submarine missiles. Armies were equipped with nuclear artillery of various calibres and free-flight rockets. Ground-launched cruise missiles, surface-to-air defence missiles, mortars and even land-mines were given nuclear warheads.

These deployments were considered necessary at a time when Soviet conventional forces in Western Europe were believed to outnumber NATO's by a factor of three to one. The dismemberment of the Warsaw Pact and of the Soviet Union, followed by the expansion of NATO, has meant that NATO's conventional forces now considerably outnumber Russia's. NATO's deployed nuclear weapons in Europe have been reduced by more than 97 per cent since their peak in the 1970s. It might have been expected that this change, coupled with the general recognition that nuclear weapons are not useful for war fighting (if ever they were), would have led to the reconsideration of doctrine. But this has not yet happened. American TNW have been stationed on the territory of various non-nuclear European members of NATO ever since the 1950s and early 1960s, when bilateral Programs of Cooperation were concluded between these countries and the US; and some of them remain to this day.

Since the issue of NATO nuclear sharing was raised at the NPT in 1985, a growing number of States Parties, including more than 100 nations in the Non-Aligned Movement, have called on NATO members to transform their doctrine and policies to conform with the principle and understanding that the NPT does not cease to be valid if a country is at war. Among the Thirteen Steps agreed at the 2000 NPT Review Conference was one calling for the further reduction of non-strategic nuclear weapons, based on unilateral initiatives and as an integral part of the nuclear arms reduction and disarmament process.

US nuclear bombs were subsequently removed from the Araxos airbase in Greece in 2001, from Ramstein in Germany in 2005 and from Lakenheath in England in 2006, all unilaterally and without fanfare of any kind. In mid-October 2009 the new German centre-right coalition resolved to seek the withdrawal of all US nuclear weapons from Germany, in consultation with NATO allies. During 2010, NATO will consider new ideas for its Strategic concept, with a final text expected in time for the Lisbon Summit at the end of the year. So the NPT Review Conference in May 2010 provides an excellent opportunity for giving input and impetus to the process of reducing the role of nuclear weapons in NATO policy and achieving the withdrawal of these weapons from Europe as part of a process of deeper reductions leading to their complete elimination.

*"We pay a king's ransom for these things...
and they have no military value"*

Senior officer, USEUCOM

A king's ransom

The remaining NATO weapons in Europe are B-61 gravity bombs with an adjustable yield of between 300 tonnes and 170 kilotons. (Note that on the highest setting this bomb is more powerful than the W-76 warhead on Trident missiles.) It is believed that the total holding of live weapons in these five countries is about 200 bombs, of which half are for use by the host nations. On two bases - Aviano in Italy and Incirlik in Turkey - the aircraft that would deliver these weapons belong to fighter wings of the US Air Force, equipped with F-16s. On four bases the aircraft belong to and are operated by the host nation: Bachel (German Air Force - Tornado); Kleine Brogel (Belgian Air Force - F-16); Volkel (Royal Dutch Air Force - F-16); Ghedi-Torre (Italian Air Force - Tornado). These aircraft are dual capable, being specially equipped for nuclear munitions in addition to their normal role. The crews are trained and exercised in peacetime for their potential nuclear missions, but the readiness level for the nuclear strike role has been reduced to months which may mean that the relevant electronic and mechanical fittings are not normally fitted to the aircraft.

The US European Command (USEUCOM), once the principal advocate for nuclear weapons in Europe, no longer supports their presence. One of their senior officers is quoted as saying "We pay a king's ransom for these things and they have no military value". The view of USEUCOM is that deterrence provided by US Strategic Command's nuclear capabilities outside Europe are more cost effective, and there is no military downside to the unilateral withdrawal of all its nuclear weapons from Europe. Hence the justification for keeping them is entirely political. According to a US task force on Nuclear Weapons Management (December 2008) this military attitude fails to comprehend and therefore undermines the political value our friends and allies place on these weapons, the political costs of withdrawal and the psychological impact of their visible presence as well as the security linkages they provide. As long as our allies value their political contribution, the United States is obligated to provide and maintain the nuclear weapon capability.

If these weapons are already costing a king's ransom the costs are certain to rise in future. One reason is the need to refurbish the



B61 bomb stored inside a shelter at Volkel Air Base

nuclear warheads (B-61 Mods 3 and 4). They are the oldest in the armoury, having been first deployed thirty years ago. The new US Nuclear Posture Review, published on 6 April 2010, commits the US to retain the capability to forward-deploy US nuclear weapons on tactical fighter-bombers and heavy bombers, and proceed with full-scope life extension for the B-61 bomb including enhancing safety, security and use control. This will also mean establishing a nuclear delivery capability for the F-35 when the F-16 is phased out by 2017. In Germany the nuclear capable Tornado aircraft is also due to be phased out. Its planned Eurofighter replacement is apparently not appropriate for carrying nuclear weapons.

There is an even more urgent issue over security. According to a US Government report most storage sites still require significant additional resources to meet Department of Defense security requirements. Difficulties, including the short training regimen for nuclear security teams - in some cases as little as nine months - and the impossibility of performing no-notice security checks as a result of host nation/NATO requirements, create a hazardous situation in which weapons designed to defend NATO might themselves become targets. Peace activists frequently enter the nuclear bases in symbolic acts of protest, and it is chilling to imagine what an armed gang might achieve. Just this year nonviolent Belgian activists breached a double-fenced security barrier at Kleine Brogel air base and reached the aircraft shelters near where the nuclear bombs are stored.

Calls to reconsider European TNW deployments

The German initiative, which has been widely supported in Europe and received endorsement from senior officials and parliamentarians in a number of countries including Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway and even Poland, opens the way for a general reconsideration of existing policy. In NATO, it appears to be governments without stationed weapons, particularly the recently joined Central and Eastern European states, which attach the highest importance to retaining TNW on European soil. They see them mainly in symbolic terms and appear concerned that withdrawal of these weapons could undermine the credibility of the US nuclear umbrella and might lead to an unravelling of the NATO alliance. Such concerns have been exacerbated by how changes to the proposed US anti-ballistic missile plans were handled and the divisions over Afghanistan. Nor was confidence improved by military brinkmanship between Georgia and Russia over South Ossetia and big military exercises in Western Russia and Belarus in October 2009.

Two arguments against the withdrawal of NATO's TNW deserve special mention. One concerns Alliance solidarity. According to one diplomat at NATO's headquarters, 'The [forward based TNW] are the foundation of that solidarity. Take them away and what have we left? If this is true then NATO is indeed fragile. The 2010 US Nuclear Posture Review takes the following position: 'Although the risk of nuclear attack against nuclear attack is at a historic low, the presence of US nuclear weapons - combined with NATO's unique sharing arrangements under which the non-nuclear members participate in nuclear planning and possess specially configured aircraft capable of delivering nuclear weapons - contribute to alliance cohesion and provide reassurance to allies who feel exposed to regional threats.

Are we really to believe that Czechs and Hungarians, for example, sleep more easily for knowing that their German, Italian, Belgian, Dutch and Turkish allies are sitting on small stockpiles of American nuclear bombs and have a veto on their use? Equally far-fetched is the view expressed by some NATO diplomats that the mere presence of these weapons helps to dissuade NATO members that might otherwise decide to acquire such things for themselves. That argument might have had resonance in the 1960s, but not now. The US Nuclear Posture Review comments 'the role of nuclear weapons will be discussed this year in connection with NATO's revision of its Strategic Concept. Any changes in NATO's nuclear posture should only be taken after a thorough review within - and decision by the Alliance.

Another counterargument to NATO's unilateral withdrawal of these weapons is that this would be better done as part of a wider agreement with Russia to get rid of all TNW. While it is of course desirable to promote reductions in Russia's TNW arsenal as well, NATO should determine its weapon requirements against its own strategic needs, and if forward basing is neither cost-effective nor militarily useful we should not hang on to these weapons in the hope of using them as a bargaining chip. Though elimination would be most sensible, if need be the withdrawn weapons could still be stored on the US mainland, to await dismantlement as US-Russian negotiations enter the next phase of deeper cuts.

As NATO revisits its Strategic Concept, it is time to develop a strategic and security approach that is more appropriate to the 21st century's challenges.



Acronym Institute for Disarmament Diplomacy

What needs to be done?

As NATO revisits its Strategic Concept, it is time to develop a strategic and security approach that is more appropriate to the 21st century's challenges. NATO needs to end nuclear sharing, withdraw tactical nuclear weapons from Europe, and work more closely with Russia to eliminate all tactical nuclear weapons and strengthen the existing treaties and non-proliferation regime.

The NPT Review Conference should affirm that possession of nuclear weapons is not an instrument for exercising regional influence or political and economic leverage.

Pending the legal recognition that all nuclear weapons attacks would violate international law, alliances that currently rely on nuclear weapons for extended deterrence should end deployments of nuclear weapons outside the territory of possessor states and phase out extended nuclear deterrence, replacing it with regional cooperative security mechanisms.

NATO's Strategic Concept should enable US TNW to be withdrawn from Europe, and NATO's non-nuclear members should cease equipping their aircraft and training to use US nuclear weapons in times of war.

At the 2010 Review Conference NPT states should strengthen the Treaty by declaring that it is binding on all State Parties "under any circumstances", i.e. in times of war as well as peace.

Further reading

US Department of Defense, Nuclear posture Review Report, April 2010,
<http://www.defense.gov/npr/docs/2010%20Nuclear%20Posture%20Review%20Report.pdf>

What to do about tactical nuclear weapons Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists 25 February 2010.
<http://thebulletin.org/web-edition/columnists/pavel-podvig/what-to-do-about-tactical-nuclear-weapons>

Nuclear Posture Review to Reduce Regional Role of Nuclear Weapons . FAS Strategic Security Blog February 2010.
www.fas.org/blog/ssp/2010/02/nukemission.php

The German Coalition and NATO Nuclear Policy Debate . NATO Monitor Issue Brief - updated 8 January 2010.
www.natomonitor.blogspot.com

This briefing is the copyright of the Acronym Institute for Disarmament Diplomacy, with acknowledgement and thanks to the lead author General Sir Hugh Beach. It is part of an Acronym Institute series originally produced for the 2010 NPT Review Conference. Drawing on the knowledge and experience of key thinkers, analysts and experts in the field of multilateral arms control and international security, we address some of the core issues relating to the NPT, non-proliferation and disarmament with the aim of enhancing the conference outcome and developing collective strategies to move towards security in a world free of nuclear weapons.

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