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Politics around US tactical nuclear weapons in European host states

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Introduction

NATO's member states have reached an impasse on the future of nuclear sharing in Europe, and currently appear to be operating on the assumption of business as usual through fear of change. While there would be mainstream support on both sides of the Atlantic for the practice to end, governments are reluctant to take action that may appear to challenge the relevance or the future of the NATO Alliance. Even under an Obama Administration, the United States may be reluctant to remove forward-based tactical nuclear weapons from Europe for as long as allied governments wish them to remain, in order to be seen as fulfilling commitments to NATO collective security.¹ Likewise, European host states will be reluctant to suggest that the United States remove them if the removal were interpreted to be anti-American or reflect a reduced commitment to NATO.

Yet the sustained presence of US nuclear weapons in Europe is a legacy from an outdated security agenda and no longer serves a credible purpose within NATO's nuclear posture. Prolonging nuclear sharing arrangements in Europe may harm global nuclear stability, provide additional tension with Russia and end up a costly enterprise for both the United States and host member states.

Increasing pressure from parliamentarians, pressure groups, budgets and public opinion from within host member states may yet provide an important catalyst for the US and NATO members to discuss the future of US nuclear sharing in Europe. The likely review of NATO's Strategic Concept starting in 2009 represents an opportunity for the Alliance to reconsider its dependency on nuclear sharing and come up with alternative, more valuable measures that demonstrate commitment.

Nuclear Sharing in NATO

Nuclear sharing has two main objectives: to provide a flexible (and therefore more credible) nuclear deterrent against Soviet conventional invasion; and to strengthen the foundation of NATO by engaging the United States in European security. The threat envisaged in the first objective has disappeared, and even if nuclear weapons were ever to be used in NATO's name, it would not be through vulnerable aircrafts using inaccurate free-fall bombs, but most likely those on the end of fast, efficient, accurate and invulnerable Trident missiles. The second

remains potent. The continued reluctance of NATO members to review out-dated nuclear policy indicates a desire to avoid debate that raises questions over transatlantic alliance solidarity.

Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Turkey and Belgium host US B-61 'gravity' bombs that, in the event of war or hostilities, could be delivered by aircraft and pilots from the host nation (with the exception of Turkey, which simply hosts a US base deploying B-61s). These host states could opt-out of the arrangement without the loss of security or political influence within NATO. US nuclear weapons have been withdrawn from other allies, such as South Korea, Japan, Greece and the United Kingdom, while maintaining strong and close alliances.

While exact figures of US tactical nuclear weapons in Europe are classified (NATO does not publish figures on its nuclear arsenals); it is believed there are approximately 200-350 US tactical nuclear weapons in Europe.² In Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands there are said to be 10-20 TNW B-61s based at each of the following airbases: Klieve Brogel, Buchel and Volkel. In Italy around 50 TNW are thought to be based on the Aviano airbase and 20-40 on the Ghedi Torre airbase. The United States is believed to hold around 50-90 TNW at the Incirlik airbase in Turkey.

In a multi-polar, post-Cold War strategic context, there are several reasons why NATO members would want to reconsider the forward deployment of TNW, three of which are:

- Nuclear weapons are irrelevant to the majority of security threats considered within NATO, particularly now that it is universally recognized that the Soviet/Russian threat from a supposedly superior conventional capability is so manifestly absent today. Even if European states still feel the need for an explicit US nuclear umbrella, TNWs would not be the method of choice for US military planners. Funds allocated to storing, maintaining and protecting nuclear weapon facilities could be better spent focusing on current non-traditional threats.
- NATO's nuclear sharing is the source of considerable disquiet amongst some member states within the NPT.³ It substantially weakens the authority of NATO states to demand stronger non-proliferation mechanisms essential to strengthening European and global security, and surely undermines any claim on the part of NATO members to having the necessary political will to engage in serious moves towards a world free of nuclear weapons.
- NATO states' inability to resolve the problem allows Russia to avoid its disarmament responsibilities with respect to its far more substantial arsenal of tactical nuclear weapons.

The European public has shown little concern over the continued practice of nuclear sharing in Europe since the end of the Cold War, largely through ignorance.⁴ Nevertheless, opinion about the continued existence of nuclear weapons in Europe more generally has been shifting away from support, a situation that could have particular relevance to tactical nuclear weapons with the possible review of NATO's Strategic Concept, the 2010 NPT review and increasing pressures on public spending. In 2006, 72% of the population of the five host states wanted Europe to be free from US nuclear weapons.⁵

Germany

The right of center German CDU government has stated that it will continue its obligations of NATO's nuclear sharing for the 'foreseeable future,'⁶ but there is mounting political and public opposition to this position – the strongest in Europe – and there are signs that the government may yet allow the arrangements to lapse when the current Tornado aircraft are withdrawn. At the front line, Germany played host to a large proportion of NATO's nuclear and conventional forces during the Cold War, and has also been home to a thriving and influential peace movement. NATO planning now favors bases in south and Eastern Europe suitable for staging missions in North Africa, the Middle East and beyond.

Interest in concluding Germany's involvement with nuclear sharing rose again in 2005, with strong calls from all three of the then opposition parties (Free Democrats, Green Party and Left Party) for the withdrawal of US nuclear weapons from Germany. The issue in Germany is made more acute by the need for an investment decision over the replacement of its aging Tornado PA-200 aircraft assigned to the nuclear role. The air force is due to replace its Tornados with the Eurofighter (Typhoon), but the government told the parliament in 2004 that it does not intend to certify the Typhoons to carry nuclear weapons, leaving the status of the B-61s up in the air.⁷

An overwhelming majority of Germany's population are against its deployment of nuclear weapons, demonstrated through an opinion poll of randomly selected adults, conducted by Angus Reid Strategies.⁸ Well over 90% believe nuclear weapons make the world a more dangerous place and that their government has a responsibility to pursue the goal of a world without nuclear weapons.⁹ Germany's role in NATO nuclear sharing has become increasingly unpopular, with the majority of Germans believing that the nuclear sharing concept is a violation of the NPT,¹⁰ and 60% of the population believing that nuclear sharing under NATO is morally wrong.¹¹ Likewise, polls indicate that the average German citizen does not believe the use of nuclear weapons would ever be justified,¹² while only 8% agreed with having a NATO nuclear deterrent.¹³

Italy

Italy hosts two nuclear bases. With the shift of attention to southern and eastern Europe, Italy features in NATO plans for expansion. The United States may wish to close a base in Germany and move four infantry battalions to Vicenza, making it Europe's largest US base, and include a possible increase of tactical nuclear weapons stationed in Italy. Public discontent with these proposals was vividly shown in 2007 when there was a demonstration of over 100,000 people against the Vicenza military base and the proposed expansion.¹⁴ The presence of nuclear weapons on Italian soil at another US base, Aviano, is also deeply unpopular. As a consequence, the Italian Berlusconi Government has voiced its own hesitation over nuclear sharing.¹⁵

Percentage of population desiring Europe to be nuclear free

70.5% in Germany

71.5% in Italy

88.1% in Turkey

64.6 % in Belgium

63.3% in Netherlands

Hans M. Kristensen, "US Nuclear Weapons in Europe – A Review of Post-Cold War Policy, Force Levels, and War Planning," Natural Resources Defense Council, February 2005

Italy has taken delivery of 121 dual-capable Typhoon aircraft since early 2006.¹⁶ It was also planning to purchase the dual-capable Joint Strike Fighter, but under budgetary pressures, the government announced its decision to opt-out from the JSF program in October 2008. It is unclear whether the Typhoon will be modified to carry B-61s.

The stationing of US tactical nuclear weapons has been called into question partly due to hostility to US foreign policy since the war with Iraq. The demonstration against expansion at Vicenza reflects the findings of several surveys and polls conducted in Italy concerning nuclear weapons and Italy's role in NATO nuclear sharing. In the Global Public Opinions Survey, 70% of the population thought the deployment of NATO nuclear weapons could not be justified under any circumstances,¹⁷ and 93% believed the goal for the country should be to reduce and/or eliminate nuclear weapons.¹⁸ The majority believed NATO's nuclear sharing is a violation of the NPT.¹⁹

Turkey

There is a rising sentiment amongst the population for the removal of US nuclear weapons from Turkish territory. In a recent survey,²⁰ more than half the respondents stated that they are against nuclear weapons being stationed in Turkey. Almost 60% of the Turkish population would support a government request to remove the nuclear weapons from their country, and 72% said they would support an initiative to make Turkey a nuclear-free zone.²¹ There may be several causes behind this sentiment, including the Iraq War, Turkish relations with neighboring states, budget expenditure and the moral concern over nuclear weapons. The historic precedence of Greece, a NATO member and Turkey's historic rival, ending its commitment to nuclear sharing in NATO may have further strengthened this tendency.

There have been public expressions of resentment towards the US military presence in Turkey ever since the lead up to the US war with Iraq. The United States insisted on the government allowing American troops to use Turkey as a staging post, despite overwhelmingly antiwar Turkish public and political opinion. Limited permission was granted after heavy debates and delay in the Turkish parliament.

Turkey's location has added an element of both risk and opportunity to NATO nuclear sharing. Turkey's close proximity to states deemed potentially hostile, such as Iran and Syria, make Turkey a preferred NATO base for tactical nuclear weapons. The risk, of course, is that stationing tactical nuclear weapons in Turkey might provoke a pre-emptive strike upon NATO bases. Turkish parliamentarians have expressed to NATO the difficulty of explaining the continued presence of US tactical nuclear weapons on Turkish territory to Muslim and Arab neighbors. There is a fear that they undermine Turkey's clear diplomatic objectives to act as a mediator within the region.

Turkey has a unique opportunity to play a positive role in promoting non-proliferation. Ending nuclear sharing and fully complying with the NPT would act as a powerful example to neighboring states and strengthen Turkey's legitimacy. Moreover, efforts by the Turkish government to play a leading role in the elimination of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction would receive overwhelming public support.²²

Belgium

Belgium has delayed an explicit show of indefinite commitment to NATO nuclear sharing by investing in a life extension program for its F-16s to around 2020, rather than purchasing the JSF. In mid 2005, the Belgian Senate unanimously passed a resolution calling on the government to initiate a review within NATO of its nuclear doctrine with a view to gradual withdrawal of US tactical nuclear weapons from Belgian territory.²³ The

government replied to the Senate underscoring its commitment to the NPT provisions and objectives, including on nuclear disarmament, but stated its preference to work together with NATO allies to consider changes to NATO's Strategic Concept before making any decisions on the future of NATO nuclear sharing within Belgium. Recent surveys show 70% in favor of the government initiating talks to abolish nuclear weapons,²⁴ and 65% in favor of a nuclear weapon-free Europe.²⁵

Netherlands

The current Dutch fleet of nuclear-capable F-16s are starting to reach the end of its service life, and the government is committed to purchasing the nuclear-capable JSF. Parliamentarians have debated nuclear sharing agreements and the JSF. The Dutch Labour Party has requested an independent study to compare different fighter planes, and to consider the option of upgrading the current F-16s in use, following the Belgian example. Up to now, however, there has been little public debate and awareness on the issue. Many Dutch are unaware of US nuclear weapons being based in the Netherlands, or of their state's obligations to NATO's nuclear deterrence policy.

United Kingdom

It is reported, though not officially verified, that all US tactical nuclear weapons were recently removed from the United Kingdom.²⁶ Public and parliamentary attention within the United Kingdom has always focused mainly on its own deployment, now established entirely on the submarine-based Trident system, through which the United Kingdom will continue to 'burden share' NATO nuclear deterrence.²⁷ The British public shows marginally higher support for nuclear weapons deployment than other western European countries, yet 90% support government promotion of the elimination and/or reduction of nuclear weapons and two-in-five Britons think Britain should unilaterally abandon its deterrent.²⁸

United States

There has been for some time a growing inclination within the Pentagon to scale back or end the stationing of US tactical nuclear weapons in Europe, and rationalizing, as a mid-term move, warheads to one or two bases. Despite its Nuclear Posture Review of 2001 that appeared to expand the roles for nuclear weapons, the Bush Administration has actually been looking to replace roles by more flexible conventional weapons. However, the United States does not want to be seen as acting unilaterally and reneging on its commitments to NATO.²⁹ The Obama Administration is as committed as any NATO member to moving on this issue with a unified Alliance and will look to test opinion across the Alliance beyond only the host states before making any significant changes. Nevertheless, the new Administration is also committed to producing a new Nuclear Posture Review in late 2009 or early 2010, and will be looking at revisions to its own nuclear strategy and arsenals. This is likely to include a reduced role for nuclear weapons, possibly restricting the doctrine only to deterring the use of nuclear weapons by hostile states against the United States and its allies. This would be an ideal time for NATO to conduct its review alongside the United States. Recent polls suggest 87% of the US population believe the government should negotiate an agreement to eliminate nuclear weapons.³⁰ Over half also believe that the government's practice of sharing its tactical nuclear weapons with NATO members could be a violation of the NPT and should cease.³¹

Conclusion

Nuclear burden sharing is far less of a foundation stone for the NATO alliance than it was in the Cold War, and is losing public support. More than 70% of the population in nuclear weapon states and the states involved in nuclear sharing believe nuclear weapons have a negative effect on international security.³² The removal of US tactical nuclear weapons from Europe may also find support within defense ministries, as it would also diminish the opportunity cost arising from planned modernization of storage facilities and aircraft.

Member states attitudes towards the issue have all too often been characterized by a fear of moving first, and opening up a Pandora's box. NATO's Strategic Concept of 2009/2010 represents an opportunity for NATO to reassess its stance on nuclear sharing and present a clear position to the global community on its nuclear posture. The Strategic Concept of 1999 stated '*The presence of United States conventional and nuclear forces in Europe remains vital to the security of Europe...*',³³ yet it is widely acknowledged that presence of US nuclear weapons in Europe serves only a political role. The review of the Strategic Concept today must question whether this role still has the necessary significance 20 years after the end of the Cold War to justify the financial, political and diplomatic costs, and explore new and more solid foundations on which to base the Alliance.

¹ Report of the Secretary of Defense Task Force on DoD Nuclear Weapon Management, <http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/pdfs/PhaseIIReportFinal.pdf>

² Hans M. Kristensen, "US Nuclear Weapons in Europe – A Review of Post-Cold War Policy, Force Levels, and War Planning," Natural Resources Defense Council, February 2005

³ Speech by Joschka Fischer, Federal Minister for Foreign Affairs Germany, at the 7th Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, New York, 2 May 2005, <http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/diplo/en/Infoservice/Presse/Reden/Archiv/2005/050502-ConferenceOfPartiesToNPT.html>; *Delegation NPT RevCon in New York 2004*, Belgian mayor Patrick Vankrunkelsven, http://74.125.77.132/search?q=cache:1lXeBbit1d8J:www.motherearth.org/m4p/actie_en.pdf+patrick+Vankrunkelsven+NPT&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=1&gl=uk&client=firefox-a

⁴ Stratcom – Strategic Communications. *Nuclear weapons in Europe: Survey Results from Six countries, 2006*. <http://www.greenpeace.org/raw/content/international/press/reports/nuclear-weapons-in-europe-survey.pdf>

⁵ *Nuclear weapons in Europe: Survey Results from Six countries, 2006*.

⁶ Thomas Maettig, *Tactical Nuclear Weapons in Germany: Time for Withdrawal?* March 2008, http://www.nti.org/e_research/e3_tactical_nuclear_weapons.html#fn29

⁷ News Analysis: An End to U.S. Tactical Nuclear Weapons in Europe?, Arms Control Association, July/August 2006, http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2006_07-08/NewsAnalysis

⁸ Angus Reid Strategies, *Global Public Opinions on Nuclear Weapons*, <http://www.angusreidstrategies.com/uploads/pages/pdfs/Simons%20Report.pdf>

⁹ A staggering 96.1% of the German population thinks their government should pursue the goal of reducing and/or eliminating nuclear weapons, *Global Public Opinions on Nuclear Weapons*, <http://www.angusreidstrategies.com/uploads/pages/pdfs/Simons%20Report.pdf>

¹⁰ '56.2% of Germans believe nuclear sharing concept is a violation to the NPT.' *Nuclear weapons in Europe: Survey Results from Six countries, 2006*

¹¹ *Global Public Opinions on Nuclear Weapons*

¹² 76.9% of German's believe the use of nuclear weapons by NATO could not be justified under any circumstances, *Global Public Opinions on Nuclear Weapons*

¹³ *Global Public Opinions on Nuclear Weapons*

¹⁴ 'Italians March in US Base Protest,' *BBC new website*, 17 February 2007, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/6370671.stm> (November 2008)

¹⁵ News Analysis: An End to U.S. Tactical Nuclear Weapons in Europe?,

¹⁶ *Typhoon Selected For Final Stage Of Singapore's Next Fighter Replacement Competition*, 10 October 2003, http://www.baesystems.com/Newsroom/NewsReleases/2003/press_10102003.html

¹⁷ News Analysis: An End to U.S. Tactical Nuclear Weapons in Europe?,

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ '56.7% of Italians believe nuclear sharing concept is a violation to the NPT.' *Nuclear weapons in Europe: Survey Results from Six countries, 2006*.

²⁰ Ashhan Tumer, 'NATO's Nuclear Sharing and Incirlik.' *Bulletin 26 – Dual Use: Nuclear Power and Nuclear Weapons*

<http://www.inesap.org/bulletin26/art11.htm> (November 2008)

²¹ *Global Public Opinions on Nuclear Weapons*

²² Ashhan Tumer, 'NATO's Nuclear Sharing and Incirlik.'

²³ ACT, May 2005

²⁴ *People World Wide Want Nuclear Disarmament*. http://www.abolition2000.org/atf/cf/%7B23F7F2AE-CC10-4D6F-9BF8-09CF86F1AB46%7D/poll_worldwide.pdf (November 2008)

²⁵ *Global Public Opinions on Nuclear Weapons*.

²⁶ "US Nuclear Weapons in Europe – A Review of Post-Cold War Policy, Force Levels, and War Planning,"

²⁷ It must be mentioned the UK nuclear warheads are reliant on US technology for life extension plans, and therefore not entirely independent of the United States.

²⁸ *Global Public Opinion on Nuclear weapons*.

²⁹ *Report of the Secretary of Defense Task Force on DoD Nuclear Weapon Management*,

<http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/pdfs/PhaseIIReportFinal.pdf>

³⁰ *International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear weapons. Polls: A Nuclear Free Majority*. <http://www.icanw.org/polls#new%20polls> (November 2008)

³¹ *Global Public Opinion on Nuclear Weapons*

³² Percentage from a poll taken from Britain, France, Italy, Germany, USA and Israel

³³ *NATO's Strategic Concept 1999, paragraph 42*.