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NATO and Nuclear Disarmament – II: It's Time to End NATO Nuclear Sharing

The ongoing forward deployment of non-strategic US nuclear weapons in Western Europe raises fundamental issues of strategic stability (including pre-emption, nuclear first-use, and war-fighting doctrines), public safety, and meeting Treaty obligations. American B61 nuclear gravity bombs are currently based in five European NATO member countries under NATO's nuclear sharing policy, an arrangement that will come under increasing scrutiny as those countries are asked to accept new versions of the bombs that Washington is now "modernizing," and as they think about including a B61 delivery capacity in their next generation fighter aircraft. And, given that nuclear sharing is explicitly prohibited in Articles I and II of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, concerns about treaty compliance generally, including the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty, should bring attention to NPT compliance issues.

Non-strategic US nuclear weapons have been in Europe since 1954.¹ The current European inventory of about 150 US B61 gravity bombs is a 97 percent reduction from the 7,300 US warheads in 13 weapons systems that were located in Europe at their peak in 1971.² Currently, Belgium, Germany, Italy, and Netherlands host US B61 bombs on one national base each, and they also operate soon to be replaced aircraft capable of delivering those weapons (dual – conventional and nuclear – capable aircraft, or DCA) – the F16 aircraft operated by Belgium and Netherlands, and the PA-200 Tornado aircraft by Italy and Germany. B61 bombs are also in Turkey, but at the largely US Air Base at Incirlik rather than at any exclusively Turkish base. Turkey does operate F16 DCA, but at a lower state of readiness.³

Russia is currently estimated to have about 2,000 non-strategic nuclear warheads available for use on ships, aircraft, ground forces, and missile defence systems.⁴ All Russian nonstrategic nuclear weapons are assumed to be, as indicated by Russia, in central storage facilities,⁵ perhaps some in Kaliningrad,⁶ and like the B61s, kept separate from launchers. Non-strategic nuclear weapons are not covered in US-Russia arms control agreements, nor are they covered by any multilateral agreement (except that all nuclear warheads are obviously covered by the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

All Russian tactical nuclear weapons are on Russian territory, while the US has had a long practice of transferring certain of its nuclear weapons to the territories of non-nuclear weapon state allies. That puts both the US and the European states hosting the B61 bombs in violation of the NPT. Article I of the Treaty prohibits the transfer of nuclear weapons to "any recipient whatsoever." Article II prohibits non-nuclear weapon states parties to the Treaty from receiving nuclear weapons from any source. Though these violations have existed throughout the life of the Treaty (from 1970 onwards), they are violations nonetheless.

The B61

The B61 bombs currently come in several variants and the US is in the process of morphing them into a single version, the B61-12 with variable, including relatively low, yields and a modified tail guidance mechanism to increase accuracy. Production of the B61-12 is scheduled to begin in 2020. In addition to being designed for fighter aircraft, the B61-12 will also be deployed with US Strategic bombers, notably the B-2A (stealth) and forthcoming Long-Range Strike Bombers (LRS-B). Hans Kristensen, director of the Nuclear Information Project at the Federation of American Scientists and a pre-eminent chronicler of global nuclear weapons and trends, notes that this modernization program “will result in a reduction of the total inventory of nuclear gravity bombs by nearly 50 percent” and keep kiloton ratings to 50 or lower, eliminating 400 kiloton variants of the B61 and the 1,200 kiloton B83-1.⁷

A more useable B61?

While fewer bombs are obviously a step in the right direction, more accurate/lower yield replacements will inevitably lead some military and political leaders to regard them as more useable – that the use of a “small” and carefully targeted nuclear bomb could accomplish a particular military objective without triggering a nuclear response. But that would be a dangerous gamble. The Obama-era Deputy Secretary of Defense Robert Work does not mince words: “Anyone who thinks they can control escalation through the use of nuclear weapons is literally playing with fire. Escalation is escalation, and nuclear use would be the ultimate escalation.”⁸

But the hope that nuclear weapons could be used for tactical military advantage persists. The National Threat Initiative reports on a 2018 survey that points to “an emerging debate in some corners of Moscow and Washington about whether limited use of nuclear weapons may be viewed by leaders as feasible and less catastrophic, more controllable, and more credible than the threat of massive retaliation.”⁹ The survey sought the views of experts in the United States, Russia, and Europe, and it attributes much this heightened interest in nuclear use scenarios to politically-induced (as opposed to militarily mandated) modernization and force posture decisions.

An earlier openness to removing nuclear weapons from Europe

While the ongoing presence of B61 bombs in Europe is regularly debated, it now seems to have been an excess of optimism to see in the 2010 NATO Strategic Concept (SC) some improved prospects for removing the remaining US nuclear bombs from Europe.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the 2010 SC is still the currently approved policy, and thus remains the Alliance’s operative strategic guidance document. And while it continues to insist that nuclear weapons are vital to European security, it does not insist that such weapons be based in Europe. The 1999 SC was explicit in saying the Alliance would “maintain for the foreseeable future an appropriate mix of nuclear and conventional forces *based in Europe*” (para 46, 1999). It repeated the same point a few paragraphs later, insisting that “nuclear forces *based in Europe* and committed to NATO provide an essential political and military link between the European and the North American members of the Alliance,” and that “the Alliance will therefore *maintain adequate nuclear forces in Europe*” (para 63, 1999 – in each reference, emphasis is added).

The 2010 SC repeats NATO’s familiar formula, that it maintains an “appropriate mix of nuclear and conventional forces” (para 19, 2010), but it omits specific references to any being based in Europe. It repeats a general intension to “ensure the broadest possible participation of Allies in ... peacetime basing of nuclear forces” (para 19), but the nuclear-weapons-in-Europe formulation is gone – in fact, the only such reference is to the

“dramatic” reduction in nuclear weapons stationed in Europe and the promise to pursue conditions for further reductions (para 26). In 2010 the “supreme guarantee” of nuclear weapons is specifically said to be provided by strategic nuclear weapons in the US, UK, and France (para 18), with no reference to tactical weapons based in Europe.

Back to insisting on nuclear sharing

Then things changed in Europe. By 2016 the Warsaw Summit¹¹ was still equivocating on the importance of European-based nuclear weapons, defining NATO’s “nuclear deterrence posture” as relying, “in part, on United States’ nuclear weapons forward-deployed in Europe” (para 53).¹² But the 2018 Brussels Summit communique returns to a direct affirmation that “NATO’s nuclear deterrence posture...relies on United States’ nuclear weapons forward-deployed in Europe” (para 35), adding that “National contributions of dual-capable aircraft¹³ to NATO’s nuclear deterrence mission remain central to this effort” (para 35).

Similarly, the 2018 US Nuclear Posture Review once again elevated the role of the B61 bomb in Europe:

“The United States will make available its strategic nuclear forces, and commit nuclear weapons forward-deployed to Europe, to the defense of NATO. These forces provide an *essential* political and military link between Europe and North America and are the *supreme guarantee* of Alliance security. Combined with the independent strategic nuclear forces of the United Kingdom and France, as well as Allied burden sharing arrangements, NATO’s overall nuclear deterrence forces are *essential* to the Alliance’s deterrence and defense posture now and in the future” (emphasis added).¹⁴

Dual capable aircraft – the coming decisions

In the coming years, such full-throated defence of nuclear weapons in Europe will be put to the test as all the European host states plan to upgrade their fighter aircraft and thus face the decision of whether to make their next generation fighters dual capable. Italy, Netherlands, and Turkey are opting for the US F-35 for their replacements, but so far, they have not made a clear commitment to making them nuclear capable. Belgium remains undecided on its replacement aircraft, while Germany is likely to choose the Eurofighter¹⁵ – and, again, neither has fully committed to including a nuclear capability.

Adding a nuclear weapons capability to fighter aircraft would add significant cost, and, much more significantly, would add consequential political costs for governments choosing the dual capability option in countries with populations that largely favor removing nuclear weapons from their territories. A 2015 expert analysis concluded that before the Ukraine crisis there was no clear political path for countries hosting US B61 bombs to get parliamentary approval for new nuclear related investments, and since then, they argue, “it is not clear that this calculation has changed.”¹⁶

There is strong majority support for the removal of the US nuclear weapons from four of the countries hosting them, according to a June 2018 survey,¹⁷ (there was no survey in Turkey, the fifth hosting country). The following figures represent percentages of support-for-removal/opposition-to-removal/no-response: Belgium 57/21/22%; Netherlands 56/25/19%; Germany 70/16/14%; Italy 65/18/18%. On the question of acquiring fighter aircraft capable of carrying the US B61 nuclear bomb, most were also opposed, but the results were not as strong or clear (oppose-making-them-dual-capable/support-dual-capable/no-response): Belgium 44/33/23%; Netherlands 43/39/17%; Germany 55/26/19%; Italy 59/23/19%.

Challenging forward deployment

Besides alienating national populations, critics see other major risks in forward-deployed nuclear weapons – risks of accidents and basic handling blunders, and susceptibility to terrorist attacks. Forward deployment also invites pre-emptive attacks, inasmuch as any move in a crisis to get the B61 bombs ready for use would be readily visible to an adversary, making the demonstrably alerted aircraft tempting targets for pre-emptive attack.¹⁸ Furthermore, the European based nuclear bombs have really proven to be of questionable deterrent value among those NATO allies most anxious about Russian intentions toward them. Baltic and other East European NATO member states tend to support forward basing, but the presence of those forward-deployed systems seems to give them little comfort, as they demand instead the presence, close at hand, of NATO conventional forces (like the trip-wire force Canada is leading in Latvia).

So, the case for removing B61 bombs from Europe remains strong. The 2012 NATO Deterrence and Defence Posture Review was more concrete in proposing that the alliance promote conditions for “further reductions on non-strategic nuclear weapons assigned to NATO” (para 11). It committed to exploring arrangements to that end (para 12)¹⁹ and called for reciprocal reductions in Russia’s non-strategic weapons stockpile (para 26). Two former US security and foreign policy officials, writing in *Foreign Affairs* in 2016, admittedly a very long time ago in American political years, called for an American freeze on B61 modernization and for the phased withdrawal of all US nuclear weapons from Europe.²⁰ They argued that there is no longer any military rationale for US nuclear weapons in Europe and that in 2008 the US European Command ended its support for maintaining US nuclear weapons in Europe. And they did not propose any linkage between reductions in US tactical nuclear weapons in Europe and Russia’s roughly 2,000 tactical nuclear weapons – Russia sees its tactical nuclear weapons as countering NATO’s superiority in conventional military capabilities, not in countering US tactical nuclear weapons.

Removing US nuclear weapons from Europe would be a limited but significant development – limited because, even with all B61 bombs removed from forward deployment, nuclear sharing would not necessarily end²¹ and, furthermore, three NATO members would still be nuclear weapon states, two of them continuing to maintain nuclear weapons in Europe. But it would send an important de-escalatory signal to Russia, and it would help to clear a path toward renewed East/West dialogue – a clear prerequisite for further strategic arms reductions.

NATO disarmament options

NATO is a nuclear alliance, but it has no nuclear weapons of its own, and that in turn means it is not a party to any arms control or disarmament agreement. NATO nevertheless is certainly involved in seeking to coordinate common positions among Alliance member countries in some multilateral negotiations (e.g. the 2017 Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons). And while individual NATO member states are obviously responsible for their own arms control policies, there are collective disarmament initiatives available to NATO:

- 1) The most obvious would be for the North Atlantic Council to accept, as it seemed prepared to do in 2010, the removal of American nuclear weapons from Europe and have them returned to the US – which would have the added virtue of finally bringing the US and the European states hosting its weapons into compliance with Articles I and II of the NPT.
- 2) The Atlantic Council could also reformulate its nuclear posture to reduce and ultimately eliminate the place of nuclear weapons in alliance defence policy – an action that Council member states agreed to at the 2010 Review Conference of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (Action 5.c).

3) NATO should certainly be more attentive to taking clear steps to help create security conditions in Europe conducive to reducing East/West tensions and to helping create the conditions for further nuclear reductions in line with NATO's stated intention to work toward a world without nuclear weapons.

The first of these initiatives is eminently doable, the best can be said about the second is that it is not imminent, and the least that must be said about the third is that it is essential.

Notes

¹ Hans M. Kristensen, "U.S. Nuclear Weapons in Europe: A Review of Post-Cold War Policy, Force Levels, and War Planning," Natural Resources Defense Council, February 2005. <https://www.nrdc.org/sites/default/files/euro.pdf>

² Hans M. Kristensen, "NATO Nuclear Operations: Management, Escalation, Balance of Power," PowerPoint presentation at James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies, October 27, 2015. www.fas.org

³ Hans M. Kristensen, "B61-12 Guided Nuclear Bomb," in Steve Andreasen, Isabelle Williams, Brian Rose, Hans M. Kristensen, and Simon Lunn, *Building a Safe, Secure, and Credible NATO Nuclear Posture*, Nuclear Threat Initiative, January 2018.

⁴ Hans M. Kristensen and Robert S. Norris, "Russian nuclear forces, 2018," Nuclear Notebook, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 74, No. 3.

⁵ Hans M. Kristensen and Robert S. Norris, "Worldwide deployments of nuclear weapons, 2017," Nuclear Notebook, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 73, No. 5.

⁶ "The Federation of American Scientists (FAS) has published satellite images which the group says show a storage facility in the Baltic coast enclave between Poland and Lithuania being deepened and then covered with a new concrete roof in recent months. It has all the fingerprints of typical Russian nuclear weapons storage sites," said Hans Kristensen, the director of the nuclear information project at FAS. "There is a heavy-duty external perimeter of multilayered fencing. The bunkers themselves have triple fencing around them as well. These are typical features from all the other nuclear weapons storage sites that we know about in Russia. It's a site we have been monitoring for quite some time and there have been some upgrades in the past but nothing as dramatic as this one. This is the first time we've seen one of the nuclear bunkers being excavated and apparently renovated," Kristensen said. "These pictures don't prove that there are nuclear weapons in Kaliningrad now, but they do show it is an active site." Julian Borger, "Kaliningrad photos appear to show Russia upgrading nuclear weapons bunker," *The Guardian*, 18 June 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/18/kaliningrad-nuclear-bunker-russia-satellite-photos-report>

⁷ Hans M. Kristensen, "B61-12 Guided Nuclear Bomb," January 2018.

⁸ Hans M. Kristensen, "B61-12 Guided Nuclear Bomb," January 2018.

⁹ Robert E. Berls, Jr., Leon Ratz, and Brian Rose, "Rising Nuclear Dangers: Diverging Views of Strategic Stability," National Threat Initiative, 23 October 2018. <https://www.nti>

¹⁰ As argued in 2010 in, Ernie Regehr, "Changes to the nuclear elements of NATO's Strategic Concept," *Disarming Conflict*, 29 November 2010. <http://disarmingconflict.ca/2010/11/29/changes-to-the-nuclear-elements-of-nato%E2%80%99s-strategic-concept/>

¹¹ Warsaw Summit Communiqué: Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Warsaw 8-9 July 2016. <https://nato.usmission.gov/warsaw-summit-communicue/>

¹² The transition from the 2010 posture, continued in the 2012 and 2014 summit states, to the 2018 formulation is discussed in: Monica Montgomery, "NATO Presses Stand on Nuclear Weapons," *Arms Control Today*, September 2018. <https://www.armscontrol.org>

¹³ "A number of NATO member countries contribute a dual-capable aircraft (DCA) capability to the Alliance. These aircraft are available for nuclear roles at various levels of readiness – the highest level of readiness is measured in weeks. In their nuclear role, the aircraft are equipped to carry nuclear bombs and personnel are trained accordingly. The United States maintains absolute control and custody of the associated nuclear weapons, while Allies provide military support for the DCA mission with conventional forces and capabilities."
NATO's nuclear deterrence policy and forces (last updated 17 May 2018).
https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_50068.htm?selectedLocale=en

¹⁴ *Nuclear Posture Review*, US Department of Defense, February 2018.
<https://dod.defense.gov/News/SpecialReports/2018NuclearPostureReview.aspx>

¹⁵ Hans M. Kristensen, "Supporting the DCA Mission," in Steve Andreasen, Isabelle Williams, Brian Rose, Hans M. Kristensen, and Simon Lunn, *Building a Safe, Secure, and Credible NATO Nuclear Posture*, Nuclear Threat Initiative, January 2018.

¹⁶ Isabelle Williams and Steven P. Andreason, "The Debate Over Disarmament within NATO," James Goodby and George Schultz (eds), *The War that Must Never be Fought* (Hoover Press, 2015).

¹⁷ Commissioned by the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN): European Attitudes Toward the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons: A YouGov Poll of Four NATO States, June 2018.
www.icanw.org/wp-content/uploads/.../YouGov_ICAN_EUNATOTPNW2018.pdf

¹⁸ Ernest J. Moniz and Sam Nunn, "Toward a New NATO Nuclear Posture," in Steve Andreasen, Isabelle Williams, Brian Rose, Hans M. Kristensen, and Simon Lunn, *Building a Safe, Secure, and Credible NATO Nuclear Posture*, Nuclear Threat Initiative, January 2018.

¹⁹ NATO's nuclear deterrence policy and forces (last updated 17 May 2018).
https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_50068.htm?selectedLocale=en

²⁰ Richard Sokolsky and Gordon Adams, "The Problem with NATO's Nukes: Time to Rid Europe of its Cold War Legacy," *Foreign Affairs*, 09 February 2016. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com>

²¹ Isabelle Williams and Steven P. Andreason, "The Debate Over Disarmament within NATO," James Goodby and George Schultz (eds), *The War that Must Never be Fought* (Hoover Press, 2015).