

Criticism of NATO nuclear policy reaches US Senate

Nicola Butler

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Opposition to nuclear sharing leads to proposed Senate amendment on NATO expansion

On 28 April 1998, the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) formally protested the nuclear-sharing arrangements practiced by NATO in Europe. Under NATO policies, US nuclear weapons are deployed in Europe, and six non-nuclear weapon states party to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) are trained to use those weapons. In wartime, the weapons could be released to Belgium, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, and Turkey for use.

At a meeting of the NPT review process, the NAM proposed language which called on: *the Nuclear-weapon States parties to the NPT ... to refrain from, among themselves, with non-nuclear weapons states, and with States not party to the Treaty, nuclear sharing for military purposes under any kind of security arrangements.*

Two days after the NAM proposal, during the debate in the US Senate on NATO expansion, Senator Tom Harkin offered an amendment that would “urge examination of the compatibility of certain programs involving nuclear weapons cooperation with the obligations of the United States and other NATO members” under the NPT. The amendment reads:

The Senate declares that the President, as part of NATO’s ongoing Strategic Review, should examine the political and legal compatibility between – (1) current United States programs involving nuclear weapons cooperation with other NATO members; and (2) the obligations of the United States and the other NATO members under the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, done at Washington, London, and Moscow on July 1, 1968.

In the debate, Sen. Harkin stated: “The nonaligned members of the NPT have expressed great concern over NATO’s nuclear-sharing programs. Let me make it clear. The United States has nuclear weapons at US bases in NATO nations. In time of war the United States could release these nuclear weapons to these allied nations. Of course, in peacetime our allies do not have control over them. We retain control. However, we do assist in training foreign militaries in nuclear-use capabilities. For example, we train our NATO ally pilots how to drop nuclear weapons. We train their ground crews on how to store nuclear weapons and how to load them onto aircraft. And 110 nations have expressed concern over NATO’s expansion impact on the NPT.

“The first indication of this, Mr. President, was in an article that appeared in Defense News, on March 30, saying that: ‘The 113 members of the so-called nonaligned movement, none of which have nuclear weapons, have asked conference leaders at the meeting to discuss assurances for parties to the NPT that they will not be targeted by nuclear weapons.’ Stephen Young, of the British American Security Information Council was quoted in the article as adding, ‘If NATO won’t give nuclear weapons up, and in fact continues to publicly declare nuclear weapons as part of its strategy for the future of the alliance, the fear is that some states that do not currently have nuclear weapons may become frustrated and decide to acquire them for protection.’

“Now, we have a news release from the same organization that came in just yesterday that stated that: ‘At the meeting of the member states of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty’ – in Geneva on April 28, just 2 days ago, 110 nations of the nonaligned movement – ‘demanded an end to NATO nuclear-sharing arrangements.’

“A working paper representing the position of more than 110 states demands that – and I quote – ‘the nuclear weapons states parties to the NPT refrain from, among themselves, with non-nuclear weapons states, and with states not party to the treaty, nuclear sharing for military purposes under any kind of security arrangements.’ Well, NATO is the only alliance which operates nuclear-sharing arrangements. Under these arrangements, somewhere between 150 to 200 US nuclear weapons are deployed in the six European States: Belgium, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, and Turkey.

“NATO countries, of course, have always maintained that NATO nuclear sharing is legal under the NPT because it does not involve the actual transfer of nuclear weapons unless a decision was made to go to war. However, the NPT regime also involves, as I stated earlier, the sharing of nuclear knowledge. So I think it is a well-grounded concern of the nonaligned nations to express their concerns about the expansion of NATO and the fact that we will begin sharing nuclear knowledge with the three new member nations. I think their fears are well founded and worth considering.

“Will we now, of course, with the addition of these three new nations, begin to share this nuclear knowledge? Are these three new nations full and absolute partners of NATO – as many have said here on the floor during the course of the debate, that Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic should not be second-class NATO partners but should have all of the rights, obligations, and powers inherent in any NATO member nation? If that is the case, then certainly we will begin to share nuclear knowledge with those three countries.

“I believe, Mr. President, that this could fly in the face of our obligations under the nuclear nonproliferation treaty. Therein lies the conundrum. If we do proceed with NATO expansion – and it obviously looks like the votes will be here to do that – and if these three nations become full partners in NATO, as many have said they should, and obviously they will under the reading of the protocols, we then will proceed to share nuclear knowledge with those three nations. And what of nuclear capabilities? I am not saying that we will turn over control of nuclear weapons – we have not yet done that to any nation of NATO – but we could get to the point where we might turn over nuclear weapons to those three nations if, in fact, conditions warrant it.

“I will close by saying that I will withdraw my amendment, but I wanted to lay it down as a marker. We are going to hear more about the NATO expansion treaty and what it will mean to the nonproliferation treaty with our sharing of nuclear knowledge with these three countries, all of whom, I might point out, are signatories to the NPT. I think therein lies a dilemma. To this Senator’s way of thinking, I believe the NPT is more important to us and more important to the world community than the expansion of NATO to include these three countries. Again, as Barbara Tuchman said in ‘The March of Folly,’ ‘I believe we are rushing into this without considering all of its ramifications, especially with nonproliferation.’

The NAM Statement was made at the second Preparatory Committee meeting for the 2000 Review Conference of the NPT, which took place 27 April–8 May at the United Nations in Geneva.