

# **Time for a nuclear weapons-free zone in Europe?**

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Secretary General George Robertson never tires of saying, 'NATO is transforming'. Truly, change is underway, but is the Alliance really undergoing a complete process of transformation? Having recently announced his retirement for December 2003, it would seem timely to reflect on his term of office.

On 28 May 2002, NATO and Russia signed an agreement at an Italian Air-Force base that brought closure to the simmering Cold War enmities. This was accomplished with a little mutual understanding that terrorism might be countered, in part, by missile defence systems and a growing willingness to use tactical nuclear weapons. The groundwork for this agreement was laid during the carefully choreographed meetings in Washington and at the Bush family ranch in Crawford in November 2001 and in Moscow on 24 May 2002.

There was little progress in five years of the Permanent Joint Council which clearly offered Russia insufficient influence and status and ended up something of a misnomer. But following September 11, everything changed, including the imperative to stand 'shoulder to shoulder' to combat terrorism – everywhere. Thus, the NATO-Russian Council came to pass in May 2002 and prepared the ground for 'joint action at 20' (rather than the NATO 19, plus 1 formula), unhindered progress on developing missile defence systems and an understanding that addressing tactical nuclear weapons could be safely put on the backburner.

The Prague Summit in November focused on enlargement into eastern Europe, the prosecution of the 'war on terrorism' and how member states could enhance their overall capabilities and contribution to NATO operations. Nuclear policy was not discussed and tactical nuclear weapons (TNWs) in Europe remained the forgotten issue.

A continued adherence to outmoded justifications for the possession and threatened use of nuclear weapons prevents serious debate about how to address the proliferation threat that TNWs pose. Indeed, the Bush Administration recently confirmed that Washington is prepared to respond to any chemical or biological attack on the U.S., or its allies, with its own Weapons of Mass Destruction.

Given the current political climate of opposition to multilateral agreements in the U.S., the absence of any arms reduction treaties covering TNWs in the arsenals of both Russia and the United States seem unlikely to be addressed any time soon. Yet the thousands of TNWs deployed in Russia and the estimated 150-180 TNWs deployed on the territory of some NATO Member States in Europe must be regarded as attractive targets to terrorist organisations. Both nations have sent strong messages that their possession adds to their security when, in fact, the opposite is true, while opportunities to eliminate them are squandered.

Not surprisingly, nuclear weapons were not on the agenda of the NATO-Russian Council in Moscow on December 9 either. In a speech to Russian businessmen, Lord Robertson said that, "You will find no one in NATO who would advocate putting nuclear weapons into the new NATO members to defend against some imaginary Russian threat."

Yes, that may be so, but can we find anyone in NATO who will advocate a nuclear weapons-free zone in Europe and an international treaty to eliminate tactical nuclear weapons? The concept of transformation could then be more accurately applied to developments within, and just outside, the Alliance.