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BASIC Backgrounder

Considering NATO's Tactical Nuclear Weapons after the U.S. Nuclear Posture Review

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The moment the Allies have been waiting for is here. A comprehensive discussion around the future posture of the Alliance had been held back as governments awaited the verdict of the Obama Administration's release of the U.S. Nuclear Posture Review (NPR). The NPR has been published, and it explicitly leaves open all options for NATO allies to consider. Now NATO can freely move ahead with its Strategic Concept review, which is to be completed when the Allies meet at the next NATO Summit, in Lisbon next fall.

Whatever the outcome at the end of the Alliance's review, the role of extended nuclear deterrence will undoubtedly remain, based upon the *strategic* arsenals of the United States, the United Kingdom and France. The conclusion that is far less certain is where the Alliance will come down on the role of the United States' European-based *tactical* or *sub-strategic* nuclear weapons (TNWs), which are the forward-deployed B61 gravity bombs deliverable by dual-capable aircraft that form NATO's nuclear-sharing arrangements. Although numbers of U.S. TNWs have declined in Europe since the end of the Cold War, about 200 of these bombs are still thought to be based in Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Turkey.¹

Calls for further drawdown

Leaders from some European countries, including those where many of these bombs are stored and where air forces train for using these weapons, have been raising the prospect of removing the bombs in support of nuclear arms control efforts. In addition to supporting this agenda, these leaders are likely thinking of national aircraft procurement decisions between now and 2020, politically challenging when the role of these systems is controversial, opaque and when defense budgets are already stretched tight. Widespread and entrenched public opposition toward continuing nuclear deployments on their territories could sink any such investments before they make it onto any budget line.

The new German government first came out on the subject soon after its election in October 2009, calling for an alliance-wide discussion over the removal of the bombs in support of the U.S. President's campaign for a world free of nuclear weapons. In early February 2010, the foreign ministers of Poland and Sweden argued in an [IHT/NYT op-ed](#) that the United States and allies should work with Russia to remove these weapons from arsenals in Europe, although they also suggested that it would not be a bad thing if interested parties decided to make some unilateral moves to help build confidence. Most recently, the Foreign Ministers of Belgium, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Norway took up the issue in a [letter](#) to NATO's Secretary General. They requested that NATO foreign ministers meeting in Tallinn, Estonia (22-23 April) discuss how NATO's nuclear policies can support nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation with an eye toward increasing international momentum going into the Review Conference of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The Review Conference starts two weeks later in New York.

Adding to considerations for their consolidation to fewer bases or complete removal were worries about the security of the bombs. A 2008 U.S. Air Force Blue Ribbon Review panel, which appraised security at these bases, found that improvements were required at some of the sites.² Security surrounding these weapons remains open to question. Recently, a group of protesters breached the security perimeter of Kleine Brogel Air Base in Belgium.³ A more serious incident could force the hasty removal of these weapons – a move with unpredictable consequences that could make allies more uncomfortable than if they were to remove the bombs as part of a more purposeful, allied-inclusive plan.

Voices wary of change

There was a hint of warning from the United States amid European calls for NATO to become more active on nuclear disarmament. The strongest official wording came from Secretary of State Hillary Clinton during a NATO Strategic Concept [seminar](#) held in Washington on 22 February:

"This dangerous world still requires deterrence and we know there's a debate going on in Europe and even among some of our leading member nations about, well, what does that mean. ...We would hope that there is no precipitous move made that would undermine the deterrence capability."

The deepest concerns over moves toward reducing the TNWs seem to come from within NATO's long-time policymaking establishment,⁴ and some members in Central and Eastern Europe that had suffered under the Soviet regime. They worry about the signals that would be sent should the weapons be withdrawn: would this indicate a U.S. pullback from Europe and the weakening of transatlantic ties? Would Russia see this move as a sign of weakness?

The new NPR on U.S. TNWs in Europe

The new [NPR](#)⁵ essentially leaves open for allies to decide whether to continue the forward deployment of the nuclear bombs in Europe, but makes clear that the United States will maintain all capabilities necessary for their deployment for the future whatever the decision by allies:

"The United States will consult with our allies regarding the future basing of nuclear weapons in Europe, and is committed to making consensus decisions through NATO processes. In cooperation with allies and partners, the NPR has determined that the following steps will be taken. ... The Air Force will retain a dual-capable fighter (the capability to deliver both conventional and nuclear weapons) as it replaces F-16s with the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter. ... the United States will also conduct a full scope B-61

(nuclear bomb) Life Extension Program to ensure its functionality with the F-35 and to include making surety – safety, security, and use control – enhancements to maintain confidence in the B-61. These decisions ensure that the United States will retain the capability to forward-deploy non-strategic nuclear weapons in support of its Alliance commitments. These decisions do not presume the results of future decisions within NATO about the requirements of nuclear deterrence and nuclear sharing, but keep open all options.” (pp. 27-28)

The Administration takes great pains to reassure all allies about U.S. security commitments and explains that this reassurance can take the form of nuclear, conventional, or missile defense-related activities or a combination thereof, as well as “tools” other than weapon systems:

“The United States seeks to significantly strengthen regional security architectures in a comprehensive way. It seeks improved peacetime approaches that fully integrate “whole of government” approaches as well as the “hard” and “soft power” tools of the United States and its allies and partners, including an overall balance of conventional military power that serves the purposes of security and peace. U.S. nuclear weapons will play a role in the deterrence of regional states so long as those states have nuclear weapons, but the decisions taken in the NPR, BMDR [Ballistic Missile Defense Review], and QDR [Quadrennial Defense Review] reflect the U.S. desire to increase reliance on non-nuclear means to accomplish our objectives of deterring such states and reassuring our allies and partners.”(p. 28)

The NPR goes on to emphasize that “strengthening the non-nuclear elements of regional security architectures is vital to moving toward a world free of nuclear weapons.” (p. 33) However, the document does not provide any clear signals to those allies advocating for the removal or consolidation of the U.S. TNWs. Instead, the NPR refers in broad terms to actions that may be taken with allies (in Europe and elsewhere) on nuclear arms control, especially within a regional context, “the United States will work with allies and partners to strengthen the global non-proliferation regime, especially the implementation of existing commitments within their regions.” (p. 31) Most specifically, the Administration points to future discussions that could include the prospect of Moscow “further consolidating” its TNW arsenal “in a small number of secure facilities deep within Russia”(p. 29) and proposes:

“Following ratification and entry into force of New START, the Administration will pursue discussions with Russia on further reductions and transparency, which could be pursued through formal agreements and/or parallel voluntary measures. These follow-on reductions should be broader in scope than previous bilateral agreements, addressing all the nuclear weapons of the two countries, not just deployed strategic nuclear weapons.” (p. 30)

In the concluding section, “Looking Ahead: Toward a World without Nuclear Weapons,” the Obama Administration says that “While security arrangements including NATO will retain a nuclear dimension so long as nuclear threats to the United States and our allies and partners remain, we will continue to seek to reduce the role and numbers of nuclear weapons in the future.” (p. 48)

Taking forward NATO's new Strategic Concept

The Alliance's current [Strategic Concept](#), released in 1999, includes justifications for NATO's nuclear policies. In light of the new U.S. NPR and recent policy discussions, allies could consider the following questions to ensure a more comprehensive review while developing the new Concept:

1.) How important are nuclear weapons to NATO's security? The current Concept gives nuclear weapons a central role in maintaining Alliance security, stipulating that: "Nuclear weapons make a unique contribution in rendering the risks of aggression against the Alliance incalculable and unacceptable" and that they "remain essential to preserve peace" (Paragraph 46), and goes on to say that the strategic nuclear forces of the United States, United Kingdom and France provide the "supreme guarantee of the security of the Allies." (Paragraph 62) Logically, the issue of European deterrence and assurance in the 21st century should be discussed within the review process before allies consider the TNWs.

2.) If nuclear weapons are important, then to what extent are the TNWs essential for maintaining a credible extended nuclear deterrence posture? The current Concept declares that the TNWs in Europe are essential for NATO's nuclear posture, and adds the following requirement: "These forces need to have the necessary characteristics and appropriate flexibility and survivability, to be perceived as a credible and effective element of the Allies' strategy in preventing war. They will be maintained at the minimum level sufficient to preserve peace and stability." (Paragraph 63) These weapons, intended for theater warfare, were in part originally deployed in preparation for threatening nuclear escalation in the event of a large conventional war in Europe. Such a scenario is now even more remote than it was eleven years ago. Moreover, leaders will need to consider that the aircraft assigned to the TNWs are of relatively short-range and would take much longer to activate than their strategic counterparts.

3.) How important are the TNWs for maintaining transatlantic ties? The Strategic Concept declares that the TNWs "...will provide an essential link with strategic nuclear forces, reinforcing the transatlantic link." (Paragraph 64) In practice, it is said that the B-61s and their assigned Dual Capable Aircraft have formed a "visible presence"⁶ that some allied leaders feel has been important for preserving the appearance of close European-U.S. ties and displaying the willingness of European countries to involve themselves in a nuclear scenario, as noted in a relevant [report](#) released by RUSI last month. Yet if the weapons are retained only for symbolic purposes and are not essential for the credibility of NATO's nuclear policies, this raises at least four additional questions:

- How can all allies feel that they are sufficiently engaged and appreciated in critical military planning operations?
- Should allied leaders find other more effective ways to fulfill any requirements for more visible transatlantic connections, ones that more clearly benefit the interests and security of Europe and of the United States in a mutually-beneficial arrangement?
- To what extent does the symbolic role of the TNWs jeopardize transatlantic pleas for nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation?
- How will the leaders of west European states justify to their parliaments and publics the significant spending of scarce public resources on controversial nuclear systems that serve no clear military role?

The importance of process

Beyond considering the Strategic Concept itself, the process of how this consideration unfolds may be just as important for the Alliance. NATO's Secretary General, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, reflected on both the relevance of the nuclear arms control agenda, while emphasizing Alliance unity, during a [press briefing](#) on 3 March:

“...The goal of working towards a world free of nuclear weapons is one which we can all embrace. And I've scheduled a discussion at our next Foreign Ministers meeting in Tallinn on how NATO can contribute to arms control and disarmament, including with an eye to our new Strategic Concept. ... There are a lot of nuclear weapons in the world, and a number of countries that either have them, would like to have them, or could have them quickly if they decided they needed them. That is just the way it is. So whatever we do in support of arms control and disarmament should be balanced with deterrence. ...Finally, it is important that anything that affects NATO's nuclear policy or posture be decided by the Allies together, without any unilateral moves.”

Therefore, a full-scale discussion is expected over the Alliance's nuclear posture. Any decision taken without sensitivity towards those who feel the least secure or who may face economic and political costs could run the risk of harming alliance cohesion. Equally, forcing the hand of political leaders hosting the systems so that they have to justify controversial and expensive systems with little military role to doubting Parliaments and publics could equally harm cohesion. Leaders should also think about the opportunity that comes with creating the new Strategic Concept. The decisions made by Allies now on laying out NATO's nuclear posture for the decade or so to come could affect the way other countries outside of the alliance think about nuclear weapons. True, the results may not prevent more countries from joining the nuclear club; which will require efforts beyond NATO. After all, it could be argued that decisions made decades ago are at the root of present-day nuclear threats. Whether or not one thinks that the Alliance has a responsibility to shape how nuclear weapons are perceived in global security, NATO, as the most powerful military alliance in history, now has the opportunity to take the lead.

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NOTES

¹ Hans Kristensen, "U.S. Nuclear Weapons Withdrawn from the United Kingdom," FAS Strategic Security Blog, 26 June 2008, available at: <http://www.fas.org/programs/ssp/nukes/images/EuroNukes.pdf>.

² Major General Polly A. Peyer, Chair, "Air Force Blue Ribbon Review of Nuclear Policies and Procedures," Headquarters U.S. Air Force, 8 February 2008, p. 5, available via the website of the Federation of American Scientists, <http://www.fas.org/nuke/guide/usa/doctrine/usaf/BRR-2008.pdf>.

³ A video of the incident is available on YouTube, posted on 1 February 2010, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KfgW_mfxBc0.

⁴ See, for example, the analysis by Michael Rühle, "Good and Bad nuclear weapons: Berlin's part in shaping nuclear reality," Körber Policy Paper, No. 3, Körber Foundation International Affairs, April 2009, http://www.koerberstiftung.de/fileadmin/user_upload/internationale_politik/pdf/Koerber_Policy_Paper_No_3.pdf.

⁵ The 2010 NPR is unclassified and available online: U.S. Department of Defense, "Nuclear Posture Review Report, April 2010, <http://www.defense.gov/npr/docs/2010%20Nuclear%20Posture%20Review%20Report.pdf>

⁶ Malcolm Chalmers and Simon Lunn, "NATO's Tactical Nuclear Dilemma," *RUSI Occasional Paper*, March 2010, p. 16, http://www.rusi.org/downloads/assets/NATOs_Nuclear_Dilemma.pdf