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Introduction

The United States is currently believed to deploy between 150-200 tactical or theatre nuclear weapons (TNW)¹ at five different locations in Europe.²

Originally part of a diverse package of several thousand nuclear weapons distributed throughout Western Europe, TNW were first deployed early in the Cold War. Their primary function was to counter the perceived superiority of Warsaw Pact conventional forces, and in the case of Soviet invasion, they were to be used on the battlefield to prevent a rapid over-run of Europe. Their deployment also reassured Europeans of US commitment to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons in their

¹ Theatre or tactical nuclear weapons are also sometimes referred to as sub-strategic (SSNW) or non-strategic (NSNW).

² TNW currently located in Europe are all B61 -3, -4 types. The locations are believed to be Belgium, Germany, Italy, Turkey and the Netherlands. Robert S. Norris and Hans M. Kristensen, *US tactical nuclear weapons in Europe, 2011*, Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, Nuclear Notebook 2011 67:64-73.

defence.³ A system of consultation and participation was set up to share nuclear information and planning between allies.⁴

This system has so far survived the end of the Cold War and a dramatic reduction in the number, variety and locations of TNW deployments in Europe. Allies were quick to recognize TNW had lost their military role, and President Bush (snr) in 1991 signed the Presidential Nuclear Initiatives that led to dramatic and rapid unilateral reductions. Over the years, reductions continued, and numbers halved again in the first decade of the 21st century.⁵ Nevertheless, TNW retained much of their political value in keeping Alliance cohesion and solidarity at a time when the mission had become less clear. The 1999 Strategic Concept, for example, stated “the fundamental purpose of the nuclear forces of the Allies is political: to preserve peace and prevent coercion and any kind of war,” adding that deterrence also depends on “equitable sharing of the roles, risks and responsibilities, as well as the benefits, of common defence.”⁶

³ In exchange for such reassurance, European allies agreed to share the ‘nuclear responsibility’ by hosting the weapons on their own territory.

⁴ This primarily involves the Nuclear Planning Group that includes Brussels-based representatives of all members of the Alliance except France, meeting regularly in private to review policy and posture. The NPG is advised and supported by the High Level Group (HLG) of more technical defense officials from NATO capitals. Allies participate in regular exercises involving military assets that support the nuclear mission.

⁵ NATO has so far withdrawn 97% of the weapons stored in Europe. See Robert S. Norris and Hans M. Kristensen (2011).

⁶ The Alliance’s Strategic Concept, 24 April 1999, approved by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Washington, DC, paragraphs 62 and 42 respectively.

A timid departure from the 1999 document, the new Strategic Concept adopted by NATO at its summit in Lisbon, 19 November 2010, contains no explicit mention of TNW and their role in strengthening the transatlantic link. In deference to the US Nuclear Posture Review, the 2010 document refers to deterrence as “based on an appropriate mix of conventional and nuclear capabilities” with the ultimate nuclear guarantee provided “by the strategic nuclear forces of the Alliance,” particularly those of the United States, United Kingdom and France.⁷

The new Strategic Concept also initiated “a review of NATO’s overall posture in deterring and defending against the full range of threats to the Alliance.”⁸ This Defence and Deterrence Posture Review (DDPR), whose terms of reference have recently been agreed, will cover nuclear theatre, conventional forces and missile defense, and will report to the next NATO Summit in the United States in April 2012.

The European Context

The current debate in Europe on the future of US nuclear bombs on European soil highlights differences in allies’ security concerns, strategic realities, conceptions of deterrence and inclinations towards nuclear disarmament. Prompted by the newly-installed German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle in October 2009, there have been strong calls to reconsider the role of

⁷ Strategic Concept For the Defence and Security of The Members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, adopted by Heads of State and Government in Lisbon, *Active Engagement, Modern Defence*, paras. 16 and 18.

⁸ *Idem*, par. 19.

TNW coming from [Poland and Sweden](#), and from [Belgium, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Norway](#) in separate initiatives in February 2010, and more recently in a non-paper from [Norway, Poland, Germany, and the Netherlands](#).⁹

Arguments in favor of the status quo focus on the value to maintaining the transatlantic partnership and providing Europe with the tangible presence of US nuclear weapons, symbolic of extended nuclear deterrence. The collective nuclear capability shares the burden of risk, of responsibility and of decision-making. The counterarguments point to the weapons’ obsolescence, the lack of credible scenarios for their military use, the cost of maintaining the bombs, safeguarding the five airbases at which they are stored, and most of all, replacing aging delivery systems.¹⁰ The deployment of TNW in non-nuclear weapon states is also considered by some NPT states to be a violation of the spirit, if not the letter, of the NPT and to sell short Europe’s contribution to worldwide nuclear reductions and non-proliferation efforts.

Opinions have generally been influenced by strategic location. The Baltic states have been nervous that the withdrawal of US nuclear forces from Europe could inadvertently embolden Russia, signaling that the United States is less committed to Europe. Turkey has preferred to retain its

⁹ Six other NATO allies, namely Belgium, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Iceland, Luxemburg and Slovenia supported the paper: <http://www.fas.org/blog/ssp/2011/04/natoproposal.php>

¹⁰ Replacing F-16 and Tornado aircraft with F-35s and potentially modified Typhoon Eurofighters.

status as a (presumed) host state but opposes the possibility of becoming the sole host state. France has been the most vocal opponent of withdrawal, worried that it will impact on their allies resolve to stand by nuclear deterrence as a core function of the Alliance. Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium and Norway have actively highlighted the lack of a credible deterrent value for such weapons and stressed the case for taking faster steps toward nuclear disarmament. Germany, currently replacing its Tornado fleet (some of which are nuclear capable) with Typhoon Eurofighters has no intention of deploying new nuclear-capable aircraft. Belgium and the Netherlands are also likely to follow Germany's lead.

Italy's position

Historically, Italian 'nuclear policy' has shown a high degree of consistency throughout almost five decades of relatively unstable government. Nuclear weapons (strategic and sub-strategic) have, in fact, been seen by Italian political authorities as instrumental to achieving a series of related domestic and international objectives, namely international prestige and status, participation in the 'circles of power', and strengthening Italy's relationship with the United States. Domestically their deployment was used in the early years to ensure the Italian Communist Party remained in opposition.¹¹ Given such history, does Italy still see nuclear weapons as an asset? And if so, what sort of value do

¹¹ On the history of Italian nuclear policy, its genesis and developments see Leopoldo Nuti, *La Sfida Nucleare, La politica estera italiana e le armi atomiche 1945-1991*, Il Mulino, 2007, which is to date the most thorough historical account on Italy's nuclear policy.

the weapons retain? And why has the Italian government been so reticent in taking a stance in the context of the debate currently animating the Alliance?

Italy is believed to host approximately 60-70 US TNW¹² and possesses 69 nuclear-capable Tornado IDS aircraft.¹³

In official statements, Italy is committed to the goal of nuclear disarmament and progressive reduction of US nuclear bombs in Europe with the view of their final elimination. Echoing similar initiatives in other countries, for example, four senior statesmen, Massimo D'Alema, Gianfranco Fini, Arturo Parisi and Giorgio La Malfa, authored an open letter on 24 July 2008 to *Il Corriere della Sera* to "testify that, across the Italian political spectrum and inside the scientific community, there was agreement on the importance of nuclear disarmament."¹⁴ The [European Strategy against the Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction](#) was approved under an Italian Presidency in 2003, and again, after much preparation by Rome, the EU adopted under a later Italian Presidency in 2008 the

¹² NATO maintains a policy of ambiguity regarding numbers and types of TNW forward-deployed in Europe. B-61s are probably stationed in Aviano (50) and Ghedi Torre (10-20). Robert S. Norris and Hans M. Kristensen (2011).

¹³ The aircraft are based at Ghedi Torre, Brescia. Malcom Chalmers, *NATO Dual-Capable Aircraft: A Stocktake*, in Malcolm Chalmers and Simon Lunn, *NATO's Tactical Nuclear Dilemma*, RUSI Occasional Paper, March 2010.

¹⁴ The letter (in Italian) is available online: <http://www.disarmo.org/rete/a/26870.html>. The authors were respectively previous Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Defence and (European) Communitarian Policies.

[L'Aquila G8 Statement on Non-Proliferation](#).¹⁵

As for TNW in particular, answering an [interrogation](#) by Francesco Tempestini of the Partito Democratico (PD) the Undersecretary of Foreign Affairs, Vincenzo Scotti, stated that “Italy aims to preserve a credible deterrent capability in NATO and [...] at maintaining its responsibilities towards allies,” reaffirming that “the government understands this issue is susceptible to having ramifications on the Alliance’s solidarity and cohesion.”¹⁶ Addressing the North Atlantic Council, the President of the Republic, Giorgio Napolitano, stated that “while deterrence still plays a fundamental role in preventing nuclear wars, NATO should consider how to contribute to the nuclear-free world goal of President Obama’s Prague speech. Small, well-thought, concrete and concerted steps can go a long way in creating momentum toward the final goal.”¹⁷ The need for slow, measured and concerted steps was also stressed in a [unitary parliamentary motion](#) passed in June 2010 that committed the government to “participate [...] in the

¹⁵ In November 2008, the *Camera dei Deputati* discussing the definition of the agenda of the summit passed four motions stressing the need to include non-proliferation and disarmament. The importance of such inclusion was later reiterated by the Minister of Foreign Affairs Franco Frattini before the *Commissioni Esteri* of the Senate and *Camera*¹⁵ (3 December 2008) and in the motions by Mogherini Rebesani, Evangelisti and Pianetta, Dozzo, and Iannaccone, approved by the *Camera dei Deputati* on 23 June 2009.

¹⁶ Allegato-Interrogazione n. 5-02595 Tempestini: *Sulle iniziative per il disarmo nucleare del territorio europeo*. Testo Integrale della Risposta.

¹⁷ Address by Giorgio Napolitano, President of the Italian Republic, North Atlantic Council, <http://www.quirinale.it/elementi/Continua.aspx?tip=Discorso&key=1794>.

current debate inside NATO on the future of its nuclear deterrent” and “support the opportunity to further reduce [their numbers] with a view to their final elimination through measured, concrete and harmonized steps.”¹⁸

If this is the position of the government, however, why has Italy been so cautious in joining the debate currently taking place in Europe on TNW? And why, in an example of ‘significant silence’, did Italy not join the letter authored by [Belgium, Germany, Luxembourg, The Netherlands and Norway](#) to Secretary General Rasmussen or the more recent initiative by [Germany, the Netherlands, Norway and Poland](#), along with six other allies?

Italy appears to have tacitly acknowledged the decline in military value of TNW. According to Paolo Foradori, the only Italian scholar to have written on the issue, “the diminishing military value that NATO currently attributes to sub-strategic nuclear weapons is reflected in the Italian position.”¹⁹ Foradori quotes a number of Italian politicians and experts in their opinion that TNW have no military value, including Massimo D’Alema and Gianfranco Fini. Likewise, Giorgio La Malfa MP states that “TNW have no military significance today because there is no credible military scenario for their use. They are useless and

¹⁸ This unitary motion is the result of three different motions presented by Mogherini Rebesani et al n. [1-00359](#), Bosi et al n. [1-00369](#) e Boniver, Dozzo, Iannaccone et al n. [1-00370](#), concerning initiatives on nuclear proliferation and disarmament. It does not have binding power on the government.

¹⁹ Paolo Foradori, *Tactical Nuclear Weapons in Italy: Striking the balance between disarmament aspirations and Alliance obligations*, Istituto Affari Internazionali, 4 March 2011, p. 4 available in Italian at <http://www.iai.it/pdf/DocIAI/iai1104.pdf>.

we can get rid of them.”²⁰ Along the same lines, Stefano Silvestri, Chair of the Italian Institute of Foreign Affairs (IAI), affirms that “these weapons have almost nil military value,” and analyst Pietro Batacchi, defines the weapons as “a relics of the Cold War, a liability, unnecessary to Italy’s security.”²¹

Nevertheless, according to a senior Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) official, the value of TNW has been in representing Alliance cohesion and in the coupling of US commitments to Europe: “the risk and responsibility sharing is fundamental to Italian authorities and to the understanding they have of Alliance cohesion.”²² In this respect, NATO has long been considered Italy’s primary hard security provider (followed by the EU in more soft security issues) and still provides a “much stronger guarantee of territorial integrity than the Italian armed forces would ever be able to provide alone.”²³ Understandably, Italy sees a robust interest in keeping NATO strong and united, with responsibilities shared amongst allies. This burden sharing has a long history, referred to by one MFA official as the Alliance’s “*Pole star*.”²⁴ According to Silvestri, “the American nuclear guarantee is still important to European security, and the nuclear element is at its core. Italian

authorities fear that by removing [the nuclear element]...this guarantee may somehow be weakened.”²⁵ This in turn “would risk the credibility of the Alliance’s collective defense system.”²⁶ He indicates in addition that the “Italian authorities are against unilateral reductions because they believe TNW should be included in negotiations on future arms control with Russia,” a view backed up in an interview with a senior foreign ministry official who saw TNW as a “bargaining chip” vis-à-vis Russia.²⁷ Locking US TNW into negotiations with Russia presents a certain degree of complications, first and foremost because Russia sees few incentives to negotiate its TNW away.²⁸ Nevertheless, this reflects the policy of the US Administration²⁹ and the consensus of the Alliance as expressed in the Strategic Concept, and in meetings

²⁰ Author’s interview with Giorgio La Malfa MP, April 2011.

²¹ Author’s interview with Stefano Silvestri, Chair of the Istituto Affari Internazionali, April 2011. And with Pietro Batacchi from CESI, Centro Studi Internazionali, May 2010.

²² Author’s interview with senior MFA official, June 2010.

²³ Riccardo Alcaro, *The Italian Government on the NATO’s New Strategic Concept*, Istituto Affari Internazionali, 12 July 2010, p.3.

²⁴ Author’s interview with senior MFA official, June 2010.

²⁵ Author’s interview with Stefano Silvestri, April 2011.

²⁶ *Idem*.

²⁷ Author’s interview with Stefano Silvestri, April 2011 and with senior MFA official, June 2010.

²⁸ Russia, in fact, has had a long-standing conditionality on TNW that NATO should bring all of the nuclear weapons deployed on NATO territory in Europe back to the United States before Russia would consider beginning talks. Russia, furthermore appears attached to the deployment of its own TNW for a number of reasons including the need to balance US and NATO conventional superiority, resolve differences regarding the Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) and deter, and if necessary defend against, future Chinese territorial aggression. To complicate matters further, Russia wants to add missile defence to the equation. Thus, finding an arrangement that takes into account the capabilities of conventional forces, nuclear capabilities, and strategic defences will prove to be very difficult.

²⁹ When ratifying the New START Treaty in December 2010, the US Senate adopted a resolution obliging the US government to start talks on TNW with Russia.
<http://en.rian.ru/world/20110203/162430188.html>.

since. Because they are in line with the consensus, the Italian government may see no reason to risk rocking the boat by publicly voicing their agreement.

Conclusion

Transatlantic solidarity, Alliance cohesion and Russia are the main considerations preoccupying Italian policy makers when it comes to TNW policy and explain Italy's particularly cautious approach. Whilst recognizing that TNW today have no military value, Italy appreciates their political dimensions and, in more utilitarian terms, believes they should be used in negotiation with Russia. At the same time, however, Italy has expressed commitment to the long-term vision of a world free from nuclear weapons, and supports disarmament steps. It has committed to support the reduction of TNW on the European territory with the view of their final elimination.

Concluding, Italy is caught in a fundamental ambiguity. As pointed out by Giorgio La Malfa MP: "whilst in official statements Italy is in favor of removal, the emphasis that has been put by Italian officials on the need for a collegial decision inside NATO, indicates a very serious ambiguity insofar as submitting any initiative to a will (within NATO) that simply is not there. This means de facto to be against removing TNW."³⁰ More cautious on this point a senior MFA official who captured Italy's position in one sentence by saying that Italy is "neither in favor nor against [the removal of TNW]"

³⁰ Author's interview with Giorgio La Malfa MP, April 2011.

adding that "any fundamental shift will depend on the US"³¹

This final point that Italy may in the end decide to accommodate US preferences appeared to be shared amongst some interviewees. It would be in line with a tradition of foreign policy decisions made by Italian authorities, reflecting a bipartisan consensus on the primacy of Italy's relationship with Washington.³²

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³¹ Author's interview with senior MFA official, February 2011.

³² Jason W. Davidson, *Italy-US Relations since the End of the Cold War: Prestige, Peace, and the Transatlantic Balance*, Bulletin of Italian Politics, Vol. 1, No. 2, 2009, 289-308.