

NATO

nuclear weapons policy in Europe

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The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) was formed in 1949 in response to a perceived threat of conventional attack from the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). Begun as a group of 10 western European states, as well as Canada and the United States of America (USA), NATO has since grown to an alliance of 28 European and North American states, including three former Soviet Republics: Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

EVEN THOUGH the Trident nuclear missile system draws most public attention, in fact the UK also participates in another nuclear weapons programme: the 'sharing' of some 150+ US nuclear weapons with its NATO Allies. Although only five Allies physically host these weapons (B61 nuclear gravity bombs), all NATO Allies are said to share in the responsibility for maintaining the weapons in Europe, as well as undertaking specific roles in the delivery of those weapons to target in time of crisis.

From September 1954 until July 2008, US nuclear weapons maintained a continual presence within the UK independent of UK nuclear forces. Their withdrawal was undertaken quietly, and in contrast to publicly stated fears that further removal of US nuclear weapons in Europe could somehow undermine the NATO Alliance; withdrawal of identical weapons from Greece in 2001 did not affect NATO negatively, either.

This briefing will outline the history of US nuclear weapons in Europe, the strains which NATO has both faced and created during the post-Cold War period, and the prospects for stable European security and peace in the face of continued NATO nuclear weapons 'sharing'.

The current generation of US nuclear weapons in Europe, the B61 gravity bombs, are 'hosted' by five NATO Allies: Belgium (at Kleine Brogel air base); Germany (at Büchel air base); Italy (at Ghedi Torre air base); the Netherlands (at Volkel air base); and Turkey (at Incirlik air base, one of the planning sites for the attempted military coup d'état in July 2016).

These weapons represent the legacy of a failed policy: 'Flexible Response', the Kennedy-era reaction to the previous 'Massive Retaliation' theory propounded by the Eisenhower administration and pressed on its somewhat dubious NATO Allies. Under Massive Retaliation, the only response required by NATO to Soviet aggression at any level was to attack targets behind the Iron Curtain with nuclear weapons.

To be sure, this lacked credibility, when the prospect of a Soviet attack across the East/West German border with armoured units could be expected to result in a mushroom cloud over Leningrad. The Soviets treated it as the non-threat that it was and continued to upgrade both their conventional and nuclear capabilities in Europe.

As it gradually dawned on US and NATO decision-makers that their nuclear posture verged on the absurd, the Flexible Response doctrine of the early 1960s represented both a means back to credibility, and an increased chance that nuclear weapons would be used in Europe in time of crisis. Now, if a Soviet armoured unit were to attack across the East/West German border, it could expect to be met first by NATO tanks, and if they defeated that response, then small-yield, short-range nuclear weapons would provide NATO with a more realistic (and therefore much more likely and dangerous) defence option.

Such 'tactical' nuclear weapons (TNW; but surely a misnomer in an age when no deliberate nuclear explosion can fail to have strategic effect, regardless of its size or the range of its delivery mechanism) soon filled the conceptual gap between Soviet and NATO conventional capabilities in Europe. The stockpile of such NATO weapons eventually peaked in 1971 at 7,300 warheads, long after it had become clear that the Soviets, too, possessed 'tactical' nuclear weapons in abundance. (Their arsenal of such weapons would eventually grow to over 20,000, possibly as many as 25,000.)

Despite a series of nuclear accidents, misperceptions, and crisis near-misses, the US and USSR managed to see out the Cold War without triggering nuclear Armageddon. What followed was criminally unplanned, and missed opportunities characterised the immediate post-Cold War era. Although both the US and the Soviet Union had agreed to undertake reductions to both their strategic and intermediate-range

nuclear forces (e.g., the SALT I and II treaties, the START treaty, and the INF treaty), no bilateral consultations on reductions to and/or removal of TNW ever took place.

What did occur, however, was a series of ‘unilateral/reciprocal’ gestures in late 1991 and early 1992 between President George H.W. Bush, on the one hand, and General Secretary of the Soviet Union Mikhail Gorbachev and later President of the Russian Federation Boris Yeltsin on the other. These Presidential Nuclear Initiatives (PNI) were to vastly reduce the number of TNW in Europe, as well as completely eliminating nuclear weapons aboard US Navy surface vessels, and de-alerting US strategic bombers for the first time since 1957.

However, the PNI can only be viewed as a partial success, since thousands of TNW remained in place in Europe following their completion, and in fact over 1,200 still do so today. It is upon these last few hundreds of TNW that we must focus our attention, as they tell part of a tragic story of missed opportunities and foregone chances since the end of the Cold War – as well as a grim (and unnecessary) backdrop to today’s NATO-Russia tensions.

In 1990, between the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, agreements were made in secret between the US, NATO governments including West Germany, and other key players in order to offer incentives to the Soviets to allow the reunification of Germany as the peaceful climax to the Cold War. When interviewed in November 2009 about what Russia got from this fundamental realignment of Europe, then-Russian President Dmitri Medvedev replied, *“None of the things that we were assured, namely that NATO would not expand endlessly eastwards and our interests would be continuously taken into consideration.”*

Although NATO continues to deny it, evidence persists that the US government, on behalf of its NATO Allies, promised the Soviet Union that NATO would not, in fact, enlarge its boundaries to the east by seeking as new members either former Warsaw Pact satellites or former Soviet republics. What happened instead is instructive, if only as a blueprint of how not to win friends and influence nations. Stripped of its reason to exist, NATO chose instead to expand eastward, adding East Germany in 1990, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland in 1999, and seven other Eastern European countries in 2004, including the former Soviet Baltic republics.

During this entire period, the Russian Federation sought closer relations with both the US and NATO, evinced by the signing of the NATO-Russia Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security in 1997. Even the election of Vladimir Putin as President of the Russian Federation in March 2000 did not dampen the cooperative spirit which Russia extended to the West. On 11 September 2001, in fact, Putin was the first foreign leader to contact President George W. Bush following the attacks on the World Trade Centre and Pentagon. Putin unilaterally

cancelled Russian strategic training exercises in the far North in order to avoid possible reaction from US strategic forces on edge due to the terrorist attacks.

Three years later, Putin’s reward was to see NATO’s largest wave of enlargement take place. In 2008, however, all hope of reconciling NATO-Russia relations appeared gone when, in March of that year, NATO guaranteed future membership to both Georgia and Ukraine at its Bucharest Summit. Russian reaction was neither timid nor long in coming, with Russian forces invading Georgia in August of that same year. In 2014, of course, the other Russian shoe fell hard when Russia annexed Crimea and undertook ‘hybrid war’ operations in eastern Ukraine. Western-imposed sanctions against Russia and Putin’s government increased after the Ukraine incidents, leading to the current situation of moderate tension, ill will and poor communications.

It is against this background that we must judge the salience of US ‘shared’ nuclear weapons in Europe. When, a few years ago, it appeared the time was ripe to do more in the way of nuclear reductions in Europe following the New START Treaty signature and entry into force in 2011, attention drifted briefly to the 180 nuclear warheads in NATO bases around Europe. As though just noticing that these weapons had been left behind by the PNI process, commentators called for a TNW negotiation to match the advances made by the New START and INF Treaties on long-range strategic and intermediate-range nuclear weapons, respectively.

It was then, however, that the political narratives of President Obama’s ‘Prague Agenda’, named after the April 2009 speech which contained his vision of a world free of nuclear weapons, on the one hand, and Russian actions in Georgia and Ukraine in particular, on the other, collided. Having had the entire post-Cold War period in which to complete nuclear reductions in Europe and transfer the last US TNW back to America, and in which to engage with the Russian Federation on new modes of cooperation rather than simply and reflexively expanding, NATO found itself with a new narrative: How to address ‘increasing Russian aggression.’

NATO’s actions are problematic from Moscow’s perspective for three major reasons:

1. **Expansion:** Even today, NATO is considering taking in new members, despite decades of Russian requests that such enlargement cease, or at least draw Moscow into close consultations before any new invitations are issued.
2. **Missile Defence:** US plans to install ballistic missile defence assets in Europe, ostensibly to counter an evolving ballistic missile threat from Iran, have provoked Moscow’s ire since first announced in 2007. Despite major revisions to the original Bush plan by Obama in 2010, Russian disbelief that such a system could be aimed at any ICBMs other than its own have yet to be overcome.
3. **TNW:** Once again, we return to the 150+ B61 nuclear

bombs in Europe. Russia can't understand how such a Cold War relic can form such a wedge in its relations with NATO, but the refusal of some NATO Allies to even discuss the weapons' removal tends to stoke Russian paranoid tendencies.

The problems with NATO's 'shared' B61s are twofold: They are militarily useless and politically dangerous. The B61 was first fielded in the 1960s, and is set to undergo a massive update and up-grade programme over the next few years, which, whilst it addresses some of the military disutility issues of the system, in fact only stokes the political problems with the bombs.

NATO plans call for the loading of B61 bombs at 'shared' bases in, e.g., Germany, onto German Tornado aircraft, thence to fly toward designated targets with an escort of NATO air defence suppression aircraft. Since distances between NATO's nuclear air bases and any conceivable targets are far greater than they were in the 1980s, mid-air refuelling will be a must. In short, the B61 'threat' is hardly likely to keep Mr. Putin awake at night. To be an effective nuclear deterrent, a weapons system needs credibility – and this the Tornado/B61 pairing will never have.

Beyond the military uselessness of the B61, there is the political problem. NATO operates by consensus, and all 28 Allies must agree before B61s can be released to the authority of NATO's supreme military commander, SACEUR, in time of crisis. The problem is this: In time of crisis, Turkey will never go on record as having approved the dropping of B61s on targets inside Iran, nor will Germany agree to join the consensus to drop nuclear weapons on Russia. These situations are simply not credible, and both Putin and Iranian leaders are well aware of this.

In short, NATO believes it can 'deter' Russia or other potential malefactors with an obsolete nuclear bomb system, delivered by short-range fighter-bomber, and which requires multiple aerial refuelling missions to arrive at any target outside NATO Europe. Needless to say, this is not the stuff of which deterrence is made.

For these practical reasons, as well as less tangible hopes that a dramatic unilateral withdrawal of B61s from Europe by the US could yet provoke reciprocal measures by Russia, it is incumbent upon CND members and supporters to remain cognizant that the UK participates in two nuclear programmes with NATO, and that they must make their voices heard when these issues are considered in London or (still) in Brussels.

Ted Seay

A 26-year veteran of the American Foreign Service, Ted Seay served at the U.S. Mission to NATO as arms control advisor from 2008 to 2011. Before that, he was seconded to the Secretariat of the Wassenaar Arrangement in Vienna from 2005 to 2008. Prior postings included Slovenia (1998-2001) as liaison to the International Trust Fund for Demining; State EUR/RPM (1996-1998), negotiating compliance with the Dayton Peace Accords; and State PM/SPN (1994-1996), where he helped draft Dayton's disarmament annex. Seay joined the State Department in 1985.

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