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NATO nukes in Europe

By Kate Hudson, CND General Secretary

The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) is a nuclear-armed alliance which insists that a nuclear capability is essential to the security of its members. However, most of its 29 member states do not possess nuclear weapons. Only three of its members have their own arsenals – the US, France and the UK, but the rest are required to participate in the ‘sharing’ of around 180 US nuclear weapons. All NATO members are required to share in the responsibility for maintaining the weapons in Europe and in the event of war, ‘host’ country aircraft will deliver the bombs.

Until recently, only five countries have been physically ‘hosting’ these weapons (B61 nuclear free-fall gravity bombs), but news from expert Hans Kristensen indicates that these weapons are also returning to Britain – or may even already be here.¹ 110 B61s were sited at RAF Lakenheath in the UK until 2008 when they were withdrawn. The return of US nuclear weapons to Britain is a significant escalation of NATO nuclear firepower in Europe, and it’s particularly dangerous to bring them back at this time, in the context of the Ukraine war with its risk of nuclear conflict. British MPs active in Parliamentary CND have been questioning government about the return of the weapons. Initially the MoD response was that it was ‘unable to comment on US spending decisions and capabilities, which are a matter for the US government’. Subsequently the MoD confirmed that it has agreed ‘to deliver a number of infrastructure programmes and projects on behalf of the United States Visiting Forces at RAF Lakenheath.’² Questions are continuing.

Hans Kristensen explains the ‘sharing’ arrangements: *‘The ‘host’ weapons at the national bases are under the custody of US Air Force Munitions Support Squadron (MUNSS) in peacetime, but the weapons are stored in underground vaults inside the protective aircraft shelters just a few meters below the wings of the aircraft. In times of war, the weapons would be handed over to the non-nuclear countries if the US president authorised employment of the weapons. But even during peacetime, the US Air Force equips the allied aircraft with the electronic and mechanical interfaces, and trains the pilots to load and employ the weapons.’*³

The ‘shared’ bombs currently stationed in five countries are: at the Kleine Brogel air base in Belgium (10-20), at the Büchel Air Base in Germany (10-20), at the Volkel air base in the Netherlands (10-20), in Italy at the Aviano and Ghedi bases (60–70) and at Incirlik airbase in Turkey (60-70). While the

governments of these countries have never officially declared the presence of these weapons, both former Italian President, Francesco Cossiga, and former Dutch Prime Minister, Ruud Lubbers, have confirmed their existence.

There is strong opposition to these weapons being sited in Europe, including from some of the host nation governments. Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands have all, unsuccessfully, called for the removal of US nuclear weapons from their countries. The response to their request has been that NATO decisions are consensus-based and all member states would have to agree to their removal. However, B61s used to be sited in Greece as well as in the UK, but these were removed, respectively, in 2001 and between 2004 and 2008. In the case of the UK it was indicated that it was the result of persistent popular protest.

But it is not simply the fact that these nuclear weapons are based in Europe that attracts criticism. There is widespread concern about the type of nuclear weapons as well. The current B61 is a so-called ‘tactical’ or non-strategic nuclear weapon. This means it is a low-yield weapon, designed primarily for use on the battlefield. ‘Strategic’ nuclear weapons, like those of the UK’s Trident nuclear weapons system, are designed to hit major targets, like cities or major industrial areas, in the interior of enemy territory. The B61 has a variable yield, of between 0.3 to 340 kilotons that can be adapted according to the scenario in which it might be used. This clearly shows that ‘low-yield’ is a misnomer; the atom bomb dropped on Hiroshima was 15 kilotons. In the event of nuclear war over Ukraine, these are the weapons likely to be used by NATO.

Tactical nuclear weapons are also more vulnerable than strategic nuclear weapons to terrorist acquisition, because of their generally smaller size, greater numbers,

wide distribution and less sophisticated locking and safeguard technology. This is particularly worrying when considering that the Turkish nuclear weapon base is less than 70 miles from war-torn Syria. The wisdom of storing such a large nuclear weapons stockpile in such a volatile region must be in doubt.

The siting of tactical nuclear weapons in Europe originated during the Cold War. As Tim Street from the Oxford Research Group observes:

*'The justification given for the deployment of these weapons was the need to deter an attack on European NATO allies by the Soviet Union's conventional military forces. It was argued that Moscow's superior numbers of troops, tanks and artillery threatened Europe and had to be countered. The US spread its nuclear weapons strategically across several bases in Europe, supposedly providing the alliance with a 'flexible response', meaning the ability to control escalation during a conflict, with the first use of nuclear weapons not ruled out.'*⁴

Whether or not NATO states are directly involved in the nuclear weapons hosting, they are all part of NATO's Nuclear Planning Group (NPG) – with the exception of France, which has chosen not to participate and unlike the UK, its nuclear weapons are not assigned to NATO. The NPG is NATO's 'senior body on nuclear policy issues', founded in 1996 to provide a consultative process on nuclear doctrine within NATO.⁵

Given that NATO, including the NPG operates by consensus, the question remains as to how rapidly a decision on the use of B61s could be made – if at all. NATO members were divided over action on the Iraq war and President Bush proceeded with the war on Iraq in 2003 with support from a 'Coalition of the Willing' instead. NATO members today may also have different political and security priorities but nevertheless, these weapons remain a substantial threat to those in conflict with NATO in the European theatre, particularly in view of the new, increasingly militarised, unity in Europe, brought about by the Ukraine war.

NPT Breach

What is never acknowledged by official sources is that nuclear 'sharing' is actually illegal. Having US nuclear bombs in Europe conflicts with the legal obligations of the signatories to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Article I of the NPT forbids the transfer of nuclear weapons to non-nuclear weapon states: 'Each nuclear-weapon state party to the Treaty undertakes not to transfer to any recipient whatsoever nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices or control over such weapons or explosive devices directly, or indirectly.'

Article II imposes a complementary requirement on non-nuclear weapons states not to 'receive the transfer' of nuclear weapons. NATO nuclear sharing breaches these obligations as it is intended to allow the transfer of US nuclear weapons to non-nuclear allies - Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, Italy and Turkey – to deliver in time of war. NATO asserts that NATO's nuclear sharing agreement predates the NPT and claims that it doesn't involve the transfer of nuclear weapons or control over

them unless NATO has gone to war, in which case the treaty would no longer apply.

These are dubious excuses to put it mildly. As Acronym points out: *'If any other NPT states tried to share nuclear weapons using similar arrangements, the NATO countries would be the first to condemn them for breaching Articles I and II of the NPT. Yet if they adopted the US/NATO interpretation of their NPT obligations, Russia could reintroduce nuclear weapons into Belarus for wartime use by Belarusian armed forces; or China could create nuclear sharing arrangements with North Korea. In effect, NATO has established and continues to maintain a privileged practice that it would not want others to emulate.'*⁶

NATO's excuses for its breach of the NPT have been the subject of much debate and disquiet amongst signatories to the NPT over the last few decades. In 1985, the NPT Review Conference agreed as part of its Final Document that the Treaty remains in force 'under any circumstances', thus negating the argument that war would invalidate Articles I and II. Since then, a growing number of NPT signatories, including more than 100 states in the Non-Aligned Movement, have called on NATO members to bring their policies into line with their NPT obligations.

The UK's own nuclear weapons system – Trident – has been assigned to NATO under the 1963 Polaris Sales Agreement. Ultimately, this means that the UK's nuclear weapons could be used against a country attacking (or threatening to attack) one of the alliance member states since an attack on one NATO member state is seen as being an attack on all member states. NATO also rejects a policy of 'no first use' of nuclear weapons.

Upgrade

When the bombs arrive at Lakenheath, they will be a new version of the B61s with enhanced and much more dangerous capabilities. This follows a decision by the US administration in 2013 to initiate a Life Extension Programme for the current B61s, extending their life by up to 30 years. The new bombs, the B61-12s, can either function as gravity bombs or as guided drop bombs. This means they can be targeted with GPS and satellite, can be accurately steered and can be used as attack weapons. Reports suggest that the deployment of the B61-12s is being accelerated to bases across Europe. At the same time, new US-built F35a fighter jets will be coming to Europe, bought by a number of countries, and will carry the B61-12s. They have already arrived in Britain. Taking the jets and the bombs together, this represents a significant enhancement of US nuclear capability in Europe.

Withdrawal

The US should withdraw all its nuclear weapons from Europe. This would ensure compliance with the NPT Articles I and II. The presence of these weapons endorses the dangerous concept that non-nuclear countries may adopt nuclear roles on behalf of nuclear powers, and this has to be confronted and ended. Nuclear withdrawal – rather than reinforcement - could help ease the ongoing tension between NATO and Russia, and pave the way for further negotiations on nuclear weapons reductions with

Russia. At a time when the risk of nuclear war is the greatest it has been for decades, this would be a very welcome development. Peace organisations across Europe are active in their opposition to NATO nuclear weapons in Europe and the peace movement

here in the UK is stepping up its activity on this front, linking the struggle at Lakenheath, once again, with those at other US nuclear bases across Europe.

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- ¹ 'Lakenheath Air Base Added To Nuclear Weapons Storage Site Upgrades', Federation of American Scientists, 11 April 2022 <https://fas.org/blogs/security/2022/04/lakenheath-air-base-added-to-nuclear-weapons-storage-site-upgrades/>
 - ² Question for Ministry of Defence, tabled 17 May 2022 <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2022-05-17/3555>
 - ³ Kristensen, Hans 'Non-Strategic Nuclear Weapons', Federation of American Scientists, 2012 https://fas.org/_docs/Non_Strategic_Nuclear_Weapons.pdf
 - ⁴ Street, Tim 'ORG Explains #5: NATO Nuclear Sharing', Oxford Research Group, 2018 <https://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/org-explains-5-nato-nuclear-sharing>
 - ⁵ https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_50069.htm
 - ⁶ Acronym Institute, 'NATO's nuclear sharing: A cold war anachronism that undermines the NPT', 2017 <http://www.acronym.org.uk/old/articles-and-analyses/natos-nuclear-sharing-cold-war-anachronism-undermines-npt?page=show>

