

The Coming NATO Nuclear Debate

*Bruno Tertrais**

Theme: This ARI argues that NATO Member States must reassess the need for a US nuclear presence in Europe.

Summary: The topic of the continuing US nuclear presence in Europe –a legacy of the Cold War– has been a recurring feature of discussion throughout the Alliance for decades. But there are good reasons to believe that a major new debate will develop in the coming years on this issue given the convergence of events that should take place in the years 2009-15. The next NPT Review Conference will be held in 2010. The construction of a ground-based interceptors site in Europe is due to be completed in around 2011-13 and NATO's other missile defence programmes should have come to fruition by then. At about the same time, decisions will have to be made regarding the replacement of most NATO nuclear-capable bomber aircraft.

This paper analyses NATO's current nuclear position, the arguments for and against withdrawal, and the need for a calm process of behind-the-doors consultations on this issue, with an open mind and with no taboos. Otherwise, NATO could generate a new controversy between Member States and put at risk the credibility of its nuclear deterrence.

Analysis: According to open sources, the US continues to station a number of B-61 gravity bombs in five or six European countries, which can be carried by a number of certified US and European aircraft. The continuation of the US nuclear presence in Europe, which started in 1954, was reportedly authorised by George Bush –as by all previous US Presidents since Eisenhower– in 2004.

European 'host nations' include Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Turkey and perhaps also the UK. Four bases host a small number of weapons (probably about 20 each) dedicated to European air forces: those of Kleine Brogel (Belgium), Volkel (Netherlands), Büchel (Germany) and Ghedi Torre (Italy). The only major NATO nuclear bases today are US bases on the Alliance's 'Southern Flank': Aviano (Italy) and Inçirlik (Turkey). Each of these two bases reportedly holds about 50 weapons. Whether or not there are still US nuclear bombs in the UK remains unclear. Hans Kristensen, a US analyst who has been closely monitoring the issue for years, affirmed in June 2008 that the 100 or so weapons deployed there, which were earmarked for US Air Force use, had been removed ('US Nuclear Weapons Withdrawn from the United Kingdom', FAS Strategic Security Blog, 28/VI/2008). However, a 1996 press report had made the same

* *Senior Research Fellow, Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique.*

claim ('US nukes out of Britain', *The Sunday Telegraph*, 27/X/1996)—, which later turned out to be erroneous.

The current total number of US nuclear weapons in Europe is classified —estimates vary considerably— but it is probably around 150 to 350. All weapons are under US control, and would remain so, even in the event of a crisis, when carried by European aircraft. Although the NATO Council would make a recommendation on their use, the final decision would remain in US hands, as it would remain in the hands of London for the use of British submarine-launched missiles in support of NATO.

Today, this stockpile has an almost 'dormant' status. It was reduced by around 90% in the early 1990s. Further reductions were made in 2001, when all weapons were withdrawn from Greece, and in 2005, when they were removed from the Ramstein US Air Force base in Germany. In addition, the dual-capability aircraft which are equipped and trained for nuclear missions are now on a very low level of alert (months).

Other NATO countries have volunteered to take part in nuclear missions at times of crisis. A 'nuclear raid' would require a large number of aircraft for refuelling, the suppression of air defences and other tasks, thus giving the opportunity for a wider number of nations to participate. This readiness of Alliance countries to join in a collective nuclear strike is intended to reinforce deterrence.

The Arguments for Withdrawal

The withdrawal from Europe of US gravity bombs might have significant benefits from an arms control and non-proliferation perspective. Many States that do not have nuclear weapons have long complained about NATO's nuclear-sharing arrangements, which in their view are contrary to the NPT. Also, an end to this process would help to create a new international norm, whereby no nuclear weapon can be permanently stationed on the territory of a non-nuclear-weapon State. This may help to avoid a future situation in which other countries might imitate the NATO arrangement: Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, for instance, or China and Burma.

Since September 2001, the fear of terrorism has heightened security concerns at nuclear bases. In 2008, a US blue-ribbon panel indicated that security standards on the outside perimeter of NATO nuclear bases (which are under the responsibility of the host country) did not all meet US standards. While NATO officials are adamant that these are minor issues which do not detract from the security of the sites in any way, the report was used as an additional argument by those who would like to see the weapons removed.

Another argument is the absence of a convincing military rationale for the continued forward basing of air-launched bombs. Given the advances of the past 30 years in intelligence, accuracy and command and control arrangements, there are few missions, if any, that NATO cannot carry out by resorting to US strategic forces, or to sea-launched cruise missiles (an option that exists at times of crisis). Moreover, air-delivered gravity bombs are increasingly less likely to reach targets on the territory of countries which have a well-defended airspace, since aircraft have to actually fly on to the target and are currently unable to launch from a distance.

The political rationale for the US nuclear presence is itself questionable. Why would NATO need the permanent presence of nuclear weapons to ensure Alliance cohesion and solidarity? US nuclear weapons have been withdrawn from the territories of other allies

such as Japan and South Korea. And given the Alliance's expansion since 1999, NATO countries with nuclear weapons on their soil are now a small minority –compared with around 50% up until the end of the Cold War–. In other words, the status of 'host country' is now an exception. NATO informed Russia in 1997 that the Alliance had 'no intention, no plan and no reason' to deploy nuclear weapons on the territories of its new members, and this political commitment remains firm.

Finally, since Europe should be protected in the future by antimissile capabilities, some argue that NATO might not need both a 'safety belt' (deterrence) and an 'airbag' (defence). Since most State-based WMD threats to be faced by Europe in the future will be carried by missiles, is defence not enough?

The Arguments Against Withdrawal

However, other factors will make NATO countries hesitate before altering the current arrangement. The first is obviously the sense of growing military threat compared to the strategic scenario of only a few years ago. Iran and Russia, in particular, are now clearly considered potential threats by several Alliance nations. Iran is unanimously perceived to be the most threatening country by the public opinion of NATO countries. Within the Alliance, the percentage of those opposed to Iran acquiring nuclear weapons ranges from 83% (Bulgaria) to 97% (Germany). A nuclear-armed Iran would be considered a serious threat by a large majority of the public throughout NATO: from 65% in Bulgaria to 87% in Italy (47-Nation Pew Global Attitudes Survey, The Pew Global Attitudes Project, 27/VI/2007). If Iran were to reach the nuclear threshold, it would become possible for other countries, such as Egypt, to be tempted to follow suit. The destruction of a North Korean reactor in Syria by Israel in September 2007 was a reminder that nuclear proliferation can bring unpleasant surprises.

Ballistic proliferation could also extend beyond Iran: Syria, Egypt and Pakistan have active ballistic modernisation programs, and Saudi Arabia maintains a force of Chinese-made medium-range missiles. Alliance governments unanimously agree on the potential ballistic threat: while the Heads of State and Government stated in the North Atlantic Council Summit of Bucharest that 'ballistic missile proliferation poses an increasing threat to Allies' forces, territory and populations' (Summit Declaration, 3/IV/2008), NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer has pointed out that 'There is absolutely a shared threat perception between the allies. Allies all agree that there is a threat from ballistic missiles' (Press Conference, 19/IV/2007).

The behaviour of Russia in its neighbourhood, as well as its 2007 decision to 'suspend' its compliance with the Conventional Forces in Europe treaty, is making Eastern European countries increasingly nervous. The bombing of Georgia in August 2008 and the use of short-range ballistic missiles (including the nuclear-capable SS-21 and SS-26), has done nothing to dispel their concern. The continued stationing of US nuclear weapons in Europe reassures neighbouring NATO countries that an aggression against them would be unwise. It also 'balances', to some extent, Russia's possession of a large number of short-range nuclear forces.

Ankara deserves particular attention. The presence of US nuclear weapons on Turkish soil is fairly unpopular within the country, but the military elite view it as a significant component of their relationship with the US. The US nuclear presence reassures allies that might otherwise be tempted to go nuclear. A withdrawal could affect Ankara's perception of its security if faced with a nuclear-capable Iran. Should this be the case,

many observers agree that Turkey could consider a nuclear programme for itself. Turkey currently has a significant civilian nuclear research programme, but does not have the installations required for making fissile material. It would need to either construct a uranium enrichment plant or build a dedicated plutonium production reactor. This would require a break in its current nuclear policy. Furthermore, producing fissile material with such installations would imply a withdrawal from the NPT. To be fair, such an option would appear credible only if three conditions were met: a severe crisis of confidence between Ankara and Washington, a crumbling of the NPT regime and expectations that the EU will refuse to admit Turkey (for it is difficult to imagine the EU admitting in its ranks a new nuclear nation).

Also, not all European members of the Alliance will agree that missile defence will be a perfect substitute for nuclear deterrence (especially given its modest rate of success so far, from a technical point of view). More generally, a US nuclear withdrawal could be *perceived* as a lessening of transatlantic security ties by countries which are particularly keen to shelter behind US protection, such as Poland, the Baltic States and Turkey. Finally, despite the shortcomings of the current stance, there is no substitute for an air-delivered arsenal if NATO wants to continue to have the possibility of organising a multinational 'nuclear raid'. This would not be possible with US strategic weapons or sea-based platforms.

The Upcoming Debate

It is the contention of this analysis that a conjunction of upcoming events will soon trigger a serious political debate on the future of the US nuclear presence in Europe. George Bush's successor will certainly review the US nuclear position, and the question of the so-called 'non-strategic' nuclear weapons (since they are not covered by the traditional US-Russian arms control process) will inevitably be tackled. It is also possible that the very future of the air-launched component of the US deterrent will be discussed. Then, the next NPT Review Conference will take place in the spring of 2010. Many Western nations, as well as countries of the Non-Aligned Movement, will demand progress on nuclear disarmament before that date, in order to ensure the continuation of the treaty's validity and legitimacy. Around the same time (2010-11), decisions will have to be taken regarding the replacement of most NATO nuclear-capable bomber aircraft, which cannot stay in service much beyond the 2017-20 timeframe. Then, around 2020, the B-61 themselves will need to be replaced. Immediately afterwards, around 2011-13, the construction of the European ground-based interceptors site is due to be completed, and the other NATO missile defence programmes should come to fruition. Meanwhile, a new NATO Strategic Concept is likely to be drafted during the years 2009-10, to be presented to the Alliance Heads of State and Government in 2010 or 2011. This will certainly include a review of NATO's nuclear and missile defence policy.

In Europe, many political parties, in particular in Northern and Central Europe (and mostly on the left of the political spectrum), are calling for a radical re-think of NATO's nuclear stance. In the European Parliament, a loose coalition of politicians ('Parliamentarians for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament', led by a German MEP) is calling for the immediate withdrawal of US weapons. Almost all German political parties favour such a withdrawal: the Left Party, the Free Democratic Party (FDP), the Green Party and a majority of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), which is part of the current ruling coalition ('German Politicians Want Nukes out of Europe', *Spiegel Online*, 23/VI/2008). The German and Norwegian governments have openly called for a discussion on this issue. In Washington, most analysts close to the Democratic Party also consider that such

deployments are outdated. And in the Pentagon itself, the US Air Force has long lobbied for an end to the nuclear mission in Europe, which it tends to consider a waste of resources. The cost of replacing nuclear-capable aircraft will certainly be a key issue in the debate. So far, many European host nations have balked at the idea of paying the additional costs needed to give a nuclear capability to the *Eurofighter* or the *Joint Strike Fighter* (JSF), which are to replace the ageing Tornado and F-16 currently in the inventory of most host nations.

In the face of such opposition, there also exists, however, strong support for the continuation of the US nuclear presence. This includes some key political forces such as the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), which is the senior partner in the German governing coalition, and thus reflects the government's position. Within the German bureaucracy, the Defence Ministry remains a strong supporter of Berlin's nuclear role as do most Defence Ministries of the host countries. Besides the traditional arguments about the value of nuclear deterrence –including a possible nuclear Iran in the future– the weight that Berlin's 'host country' status and influence gives it in NATO strategic debates is also mentioned.

Importantly, the new NATO members have been staunch supporters of the US nuclear presence since their entry into the Alliance. In particular, Poland and the Baltic states, for the reasons mentioned above, are keen to see its continuation.

Finally, even though France is not directly involved in this debate since its nuclear forces are not assigned to NATO (and it is not a member of the Nuclear Planning Group), its probable re-entry into the integrated military structure might force it to take a position on these issues, even though it intends to keep its nuclear force completely independent.

Conclusions

Scenarios for 2010 and Beyond

Given the state of play, what are the most probable scenarios for 2010-15? It is likely that the US Administration which will come into power in January 2009 will attempt to put non-strategic weapons on the agenda of future arms control talks with Russia (which will probably begin soon after, since START-1 expires in December 2009). However, there is no indication that Russia would be ready to 'trade' or even significantly reduce its non-strategic stockpile for the presence of US nuclear weapons in Europe. Conceivably, it might be possible to envision the withdrawal of all US and Russian nuclear weapons from Central and Eastern Europe, to create a *de facto* (though not *de jure*) nuclear-weapon-free zone from the Eastern French border to the Urals. This would ensure, in particular, that no Russian nuclear weapons are stationed in the Kaliningrad oblast and thus settle an important Baltic and Polish concern. But it is an unlikely scenario.

If there is stronger pressure within host countries such as Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium to do so –or if they refuse to pay the cost of aircraft modernisation– NATO might consider the 'consolidation' of most currently deployed weapons in the two remaining US bases of Aviano and Inçirlik, and possibly three if Lakenheath is included. Another option in such a case would be to bring an end to nuclear sharing *per se*, but a continuation of nuclear basing in Europe. The US would retain a small number of nuclear weapons in some of these countries –the UK and Turkey– for use exclusively by the US air forces. At an extreme, a US nuclear presence only in the UK, which is a nuclear-weapon state,

would maintain a visible transatlantic nuclear link while still allowing the creation of the new international norm mentioned above.

However, there are also good reasons to maintain the current situation, which has been 'tried and tested' over several decades. Whatever happens, it is important for NATO governments to avoid rushing into any decision on the future of US nuclear deployment. Once withdrawn, US weapons cannot be brought back. The Alliance should begin quiet, behind-the-doors consultations on this issue, with an open mind. All options should be discussed, with no taboos.

This sensitive debate should not be brought into the limelight before thinking has matured and options have been carefully thought through. The worse that could happen for NATO would be a decision forced by an uninformed political debate. And whatever the Alliance's Heads of State and Government may decide, it should bring net benefits in terms of security for the countries of Europe and for NATO as a whole.

Bruno Tertrais
Senior Research Fellow, Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique