

Removal of nuclear weapons from Europe – Background document

The United States deploys tactical nuclear weapons in six NATO countries, in Britain (Lakenheath) and in five non-nuclear states: Belgium (Kleine Brogel), Germany (Büchel and Ramstein), Italy (Aviano), Netherlands (Volkel) and Turkey (Incirlik). In total, 480 gravity bombs of the B61 family are deployed, each with a power between 0.3 and 170 kilotons TNT, the higher limit corresponding to eight times the power of the Hiroshima bomb. The weapons are stored at US airbases under US control or are kept under US custody at national airbases. In times of war the latter will be delivered by personnel of the national air forces of the involved NATO countries for which the pilots and the airbase staff assigned to such missions are continuously trained. The military authorities of all NATO members, with the exception of France take part in the NATO Nuclear Planning Group, where decisions are made about strike missions and targeting.

NATO officials admit that the arguments for the present deployment of nuclear weapons shifted from military to political: they are kept to support the NATO policy of shared risks, the US nuclear presence in Europe and the transatlantic bond. On the other hand, the bombs have been modernized and upgraded in the last seven years and the potential targeting is extended from the area of the European Command (EUCOM) to the Central Command (CENTCOM) which would allow strike missions to Middle Eastern countries, specifically Iran and Syria. The last fact and the “first-strike principle,” according to which NATO may use nuclear weapons without being attacked by them, intensify the threat of these weapons to the NATO countries and to all humankind. If NATO gets involved in a war and NATO countries use their atomic weapons, they are open for retaliation.

The presence of nuclear weapons in the European countries violates the statutes of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), a Treaty that has been signed by all concerned countries. The NPT forbids the transfer of nuclear weapons to non-nuclear states, as the United States has done, and forbids any state to receive them. In Article VI of the NPT, the nuclear weapon states accept the obligation to negotiate nuclear disarmament in good faith leading to the total abolition of their nuclear arsenals. The presence of nuclear weapons is a permanent source of uncertainty and a threat to European and global security. It is a stimulus for other nations to acquire similar weaponry.

On the other hand, removal of the US nuclear weapons presently deployed in Europe would improve relations with Russia and take away the major obstacle impeding an agreement on reduction or elimination of the extensive Russian arsenal of tactical nuclear weapons. It would open the possibility of establishing a nuclear-free zone in Central and Eastern Europe and would be an important step toward full compliance of the nuclear weapons states with the obligations of the NPT.