

US tactical nuclear weapons in Europe

October 2005



Published by Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament
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THERE IS GROWING CONCERN about the role of tactical nuclear weapons (TNW) in the world. These weapons, which come in many types and sizes, are generally defined as being smaller and more usable than strategic nuclear weapons. They are held in large numbers by the US and Russia in particular. The US deploys TNW on its own soil and also on the soil of some of its NATO partners in Europe.

The present situation

There are estimated to be 480 US tactical nuclear weapons in Europe, deployed at the following bases:

Country	Base	Weapons (B61 bombs)		
		US	Host*	Total
Belgium	Kleine Brogel AB	0	20	20
Germany	Bueschel AB	0	20	20
	Ramstein AB	90	40	130
Italy	Aviano AB	50	0	50
	Ghedi Torre AB	0	40	40
Netherlands	Volkel AB	0	20	20
Turkey	Incirlik AB	50	40	90
United Kingdom	RAF Lakenheath	110	0	110
	Total	300	180	480

**Weapons in the 'Host' column are those which are assigned for delivery by the aircraft of the host country. Weapons in the 'US' column would be delivered by US aircraft.*
(Source: Report by Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), *U.S. Nuclear Weapons in Europe*, February 2005)

This total is higher than each of the individual nuclear arsenals held by the Chinese, British or French. Apart from those based at Lakenheath, Incirlik, Aviano and some at Ramstein, these tactical nuclear weapons are in formations belonging to the host country, with host crew trained to fly them, and, in the event of war, are due to be turned over to the respective host governments. This nuclear sharing is a breach of Articles I and II of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which prohibit, for all parties to the Treaty, transferring or receiving the transfer of nuclear weapons or control over such weapons, directly or indirectly. The US has argued that transfer and control to the non-nuclear weapon states does not occur until wartime, when the treaty no longer applies; but controversy over the interpretation of the Articles has recently increased. As a

report by the Natural Resources Defence Council (NRDC) firmly states, *“Equipping non-nuclear countries with the means to conduct preparation for nuclear warfare expresses a double standard that conflicts with U.S. and European non-proliferation objectives to persuade countries such as Iran and North Korea from developing nuclear weapons.”*¹ Even more strongly does it conflict with the expressed goals of the NPT. The US is the only country to deploy nuclear weapons in other countries.

The dangers

“Nuclear terrorism is one of the most urgent threats of our time.”

(Secretary-General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan to the Committee on the Adoption of a Draft International Treaty to fight nuclear terrorism, 1st April 2005)

TNW are more vulnerable than strategic nuclear weapons to terrorist acquisition, because of their generally smaller size, greater numbers, wide distribution, lack of monitoring in many areas, and ease of use (because they usually have less sophisticated locking and safeguard technology). They are considered as ‘low yield’ weapons, with a variable explosive force between 0.1 kilotons and 1 megaton; the US B61s have a variable yield between 0.3 and 170 kilotons. The Hiroshima bomb had a yield of about 12 kilotons. Thus, TNW can cause enormous damage, death and radiation contamination, and ‘low yield’ has to be seen as a purely military/technical term. Moreover, even without a nuclear detonation, TNW detonated by impact (for example, in a road or air accident, or deliberately) can cause extremely serious damage by dispersal of highly toxic fine particles of plutonium.

CND is very conscious of the danger of accidental detonation, nuclear or otherwise. There were two major nuclear weapons accidents at Lakenheath, in 1956 and 1961 (both kept secret for about 30 years). They did not result in nuclear catastrophe but were fearsome near-misses. In 2003, the US and UK military conducted an exercise, ‘Dimming Sun’, in Norfolk (quite near Lakenheath), involving over 1,000 police, local government, hospital, ambulance and service personnel. The scenario for this exercise was a US Air Force plane crashing with nuclear weapons on board. If the authorities are sufficiently worried about a TNW accident to mount this event (costing several million of dollars), so indeed should we be. And it is not reassuring to learn that in 2003 the pass rate for Air Force Nuclear Surety Inspections hit an all-time low, when only half of the inspections resulted in a pass.²

The most serious danger of TNW is that they are now incorporated into the military planning of the nuclear weapon states and NATO. In the US Nuclear Posture Review of 2002 and NATO’s flexible response and first-use policies, they play a very proactive role, and the US, Russia and almost certainly the UK are planning new or successor types of TNW. Although seen as ‘usable nukes’, they not only cause huge damage themselves, but could also lead to a nuclear conflict of unimaginable proportions.

Attempts to control and reduce tactical nuclear weapons

TNW are not subject to formal arms control agreements. In 1991 the then President Bush announced unilateral reductions in US tactical weapons, and President Gorbachev followed closely with a similar range and proportion of unilateral reductions. This left the US with some 1,600 TNW (480 in Europe) and Russia

with around 3,500, all in Russian territory. However, doubts remain about the numbers, security and other conditions of the latter. Most importantly, the unilateral reductions do not constitute a treaty and have no legal binding force or any provisions for monitoring or verification.

At the 2000 NPT Review Conference, TNW were specified in step nine of the '13 Steps' Plan of Action, agreed unanimously by all member states. Step 9 (c) states:

"The further reduction of non-strategic nuclear weapons, based on unilateral initiatives and as an integral part of the nuclear arms reduction and disarmament process."

At the 2002 Preparatory Conference for the 2005 NPT Review Conference, Germany presented a working paper calling strongly for tactical nuclear disarmament in line with the '13 Steps' Plan. But 2002 was also the year of the US Nuclear Posture Review, which recommended a "capabilities-based" approach to nuclear planning, with "greater flexibility for a range of contingencies". This includes decreased reliance on strategic weapons while simultaneously preparing for more use of TNW, for example earth-penetrating bombs and battlefield weapons. Also proposed is a "revitalised nuclear weapons complex that will ... be able... to design, develop, manufacture and certify new warheads in response to new national security requirements; and maintain readiness to resume underground nuclear testing if required."

In October 2004, at the UN First Committee (of the General Assembly), the New Agenda Coalition (South Africa, Ireland, Sweden, Mexico, Egypt, Brazil) proposed a resolution which included a call to the nuclear weapon states "to take further steps to reduce their non-strategic nuclear arsenals and not to develop new types of nuclear weapons, in accordance with their commitment to diminish the role of nuclear weapons in their security policies." The vote on this was: 135 for, 5 against (US, UK, France, Israel and Latvia), with 25 abstentions (including by Russia). The 'for' votes included those of China, Japan, South Korea, Pakistan and, importantly, Belgium, The Netherlands, Germany and Turkey, all of whom have US B61s on their territory.

The rationale: does it hold up?

US tactical nuclear weapons in Europe are a legacy of the Cold War. The 1991 reductions on the part of the US and Russia were a recognition of this. Why have they not been continued?

According to the Natural Resources Defense Council: "The justifications [on the part of NATO] are poorly explained and muddled, consisting of remnants of Cold War rationale about the Russian threat, vague missions such as war prevention, ambiguous suggestions like deterring proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and dubious claims about nuclear weapons providing a unique link between Europe and its North American allies."³

This is echoed by a number of writers. For example, according to General Sir Hugh Beach:

*"... the continued presence of U.S. TNW in Europe is due more to institutional paralysis than to logic: the desire to demonstrate the U.S.'s continued commitment to European security and some vague concept of risk and burden sharing among NATO allies."*⁴

Neither in military nor political terms does the rationale stand up, and indeed in some respects, like deterrence of proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, it is counter-productive.

What would withdrawal achieve?

First of all, by withdrawing TNW from European soil, compliance with the NPT (Articles I and II) would be achieved. Moreover, the presence of these weapons “*endorses the concept that non-nuclear countries may adopt ‘surrogate’ nuclear roles on behalf of nuclear powers*”;⁵ a dangerous and strenuously unpopular possibility.

In addition, withdrawal is a precondition for TNW negotiations with Russia, which has a longstanding desire to rid Europe of nuclear weapons. On June 2nd this year Russian Defence Minister Sergei Ivanov said, “*We are prepared to start talks about tactical nuclear weapons only when all countries possessing them keep these weapons in their own territory. Russia stores its TNW on its own territory, which cannot be said about other countries.*” This would pave the way for further reductions in Russian and US tactical nuclear weapons. A US/Russian arms control and reduction agreement would provide more secure storage and effective monitoring and verification. This would greatly reduce the opportunities for terrorist acquisition and the spread of nuclear equipment and technology around the world.

Finally, on a lesser scale but still important, withdrawal would virtually eliminate the risks of accident or hostile attack for areas surrounding the bases where US bombs are deployed.

Problems

There are certain difficulties involved in achieving further TNW control and reduction, set out by Lennox and Scoville.⁶ They include the need to change those aspects of military planning which incorporate TNW; recognising the realities of the post-Cold War, post-9/11 world; the asymmetry in numbers between Russian and US TNW; problems in verification because of the small size of TNW, their large numbers and wide distribution; the high cost for Russia of dismantling its weapons. But these would not be intractable difficulties were there a real will to achieve the goal. Some are already being addressed, for example by the US Nunn-Lugar Threat Reduction Act which deals with financial and technical aid for dismantling.

Recent developments

Calls for the withdrawal of US TNW have been made in several NATO countries. In April this year the Belgian Senate led the way with an unanimous resolution demanding the withdrawal of all 480 B61s in Europe (later joined by a resolution in the lower house). The German Defence Minister proposed including the issue on the agenda of the NATO ministerial meeting in early June, as did his counterpart in France. The Social Democrats in the Netherlands have added their voice for withdrawal. However, NATO refused to debate the issue at their meeting, re-affirming instead their nuclear policy as set out in the Strategic Concept of 1999. It seems unlikely at present that those European governments in NATO who host US B61s will press this issue. They “*shy away from urging a change in NATO’s nuclear weapons policy because they fear repercussions for transatlantic relations.*”⁷

During the first week of the NPT Review Conference in May 2005, a new non-governmental network, ‘Nukes-out-of-Europe’, was formed, comprising members from groups in Belgium, The Netherlands,

Germany, Italy and Britain. The network's first project was to involve as many parliamentarians as possible by means of a declaration calling on their governments to begin negotiations for withdrawal. So far 89 have signed declarations, and these were presented to NATO Defence Ministers at their meeting in Berlin on 14-15th September. Efforts will continue to maintain and increase contact with parliamentarians. The network also provides improved communication among member groups and mutual support.

Conclusion

The most effective spur to overall TNW disarmament would be US withdrawal of its nuclear weapons from Europe. Writing in the *Financial Times* (23rd June 2005), the late Robin Cook and Robert Macnamara stated, *"It will be up to Europe's leaders to push Washington to remove the remaining U.S. nuclear weapons deployed in Europe and to push Russia to agree to meaningful talks on verifiable tactical nuclear weapons reductions... The decisions we take now will help determine the safety of the world we bequeath to our children. The task of dealing with this dangerous legacy of the Cold War will not be simple but it must be done, and soon."*

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¹ Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), *U.S. Nuclear Weapons in Europe: A Review of Post-Cold War Policy, Force Levels and War Planning*, prepared by Hans M. Kristensen, February 2005, p6 available on their website at <http://www.nrdc.org/nuclear/euro/euro.pdf>

² NRDC Report *ibid*

³ NRDC Report *ibid* p.70

⁴ Beach, General Sir Hugh, *Tactical Nuclear Weapons: Europe's redundant weapons of mass destruction*, ISIS Saferworld and ISIS Europe, April 2004

⁵ NRDC Report *ibid* p71

⁶ Lennox, R. and Scoville, H, *Briefing Book on Tactical Nuclear Weapons*, Centre for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, 2003

⁷ Olivier Meier, international representative in Berlin of the US-based Arms Control Association quoted in the Global Security Newswire 24th June 2005