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United States nuclear weapons in Europe

Around 200 United States nuclear B61 free-fall gravity bombs are stationed in five countries in Europe: Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, Italy and Turkey. While the governments of these countries have never officially declared the presence of these weapons, individuals such as the former Italian president and former Dutch prime minister have confirmed this to be the case.

THE nuclear sharing arrangement is part of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation's (NATO) defence policy. In peace time, the nuclear weapons stored in non-nuclear countries are guarded by US forces, with a dual code system activated in a time of war. Both host country and the US would then need to approve the use of the weapons, which would be launched on the former's airplanes.

When these bombs were initially deployed, the original targets were eastern European states. But as the Cold War ended, and these states became part of the European Union and in some cases NATO itself, the practice has become provocative, destabilising and dangerous.

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.

Where are the bombs?

Up to 20 nuclear bombs are stored at each of the following: the Kleine Brogel air base in Belgium, the Büchel Air Base in Germany, and the Volkel air base in the Netherlands.

Around 70 bombs are stored in Italy, distributed between the Aviano and Ghedi air bases. Up to 70 bombs are also stored at the Incirlik air base in Turkey.

100 of these bombs had been stored at RAF Lakenheath in East Anglia, but were removed in 2008, following persistent popular protest at the airbase. This ended 50 years of US nuclear weapons in Britain.

NPT breach

Having US nuclear bombs in Europe conflicts with the legal obligations of the signatories to the nuclear

Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Articles 1 and 2 of the NPT forbid the transfer of nuclear weapons to non-nuclear weapon states, but Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, Italy and Turkey are all non-nuclear.

Even though the UK does not host US bombs any more, the UK's nuclear weapons system has been assigned to NATO since the 1960s. 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.

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 the controversy continues.

In 2014, NATO reaffirmed it would remain a nuclear alliance, maintaining that this capability is essential to the security of its members.

Tactical nuclear weapons

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. A B61 bomb is a tactical nuclear weapon, which is generally understood to be smaller and more usable than strategic nuclear weapons (such as the type the UK owns). In total, the US has about 200 of these while Russia has almost 2000.

Tactical nuclear weapons are 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.

Upgrade

In 2013 the US administration initiated a Life Extension Programme for the current B61 models deployed in Europe, extending their life by up to 30 years and significantly enhancing their capabilities. This new model, the B61-12, can be accurately steered, is earth-penetrating and is due by 2020. The yield of the bomb can be adjusted, making it more usable, and it is expected to cost over \$8 billion, marking the US' ongoing commitment to the nuclear-sharing arrangement. Moreover, several NATO members plan to upgrade their fighter-bomber planes. Together, this represents a significant enhancement of US nuclear capability in Europe.

Withdrawal

The US should withdraw all tactical nuclear weapons from Europe. This would ensure compliance with the NPT (Articles I and II). Moreover, the presence of these weapons endorses the dangerous concept that non-nuclear countries may adopt nuclear roles on behalf of nuclear powers.

This could also pave the way for further negotiations on nuclear weapons reductions with Russia and thereby potentially impacting on multilateral negotiations. Withdrawal would eliminate the risks of accident or hostile attack for areas surrounding the bases where US bombs are deployed.

A withdrawal of all US/NATO nuclear weapons from Europe would have a constructive impact on international disarmament.

