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NOTE: Click here to read a February 26 letter to the Secretary General of NATO from the chief diplomats of Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Norway, and Luxembourg. (PDF)

The German government’s explicit support for the withdrawal of nuclear weapons from Germany has triggered a debate within NATO and revealed differences among Germany’s governing parties, official statements and comments during interviews suggest. NATO allies will now have to debate the German initiative and the future of U.S. nuclear deployments in Europe during the current review of NATO’s Strategic Concept.

The new German coalition government supported the withdrawal in its Oct. 24 statement of its policy program. Against the background of the upcoming review conference of the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) “and in the context of the talks on a new Strategic Concept for NATO,” Berlin “will advocate a withdrawal of remaining nuclear weapons from Germany, both within NATO and vis-à-vis our American allies,” the statement said.

The document represents an agreement involving the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), its partner the Christian Social Union (CSU), and the Free Democratic Party (FDP). It marks the first time that the government of a NATO country has publicly promoted the removal of U.S. nuclear weapons from its territory and, according to several sources, has already triggered discussions on the future of NATO’s nuclear policies.

Previous German governments had raised the issue of the future of U.S. nuclear deployments but never so clearly called for a nuclear-weapon-free Germany. (See ACT, May 2009.) Canada and Greece are believed to have initiated a quiet withdrawal of U.S. nuclear weapons from their countries.

According to an Oct. 29 analysis by Hans Kristensen posted on the Federation of American Scientists’ Strategic Security Blog, the United States still deploys 10 to 20 B61 free-fall nuclear bombs at Büchel Air Force Base in western Germany. Kristensen concludes that the United States keeps a total of 150 to 240 nuclear weapons in Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Turkey. Under NATO nuclear sharing arrangements, these countries would provide aircraft that could deliver U.S. nuclear weapons to their targets in times of war. (In his analysis, Kristensen says he believes that the strike mission of the Turkish air force has expired.) NATO does not provide details of nuclear deployments, but officials in the past have confirmed that “a few hundred” U.S. nuclear weapons are deployed in Europe. (See ACT, September 2007.)

NATO allies consult on these arrangements and other aspects of the alliance’s nuclear policies in the Nuclear Planning Group (NPG). NATO is currently reviewing its 1999 Strategic Concept, including its nuclear policies, and hopes to reach agreement on a new concept by the end of next year.

Domestic Discussions

FDP defense spokesperson Elke Hoff told Arms Control Today in a Nov. 13 e-mail that the members of the coalition were able to agree only after “a tough struggle” on the goal of creating a nuclear-weapon-free Germany. According to a knowledgeable source, the compromise formula in the
government program in the end had to be agreed at the highest level, by party leaders Chancellor Angela Merkel of the CDU and incoming Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle of the FDP. Hoff emphasized that the two parties now jointly support the initiative and that “the goal of withdrawal of the remaining nuclear weapons from Germany is thus a solid part of our government’s program.”

The new government places its initiative in the context of global nuclear disarmament by stating that it emphatically supports “President [Barack] Obama’s proposals for new far-reaching disarmament initiatives – including the goal of a nuclear-weapon-free world.” At a Nov. 5 press conference during his introductory visit to Washington, Westerwelle underlined Germany’s support for the “peace policy and the disarmament policy pursued by the American administration” and stated that “we want to do whatever we can not only to accompany it with words but also with deeds.”

Hoff said the new government views its initiative both as a disarmament measure and a contribution to nuclear nonproliferation. “We want to send a signal and fulfill our commitments under the NPT 100 percent,” she said.

NATO nuclear sharing arrangements have been repeatedly criticized during meetings of NPT states-parties as being at odds with the treaty’s letter and spirit. (See ACT, June 2008.)

A senior German Federal Foreign Office source said in a Nov. 11 interview that “the interagency process to implement the program of the new government has begun.” In the past, Germany’s Federal Ministry of Defense has supported continued German involvement in nuclear sharing and deployment of U.S. nuclear weapons in Germany. Officials speaking privately indicated that the political agreement to initiate withdrawal is unlikely to lead to a quick change in that position.

Westerwelle had taken a clear position on the issue of withdrawal during the campaign before the Sept. 27 election. On Aug. 16, for example, Westerwelle told the Associated Press that, if elected, he would conclude negotiations with German allies on the complete withdrawal of U.S. nuclear weapons from Germany during the four-year-term of the new government. After his designation as foreign minister, in an Oct. 27 interview with the German journal Internationale Politik, he insisted that Germany should lead when it comes to nuclear disarmament and “could set an example by working within NATO toward the withdrawal of U.S. nuclear weapons still stationed on our soil.”

The CDU and the CSU are the only parties in the Bundestag that have recently supported nuclear sharing and Germany’s participation in the arrangement. In the past, Merkel had emphasized that nuclear sharing provides Germany with a unique opportunity to be involved in the nuclear weapons policies of NATO allies. After the election, during a Nov. 10 parliamentary debate on the new government’s policies, Merkel mentioned neither withdrawal nor nuclear sharing and merely argued that the new government wants to make sure that NATO’s new Strategic Concept “will also put the issue of disarmament on the agenda.” Andreas Schockenhoff, the CDU member of parliament responsible for foreign and security policies, told Arms Control Today in a Nov. 11 e-mail that the government’s new position does “absolutely not indicate a break” with past policies of the conservative party. “A withdrawal of U.S. nuclear weapons from Germany would not at all mean that we are no longer part of nuclear sharing,” he argued. Schockenhoff pointed out that Greece no longer has U.S. weapons deployed on its territory but is still taking part in nuclear sharing. Participation in NATO’s NPG, for example, is not linked to hosting U.S. nuclear weapons. “Germany’s active participation in the transatlantic Alliance is therefore not at stake,” he wrote.

Negotiating With the Russians?

Differences continue to exist among the German coalition partners on the conditions for withdrawal. Previous German governments placed removal of U.S. nuclear weapons in the context of negotiations with Russia on tactical nuclear weapons. According to the source close to the negotiations on the government’s program, it was a conscious decision during discussions on the government’s program not to include such a linkage. By contrast, Schockenhoff in the Nov. 10 parliamentary debate mentioned an additional precondition by stating that removal of U.S. nuclear weapons should be pursued in close consultation with allies and “in the context of disarmament agreements.”
Russia is believed to possess more than 2,000 tactical nuclear weapons in various states of readiness. According to many observers, these weapons pose a particular security risk because many are small and easy to use, making them a potential target of terrorist groups. In interviews, several German and NATO officials pointed out that the Obama administration has said it intends to include tactical nuclear weapons in the next round of nuclear arms control negotiations with Russia, due to begin once the current talks on a follow-on agreement to START are completed.

At the same time, the Obama administration seems to have reconsidered the previous U.S. stance that NATO nuclear weapons are a bargaining chip in future talks with Russia on tactical nuclear weapons. In July 30 remarks at a U.S. Strategic Command symposium on nuclear deterrence in Omaha, Robert Einhorn, the Department of State’s special adviser for nonproliferation and arms control, posed the question of whether the United States “as an inducement to Russia to limit or consolidate its tactical weapons, should be prepared to reduce or eliminate the relatively small number of U.S. nuclear weapons that remain in Europe,” according to Global Security Newswire.

A U.S. official said in a Nov. 11 interview that Washington’s position on whether U.S. tactical nuclear weapons deployed in Europe should be a future bargaining chip with Russia is “nuanced.” He explained that the United States is “not talking about the mere elimination of the whole class of nuclear weapons but about devaluing the importance of nuclear weapons.” Given the disproportion in the size of Russian and U.S. tactical nuclear weapons stockpiles, he said, “What incentive would there be for Russia to enter negotiations on these weapons even if NATO were to put all its weapons on the table? Frankly, it would be difficult to get the Russians to the table in the first place.”

NATO Reactions

The senior Foreign Office source confirmed that the issue of withdrawal will be discussed in the context of the ongoing NATO discussion about a new Strategic Concept and “would be on the arms control agenda as soon as possible.” Schockenhoff emphasized that “a consensus within NATO on this question is a precondition for any changes,” but said that he “expects positive reactions by NATO allies to this project because disarmament and arms control play an important role in the alliance.” Hoff emphasized that “it will be particularly important that talks with our allies in NATO about a withdrawal of U.S. nuclear weapons from Germany will be conducted on the basis of rational criteria and free of Cold War reflexes.”

According to several sources, a presentation by German representatives of Berlin’s new position in the NATO Council did not trigger a direct reaction by allies. Yet, German representatives were apparently approached on a bilateral basis by several NATO allies who were seeking clarification of Berlin’s position on nuclear sharing. The U.S. official said the new German government’s initiative to advocate a removal of U.S. nuclear weapons from Germany has indeed prompted “a lively debate within NATO.” That debate so far has been limited to “informal discussions and corridor chatter” rather than formal consideration of the proposal, he said, adding that the discussions “are certainly going to be interesting.”

Several officials predicted that formal consultations would be unlikely to take place before the U.S. Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) is completed in early 2010, making it unlikely that NATO countries will be able to present a coordinated stance on the future of nuclear sharing at the next NPT review conference.

Obama administration officials have apparently promised to brief NATO allies in January on the NPR, although it is unclear whether Washington will give allies an opportunity to provide input into the outcome.

During a Nov. 3 press conference with Westerwelle, NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen evaded a question on whether the removal of all nuclear U.S. warheads from Europe, and in particular from Germany, would be conducive to alliance security. He did say that it is “only natural that there is a political discussion and a discussion in our publics about our nuclear strategy” and “noted with satisfaction” assurances by the new German government “that any steps and any discussion or any decision will take place in a multilateral framework.” Westerwelle took pains to
point out that Germany would not move ahead unilaterally, saying that “we will take decisions together.... [T]he new federal German government is not aiming at going matters alone.”

**Allied Reactions**

The Dutch government also reacted cautiously. According a Nov. 2 press release posted on the Dutch Foreign Ministry’s Web site, Westerwelle and his Dutch counterpart, Maxime Verhagen, agreed that “the current international situation presents an opportunity to take new steps” to reduce the number of nuclear weapons in Europe, but “stressed that unilateral disarmament is not on the cards.” Verhagen said that “involving NATO in nuclear negotiations between Russia and the United States” would be “the best way of eliminating the largest possible number of nuclear weapons.”

However, there are divisions on this issue among the three parties that form the Dutch government. A Sept. 9 article in the Dutch daily *de Volkskrant* quotes Labour Party foreign affairs spokesman Martijn van Dam as saying that the Netherlands should invite Obama to remove the U.S. nuclear weapons from Dutch territory. “The Netherlands should tell the American president Obama: come and get them,” van Dam said. Christian Democrats and the Christian Union, who are in a coalition with Labour, do not agree with this and on Oct. 15 rejected three parliamentary resolutions that supported withdrawal of nuclear weapons. Labour voted in favor of two of the resolutions, but rejected one that supported unilateral action by the Dutch government.

A senior Belgian official told *Arms Control Today* in a Nov. 16 e-mail that “Belgium is and remains supportive of a world free of all nuclear weapons” and welcomed the U.S. commitment to that goal. The official argued that Belgium should now “actively contribute to a coherent and result-oriented strategy, [which must] be agreed within the relevant multilateral frameworks, in the first instance within NATO.” He cautioned that “none of this can be done unilaterally, we must be committed to multilateral consultation and decision-making.”

The Belgian parliament has repeatedly urged the government to take action toward withdrawal of nuclear weapons from Belgium and Europe. On Oct. 15, legislation proposing a ban in Belgium of the production, storage, sale, transport, and possession of nuclear arms was introduced.

Many observers have noted that the issue of providing assurances, including extended deterrence, to U.S. allies while the United States pursues a nuclear-weapon-free world is one of the contentious issues in the NPR. Referring to the issues surrounding withdrawal of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons, the U.S. official indicated that “the Obama administration is certainly going to be interested in exploring these issues in the context of the review of NATO’s Strategic Concept.” He predicted that “the current administration will be much more receptive to the ideas advocated by Germany than the previous administration” and said that the current U.S. ambassador to NATO, Ivo Daalder, personally has a strong interest in nuclear disarmament. Before taking his new position, Daalder co-authored an article in the November/December 2008 issue of *Foreign Affairs* on “The Logic of Zero,” which argues for strong U.S. leadership on nuclear disarmament.

**Notes of Caution**

In a Nov. 9 interview with MDR Radio in Berlin, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton gave a cautious response to the question of when the United States might withdraw nuclear weapons from Germany, saying that “we have to be very careful about how we evaluate the different threats, the need for deterrence.” Clinton pointed to differences among allies on the need for U.S. nuclear deployments in Europe. “NATO is the appropriate forum to consider all of the ramifications, because we have obligations to states further east. We have obligations to states in the Balkans and further south,” she said.

German Defense Minister Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg, in a Nov. 19 speech in Washington, explicitly warned that new NATO members might take over Germany’s role in nuclear sharing, should U.S. weapons deployed in Germany be withdrawn unilaterally. Guttenberg said that when discussing the future of nuclear weapons in Germany, “we have to keep in mind what any step means, as a consequence.” Pointing to NATO’s 1996 promise not to deploy nuclear weapons on the territory of new alliance members, Guttenberg said that “we could have partners in mind who probably would
be glad to offer their grounds and their soil for any weapons. But the question is whether that makes sense, then, for the security structures within Europe.”

NATO’s 1996 statement that it “has no intention, no plan and no need to station nuclear weapons on the territory of any new members” was essential to reducing Russian opposition to former Warsaw Pact members joining the alliance.

One option to reduce NATO’s nuclear profile would be consolidation of U.S. weapons in a few states. A 2006 NATO report by Jeffrey Larsen entitled “The Future of U.S. Non-Strategic Nuclear Weapons and Implications for NATO” concludes that one option is for NATO to decide “to move all of its nuclear weapons to storage sites in southern Europe to be closer to the most likely near-term threats.” Kristensen in his Web log cites rumors that “have circulated for several years about plans to consolidate the remaining weapons from the current six bases to one or two bases” in Italy and Turkey. Officials interviewed for this article differed as to the likelihood of such an option. The U.S. official stated that such a proposal is “now more likely to be realized than in the past, not so much because of the German initiative but mainly because of the change in U.S. administration and its new nuclear weapons policies.” Others pointed out the preliminary nature of the discussions and that NATO’s High Level Group is currently only beginning consideration of various options for NATO’s future nuclear posture. These officials also emphasized that placing nuclear weapons only in Italy and Turkey might be controversial in those countries and would face a number of practical and political hurdles.

Kristensen wrote in his blog that “Turkey does not allow the U.S. Air Force to deploy the fighter-bombers to Incirlik that are needed to deliver the bombs if necessary, and has several times restricted U.S. deployments through Turkey into Iraq.” Aviano Air Base in Italy, where U.S. nuclear weapons would presumably be concentrated, is already overburdened with conventional missions, he said.

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Article corrected January 21, 2010. Original article misstated the date of Germany’s September 27 national election.

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