

NATO's Nuclear Decision

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Some habits, even dangerous ones, are hard to break. The Cold War is long over, but there are nearly 200 U.S. tactical nuclear bombs on NATO military bases in Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Turkey. Russia, which has an even larger stockpile of tactical nuclear bombs, refuses to enter into talks to limit them, citing the U.S. deployments in Europe.

It is time for a change. Battlefield nuclear bombs serve no meaningful military role for the defense of NATO or Russia. The devastating power and inescapable collateral effects of such weapons make them inappropriate tools against non-nuclear targets, and the possible loss or theft of these weapons poses an unacceptable risk of nuclear terrorism.

As Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. James Cartwright acknowledged at an April 8 briefing in Washington on the new U.S. Nuclear Posture Review Report, NATO nuclear weapons do not serve a military function not already addressed by other U.S. military assets, including its 2,000 deployed strategic nuclear weapons.

Successive U.S. administrations have sought to initiate talks with Russia on substrategic nuclear weapons, but Russia's increasing reliance on nuclear weapons and NATO's own nuclear policy inertia have stymied progress. Following ratification of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, President Barack Obama has pledged to pursue further reductions in all types of U.S. and Russian nuclear weapons—deployed and nondeployed, strategic and tactical.

To increase the chances of success, the United States must persuade its NATO partners to eliminate the requirement for forward-deployed tactical nuclear weapons in the alliance's new Strategic Concept, due to be completed this November. If NATO can agree to eliminate its nuclear relics, Russia would more likely agree to further consolidate and verifiably dismantle its own stockpile. Otherwise, Russia will continue to use them as cynical justification to refuse to talk.

Earlier this year, five NATO members, including three that host tactical nuclear bombs, called on the alliance to review its outdated nuclear sharing arrangements. There is widespread recognition that there is no military reason to maintain the current NATO nuclear weapons policy, but there is no consensus about how to revise it.

Supporters of the status quo, such as France, still believe in the antiquated notion that U.S. tactical bombs in Europe reduce the incentive for a U.S. ally such as Turkey to pursue a bomb of its own. In reality, U.S. and NATO security commitments make the presence of these weapons irrelevant to Turkey's defense. Furthermore, Ankara is on record in support of "the inclusion of all non-strategic nuclear weapons" in the disarmament process "with a view to their reduction and elimination."

In April in Tallinn, Estonia, NATO foreign ministers met to discuss the issue. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton opened the door to change, but provided little helpful guidance. She argued that "as long as nuclear weapons exist, NATO will remain a nuclear alliance," while saying that "the broader goal of the alliance must be to reduce the number and role of nuclear weapons."

Clinton suggested that, in any future reductions, "our aim should be to seek Russian agreement to increase transparency on non-strategic nuclear weapons in Europe [and] relocate these weapons

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away from the territory of NATO members.”

Unfortunately, Clinton failed to state the obvious: The original rationale for deploying U.S. tactical nuclear bombs in Europe—to counter a Soviet land invasion—has disintegrated, and the weapons have become an obstacle toward the goal of reducing Russia’s residual tactical nuclear stockpile.

It is time for Washington to lead and for NATO to act. NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen is expected to circulate a draft of the Strategic Concept by the end of September so it can be finalized at the NATO summit in Lisbon. Rasmussen has a responsibility to ensure the discussion is transparent, open, and thorough.

For his part, Obama should make it clear that he supports the withdrawal of tactical nuclear bombs from Europe as a step toward his vision of a world without nuclear weapons. He can and should underscore that the United States can easily sustain its commitments to the common defense of NATO without forward-deployed tactical nuclear weapons. NATO should announce it will not be the first to use nuclear weapons, begin withdrawing its obsolete tactical nuclear forces from Europe, and formally invite Russia to engage in talks with Washington to verifiably account for, consolidate, and dismantle all tactical nuclear weapons held by each side.

If NATO members do not have sufficient time to agree on how to implement a new nuclear policy, they could launch a more comprehensive NATO nuclear posture review in Lisbon aimed at reducing the role and salience of nuclear weapons. NATO is a strong and dynamic alliance that simply does not need to cling to obsolete U.S. weapons of mass destruction to sustain transatlantic unity.

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Corrected online September 23, 2010. Original "Focus" stated that four NATO countries hosting tactical nuclear bombs called on the alliance to review its outdated nuclear sharing arrangements. The correct number is three.

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