Experts Urge NATO to Reduce Role of Nuclear Weapons and Open the Door for the Removal of U.S. Tactical Warheads

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(Washington, D.C.) More than two dozen nuclear experts and former senior government officials are calling on NATO "to declare a more limited role for its nuclear capabilities that would help open the way for overdue changes to its Cold War-era policy of forward-basing U.S. tactical nuclear weapons. This would help facilitate another, post-New START round of reductions, which should involve all types of Russian and U.S. nuclear weapons."

In a letter delivered July 12 to NATO member states and Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen, the experts said that: "Today, NATO's nuclear weapons no longer serve the deterrence or war-fighting role they were intended for during the Cold War. NATO members, along with Russia, share a common interest in preventing proliferation and reducing the risks posed by excess strategic and tactical nuclear weapons stockpiles. Nuclear weapons are useless in dealing with the main challenges facing the alliance, including extremism beyond NATO's borders, terrorism, and cyber threats. The maintenance of obsolete NATO nuclear capabilities diverts resources from investments in more essential capabilities."

At NATO's November 2010 Lisbon summit, the 28-nation alliance adopted a new Strategic Concept left open questions around the deployment of the 180 U.S. tactical nuclear weapons remaining in five European NATO countries. In April, NATO formally launched a Deterrence and Defense Posture Review (DDPR) that is to determine the appropriate mix of nuclear weapons, ballistic missile defenses, and conventional forces necessary for the Alliance. The DDPR is to be completed before the May 2012 NATO summit in Chicago.

"The U.S. tactical nuclear weapons deployed in Europe are more of a liability than an asset. NATO should declare that it is prepared to withdraw these obsolete weapons and engage Russia in a process that begins to reduce its far larger tactical nuclear arsenal," said Daryl G. Kimball of the Washington-based Arms Control Association and a signatory of the letter.

Paul Ingram of the British American Security Information Council and a signatory said: "NATO's failure to remove these outdated free-fall bombs that have no military or deterrence value and little public support, risks harming future Alliance unity and relevance."

Among the signatories of the letter are: retired Gen. Hugh Beach of the U.K.; retired Gen. Bernard Norlaine of France; Sir Malcom Rifkind, the U.K.'s former Foreign Secretary and Secretary of State for Defence; as well other former senior officials and experts from the Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Turkey, U.K., and the United States.

The experts make five key recommendations regarding the NATO Deterrence and Defense Posture Review (quotes are directly from the letter):

- "Clarify that the fundamental purpose of nuclear weapons for the alliance is to..."
deter a nuclear attack by a potential adversary and that NATO pledges not to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear members of the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. This policy would bring NATO into alignment with the 2010 U.S. Nuclear Posture Review Report and signal that NATO is reducing the role and salience of nuclear weapons," the experts write.

- "Acknowledge that U.S. non-strategic nuclear forces deployed in Europe and assigned to NATO do not serve a deterrence or retaliatory function that cannot be provided by the strategic nuclear forces or conventional military assets of Alliance members." Senior U.S. officials, including the Vice-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and White House WMD Coordinator Gary Samore, have stated that "whatever military mission they serve could of course also be accomplished through the use of systems that are not tactical systems based in Europe."

- "Endorse further, verifiable reductions of all types of U.S. and Russian nuclear forces-strategic and nonstrategic, deployed and nondeployed-as well as nuclear weapons delivery systems." The 2010 Strategic Concept stated that NATO should "seek Russian agreement to increase transparency on its nuclear weapons in Europe and relocate these weapons away from the territory of NATO members."

- "Not call for the modernization of the B61 nuclear warheads stationed in Europe and the dual-capable aircraft designated to carry them. A NATO-wide mandate to maintain obsolete and costly nuclear weapons capabilities would likely lead to rifts within the alliance."

- "Reiterate NATO's assurance that its current and future missile defense capabilities are not 'targeted' at Russia's strategic forces and that NATO member state missile interceptor deployments will be designed and configured to address third party missile threats as they emerge."

"Two decades ago this year, the United States and NATO took a series of bold unilateral steps that eliminated ground-launched and naval nuclear weapons from Europe and caused Russia to reciprocate. The DDPR must recapture that bold vision, not by reviving an East-West mindset that makes decisions about the future of U.S. non-strategic nuclear weapons in Europe contingent upon Russian steps, but by completing the process that was begun two decades ago of withdrawing non-strategic nuclear weapons from Europe to motivate Russia to follow suit," said Hans Kristensen of the Federation of American Scientists who also signed the letter.

To download a pdf version of the experts letter on the NATO DDPR click here.

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