

Opposition to nuclear weapons

By **Judy Dempsey** International Herald Tribune
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BERLIN Three German parties, including the Social Democrats of Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, have called on the United States to withdraw its nuclear weapons from German territory, denouncing the arms as a relic of the cold war.

The calls were issued as the Social Democrats competed in a bitter struggle to maintain control over the traditionally Social Democrat region of North Rhine-Westphalia, where voters go to the polls on May 22.

The appeal appears to be falling on deaf ears. The United States said on Tuesday that it had no intention of pulling out the weapons, which it called essential for peace and stability in Europe.

"The nuclear weapons will be maintained at a minimum level to preserve peace and stability," said an American diplomat who requested anonymity. "It is something all the NATO allies have agreed on. They are the essential military and political link between the United States and Europe."

The official would not comment on the number of American nuclear weapons still in Germany. But according to the Natural Resources Defense Council, a research institute in Washington, there are 480 U.S. nuclear warheads in Europe, of which 130 are deployed at the U.S. base at Ramstein in southwestern Germany.

A NATO diplomat in Brussels also declined to comment. "This is a bilateral issue between Germany and the United States, and not with NATO," said the official, who asked not to be identified.

But with the weapons integrated into the forces of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, this would appear to give the deployment question more than a bilateral scope.

NATO says that nuclear weapons play a central role in the alliance's strategy of flexible response.

The Schröder coalition has already tried to broach the matter with NATO, but without success, largely because some of the alliance's 26 members fear it could generate a wider discussion on French and British nuclear capabilities.

Besides the Social Democrats, the two other German parties that have said it was time the United States took the weapons out of Germany are the Greens, the coalition partner of the Social Democrats, and the liberal Free Democrats, the small opposition party that could be the kingmaker in federal elections next year.

Claudia Roth, leader of the Greens, told The Berliner Zeitung newspaper this week that the weapons "have to be pulled out and destroyed."

She added: "Nuclear weapons in Germany are a relic of the cold war."

Gert Weisskirchen, foreign policy spokesman for the Social Democrats, issued similar calls, adding: "If the weapons were removed, the United States could send a signal to Russia, which is sitting on a nuclear arsenal."

Guido Westerwelle, head of the Free Democrats, told The Berliner Zeitung that the weapons were superfluous because the cold war was over.

The renewed interest in the U.S. arsenal coincides with the start of a review meeting of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty at the United Nations in New York. It also comes at a time when German political parties are doing everything possible to get support, even if it means questioning U.S. policy, ahead of the state elections in North-Rhine Westphalia, in which the Social Democrats could face their first regional electoral defeat in more than three decades.

Since the end of the cold war, NATO has reduced its weapons in Europe by more than 85 percent. All nuclear warheads for NATO ground-launched missile forces, including nuclear artillery and surface-to-surface missiles, were eliminated, and the number of air-delivered bombs was reduced by 50 percent.

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