

Theater Nuclear Weapons in Europe: The Contemporary Debate

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Introduction

Are U.S. nuclear weapons still needed in Europe now that the threat that brought them there is gone? These weapons had profound implications in shaping the political and military landscape of Europe in the second half of the twentieth century—deterring Soviet aggression, reassuring NATO Allies of American commitment and protection under the U.S. nuclear umbrella, and fostering stability in the midst of a hostile East-West relationship—yet their relative importance today is much less clear.

The contemporary debate centers on whether basing theater nuclear weapons in Europe is a useful, irrelevant or counterproductive strategy for maintaining security in Europe in today's security environment. Useful, in this context, refers to political and military utility for deterring aggression against Europe, maintaining U.S. nuclear commitments, dissuading other states from pursuing nuclear weapons, and defeating potential aggressors should conflict arise. This debate is extremely significant in today's environment where proliferation and the potential use of weapons of mass destruction reign as the greatest security threat. The issues surrounding the debate are broad and complex, and they warrant serious analysis if NATO is to move beyond the Cold War security framework. U.S. policymakers adhere to the political and military utility arguments, especially in the wake of September 11 and the new emphasis on countering the proliferation and use of WMD. Others argue that TNWs in Europe are irrelevant, meaning that their political and military utility has been supplanted by political, cultural and economic interdependence, the ever-increasing capabilities of conventional forces, and the existential deterrent provided by U.S. strategic nuclear weapons. Nonproliferation and arms control advocates argue that TNWs are counterproductive because they enhance, rather than deter proliferation, undermine the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), and impede progress in the NATO-Russia security relationship.

This essay approaches the issue of forward basing TNWs in Europe from a pragmatic point of view, seeking to enhance European security while reducing the risk of nuclear conflict through cooperation. The essay views international security in the neo-liberalist tradition, accepting as a starting position the fundamental paradigm set forth by neo-realism, that the international system is governed by anarchy, where states are the primary actors, and these states are motivated by power and state interests. While cooperation in national security affairs is inherently difficult, it is also increasingly important in a security environment marked by global threats and WMD. From this approach, the essay analyzes the arguments concerning political and military utility, relevance, and counter productivity of U.S. theater nuclear weapons in Europe. It then offers two policy options: (1) maintaining the status quo, and (2) withdrawing U.S. theater nuclear weapons from Europe. The political-military implications of each are evaluated. In the final analysis, the essay recommends withdrawing theater nuclear weapons from Europe in favor of a strategy emphasizing conventional deterrence supported by reassurance and the general deterrent of strategic nuclear weapons in the background.

Historical Background

Arguments supporting the political and military utility of U.S. TNWs in Europe emerge from the rationale behind forward basing U.S. TNWs in Europe during the Cold War. Given the perceived conventional imbalance after the Second World War, NATO relied on TNWs to provide a military solution to the problem of deterring Soviet aggression and defending Western Europe. The massive retaliation strategy became untenable with the emergence of nuclear parity between the United States and the Soviet Union. This development spurred an evolution in NATO strategy focused on extending deterrence to Europe. Extended deterrence required a condition of coupling between U.S. and European security interests which could only be achieved through a credible U.S. nuclear response

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and a demonstrated U.S. commitment to Europe. Forward basing TNWs in Europe satisfied these requirements and solidified the transatlantic link. The ambiguity over when and how they would be used under flexible response masked the strategic debate over the various extended deterrence strategies in order to ensure Alliance cohesion. Above all, the utility of these weapons, and thus the strategy of basing them in Europe, stemmed from the overarching belief that the Cold War existed within the context of an immediate deterrence relationship. The nature of this deterrence relationship changed significantly with the end of the Cold War; however the strategy did not. The logic of extended deterrence and the condition of coupling created by forward basing U.S. TNWs in Europe became entrenched in NATO strategic thought.

Political and Military Utility

U.S. policymakers support the TNW policy for traditional reasons as well as emerging roles. The fall of the Soviet Union by no means assured that Europe was safe from aggression in the early post-Cold War years. U.S. theater nuclear weapons in Europe, although reduced in quantity by the Presidential Nuclear Initiatives (PNIs), retained their historical political and military utility. In the twenty-first century strategic environment, U.S. officials see continued political and military utility in TNWs. The new U.S. defense policy goals—assure, dissuade, deter and defeat—outlined in the 2002 *Nuclear Posture Review*, combined with the Bush administration's doctrine of preemption and focus on counterproliferation laid out in the *National Security Strategy and National Strategy to Combat Weapons of Mass Destruction*, highlight security concerns that make administration officials reluctant to give up options.[1]

NATO, as well, supports the continued deployment of TNWs in Europe based on traditional arguments for their utility in Alliance security. From 1991 to 1999, the Allies' Strategic Concept emphasized their political utility in deterring any kind of war or coercion.[2] Although focused more on the volatile situation in the East in the early part of the decade, relations with Russia improved with time and a great deal of effort. The Alliance offered reassurances to Russia regarding the status of its TNW arsenal and dual-capable aircraft readiness, yet at the same time it emphasized nuclear guarantees, roles and responsibilities to new members under the process of enlargement. NATO's nuclear doctrine today places greater emphasis on deterring threats posed by WMD proliferation and use. Throughout this period, just as during the Cold War, NATO continued to place great value on U.S. nuclear forces based in Europe and committed to NATO, which "provide an essential political and military linkage between the European and the North American members of the Alliance." [3] For NATO, widespread participation in nuclear sharing and nuclear consultative arrangements is a necessity for preserving the transatlantic link. These arrangements assure Allies of U.S. commitment and symbolize the credibility of extended deterrence, which alleviates the potential for proliferation within the Alliance. In terms of utility, then, NATO's European members think mainly politically while U.S. policymakers think both politically and operationally.

Political and Military Relevance

Many analysts question the political and military relevance of TNWs in Europe today. The nature of the transatlantic link is primarily economic and political, with military links maintained via conventional forces. Economic interdependence and dense institutional arrangements couple the United States and Europe in ways far beyond the symbolic basing of U.S. theater nuclear weapons. Without these weapons, NATO members would continue to participate in nuclear policy decision-making through the political mechanisms in the Nuclear Planning Group and the requirement for consensus in NATO decision-making.

According to NATO's 1999 Strategic Concept, "The supreme guarantee of the security of the Allies is provided by the strategic nuclear forces of the Alliance, particularly those of the United States." [4] This means that U.S. strategic forces, available for Alliance collective defense under Article V of the North Atlantic Treaty, serve to preserve the peace and prevent coercion. In addition to the obligations under Article V, the U.S. strategic arsenal is further linked to Europe through conventional force deployments. These conventional deployments in Europe not only symbolize U.S. commitment to European security, they also enhance the credibility of nuclear deterrence since a nuclear attack on Europe would most assuredly affect American forces stationed there. Even if TNWs were withdrawn from Europe, the United States would maintain a strategic nuclear response option. Given that the readiness of NATO's dual-capable aircraft for nuclear missions is now measured in months rather than minutes or hours [5], such an option, carried out with strategic bombers or Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) would provide greater operational flexibility. In this context, a strategic strike, utilizing a low-yield warhead provides the same, if not greater utility than a gravity bomb dropped from a tactical aircraft based in Europe. The latter becomes irrelevant for European security.

Theater nuclear weapons based in Europe may also be seen as irrelevant from the standpoint of credibility and the "nuclear taboo." Efforts to make TNWs more "usable," such as the current feasibility studies of a Robust Nuclear Earth Penetrator or "bunker buster," may enhance the capabilities of TNWs, but will do little to alleviate the growing taboo against their use. The domestic and international political consequences of the decision to use nuclear weapons, especially in a pre-emptive counterproliferation role, profoundly affect the decision-maker's willingness to do so. The decision to employ nuclear weapons would constitute a violation of the near sixty-year-old "nuclear taboo."

In addition to rejecting international norms and potentially violating international law, the decision to employ nuclear weapons preemptively would undermine U.S. global moral leadership. Any U.S. president would likely be very hesitant to make such a decision. This applies to a decision to use any nuclear weapon—whether theater or strategic, forward deployed or launched from the United States—the nuclear taboo relates simply to crossing the nuclear threshold. The reality is that forward deployed TNWs pose no more credible threat than low-yield ICBMs or bombers based in the United States in terms of willingness to cross the nuclear threshold. This is especially true in Europe where, according to Stanley Sloan, "It is also uncertain whether America's European allies would allow the United States to use its Europe-based weapons for any purpose other than deterrence or defense of the Alliance."^[6] Since these functions are provided by conventional forces and the U.S. strategic nuclear arsenal, TNWs deployed in Europe are irrelevant for maintaining security on that continent.

Conventional deterrence, by contrast, may be more effective than deterrence based on theater nuclear weapons. Modern conventional forces not only can dominate on the battlefield, they now possess the capability to hold hard and difficult targets at risk in deterring the proliferation and use of WMD. According to a recent research report published by Air University, "The U.S. is now on the threshold of new conventional weapons technology which hold hardened and deeply buried targets at risk, as well as smart weapons that loiter over battle lines and target massed hostile forces. These target sets could only be previously destroyed using nuclear weapons."^[7] As congressional research analyst Jonathan Medalia points out, "U.S. forces demonstrated the ability of ground troops to attack tunnel complexes in Afghanistan and the ability of precision conventional ordnance to destroy underground bunkers in Iraq. It would be better, in this view, to spend funds on improving the ability to destroy these targets with conventional means rather than on nuclear weapons."^[8] Conventional deterrence enables the United States to more credibly threaten what rogue leaders value most—regime survival—and this capability will only improve in the future. For these reasons, TNWs based in Europe are irrelevant for European security today.

Counterproductive in Today's Security Environment

TNWs in Europe are actually counterproductive in today's security environment, particularly because of their negative impact on nonproliferation and arms control efforts. NATO simultaneously promotes nuclear deterrence and nonproliferation in its security policies. This schizophrenic approach emphasizing the value of U.S. TNWs in Europe is counterproductive to European security because it undermines NATO's nonproliferation efforts. Theater nuclear weapons in Europe represent a holdover from the Cold War situation of immediate deterrence; today they represent a strategy in search of a threat. The problem imposed by this situation is precisely that threats will emerge. This is the classic "security dilemma" and "spiral model" theory, which still operates today. According to Robert Jervis, "When states seek the ability to defend themselves, they get too much and too little—too much because they gain the ability to carry out aggression; too little because others, being menaced, will increase their own arms and so reduce the first state's security."^[9] In this regard, emphasizing the utility of these weapons enhances, rather than deters, proliferation of WMD because it sends a signal that even the world's greatest power sees TNWs as potentially usable and as necessary for security.

NATO's nuclear doctrine is at odds with member states' Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) commitments. The nuclear sharing arrangements in NATO are seen by many as *de facto* proliferation due to the United States' controversial interpretation of Articles I and II—that these restrictions do not apply in times of war.^[10] According to a British American Security Information Council report, "More than 100 nations including South Africa, Egypt and the entire Non-Aligned Movement, have consistently expressed concern that members of NATO, especially Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Turkey, as well as the United States, are themselves nuclear proliferators, acting against the intent and possibly the letter of the NPT."^[11] Continued reliance on the forward-basing policy runs counter to the goals of the nonproliferation regime.

This policy also threatens Alliance cohesion due to differing positions on the actual role of forward-based U.S. TNWs in NATO counterproliferation policy. One senior European diplomat has strongly staked out the European position on the issue: "If you think we are going to let the Americans throw

nuclear weapons around on Europe's periphery, then you must be crazy."^[12] During a recent NATO exercise, however, this is precisely the issue that divided the Allied participants.^[13] The lack of cohesion actually forced NATO Secretary General Lord Robertson to end the exercise early "to prevent open conflict emerging between allies."^[14]

NATO's continued reliance on forward-based TNWs for political power limits the success of confidence and security building measures (CSBMs) designed to promote cooperation in nonproliferation because it undermines NATO's moral credibility in influencing other states to forego nuclear weapons programs of their own. Contrary to NATO doctrine, which assigns political and military utility to U.S. TNWs in Europe, these weapons are actually counterproductive for European security.

Both NATO and Russia continue to hold their TNWs in high regard. This emphasis on the utility of these weapons creates an immediate deterrence situation where one does not exist, creating a roadblock to cooperation on arms control. This situation is particularly problematic as NATO and Russia pursue a security relationship based on partnership and cooperation. William Potter and Nikolai Sokov argue that a U.S. initiative to remove its residual TNWs in Europe could "go a long way towards dispelling Russian fears about NATO and could help to revive the spirit of the parallel 1991 initiatives."^[15] Even if abandoning the long-standing policy of forward basing U.S. TNWs in Europe proves insufficient to induce Russia to eliminate all of its theater nuclear weapons, this step could remove an obstacle to further cooperation on arms control at relatively little strategic cost, given the nature of the transatlantic link today, NATO's conventional superiority, and the general deterrent of U.S. strategic nuclear forces.

NATO TNW → Res TNW → Prolif Concern:

U.S. theater nuclear weapons in Europe also complicate cooperation in nonproliferation. The security of Russia's theater nuclear weapons is an issue of great concern in the West. This concern emerges from a lack of transparency in the Russian theater nuclear arsenal. Alexander and Millar point out, "The lack of information about the size of the Russian tactical nuclear weapons arsenal raises uncertainties regarding the security of the storage of these weapons as well as about their protections against accidental, unauthorized, or illicit use."^[16] Russia, however, refuses to "consider negotiations to control its tactical nuclear arsenal if the United States will not remove its nuclear weapons from Europe."^[17] NATO has approached the subject several times with little success. In December 2000, NATO proposed a set of transparency measures aimed at conducting reciprocal data exchanges on TNWs. These proposals were included in a broad document entitled "Options for Confidence and Security Building Measures (CSBMs), Verification, Non-proliferation and Arms Control" designed to "enhance mutual trust and promote greater openness and transparency on nuclear weapons and safety issues between NATO and Russia."^[18] Despite such efforts, "information presented by the Russian was extremely vague."^[19] The Russian refusal to share information on TNWs hinges on the continued deployment of U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe. Removing these weapons could, in fact, lead to increased transparency on the Russian TNW arsenal, and provide greater opportunities to improve the safety and security of these weapons and keep them out of the hands of rogue states and terrorists. Recognizing this, some NATO members have suggested greater effort on the part of the Alliance. In Lloyd Axworthy's 2000 address to the North Atlantic Council, the Canadian official stated,

Can we not be more transparent about how many nuclear gravity bombs we have left, and where they are located? Can NATO not unilaterally reduce the number of remaining bombs further, and call for a proportional parallel action by the Russian Federation? Could we not take these sorts of measures to increase confidence with others, especially Russia, in order to pave the way for greater Russian openness on their huge sub-strategic stockpiles?^[20]

The U.S. nuclear presence in Europe is a reminder of the Cold War mentality. The forward basing policy serves as a roadblock to cooperation at a time when the NATO-Russia relationship centers on partnership and cooperation. The concession of removing these weapons from Europe could pay dividends in terms of cooperation with Russia in the nonproliferation effort.

Policy Options

The United States and its European-NATO partners face two policy options regarding TNWs in Europe. The first is to maintain the status quo, in which U.S. theater nuclear weapons remain forward-based on European soil. The second is withdrawing these weapons from Europe and relying on other means to provide security for the Atlantic Alliance.

Status Quo

U.S. and Allied risk assessments and interests could lead to a decision to maintain the TNW deployments in Europe for the foreseeable future. In this view, threat uncertainties in future Russian political and military developments could create a desire among NATO officials to maintain a hedge in nuclear capabilities. However, given recent statements by both U.S. and Allied officials regarding the NATO-Russia security relationship, perhaps an even greater impetus lies in the threat of WMD proliferation and use. NATO's increasing role in "out of area" operations and its proximity to volatile areas in the Middle East could support a continued reliance on a theater nuclear deterrent. The fact that these weapons are closer to potential adversaries than those stationed in the United States could enhance U.S. counterproliferation strategy, and future upgrades, as envisioned in the *Nuclear Posture Review*, to an existing NATO capability may be politically easier to achieve. Traditional political arguments for Alliance cohesion could be maintained, including reassuring Allies of U.S. commitment and credibility and ensuring widespread sharing of nuclear roles and responsibilities.

The status quo policy option has potential drawbacks as well. Maintaining these weapons in Europe and emphasizing their utility creates an immediate deterrence situation where one does not exist. If the greatest military power, and by extension, the strongest alliance in the world, claim TNWs are required for security, then smaller, less powerful states in much more precarious security situations will surely follow suit. These weapons enhance, rather than deter, proliferation of WMD. NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements are seen as incompatible with the letter and intent of the NPT, and maintaining these arrangements could undermine the Alliance's position in supporting nonproliferation. Moreover, stressing TNW utility reduces the psychological effectiveness of CSBMs designed to reassure non-nuclear weapon states and increases incentives for these states to acquire WMD. NATO's adherence to TNW utility complicates relations with Russia as well, and could continue to hinder prospects for cooperation on arms control and nonproliferation. This is particularly troublesome when the security and stability of Russia's nuclear complex is an area of deep concern with respect to the threat of nuclear terrorism.

Withdrawal

The United States and its Allies could, on the other hand, choose to withdraw the U.S. TNWs from Europe, relying instead on other means to provide security for Europe. Such a policy would recognize the growing irrelevance of these weapons, given their decreasing credibility, the increasing importance of the nuclear taboo, and the capabilities inherent in modern U.S. and Allied conventional combat power. Conventional forces today can dominate on the battlefield and also increasingly possess some capability to destroy hardened and difficult targets. New conventional initiatives will enhance these capabilities in the future. From the standpoint of rationality, retaliation and unbearable damage, conventional deterrence via modern forces may be more effective for threatening regime survival—a key factor in deterring, dissuading and defeating potential rogue states and WMD proliferators. Removing U.S. TNWs from Europe would be an important disarmament step that could signal a change in real intent and real capability away from reliance on nuclear weapons for security. This would enhance the effectiveness of CSBMs and provide greater reassurance for both nuclear weapon and non-nuclear weapon states. By making NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements irrelevant, withdrawal would increase the credibility of Allies' commitments to the NPT and enhance international efforts to stop the proliferation of WMD. Moreover, removing the residual U.S. nuclear presence in Europe would eliminate a significant roadblock to cooperation in NATO-Russia relations, which could lead to a reduction in Russian theater nuclear forces or at least increased transparency on the size and security of the Russian arsenal.

Withdrawing the TNWs from Europe could be seen as a reduction in U.S. capability and removal of an option for the president in a crisis situation. In reality, this is unlikely to be the case. Given that the readiness of NATO's dual-capable aircraft for nuclear missions is now measured in months rather than minutes or hours, response time is now shorter for a strategic strike launched from the United States than it is for a tactical strike launched from NATO territory, should the worst possible scenario actually arise. Arguments regarding the time factor apply primarily to the potential for preemptive strikes; however, it is highly unlikely that NATO would allow the preemptive use of nuclear weapons based in Alliance territory. Such a decision could, in fact, greatly impact Alliance cohesion.

The strongest criticism against removing U.S. TNWs from Europe revolves around the very issue of Alliance cohesion. NATO's conception of the transatlantic link and the essential political and military role of TNWs in maintaining a condition of coupling between the United States and Europe have become institutionalized to the point of bureaucratic opposition. Yet the transatlantic link now reaches far beyond the symbolic basing of a few hundred nuclear gravity bombs on European soil. Deep economic interdependence and dense institutional integration, combined with U.S. conventional commitments and the ultimate security guarantee of U.S. strategic nuclear deterrence in the

background characterize the nature of the transatlantic link today. As former Supreme Allied Command Europe, Wesley Clark, properly asserts, "evolution and adaptation of the comfortable security fixtures of the past should be no cause for concern, for through such prudent adjustments we equip ourselves to confront the flux of events that time shall surely bring."^[21] The time in which U.S. TNWs played a pivotal role in European security is long past; these weapons are now in some ways irrelevant and counterproductive in others. NATO should withdraw the U.S. theater nuclear weapons in Europe, and focus instead on a strategy of conventional deterrence and reassurance while maintaining general nuclear deterrence via strategic forces.

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