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Unione degli Scienziati Per Il Disarmo

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Time to withdraw U.S. nuclear weapons deployed in Europe

U.S. nuclear weapons have been deployed in Europe since the late fifties. At their peak in the seventies, about 7,000 U.S. nuclear warheads, for all sorts of American- and allied-owned delivery vehicles, were deployed in several western European and NATO countries.

But there never was a common policy of nuclear sharing in NATO. Norway, for example, never wanted to have anything operational to do with nuclear weapons, being strongly committed to nuclear disarmament. Others (Canada, Greece) quietly renounced their nuclear roles as time went by. Still others, such as Spain, when joining the alliance in 1982, stipulated a nuclear free status for their territories and forces.

Nothing, therefore, compels Italy and the other European NATO allies that still deploy U.S. nuclear weapons to do so indefinitely.

Some 100 U.S. B-61 nuclear gravity bombs are still kept in Europe, and programs to modernize them to B61-12 make the situation more critical. Four air bases--in Belgium (Kleine Brogel), Germany (Büchel), Italy (Ghedi), and the Netherlands (Volkel)--each host 15 bombs for possible use by their respective national air forces, with pilots and fighter bombers trained and equipped to deliver the U.S. nuclear bombs assigned to them. For its part, the U.S. Air Force has two bases, one in Italy (Aviano) and another in Turkey (Incirlik), each with 20 bombs¹ for use only by U.S. airplanes.

All the B-61 nuclear gravity bombs are at all times under U.S. custody. Any bombs to be used by allied forces would be turned over to them only in case of a planned nuclear use.

We are conscious that nuclear arms control and disarmament is in a difficult situation. Some arms control agreements (e.g. the ABM and the INF Treaties) have been dismantled. The JCPOA is also in a critical situation, and the CTBT is not yet in force.

Concerning nuclear disarmament in Europe, we still have U.S. nuclear weapons deployed in NATO countries. While it is true that their number (100) is very small compared to the approximately 13,500 in the world's combined inventory of nuclear warheads, still the rationale for their deployment is questionable.

The U.S. has thousands of other warheads and delivery vehicles capable of reaching any target in the world. Keeping nukes forward deployed in Europe is just an organizational and security burden on Americans. No one in the U.S. can seriously believe that crossing the nuclear threshold with a B-61 deployed in Europe would not invite retaliation against the U.S. itself. And if, on the contrary, someone in the U.S. were to feel confident about the ability to confine a nuclear exchange to Europe, this would hardly be good news for Europeans.

¹ See Hans M. Kristensen and Matt Korda, "United States Nuclear Weapons, 2021", *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, January 2021.



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The weapons are an organizational and security burden to European allies as well. On top of that, the Europeans know that, for all the reasons above, the U.S. would be as reluctant to cross the nuclear threshold with an allied bomber as with one of its own. And again, if on the contrary the U.S. were to be *less* reluctant, Europeans would have every reason to worry.

But being forward-deployed, these weapons somehow threaten strategic stability in a crisis—the issue “use them or lose them” somehow increases the risk of nuclear escalation. Moreover, the nuclear/conventional Dual Capable Aircraft (DCA) to which they are assigned make the reading of their missions ambiguous and potentially destabilizing.

Even the rare public advocacy of these weapons limits their role to political symbolism (of allied solidarity and nuclear burden sharing). But an argument can be made that, on the contrary, they constitute asymmetries within the Alliance, whose cohesion is based instead on a different and more fundamental set of political, economic, cultural and historical reasons.

In any case, extended deterrence depends exclusively on the U.S. determination to put itself at risk in order to defend NATO allies—and not on the location where some of its nukes are deployed in peacetime.

Hosting nuclear weapons belonging to another state (and training the host country armed forces to deliver them) can be seen as a way of circumventing the NPT and in fact, legally speaking, it could be argued that it is in contrast with the NPT, in particular with Article I of the treaty (“Each nuclear-weapon State Party to the Treaty undertakes not to transfer to any recipient whatsoever nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices or control over such weapons or explosive devices directly, or indirectly....”).

Moreover, we should avoid that in the future other states possessing nuclear weapons could consider adopting the same policy of deploying their weapons on other countries' territories, with serious consequences for the effectiveness of the NPT. Note that the U.S. is the only country in the world that currently deploys nuclear weapons outside its borders.

On January 22, 2021, the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) entered into force. The treaty outlaws nuclear weapons, and there is little doubt that it is also the product of the frustration of its signatories with the loopholes and the problems of the NPT.

These loopholes include NATO nuclear sharing. In fact, the TPNW prohibits any of its parties to “allow any stationing, installation or deployment of any nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices in its territory or at any place under its jurisdiction or control”.

NATO opposes the TPNW. In arguing against it, the Alliance emphasized the importance of the NPT as the chief international legal instrument for nuclear arms control and disarmament. However, it is precisely by withdrawing U.S. nuclear weapons from Europe—whose continuing presence, as we argued, serves nobody's interests—that NATO would strengthen the NPT.



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Finally, the withdrawal of U.S. nuclear weapons from Europe could be presented as a good will gesture toward Russia prior to the relaunch of an arms control dialogue aimed, among other things, at forestalling the re-introduction in Europe of Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF). Of course, a reciprocal gesture by Russia, reducing its tactical nuclear weapons, would help to improve the arms control process.

USPID calls on all the governments concerned, beginning with Italy, to raise the issue of the total withdrawal of U.S. nuclear weapons deployed in Europe. Of course, each of the five countries has also the option of going alone and making its territory and its forces nuclear free – as other allies have done in the past.

This document has been extensively discussed in the USPID Scientific Council and approved with a large majority.

In 2008 USPID elaborated a more comprehensive document² on the elimination of NATO Tactical Nuclear Weapon.

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² USPID 2008 document: Eliminating NATO Tactical Nuclear Weapons,

http://www.uspid.org/Documenti/AltriDocumenti/Archivio/UfficialiConsiglioScientifico/2008_05_CS_en.pdf