

American Nuclear Weapons in Europe

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NATO's nuclear agreements are dated back to the foundation of the Alliance itself. The first NATO Ministerial Strategy Paper (DC 6/1) of 1949, already included the call to "guarantee the ability to immediately execute strategic bombings, with all possible means, with all types of weapons, without exception". In the early 1950s, that the Soviet Union and its allies could easily survive to NATO's forces in a conventional conflict was taken for granted. Nuclear weapons were considered the only credible defense against conventional Soviet superiority. For this reason, in 1953, the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons was decided in the doctrine of "Forward Defense".

The first atomic weapons arrived in Europe in September 1954. With them, even the questions of conservation, custody and authority of managing these weapons. In 1957, the arms race and the subsequent displacement of several Soviet-sized medium-range missiles against Western European countries, pushed Paris and Bonn to raise the issue of Nuclear Sharing, so they would be able to influence NATO's nuclear planning.

The North Atlantic Council approved the first formal agreement on nuclear weapons In December 1957, at the NATO summit, in Paris. Under this agreement, America guarded, controlled and directed the deployment of US nuclear weapons, with the agreement of the host country.

And they were employable by NATO's supreme allied commander (who's American too) by the authorization of the President of the United States.

Although the 1957 agreement defined the use of nuclear weapons in Europe, it took another decade to get the full participation of host countries in planning and using atomic weapons sites in their territories, according to the collective defense concept.

This was achieved at the 1966 NATO Foreign Ministers Summit, when the Nuclear Defense Affairs Committee (NDAC) was opened to all the allies, and the Nuclear Planning Group (NPG) was announced. It included United States, United Kingdom, West Germany and Italy as permanent members and three other rotating seats annually. France, already become a nuclear power, decided not to participate. The concept of "Nuclear Sharing", on which the employment of US weapons in Europe is still based, was so affirmed.

As we all know, in peace of time, nuclear weapons are guarded and operated by US forces; in case of war they are entrusted to the host country. Codes for arming these kind of weapons are provided by the President of the United States to the military command of the host country.

The concept of Nuclear Sharing arises from two main needs:

- 1) deterrence against the Soviet Union and the other countries of the Warsaw Pact.
- 2) to avoid nuclear proliferation among NATO allies.

At the time, some NATO countries, especially West Germany, were considering the opportunity to set up their own nuclear arsenal and to convince them desisting, it was necessary to reassure them by giving an active role in the use of atomic weapons and in their processing, related doctrines and strategies.

Today the world is very different from the time in which this system was established. The Soviet Union no longer exists, although Russia maintains a formidable nuclear arsenal, and the risk of nuclear proliferation in Europe seems to be considerably shrunk. Therefore, the debate on the future of tactical nuclear weapons seems to be appropriate.

In general, arguments in favor of the withdrawal of nuclear weapons are essentially related to the lack of credible employment scenarios, the effective cost of maintenance and the costs of updating or replacing weapons and systems, at the end of their operational life.

In addition, many of the countries favoring a reshuffling of the role and presence of nuclear weapons on European territory support the active promotion of global disarmament goal and see the reduction of such weapons as an opportunity to demonstrate concretely NATO's efforts in this field.

The arguments for maintaining the status quo, on the other hand, generally concern the value that atomic weapons will have in maintaining the transatlantic partnership. The physical presence of weapons in Europe would also be functional to the symbolic protective umbrella, that United States extends to Europe and would ultimately help maintaining the sharing of risks within NATO.

Historically, Italian politics has shown a remarkable level of coherence on the issue of nuclear weapons, despite the numerous changes in the various governments. In fact, nuclear weapons have been considered functional in achieving a series of goals: status, participation in power

groups, and strengthening of the relationship with Washington.

Certainly, the "Nuclear Sharing" allows Italy to join the discussion on nuclear deterrence policies and the elaboration of NATO's nuclear posture. In particular, participation in Nuclear Planning Group subcommittees, such as the High Level Group (HLG) and the Special Consultative Group (SCG), would make effective the influence in planning and management of NATO's nuclear component.

The presence of US nuclear weapons is also perceived as a key element to maintain a special trusted relationship with the United States, which is translated in several immediate benefits, such as intelligence sharing and collaboration in strategic sectors.

For these reasons, it's not probable that Italy would decide to renounce at the active participation in the "Nuclear Sharing", in view of the current international scenario.

Before we can actually imagine a US nuclear weapon withdrawal from Italy, it's necessary to undertake a path, that starts from reconsidering NATO's role in view of greater strategic autonomy of European countries or, better, in the European Union.

The possible creation of a European Defense, with its possibly nuclear deterrent, that could be based on the more than enough French nuclear weaponry, would restrict the role of NATO to a more balanced partnership with the United States.

Although difficult, this path is worthy to be taken, especially in the light of the imminent changing of tactical nuclear weapons role in Europe.

As is well known, the replacement program of the current nuclear bombs B61 with the new version B61-12 goes far beyond the simple elimination of obsolescent. The new B61-12 is a very flexible weapon: it can be used with explosive power far below than the previous ones and is characterized by a very high precision. This transforms B61-12, from a tool of pure deterrence, to proper weapons usable in realistically predictable war scenarios.

The risk inherent to the deployment of the B61-12 is that NATO actually contemplates the possibility of conducting a type of war that is halfway between the conventional war and the total nuclear one. A type of conflict that could be perceived as "sustainable"!

This scenario, besides being catastrophic in itself, would entail a high risk of escalating into those Mutual Assured Destruction scenarios, on which the balance of terror was based on the Cold War.

Therefore, it's fundamental that European countries find a way to loosen the bonds that bind them to the United States in nuclear sector or, at least, opposing the affirmation of a NATO posture that attributes to the nuclear weapon a role other than pure strategic deterrence.