

NATO's Secret Transatlantic Bond: Nuclear Weapons In Europe

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Global Research, May 10, 2018

[Stop NATO](#) 3 December 2009

Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [Military and WMD](#), [US NATO](#)

[War Agenda](#)

In-depth Report: [Nuclear War](#)

This article was first published by Global Research in December 2009.

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"Although technically owned by the U.S., nuclear bombs stored at NATO bases are designed to be delivered by planes from the host country."

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Is Italy capable of delivering a thermonuclear strike? Could the Belgians and the Dutch drop hydrogen bombs on enemy targets?...Germany's air force couldn't possibly be training to deliver bombs 13 times more powerful than the one that destroyed Hiroshima, could it?

The above is from the opening paragraph of a feature in Time magazine's online edition of December 2, one entitled "What to Do About Europe's Secret Nukes."

In response to the rhetorical queries posed it adopts the deadly serious tone befitting the subject in stating, "It is Europe's dirty secret that the list of nuclear-capable countries extends beyond those — Britain and France — who have built their own weapons. Nuclear bombs are stored on air-force bases in Italy, Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands — and planes from each of those countries are capable of delivering them."

The author of the article, Eben Harrell, who wrote an equally revealing piece for the same news site in June of 2008, cites the Federation of American Scientists as asserting that there are an estimated 200 American B61 thermonuclear gravity bombs stationed in the four NATO member states listed above. A fifth NATO nation that is home to the warheads, Turkey, is not dealt with in the news story. In the earlier Times article alluded to previously, author Harrell wrote that "The U.S. keeps an estimated 350 thermonuclear bombs in six NATO countries." [1] They are three variations of the B61, "up to 10 [or 13] times more powerful than the Hiroshima bomb" [2] - B61-3s, B61-4s and B61-10s - stationed on eight bases in Alliance states.

The writer reminded the magazine's readers that "Under a NATO agreement struck during the Cold War, the bombs, which are technically owned by the U.S., can be transferred to the control of a host nation's air force in times of conflict. Twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Dutch, Belgian, Italian and German pilots remain ready to engage in nuclear war." [3]

The B61 is the Pentagon's mainstay hydrogen weapon, a "lightweight bomb [that can] be delivered by...Air Force, Navy and NATO planes at very high altitudes and at speeds above Mach 2."

Also, it "can be dropped at high speeds from altitudes as low as 50 feet. As many as 22 different varieties of aircraft can carry the B61 externally or internally. This weapon can be dropped either by free-fall or as parachute-retarded; it can be detonated either by air burst or ground burst." [4]

The warplanes capable of transporting and using the bomb include new generation U.S. stealth aircraft such as the B-2 bomber and the F-35 Lightning II (multirole Joint Strike Fighter), capable of penetrating air defenses and delivering both conventional and nuclear payloads.

The Pentagon's Prompt Global Strike program, which "could encompass new generations of aircraft and armaments five times faster than anything in the current American arsenal," including "the X-51 hypersonic cruise missile, which is designed to hit Mach 5 — roughly 3600 mph," [5] could be configured for use in Europe also, as the U.S. possesses cruise missiles with nuclear warheads for deployment on planes and ships. But the warplanes mandated to deliver American nuclear weapons in Europe are those of its NATO allies, including German Tornados, variants of which were used in NATO's 1999 air war against Yugoslavia and are currently deployed in Afghanistan.

There are assumed to be 130 U.S. nuclear warheads at the Ramstein and 20 at the Buechel airbases in Germany and 20 at the Kleine Brogel Air Base in Belgium. Additionally, there are reports of dozens more in Italy (at Aviano and Ghedi) and even more, the largest amount of American nuclear weapons outside the United States itself, in Turkey at the Incirlik airbase. [6]

Not only are the warheads stationed in NATO nations but are explicitly there as part of a sixty-year policy of the Alliance, in fact a major cornerstone of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. An article in this series written before the bloc's sixtieth anniversary summit in France and Germany this past April, NATO's Sixty Year Legacy: Threat Of Nuclear War In Europe [7], examined the inextricable link between the founding of NATO in 1949 and the deployment of U.S. nuclear weapons and delivery systems in Europe. One of the main purposes of founding the Alliance was exactly to allow for the basing and use of American nuclear arms on the continent.

Seven months after the creation of the bloc, the NATO Defense Doctrine of November 1949 called for insuring "the ability to carry out strategic bombing including the prompt delivery of the atomic bomb. This is primarily a US responsibility assisted as practicable by other nations." [8]

The current NATO Handbook contains a section titled NATO's Nuclear Forces in the New Security Environment which contains this excerpt:

“During the Cold War, NATO’s nuclear forces played a central role in the Alliance’s strategy of flexible response...[N]uclear weapons were integrated into the whole of NATO’s force structure, and the Alliance maintained a variety of targeting plans which could be executed at short notice. This role entailed high readiness levels and quick-reaction alert postures for significant parts of NATO’s nuclear forces.” [9]

At no time was the deployment and intended use of U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe part of a nuclear deterrence strategy. The former Soviet Union was portrayed as having a conventional arms superiority in Europe and U.S. and NATO doctrine called for the first use of nuclear bombs. The latter were based in several NATO states on the continent as part of what was called a “nuclear sharing” or “nuclear burden sharing” arrangement: Although the bombs stored in Europe were American and under the control of the Pentagon, war plans called for their being loaded onto fellow NATO nation’s bombers for use against the Soviet Union and its (non-nuclear) Eastern European allies. The USSR itself, incidentally, didn’t successfully test its first atomic bomb until four months after NATO was formed.

With the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, formed six years after NATO and in response to the inclusion of the Federal Republic of Germany in the bloc (and the U.S. moving nuclear weapons into the nation), and of the Soviet Union itself in 1991, the Pentagon withdrew the bulk of 7,000 warheads it had maintained in Europe, but still maintains hundreds of tactical nuclear bombs.

At the 1999 NATO fiftieth anniversary summit in Washington, D.C., during which the bloc was conducting its first war, the 78-day bombing campaign against Yugoslavia, and expanding to incorporate three former Warsaw Pact members (the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland), it also approved its new and still operative Strategic Concept which states in part:

“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; the independent nuclear forces of the United Kingdom and France, which have a deterrent role of their own, contribute to the overall deterrence and security of the Allies.

“A credible Alliance nuclear posture and the demonstration of Alliance solidarity...continue to require widespread participation by European Allies involved in collective defence planning in nuclear roles, in peacetime basing of nuclear forces on their territory and in command, control and consultation arrangements. Nuclear forces based in Europe and committed to NATO provide an essential political and military link between the European and the North American members of the Alliance. The Alliance will therefore maintain adequate nuclear forces in Europe.” [10]

The Time report of 2008 wrote of the ongoing policy that it is:

“A ‘burden-sharing’ agreement that has been at the heart of NATO military policy since its inception.

“Although technically owned by the U.S., nuclear bombs stored at NATO bases are designed to be delivered by planes from the host country.” [11]

It also discussed the Air Force Blue Ribbon Review of Nuclear Weapons Policies and Procedures released in February of 2008 which “recommended that American nuclear assets in Europe be consolidated, which analysts interpret as a recommendation to move the bombs to NATO bases under ‘U.S. wings,’ meaning American bases in Europe.” [12]

Both Time articles by Eben Harrell, that of last year and that of this month, emphasize that the basing of nuclear warheads on the territory of non-nuclear nations – and Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Turkey are non-nuclear nations – is a gross violation of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty [NPT], whose first two Articles state, respectively:

“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; and not in any way to assist, encourage, or induce any non-nuclear-weapon State to manufacture or otherwise acquire nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices, or control over such weapons or explosive devices.”

“Each non-nuclear-weapon State Party to the Treaty undertakes not to receive the transfer from any transferor whatsoever of nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices or of control over such weapons or explosive devices directly, or indirectly; not to manufacture or otherwise acquire nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices; and not to seek or receive any assistance in the manufacture of nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices.” [13]

The Time piece of December 2, then, points out that the continued presence of U.S. nuclear warheads in Europe is “more than an anachronism or historical oddity. They [the weapons] are a violation of the spirit of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).”

“Because ‘nuclear burden-sharing,’ as the dispersion of B61s in Europe is called, was set up before the NPT came into force, it is technically legal. But as signatories to the NPT, the four European countries and the U.S. have pledged ‘not to receive the transfer...of nuclear weapons or control over such weapons directly, or indirectly.’ That, of course, is precisely what the long-standing NATO arrangement entails.” [14]

The author also mentioned the report of the Secretary of Defense Task Force on Nuclear Weapons Management, chaired by former U.S. Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger, Phase I [15] of which was released in September and Phase II [16] in December of 2008. The second part of the report contains a section called Deterrence: The Special Case of NATO which states:

“The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) represents a special case for deterrence, both because of history and the presence of nuclear weapons....[T]he presence of U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe remains a pillar of NATO unity. The deployment of nuclear weapons in Europe is not a Service or regional combatant command issue — it is an Alliance issue. As long as NATO members rely on U.S. nuclear weapons for deterrence — and as long as they maintain their own dual-capable aircraft as part of that deterrence — no action should be taken to remove them without a thorough and deliberate process of consultation.

“The Department of Defense, in coordination with the Department of State,

should engage its appropriate counterparts among NATO Allies in reassessing and confirming the role of nuclear weapons in Alliance strategy and policy for the future.

“The Department of Defense should ensure that the dual-capable F-35 remains on schedule. Further delays would result in increasing levels of political and strategic risk and reduced strategic options for both the United States and the Alliance.”

The F-35 is the Joint Strike Fighter multirole warplane discussed earlier, which its manufacturer Lockheed Martin boasts “Provides the United States and allied governments with an affordable, stealthy 5TH generation fighter for the 21st century.” [17]

Far from the end of the Cold War signaling the elimination of the danger of a nuclear catastrophe in Europe, in many ways matters are now even more precarious. NATO’s expansion over the past decade has now brought it to Russia’s borders. Five full member states (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway and Poland) and as many Partnership for Peace adjuncts (Azerbaijan, Finland, Georgia, Kazakhstan and Ukraine) directly adjoin Russian territory and for over five years NATO warplanes have conducted air patrols over the Baltic Sea region, a three minute flight from St. Petersburg. [18]

If launching the first unprovoked armed assault against a European nation since Hitler’s wars of 1939-1941 ten years ago and currently conducting the world’s longest and most large-scale war in South Asia were not reasons enough to demand the abolition of the world’s only military bloc, so-called global NATO, then the Alliance’s insistence on the right to station – and employ – nuclear weapons in Europe is certainly sufficient grounds for its consignment to the dark days of the Cold War and to oblivion.

Notes

- 1) Time, June 19, 2008
- 2) Ibid
- 3) Time, December 2, 2009
<http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1943799,00.html?xid=rss-topstories>
- 4) Global Security
<http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/systems/b61.htm>
- 5) Popular Mechanics, January 2007
- 6) Turkish Daily News, June 30, 2008
- 7) NATO’s Sixty Year Legacy: Threat Of Nuclear War In Europe
Stop NATO, March 31, 2009
<http://rickrozoff.wordpress.com/2009/08/27/natos-sixty-year-legacy-threat-of-nuclear-war-in-europe>
- 8) www.nato.int/docu/stratdoc/eng/intro.pdf
- 9) <http://www.nato.int/docu/handbook/2001/hb0206.htm>
- 10) NATO, April 24, 1999
http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_27433.htm
- 11) Time, June 19, 2008
- 12) Ibid
- 13) <http://www.un.org/events/npt2005/npttreaty.html>
- 14) Time, December 2, 2009
- 15) http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/Phase_I_Report_Sept_10.pdf
- 16) www.defenselink.mil/pubs/pdfs/PhaseIIReportFinal.pdf

17) Lockheed Martin

<http://www.lockheedmartin.com/products/f35>

18) Baltic Sea: Flash Point For NATO-Russia Conflict

Stop NATO, February 27, 2009

<http://rickrozoff.wordpress.com/2009/08/27/baltic-sea-flash-point-for-nato-russia-conflict>

Scandinavia And The Baltic Sea: NATO's War Plans For The High North

Stop NATO, June 14, 2009

<http://rickrozoff.wordpress.com/2009/08/31/scandinavia-and-the-baltic-sea-natos-war-plans-for-the-high-north>

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