

Nuclear Weapons And Interceptor Missiles: Twin Pillars Of U.S.-NATO Military Strategy In Europe

By [Rick Rozoff](#)

Global Research, April 23, 2010

[Stop NATO](#) 23 April 2010

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Militarization and WMD](#)

The two-day NATO foreign ministers meeting in the Estonian capital of Tallinn on April 22-23 focused on the completion of the military alliance's first 21st century Strategic Concept and on the war in Afghanistan, the near-complete absorption of the Balkans into the bloc, and the expansion of operations at the Cooperative Cyber Defense Center of Excellence established by NATO two years ago in the same city.

The most important deliberations, however, were on the integrally related questions of U.S. nuclear weapons stored on air bases in five NATO member states and the expansion of the Pentagon's interceptor missile program to all of Europe west of Russia, Belarus and Ukraine.

Discussions on the role of nuclear arms in Europe a generation after the end of the Cold War are in line with the Nuclear Posture Review released last month by the U.S. Department of Defense. NATO has never been known to deviate from American precedents and expectations. Its role is to accommodate and complement Pentagon initiatives. A nation like the Netherlands or Poland proposes, Washington disposes.

While speaking at a press conference in the ministerial meeting's host city, NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen directly tied together the retention of U.S. nuclear arms in Europe and NATO's cooperation with its dominant member on a continent-wide interceptor missile system:

"NATO's core business, its *raison-d'être*, is to protect our territory and our populations....And in a world where nuclear weapons actually exist, NATO needs a credible, effective, and safely managed deterrent.

"Missile defence is no replacement for an effective deterrent. But it can complement it. Because there are states, or other actors, who might not be rational enough to be deterred by our nuclear weapons. But they might be deterred by the realisation that their few missiles might not get through our defences."

What Rasmussen failed to mention was that in the event NATO collectively or a coalition of its main powers was to launch first strikes against nations to the east and south with conventional weapons, nuclear ones or a combination of both, an advanced phase interceptor system could prevent effective retaliation.

The NATO chief also said, "The missile threat to Europe is clear, and it is growing....Which means, to my mind, that we need to take on Alliance missile defence as a NATO mission."

Recent statements by Rasmussen, one of which has drawn the ire of Iran directly, would indicate from where the missile threat to Europe is alleged to emanate, but Rasmussen has no aversion to belaboring – or exaggerating – a point and added, “30 countries, including of course Iran, have or are developing missiles.” To address the non-existent challenge to Europe Rasmussen announced that the foreign ministers in attendance would discuss “issues surrounding missile defence, including cost, command and control,” and stated that at the bloc’s summit in Lisbon, Portugal this November “NATO nations will decide whether or not it will to take on Alliance missile defence as a NATO mission.”

After the end of the Cold War and the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, NATO ordinarily held a summit every third year in the 1990s and every second year from 1999 to 2008. But this year’s summit will be the third of what have become annual events: Romania in 2008, France and Germany in 2009, and Portugal this year.

The last will be the first NATO summit held entirely in a founding member state since the fiftieth anniversary one in Washington, DC in 1999.

Not only the increased frequency (the Alliance has never before in its 61-year history conducted summits in three successive years), but the locations of the summits reveal the intensification of NATO activity and its steady drive to the east over the last decade. In the ten years between the Washington and last year’s Strasbourg, France-Kehl, Germany summits, every one was held in Eastern Europe: In the Czech Republic in 2002, Turkey in 2004, Estonia in 2006 and Romania in 2008.

The sites, to the east and south of previous ones, are indicative of what NATO has become in the 21st century: An expansionist, active military force that has deployed troops to several current and recent conflict zones – Bosnia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Sudan and Somalia – and to numerous adjoining nations such as Albania, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Jordan and Kuwait. There were 50,000 multinational forces under NATO command in Kosovo in 1999. There are now over 90,000 (of 120,000 foreign troops) in Afghanistan, with both the aggregate number and the percentage to increase shortly.

In his opening statement at the foreign ministers meeting in Estonia, Rasmussen emphasized the centrality of U.S.-led missile shield plans in relation to the upcoming summit in Portugal and the new Strategic Concept that will be adopted there: “In Lisbon, NATO nations will decide if missile defence for our European territory and population should become an Alliance mission. I make no secret that I think it should.”

He linked maintaining American nuclear gravity bombs in several European nations and the expansion of interceptor missile facilities in Eastern Europe to the Alliance’s so-called collective defense doctrine. In his main address Rasmussen stated: “[W]e are delivering solidarity through our unflinching commitment to territorial defence. This core task of NATO is embodied in Article 5 of our founding treaty: An attack on one Ally is considered an attack on all. This is the very foundation of our Alliance....We need the right type of military capabilities. We need modern and mobile armed forces. Armed forces that are not static. Forces that are able to deploy quickly to assist an Ally in need.”

The secretary general faithfully echoed the two rationales for nuclear first strikes continued in the new U.S. Nuclear Posture Review, and indeed the American global war on terror phraseology of the past nine years, in asserting that NATO “must retain a nuclear capability as long as there are rogue regimes or terrorist groupings that may pose a nuclear threat to

us.”

But he then segued seamlessly into identifying that NATO’s main prospective target remains what it has always been: Russia. Without identifying it (or needing to in the following context), he said:

“We also need a visible presence of NATO across the entire territory of our Alliance. And we see a perfect example here in this region. We have put in place arrangements to police the Baltic airspace. A range of NATO members are actively engaged – sharing responsibility – showing solidarity – and demonstrating a capable and credible Alliance that is determined to defend our territory and to protect our populations.

“We also need to guard against new risks and threats to the security of our nations, such as energy cut-offs or cyber attacks. And here as well, we have a good example right here in Estonia, with the Alliance’s Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence.”

There are neither rogue nations nor al-Qaeda operatives with “nuclear suitcases” in the Baltic Sea region. References to energy cut-offs and cyber attacks are undeniable and exclusive allusions to actions NATO states have accused Russian of perpetrating.

The patrolling of Baltic air space by NATO warplanes and the – to call it by its proper name – cyber warfare center in Estonia are both aimed at Russia and Russia only.

In his speech Rasmussen was unequivocal in his pro-nuclear weapons stance. In addition to affirming that “What we...need is a credible nuclear deterrent” – supposedly because of “rogue regimes or terrorist groupings” – he added “for this reason, we also need a credible missile defence system, providing coverage for all the Allies.”

Again the connection between U.S. nuclear arms at NATO nations’ air bases in Europe and anti-ballistic missile installations on or near Russia’s borders was made directly and again with the transparently untenable claim that both are needed against Iran and al-Qaeda.

What plans the new Strategic Concept to be endorsed at the November summit will finalize were indicated in another statement by Rasmussen:

“The United States already has a missile defence system. Some European Allies have a capacity to protect deployed forces against missile attacks....If we connect national systems into a NATO wide missile shield to protect all our Allies, that would be a very powerful demonstration of NATO solidarity in the 21st Century. And I hope we can make progress in that direction by the time of the next NATO Summit in Lisbon in November.”

He repeated NATO’s position on nuclear arms in an interview on Estonian public television: “If we look at today’s world, then there is no alternative to nuclear arms in NATO’s deterrent capability....My personal opinion is that the stationing of US nuclear weapons in Europe is part of deterrence to be taken seriously.”

The 2010 Strategic Concept will not differ in any substantive manner from the current one adopted in 1999, which states:

“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 and common commitment to war prevention 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.”

The presence of nuclear weapons in Europe is a foundational tenet of NATO and one of the root purposes for the bloc’s existence. The first NATO Strategic Concept (The Strategic Concept For The Defense Of The North Atlantic Area), that of the year of its founding, 1949, includes among its commitments to:

“Insure 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.”

NATO’s policy in the intervening 61 years has also obligated European member states to adhere to what is called nuclear sharing or nuclear burden sharing; that is, nuclear bombs stationed on bases in Europe are to be delivered by the host nations’ air forces.

Currently there are from 200-400 U.S. tactical nuclear weapons stored on air bases in Britain, Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Turkey. The Federation of American Scientists has estimated the number as between 200 and 350 in the six aforementioned nations. All but Britain are non-nuclear states and the storage of U.S. nuclear weapons on their territories is a blatant violation of the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which stipulates:

“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....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.”

The exigencies of international treaties, even ones to which NATO members are signatories, don’t appear to have affected Anders Fogh Rasmussen’s commitment to retaining American nuclear arms in Europe.

Nor do they influence U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s stance on the issue. According to a New York Times report on the first day of the NATO foreign ministers meeting in Estonia, she “was expected to urge caution in remarks to the ministers” in regards to her nation’s nuclear weapons in Europe.

Paralleling Rasmussen's coupling of the two issues, "A senior American official said [Clinton] would underscore the need for NATO to maintain a deterrent capability and the need for the alliance to act together on this issue. The Obama administration is also pushing for NATO to embrace the American missile-defense system in Eastern Europe as a core mission of the alliance."

On the same day the Associated Press reported that Clinton "ruled out an early withdrawal of U.S. nuclear forces from Europe, telling a NATO meeting that any reductions should be tied to a nuclear pullback by Russia, which has far more of the weapons in range of European targets," and that "Clinton also said the Obama administration wants NATO to accept missile defense as a core mission of the alliance...."

What Clinton is attempting to effect is a linkage between her country's tactical nuclear weapons in Europe and Russia's arsenal of as many as 2,000 of the same. However, Russia maintains its weapons in its own territory, while the U.S.'s are half the world away, some as close to Russia as Turkey. Additionally, Russia's battlefield nuclear arsenal, given the diminished stature of its military in general in the post-Soviet period, is its last line of defense against a conventional or nuclear first strike and a deterrent against that threat.

With plans to launch its Prompt Global Strike program and with the testing of the X-37B orbital space plane while the Tallinn meeting was underway, the Pentagon is striving for a fast strike, first strike conventional weapons military superiority that could render Russia's nuclear forces easy to neutralize, hence useless. On April 23 former head of the Russian Air Force General Anatoly Kornukov described the launching of the X-37B as evidence of the U.S.'s weaponization of space and as part of a project to integrate Air Force, Space Command, and air and missile defense capabilities. The retired general told the Interfax news agency, "Now the US will be able to deliver a strike in a short time without due resistance."

Kornukov further warned that "aggressors from space could turn Russia into something like Iraq or Yugoslavia."

The director of Advanced Space Programs Development for the U.S. Air Force in the Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter administrations, Robert M. Bowman, was quoted by the Voice of Russia on the space plane launch: "One possible mission would be the destruction of opposing military satellites, gaining absolute military control of space. The second would be to destroy targets on the surface of the Earth from space without warning. These two missions were the missions assigned to the Department of Defense in 1982 by Ronald Reagan in his secret defense guidance document."

To return to the issue of U.S. nuclear arms in Europe, Clinton's prepared address for a private dinner with the foreign ministers of the other 27 NATO states on the evening of April 22 "said that sticking with a nuclear NATO is consistent with Obama's Prague speech because the administration believes it should seek a balance between reducing the role of nuclear weapons in the world and meeting the future security needs of the alliance."

Continuing from the earlier-cited Associated Press account, Clinton "made several points that appeared to exclude the possibility of bringing an early end to the presence of the weapons," including the assertion "that as long as nuclear weapons exist, NATO will remain a nuclear alliance." In her own words, for NATO, "as a nuclear alliance, sharing nuclear risks and responsibilities widely is fundamental."

U.S. nuclear strategy and the missile shield project on the European continent are incorporated into NATO doctrine and practice, whatever Europeans as a whole or individual governments think about the two issues.

Recent statements by Clinton's subordinate Ellen Tauscher, Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Affairs, and even more forceful ones by the chief of the U.S. Missile Defense Agency, Lieutenant General Patrick O'Reilly, leave no doubt that the April 8 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) agreement signed by U.S. President Barack Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev will in no manner impede American missile deployments in Eastern Europe.

On April 21 Tauscher told a panel discussion at the Atlantic Council in Washington that "The new START Treaty does not constrain U.S. missile defense programs. The United States will continue to improve our missile defenses, as needed, to defend ourselves, our deployed forces, and our allies and partners."

Regarding Russian objections, severe enough to have led the nation's foreign minister to warn Russia reserves the right to withdraw from the treaty if Washington forges ahead with its interceptor missile plans, Tauscher said that Moscow's position "is not an integral part of the New START Treaty. It's not legally-binding. It won't constrain U.S. missile defence programs."

On April 23 Andrei Nesterenko, spokesman for the Russian Foreign Ministry, said at a press briefing in Moscow: "We are concerned about the United States' absolutely unfounded anti-missile activities in Poland."

"It is not clear to us why Patriot anti-aircraft and anti-missile systems are being deployed near the Russian border. Nor have we an answer to the question about what threats will be tackled in the drill which will be held very close to Russia's Kaliningrad region."

Three days before, the Missile Defense Agency's O'Reilly told a hearing of the House Armed Services subcommittee on defense appropriations that "The new START treaty actually reduces constraints on the development of the missile defense program."

Not one to mince words, he added, "Our targets will no longer be subject to START constraints, which limited our use of air-to-surface and waterborne launches of targets which are essential for a cost-effective testing of a missile defense interceptor against medium-range and intermediate-range ballistic missiles in the Pacific region."

Less than a week earlier the deputy head of Russia's Security Council, Yuri Baluyevsky - former chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation and first deputy defense minister - identified "the deployment of the U.S. global missile defense system" as one of the two main military threats to Russia.

In 2007 NATO's senior governing body, the North Atlantic Council, endorsed the Alliance's participation in a missile shield that would take in the territory of all member states. The 2008 and 2009 summits confirmed that position.

Earlier this month Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk met with President Obama in Prague and, in addition to a U.S. Patriot Advanced Capability-3 missile battery and 100 troops to

arrive in Poland next month, said that the START II agreement would have no impact on the deployment of more advanced Standard Missile-3 anti-missile interceptors in his country.

In the same week Bulgarian Foreign Minister Nikolai Mladenov disclosed that his government will enter into negotiations with the U.S. later this year on the deployment of interceptor missiles. The missiles to be stationed in Bulgaria will presumably also be an adaptation of the previously ship-based Standard Missile-3. In his comments on the subject Mladenov explicitly described the deployments as related to NATO plans for all of Europe.

His nation, like neighboring Romania, which in February announced its intention to house U.S. interceptor missiles as well, and Poland, are former Warsaw Pact states that are now NATO members. As such they are obligated to accede to Alliance, which is to say American, plans for stationing missiles and turning their Cold War era military bases over to the West for modernization and expansion. And, if requested, to allow the deployment of strategic weapons and delivery systems.

NATO is the conduit used for bringing U.S. nuclear weapons into Europe, where they remain two decades after the end of the Cold War. Europe will not be free of nuclear arms until NATO is disbanded.

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