

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Piecing together evidence from an array of sources, the Natural Resources Defense Council has determined that the United States is still deploying 480¹ nuclear weapons in Europe. That should come as a surprise. Until now, most observers believed that there were no more than half of those weapons still left on the continent. Declassified documents obtained under the U.S. Freedom of Information Act, military literature, the media, non-governmental organizations, and other sources show that the 480 bombs are stored at eight air bases in six NATO countries – a formidable arsenal larger than the entire Chinese nuclear stockpile.

The military and political justifications given by the United States and NATO for U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe are both obsolete and vague. Long-range weapons in the United States and Britain supplant the unique role the weapons once had in continental Europe, yet it seems NATO officials have been unwilling or unable to give them up. The deployment irritates efforts to improve relations with Russia and undercuts global efforts – and those of the United States and Europe – to persuade rogue nations from developing nuclear weapons. The Bush administration and the NATO alliance should address this issue as a matter of global nuclear security, and the United States should withdraw all of its nuclear weapons from Europe.

End of Cold War, nuclear war planning modernization, revoke traditional justification for weapons

Originally, the United States deployed nuclear weapons in Europe against the threat of a Soviet invasion during the Cold War. That threat ended more than a decade ago. In the 1990s, the United States modernized its nuclear war planning system, improving the ability to rapidly design and execute nuclear strike plans. Weapons based in the United States can cover all of the potential targets covered by the bombs in Europe, and NATO officials publicly say that they have reduced the number and role of nuclear weapons in Europe. Despite these facts, the United States still requires its military in Europe to maintain nuclear strike plans. Clinging to a Cold War nuclear posture impedes NATO's transition to a modern alliance and drains scarce resources that the alliance urgently needs to fulfill real-world non-nuclear missions.

Political and military landscape eliminate the need for nuclear weapons

European security conditions have changed significantly since NATO set the level of 480 bombs in 1993, eliminating a need for U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe. Nearly all of the countries that once were potential targets for the weapons are now members of NATO. Although NATO stated in 1996 that it had “no intention, no reason, no plan” to station nuclear weapons in new member states, the limited combat range of the nuclear strike aircraft deployed in Europe probably requires some form of staging through Eastern European air bases to effectively engage targets in Russia. Yet NATO itself has reduced the readiness level of the aircraft to such an extent that it would probably be more expedient to transfer the weapons from the United States in a crisis than to increase the readiness level.

NATO maintains that these bombs are not aimed at any particular country. A June 2004 NATO issue paper claims that the alliance has “terminated the practice of maintaining standing peacetime nuclear contingency plans and associated targets for its sub-strategic nuclear forces. As a result, NATO’s nuclear forces no longer target any country.” The statement is likely an exaggeration and slightly misleading. Although NATO no longer keeps aircraft on alert at the end of the runways as it did for most of the Cold War, it still maintains detailed nuclear strike plans for potential strikes against specific targets in specific countries. To justify further the presence of these weapons, NATO officials claim that the weapons are a deterrent to war, a theory disproved by the outbreak of armed conflict in Bosnia and Yugoslavia.

Absent any meaningful military role in Europe, nuclear planners have begun to search for political justifications for the nuclear weapons outside Europe. In the 1990s, U.S. and NATO officials heralded what they described as an unprecedented reduced role for nuclear weapons. At the same time, however, U.S. European Command (EUCOM) and U.S. Strategic Command arranged for the potential use of the NATO nuclear bombs outside of EUCOM’s area of responsibility. European parliaments may not be aware of this change and some of them probably would not support it.

U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe undercut efforts to reduce global nuclear threat

Not only are U.S. and European rationales for forward-deploying U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe thin, but the presence of the weapons in Europe could affect the delicate relationship with other nuclear powers. Stationing U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe undercuts efforts to improve relations with Russia and gives the Russian military an excuse to maintain its own non-strategic nuclear weapons.

Equally troublesome is the fact that NATO has earmarked nearly a third of the forward-deployed weapons in Europe for use by the air forces of non-nuclear NATO countries, a violation of Non-Proliferation Treaty’s (NPT) main objective. Some claim that there is no NPT violation because the weapons remain under U.S. custody until the U.S. president authorizes their use for war, at which time the treaty would no longer be in effect. But all preparation for the use of the weapons takes place now in peacetime. Equipping non-nuclear countries with the means to conduct preparations for nuclear warfare expresses a double standard that conflicts with U.S. and European nuclear nonproliferation objectives to persuade countries such as Iran and North Korea from developing nuclear weapons.

What should be done about U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe?

To end Cold War nuclear planning in Europe, the United States should immediately withdraw the remaining nuclear weapons from Europe. Doing so would complete the withdrawal that began in 1991, free up resources in the U.S. Air Force and European air forces for real-world non-nuclear missions, and enable NATO to focus on the non-nuclear security priorities that matter.

In addition, NATO should end the practice of assigning nuclear strike missions to non-nuclear member countries. This should involve the removal of all mechanical and

electronic equipment on host nation aircraft intended for the delivery of nuclear weapons, and the denuclearization of facilities on national air bases intended for storage and maintenance of nuclear weapons. Doing so would end NATO's nuclear double standard and strengthen the stand of the United States and Europe in persuading other countries from developing nuclear weapons.

Finally, the United States and Europe should use the political leverage that would come from these initiatives to engage Russia to drastically reduce their large inventory of non-strategic nuclear weapons. At the same time, NATO should use the removal of nuclear weapons from Greece, Italy, and Turkey to invigorate efforts toward a nuclear weapons free zone in the Middle East. Such initiatives would provide real benefits to NATO security.