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Germany and NATO's Nuclear Dilemma

Posted on Oct.29, 2009 in NATO (http://fas.org/category/nato/), Nuclear Weapons (http://fas.org/category/nuclear\_weapons/), United States (http://fas.org/category/united\_states/) by Hans M. Kristensen (http://fas.org/author/hans-m-kristensen/)

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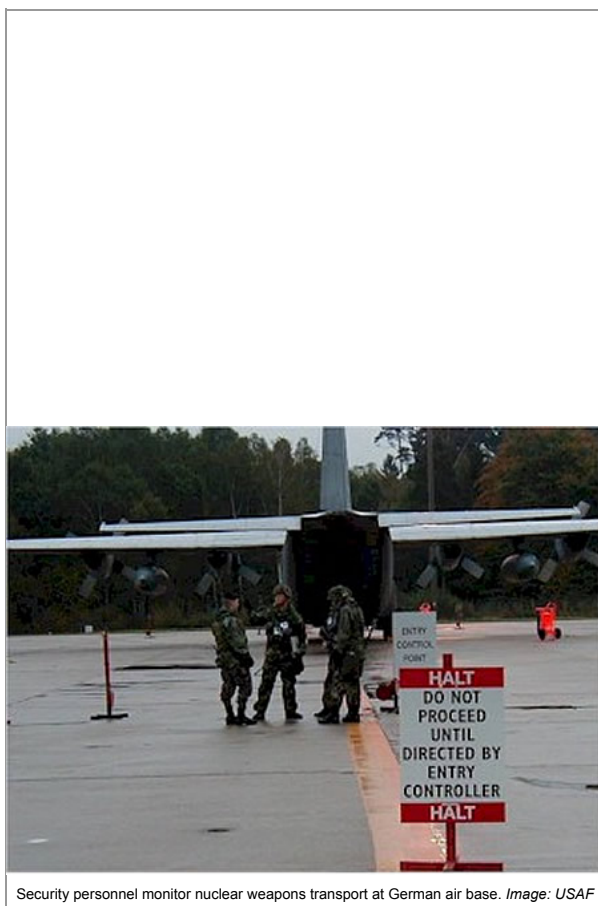
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By Hans M. Kristensen

The new German government has announced (http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,,4753409,00.html) that it wants to enter talks with its NATO allies about the withdrawal of the remaining U.S. nuclear weapons from Germany.

The announcement coincides with the Obama administration's ongoing Nuclear Posture Review, which is spending an unprecedented amount of time pondering the "international aspects" of to what extent nuclear weapons help assure allies of their security.

Germany and many other NATO countries apparently don't want to be protected by U.S. forward-deployed tactical nuclear weapons, which they see as a relic of the Cold War that locks NATO in the past and prevents its transition to the future.

**Current Deployment**

The U.S. Air Force currently deploys approximately 200 B61 nuclear bombs at six bases in five NATO countries (see Table 1). The weapons are the last remnant of a vast force of more than 7,000 tactical nuclear weapons that used to clutter bases in Europe during the Cold War as a defense against the Soviet threat and the Warsaw Pact's large conventional forces.

**Table 1:**

<b>Status of U.S. Nuclear Weapons in Europe 2009</b>						
Country	Air Base	Custodian	Platform	Deployment (WS3 vaults) (Est. Weapons)	Remarks	
Belgium	Kleine Brogel	701 MUSSS	Belgian F-16s (10 <sup>th</sup> Fighter Wing)	11	10-20	Nuclear inspection in 2004, 2006, and 2008
Germany	Büchel	702 MUSSS	German Tornados (Jahke 33)	11	10-20	Nuclear inspections in 2005, 2007, and 2009
Italy	Aviano	31 <sup>st</sup> Fighter Wing	US F-16s	18	50	Nuclear inspections in 2004, 2007, and 2009
	Gheddi Torre	704 MUSSS	Italian Tornados (6 <sup>th</sup> Storm)	11	20-40	Nuclear inspections in 2004. Rumored decision to consolidate weapons at Aviano
Netherlands	Volkel	703 MUSSS	Dutch F-16s (1 <sup>st</sup> Fighter Wing)	11	10-20	Nuclear inspections in 2005, 2006, and 2008
Turkey	Incirlik	39 <sup>th</sup> Air Base Wing	Rotating US aircraft from other wings when needed	25	50-90	Nuclear inspections in 2006 and 2008. Turkey in 2005 turned down US request to deploy 52 <sup>nd</sup> Fighter Wing aircraft to Incirlik. There is no permanent Fighter Wing and no aircraft "generation" at the base. The national Turkish nuclear strike mission has probably expired
<b>Five Countries Six Bases</b>				<b>87*</b>	<b>150-240**</b>	

\*The 87 WS3 (Weapon Storage and Security System) vaults can store up to 348 weapons. Vaults at some other bases that used to store nuclear bombs might still be maintained as well for dispersal contingencies.  
\*\*All bombs are B61-3/4. The B61-10 was placed in the inactive stockpile in 2005. Bombs were removed from Araxos Air Base in Greece in 2001, Ramstein Air Base in Germany in 2005, and RAF Lakenheath in England in 2006. Additional bombs stored in the United States can augment the European deployment as needed.

Hans M. Kruttschnitt, Federation of American Scientists, 2009

(<http://fas.org/programs/ssp/nukes/images/natonukes2009.jpg>)

Approximately 200 U.S. nuclear bombs are currently deployed at six bases in five European countries. Click image to download larger table.

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The bombs are scattered among 87 individual aircraft shelters where they are stored in underground vaults. Although well protected, this widespread deployment contrasts normal U.S. nuclear weapons security procedures that favor consolidation at as few locations as possible.

An Air Force investigation concluded (<http://fas.org/blog/ssp/2008/06/usaf-report-“most“-nuclear-weapon-sites-in-europe-do-not-meet-us-security-requirements.php>) in 2008 that “most” sites in Europe did not meet U.S. security requirements. NATO officials publicly dismissed the conclusion, and a visit by a team from the U.S. government apparently found issues but nothing alarming.

**Consolidation Versus Withdrawal**

Rumors have circulated for several years about plans to consolidate the remaining weapons from the current six bases to one or two bases. The plans would either terminate the Cold War arrangement of non-nuclear NATO countries being assigned strike missions with U.S. nuclear weapons, or move the weapons to U.S. bases with the promise that they could be returned if necessary.

Consolidation has occurred frequently since the end of the Cold War: withdrawal from Turkish national bases Akinci and Balikesir in 1995; withdrawal from German national bases Memmingen and Norvenich in 1996; withdrawal from Greek national base Araxos in 2001; withdrawal from Ramstein ([http://fas.org/blog/ssp/2007/07/united\\_states\\_removes\\_nuclear.php](http://fas.org/blog/ssp/2007/07/united_states_removes_nuclear.php)) in Germany in 2005 ; withdrawal from Lakenheath (<http://fas.org/blog/ssp/2008/06/us-nuclear-weapons-withdrawn-from-the-united-kingdom.php>) in England in 2006. Another round of consolidation would just be another slow step toward the inevitable: withdrawal from Europe.

Consolidation of the remaining nuclear bombs to the two U.S. southern bases at Aviano in Italy and Incirlik in Turkey would be problematic for two reasons. First, Turkey does not allow the U.S. Air Force to deploy the fighter-bombers to Incirlik that are needed to deliver the bombs if necessary, and has several times restricted U.S. deployments through Turkey into Iraq. Given that history, and apparent doubts ([http://www.nytimes.com/glogin?](http://www.nytimes.com/glogin?URI=http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/28/world/europe/28turkey.html&OQ=_Q3D4&OP=765900a0Q2FeQ60Q26Q2AeywQ20n_wwQ2FEeQ27Q27hecQ27e)

[URI=http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/28/world/europe/28turkey.html&OQ=\\_Q3D4&OP=765900a0Q2FeQ60Q26Q2AeywQ20n\\_wwQ2FEeQ27Q27hecQ27e](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/28/world/europe/28turkey.html&OQ=_Q3D4&OP=765900a0Q2FeQ60Q26Q2AeywQ20n_wwQ2FEeQ27Q27hecQ27e) about Turkey's future direction, is nuclear deployment in Turkey a credible posture? Second, absent a fighter wing deployment to Incirlik, Aviano carries the overwhelming burden of conventional air operations on the southern flank of NATO, operations that are already burdened by the nuclear addendum and would further be so by a decision to consolidate the nuclear mission at the base.

**An End to NATO Nuclear Strike Mission**

The German policy to seek withdrawal of nuclear weapons from Büchel Air Base essentially means – if implemented – the unraveling of the NATO nuclear strike mission, whereby non-nuclear NATO countries equip and train their air forces to deliver U.S. nuclear weapons. Germany shares this mission with Belgium, Italy, and the Netherlands, while Greece and Turkey opted out in 2001.

**Table 1:**  
**NATO Nuclear Strike Mission: Violation of NPT?**



German personnel attach a U.S. B61 nuclear bomb shape to a German Tornado fighter-bomber under supervision of U.S. personnel. As a signatory to the NPT Germany has pledged not to receive nuclear weapons, yet, as this picture illustrates, is preparing its military to do so anyway. *Image: German Ministry of Defense/Der Spiegel*

The mission is highly controversial because these countries as signatories to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) have all pledged not to receive nuclear weapons: “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.” Yet that’s precisely what the NATO strike mission entails: peacetime preparations for direct transfer of nuclear weapons and control over such weapons in times of war.

The mission is clearly inconsistent with if not the letter then certainly the spirit of the NPT. The arrangement was tolerated during the Cold War but is incompatible with nonproliferation policy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### Real-World Security Commitments

Germany is one of the “30-plus” allies and friends that some have argued recently need to be protected by nuclear weapons to prevent them from developing their own nuclear weapons. It has even been suggested that extended deterrence necessitates equipping the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter with nuclear capability.

Yet high-level officials in both the White House and the Pentagon have already concluded that the United States no longer needs to deploy nuclear bombs in Europe to meet its security obligations to NATO. Those security obligations today have very little to do with nuclear weapons and extended deterrence is predominantly served by non-nuclear means. The limited role nuclear weapons still serve can adequately be fulfilled by long-range weapon systems just as they have been in the Pacific for 17 years. Whether the ongoing Nuclear Posture Review will reflect those views will be seen in February 2010 when the review is completed.

**Figure 2:**  
**The Mission**



The U.S. nuclear bombs were deployed in Europe to defend NATO against a conventional attack from the Warsaw Pact, a threat that has long-since disappeared.

Regardless, Germany apparently does not want to be protected by U.S. nuclear weapons deployed in Europe. Neither does Belgium, where the parliament unanimously has requested nuclear bombs be withdrawn. Dutch officials privately say that they see no need for the deployment either. In fact, in all of the countries where nuclear weapons are deployed, an overwhelming majority of the public favors withdrawal ([http://fas.org/blog/ssp/2006/06/nato\\_nuclear\\_policy\\_at\\_odds\\_wi.php](http://fas.org/blog/ssp/2006/06/nato_nuclear_policy_at_odds_wi.php)) withdrawal – has the highest public support for withdrawal of any of the countries that currently store nuclear weapons. In the long run this is a serious challenge for NATO; that its nuclear posture is so clearly out of sync with public opinion.

The biggest challenge seems to be to convince Poland and Turkey that withdrawal will not undermine the U.S. security commitment. Poland is worried about Russia; Turkey about Iran. But tactical nuclear weapons were the Cold War way of addressing such concerns. What’s needed now is focused diplomacy, stewardship, and reaffirmation of non-nuclear arrangements to convince these countries that the nuclear bombs that were deployed in Europe to defend NATO against a conventional attack from the Warsaw Pact can now finally be withdrawn.

The previous two German governments also favored withdrawal but did little to push the issue. Whether the new government will be any different will be put to the test during NATO’s ongoing revision of its Strategic Concept scheduled for completion in 2010.

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## 6 thoughts on “Germany and NATO’s Nuclear Dilemma”

### 1. Frank Ch. Eigler says:

October 30, 2009 at 9:32 am (<http://fas.org/blogs/security/2009/10/germany/#comment-8016>)  
“Yet that’s precisely what the NATO strike mission entails: peacetime preparations for direct transfer of nuclear weapons and control over such weapons in times of war. ...  
The mission is clearly inconsistent with if not the letter then certainly the spirit of the NPT.”

We can all figure out how a future contradiction between actual wartime needs on one hand, and limitations of the NPT on the other, would be resolved. Practicing with dummies presents no current contradiction.

**Reply:** “Contradiction,” oh but it most certainly is. The main issue is not legal but political. Equipping non-nuclear NPT countries with the means, skills, and plans to delivery nuclear weapons is not consistent with the nonproliferation regime and the nonproliferation standards Europe and the United States are promoting. The parallel would be Russia deploying nuclear weapons in Iran, equipping Iranian aircraft to carry the weapons, training Iranian pilots to deliver the weapons, and making the procedures for handing over control of the weapons to Iran in times of war. In such a hypothetical scenario, Russia could argue that it was merely doing so to assure Iran about its security and thereby preventing it from developing its own nuclear weapons. Obviously, it would require enormous changes in Russian and Iranian policies to create such a posture, but I think most would argue that it would be a clear contradiction of the NPT. HK

[Reply \(/blogs/security/2009/10/germany/?replytocom=8016#respond\)](#)

### 2. Distiller says:

October 30, 2009 at 9:46 am (<http://fas.org/blogs/security/2009/10/germany/#comment-8017>)  
Besides the fact that the Kremlin wouldn’t send its tanks into Poland the next day after the U.S. tactical nuclear warheads would be removed from Western Europe, keeping tactical nuclear warheads stored on the ground in theatre is questionable anyway (for a number of reasons). And what can a free falling bomb on a F-16 possible do better than a UGM-109A fired from a SSN or DDG?

But I feel that these tac nukes in Europa are at least aimed as much inwards, as outwards. Sure a lot of folks in the security establishment have a hard time to leave the Cold War behind, but there are also still those who have an even harder time to leave WW2 behind ...

[Reply \(/blogs/security/2009/10/germany/?replytocom=8017#respond\)](#)

### 3. chris says:

October 31, 2009 at 9:24 pm (<http://fas.org/blogs/security/2009/10/germany/#comment-8018>)  
Why would the european NATO members need tactical nukes?

I don’t really see the importance of withdrawal, though the storage issue might be worse than I think;  
but since the fall of the soviet block, the tactical nukes are obsolete, also: there’s still two nuclear powers within arm’s reach, France and the UK, who are also NATO members.

**Reply:** Good questions. The importance of withdrawal, as I see it, is twofold: first, to free NATO from a Cold War posture to focus on today’s challenges, and; second, to end the deterrence relationship with Russia. HK

[Reply \(/blogs/security/2009/10/germany/?replytocom=8018#respond\)](#)

### 4. JAB says:

November 3, 2009 at 6:25 pm (<http://fas.org/blogs/security/2009/10/germany/#comment-8019>)  
Do you have a list of those “30 plus” nations that require nuclear protection? I believe that we should offer no nation a promise of nuclear protection, but I can see the concern of some nations who think they need some: Israel, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan come to mind. There is probably actually a very high probability that the U.S. nuclear umbrella has deterred other nations from aggression against these particular nations.

**Reply:** The “30 plus” are listed in this blog. HK

[Reply \(/blogs/security/2009/10/germany/?replytocom=8019#respond\)](#)

### 5. Artem says:

November 6, 2009 at 11:36 am (<http://fas.org/blogs/security/2009/10/germany/#comment-8020>)  
What do you think, when Germany (probably, together with Belgium and Netherlands) will address to the Allies for the consultation on the issue of the withdrawal? It seems like for Germans it would be more preferable to raise the issue on TNWs in Europe before NPR 2010 will

be published. And about JSF: will the decision, whether JSF is to be designed as DCA or not, be adopted after NPR 2010 or this two things do not correlate with?

**Reply:** The Germans certainly want to see some movement on the issue, and they will get support from several other countries. By stating in public that they want to see a withdrawal they have already accomplished raising the issue. How far they can move this inside NATO during the Strategic Concept review, much less before the NPR is published, is hard to gauge. If the past is any indication, then a decision will not come from Europe but from Washington. Some people will try to link that decision to the next round of arms control with Russia, which both Russia and the United States have said should address non-strategic weapons. But Germany and other supporters of a withdrawal have not made that link a condition, which I think is a good thing.

On the JSF, I think the NPR will made a recommendation. But although we hear some argue that that decision is intrinsically linked to extended deterrence in Europe, I don't think that view is necessarily shared by the authors of the NPR, who see other ways of continuing extended deterrence even without a nuclear JSF. HK

Reply (/blogs/security/2009/10/germany/?replytocom=8020#respond)

6.  **lisa lebowski** says:

November 7, 2009 at 5:35 pm (<http://fas.org/blogs/security/2009/10/germany/#comment-8021>)  
I would ask readers to consider the question of in what way is an atomic explosive a weapon? This is an honest question. These machines intrinsically and unavoidably produce explosions that are unfocused and on such a large scale that they do not seem to qualify as weapons. Furthermore, in the case of genuine weapons, a conjugate defensive device is possible. No such device is possible in the example of atomic explosives. I therefore submit to readers here the idea that to use the term "nuclear weapon" is, in a rhetorical sense, to repeat a falsehood that tends to create or foster a narrative myth that itself tends to encourage the use of these machines. An accurate alternative terminology, which I propose, is "infernal atomic device".

Additionally, a dependent question arises: In what way do these machines convey protection? Again, this is an honest question. Offering the near instantaneous obliteration of masses of people, lengthy poisoning of large areas, and destruction of valuable equity may indeed have some effect and may seem or even be desirable to some select few, but I am not aware of any cogent argument that supports the idea that these machines offer protection. What remains is, I suspect, another rhetorical canard that supports a dangerous narrative myth – that "nuclear protection" exists.

Reply (/blogs/security/2009/10/germany/?replytocom=8021#respond)

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