

Nuclear Weapons in Germany: Broaden and Deepen the Debate

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Summary

On February 9, the London-based Centre for European Reform released a [brief](#) by Franklin Miller, George Robertson, and Kori Schake criticizing the new German government for seeking “the withdrawal of all U.S. nuclear weapons from Germany.” The authors’ international standing makes their essay worthy of debate. Miller served for several administrations as a leading nuclear policy maker in the Pentagon and White House; Lord Robertson is a former defense secretary of the United Kingdom and secretary-general of NATO; and Schake was a senior foreign policy adviser to U.S. presidential candidate John McCain.

This Policy Outlook analyzes the main arguments Miller, Robertson, and Schake advance, and concludes that:

- The authors show an anachronistic preoccupation with NATO’s nuclear weapons capacity, and exaggerate its value in contending with the real challenges the alliance’s members face in the twenty-first century.
- No state—including Germany and the United States—should unilaterally revise NATO’s deterrence strategies, but it will prove equally debilitating for the alliance if states cling to an outmoded nuclear posture.
- Relying on nuclear weapons to defend the United States and its allies from a wider range of threats than they are appropriate for entails moral hazard, and an inherent potential for lesser conflicts to escalate to mass destruction scenarios.
- NATO should take special care to reassure Turkey and the Eastern European states that it will deploy the capabilities best suited to deter Iranian and Russian coercion, which would most likely involve political subversion, asymmetric low-intensity violence, cyber-harassment, and energy-supply blackmail, rather than nuclear weapons.
- Though Polish Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski and others have called for both the United States and Russia to remove their short-range nuclear weapons in Europe, Russia would not be willing to negotiate such reductions without a wider series of agreements to address the conventional military imbalances created by the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and the expansion of NATO.

Antiquated Arguments for Antiquated Weapons

The three authors report that NATO now retains “200-odd” air-deliverable nuclear bombs on bases with U.S. and allied air crews in Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy, and Turkey. In contrast, Russia deploys approximately 2,000 operational “tactical” nuclear weapons. The presence of the U.S./NATO bombs in Europe, the three write, “affirms the coupling of US nuclear forces – including US strategic forces—to the defence of NATO territory. Bluntly put, the nuclear arsenal in Europe serves to put the US homeland at risk to nuclear attack if NATO is forced to resort to using Europe-based nuclear bombs to defend its borders. This in turn signals to any potential aggressor the risks of an attack against NATO far outweigh possible gains.”

The Cold War assumptions in this passage deserve to be challenged. Which adversary has the means and motives to commit aggression on a scale that would plausibly justify or require the use of NATO nuclear weapons to defeat it? What would such an adversary’s cost/benefit calculation be? Aside from terrorists who may not be deterrable, the only state that appears to be a candidate is Russia. But the three authors acknowledge later that “these calculations may seem outdated; the use of nuclear weapons seems a very distant prospect.” To be sure, Russia emits bellicose rhetoric and willingness to conduct cyber-harassment, energy supply coercion, and other forms of muscle flexing. Its leadership seems lost in the darkness between the Cold War and the twenty-first century. As elaborated below, Russia needs to be dissuaded from bullying its former “communist brothers.” But Russia lacks the motive and capabilities to invade and occupy NATO states. Russia needs European energy markets and peace, too, and cannot win a renewed military competition with NATO.

The authors ignore the ongoing existence of the French and UK nuclear arsenals, whose purpose surely includes deterrence and defense against attack on NATO territory. France and the UK would not feel compelled to use their nuclear weapons unless they had suffered or were threatened with an attack on an enormous scale. If terrorists waged such an attack, the U.S. nuclear bombs based in Germany, Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands, and Turkey would be both superfluous and irrelevant for retaliatory purposes. It is hard to imagine which state could or would attack them at a level that would justify the use of nuclear weapons. But if such a state emerged, chances are it would also threaten other NATO states on the way to Paris or London. This would implicate the French and UK nuclear deterrents in the aggressor’s calculations. More likely, of course, is the possibility that Russia could commit a limited aggression on NATO member(s) east of France, and assume that France and the UK would not want to risk escalation to nuclear conflict. The victim’s invocation of NATO’s collective defense obligations would not exclude calling on France and the UK to muster their nuclear forces in extremis. The credibility of a French or UK nuclear counter is low, but not zero. Thinking about such a scenario reminds us that only a massive-scale aggression would

make the use of *any* Western nuclear weapons remotely credible—be they UK, French, or US/NATO on European soil.

Most important, as long as Russia and other states possess nuclear weapons, the United States will retain an unrivalled nuclear arsenal based at sea, on long-range bombers, and, for now, in missile silos in the United States. Indeed, if the United States and NATO were to launch nuclear weapons, these are the systems that would be used, not the antiquated bombs and aircraft now based in NATO states. The three authors know, but do not say, that U.S. military planners would prefer to remove the NATO-based bombs precisely because they are operationally unnecessary. Unlike U.S. strategic systems, the NATO bombs could be interdicted. They also are an expensive nuisance to secure and maintain. In a grave international security crisis these weapons could be inviting targets, but moving them or readying them for use to prevent their being destroyed could further destabilize the situation. The U.S. homeland would be put at risk if NATO were forced to resort to using Europe-based nuclear bombs—that is what “coupling” means. Therefore, U.S. leaders would be inclined to use more effective strategic weapons based off European soil.

The most important issues that need airing and thoughtful analysis among NATO states are not the useless bombs in Germany. What really matters are the current and future reliability of commitments to collective defense, the capabilities to deter and defeat twenty-first century threats, and NATO-Russian relations.

The three authors hint at such a discussion but never elaborate. They castigate the new German foreign minister Guido Westerwelle and his party for scoring political points by insisting on the withdrawal of NATO bombs from German bases. This could be fair if Germany does not follow up with comprehensive proposals for reassuring NATO’s easternmost members that their security interests will be robustly protected. As the three authors write, “the problem with Germany piously stepping first in line to renounce nuclear weapons on its territory is that the country has not concurrently renounced nuclear deterrence. It wants to continue to enjoy the protection of America’s nuclear umbrella, without sharing the burden of risk associated with stationing weapons in Germany.”

If Germany is serious, it should work within NATO and with Russia to more systematically address the future of nuclear deterrence in Europe and its periphery. Most pertinently, Germany could seek collective policies to obviate the range of conventional and non-military threats such as cyber-warfare and energy coercion that can lead to escalatory crises. This would be hard work and would take considerable time. But it is what responsible powers do.

On the other hand, champions of U.S. nuclear weapons often inveigh against advocates of nuclear disarmament, including President Obama, for not giving sufficient attention to the views of allies. It is duplicitous of nuclear weapon

aficionados then to deride the allies when they say they don't want these weapons. Opponents of the denuclearization strategy value allied expressions only when it suits their own views. When allied governments in Berlin, Tokyo, Ankara, and elsewhere urge the United States to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and reduce the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. and NATO policy, U.S. nuclear weapon devotees ignore them.

Reassuring Turkey

The three authors rightly highlight the need to take special care to reassure Turkey that its continued deep involvement in NATO is vital and that NATO continues to serve Turkey's interests. Turkey under the Justice and Development Party is positioning itself to be a bridge between Europe and the Middle East. Its policies and diplomacy therefore will be complicated and not "Western."

The authors, like others, worry that Turkey will be driven to unwelcome action by Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons. They note that Turkey simultaneously seeks to improve relations with Iran and to persuade Tehran to eschew fomenting insecurity in the Middle East. Ankara recognizes that an Iran that acquired nuclear weapons could exacerbate tensions in Lebanon, terrorism against Israel, and political subversion in Sunni Arab states. The authors argue that if Germany's move calls into question "NATO's nuclear guarantee ... the Turkish government may feel compelled to develop or buy nuclear weapons of its own." In this event, the authors aver, "Turkey-skeptics" in Europe could then "oppose the country's accession to the European Union."

This concern unwittingly highlights the diminished relevance of nuclear weapons to the Eurasian security challenge. To put it another way, neither NATO nuclear bombs nor nonproliferation objectives are at the top of European political leaders' agendas. The surest way to reassure Turkey and guarantee that it does not seek nuclear weapons is for Europe to signal clearly that Turkey will be welcomed into the EU, but only as a non-nuclear-weapon state under the NPT. Yet French President Nicolas Sarkozy, a stalwart foe of nuclear proliferation in Iran and elsewhere, is also the leading opponent of Turkey's entry into the EU. If further proliferation, including in Turkey, is such a great threat, embedding Turkey in Europe is the surest way to prevent it.

Here, again, the bigger challenge is to marshal high-level, sustained work within NATO to clarify the commitments, strategies, and various capabilities that member states are prepared to mobilize for their collective security. Germany's unilateral move to urge the withdrawal of a few unusable nuclear weapons from its soil does not help in this regard, but nor should it distract from NATO's larger agenda. Turkey, in the meantime, should be assured that as long as the United States retains nuclear weapons, wherever they are based,

and Turkey is a member of NATO and the NPT, the United States will use whatever means necessary to deter threats to Turkey.

Addressing Eastern European Concerns

Turning to Eastern Europe, the three authors argue that Germany's rhetoric on nuclear weapons could cause Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and the Baltic states to doubt that "NATO's commitment to their defence remains firm." They write that "Poland and the Baltic states in particular are likely to argue with merit that a withdrawal of nuclear weapons from Europe" would devalue NATO's mutual defense guarantee, under Article V, as they understand it. "They will be particularly worried that the security of the United States is being decoupled from the security of Europe—the new NATO countries still trust the US more than their west European counterparts."

This is an important concern. The Baltic and Central European states do not have full confidence that the alliance will robustly act against Russian coercion. Russia possesses thousands of short-range nuclear weapons (anachronistically referred to as "tactical"), but this is not the contemporary extended deterrence challenge. If Russia were to implement nuclear threats against these states, Russian leaders would calculate that the riposte would come from U.S. strategic forces. The Russians know as well as U.S. military planners that the NATO-based bombs are relatively useless.

In any case, the real security problem today is how to reassure new NATO members that smaller-scale threats to their security will be deterred. Cyber-disruption, energy supply restrictions, political interference, and provocative military exercises are what need to be deterred or negotiated away today. Less likely—but still much more probable than any nuclear-scale conflict—would be a Russian mobilization of conventional forces and subsequent threat to take a sliver of territory to humiliate and gain bargaining leverage against the smaller state. New members worry that NATO lacks the resolve or suitable policy options to convince the Kremlin that NATO will retaliate as much as it takes to temporize Russian behavior. They look to the United States to supply more robust protection.

The brouhaha over deployments of U.S. anti-missile radars and interceptors in the Czech Republic and Poland is a proxy for this larger concern. The United States was unable to persuade Russia and many other observers that the missile defenses proposed by the Bush administration, particularly the radar system designated for the Czech Republic, were necessary and feasible to defeat Iranian missile threats, and would be limited to this purpose and not part of a more ambitious future attempt to impair Russia's nuclear deterrent. Polish and Czech leaders saw the Bush administration's proposal as a way to tie the United States more closely to their security interests. For Warsaw and Prague, the issue was less nuclear deterrence and defense than it was

projecting to Moscow that the United States would be drawn into security crises that might arise between Russia and the new NATO members. The allies sought assurance that NATO's defense commitments would be upheld if and when they were needed. As Polish Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski declared in February 2009, "Poland expects the United States to carry through with the general promises of stronger military cooperation, even if the missile defense base doesn't work out."¹ More recently, Sikorski called for the removal of U.S. and Russian short-range nuclear weapons from Europe.

A New Security and Arms Control Agenda

Thinking in terms of *nuclear* deterrence, and especially in terms of bombs on German soil, obscures the broader challenge of reinvigorating NATO and extending deterrence against lower-scale threats. Indeed, there is a moral and strategic hazard implicit in the value the three authors' assign to nuclear weapons in Europe, and the risk that other priorities will be undervalued. As with the government bailouts of banks that took excessive risks and did not keep enough cash reserves, a similar hazard arises when nuclear deterrence is counted on to bail the United States and its allies out of a wider range of potential trouble than is reasonable to expect. Postulating the utility of nuclear weapons to deter anything less than threats to national survival may induce states to count on these weapons to prevent or halt crises in which nuclear weapons should or would not be used. It could even embolden allies to take actions that could start or intensify crises, counting on U.S. nuclear weapons to back them up. The development of more appropriate diplomatic strategies, economic counter-measures, and military capabilities may be given short shrift as a result, thereby weakening deterrence and security.

Debate over the fate of the NATO-based nuclear bombs will be constructive only if it puts much-needed attention on the need to reduce threats in Europe and to deploy strategies and capabilities to deter and defeat at an appropriate scale those threats that cannot be removed. NATO nuclear bombs are no substitute for cyber defense and deterrence; diversification of natural gas supply lines to reduce Russia's coercive power; renovated confidence-building measures between Russia and NATO states to limit the scale and offensive character of military exercises, or if Russia refuses, enhanced forward deployment of defensive capabilities in new NATO states that would deter by denying Russia the prospect of a quick successful incursion. The moral hazard in Europe today is not in taking useless tactical nuclear weapons out, it is in pretending that they can protect allies from twenty-first century threats and doing too little in the meantime to develop capabilities and diplomatic strategies to deny those threats.

The three authors take a half-step in a wise direction. They urge a debate over NATO nuclear posture that engages "the Russians in a US-Russia or NATO-Russia negotiation to reduce tactical nuclear weapons." They prefer a negotiation aimed at seeking parity at or below the 200 weapons now in

NATO. They recognize, however, that this would require much greater reductions by Russia, so they acknowledge the alternative of “cutting both sides’ forces by a common percentage.”

This half-step will not lead anywhere, however. Russia’s concerns are broader, as the authors must know. Like NATO during the Cold War, Russia sees its short-range nuclear weapons as equalizers to NATO’s conventional military superiority. Russian experts, along with objective international observers, know that the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty of 1990 required reductions that have been rendered highly inequitable by the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and the membership in NATO of states that used to be in the Pact. This resembles the AOL-Time Warner merger, which at its inception seemed a good deal, but soon became woefully lopsided as AOL’s value plummeted. Russia wants to renegotiate. Its leverage is the disproportionate number of short-range nuclear weapons left in its arsenal.

Redefining a secure, defensive balance of conventional forces between NATO and Russia is an exceedingly complicated challenge. Almost zero high-level leadership has been devoted to this issue, either in NATO or Russia. Yet there is no chance to reduce or eliminate tactical nuclear weapons in NATO and Russia without addressing the overall military-security relationship between them.

Ideally, the debate over NATO nuclear weapons and the alliance’s larger stock-taking can establish a course for mutual NATO-Russian confidence building and threat reduction. Russia can and should do much to facilitate this. It could start by relieving the sense of threat that NATO states experienced from recent cyber-attacks against Estonia, intimidation of Poland, and energy-supply disruptions via Ukraine. NATO can help by recognizing that fin-de-Cold War conventional and nuclear arms control dispensations need to be updated. Franklin Miller, George Robertson, and Kori Schake provide a welcome stimulus to the necessary debate, even if their own views are unpersuasive.

Note

¹ Robert Burns, "Obama Seen Likely to Hedge on Missile Defense," Associated Press, February 13, 2009, <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/WireStory?id=6869511&page=1>.

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