

Removal of nuclear weapons from Europe – background document

The United States deploys tactical nuclear weapons in six NATO countries, in Britain (Lakenheath) and in five non-nuclear states: Belgium (Kleine Brogel), Germany (Büchel and Ramstein), Italy (Aviano), Netherlands (Volkel) and Turkey (Incirlik). In total, 480 gravity bombs of the B61 family are deployed, each with a power between 0.3 and 170 kilotons TNT, the higher limit corresponding to eight times the Hiroshima bomb. The weapons are stored at US airbases under US control or are kept under US custody at national airbases. In time of war the latter will be handed over to the NATO countries involved and be delivered by their national air forces. The pilots and the airbase staff assigned to such missions are continuously trained and the military authorities of the countries take part in the NATO Nuclear Planning Group, where decisions are made about strike missions and targeting.

After the end of the Cold War, these weapons have lost their military function. NATO officials admit that the arguments for their present deployment shifted from military to political: they are kept to support the NATO policy of shared risks, the US nuclear presence in Europe and the transatlantic bond. On the other hand, the bombs have been modernized and upgraded in the last seven years and the potential targeting is extended from the area of the European Command (EUCOM) to the Central Command (CENTCOM), which would allow strike missions to Middle Eastern countries, specifically Iran and Syria. The last fact and the “first-strike principle,” according to which NATO may use nuclear weapons without being attacked by them, destroy the illusion that nuclear bombs serve our defence and guarantee our security. If NATO gets involved in a war and NATO countries use their atomic weapons, they are open for retaliation.

In addition to land-based nuclear weapons in Europe, the United States maintains an arsenal of weapons to be launched from ships in the Mediterranean and in the territorial waters of the European countries.

The presence of nuclear weapons in the European countries violates the statutes of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which has been signed by all concerned countries. The NPT forbids the United States to transfer nuclear weapons to non-nuclear states and the non-nuclear states to receive them. However, the US argues that in time of war the NPT will be put out of order, so that the shift of control of the weapons to non-US authorities will be allowed.

The presence of nuclear weapons is a permanent source of uncertainty and a threat to the continental and global security. It is a stimulus for other nations to acquire similar weaponry. In addition, the acceptance of new NATO member states in Eastern Europe and their participation in the NATO Nuclear Planning Group leads to new proliferation, especially if also in these countries nuclear weapons would be deployed. This situation is not hypothetical in view of the Eastern-European eagerness to be sterling NATO members. On the other hand, removal of the presently deployed nuclear weapons would improve the relations with Russia and take away the obstacle that impedes an agreement about reduction or elimination of the extensive Russian

arsenal of tactical nuclear weapons. It would open the possibility for the establishment of a nuclear-free zone in Central and Eastern Europe and be a first step to full compliance of the nuclear powers with the rules of the NPT.