

LEARN ABOUT NUCLEAR WEAPONS

NATO - background

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is a military alliance established by the North Atlantic Treaty, signed on 4 April 1949. Headquartered in Brussels, Belgium, the organization constitutes a system of collective defense in response to an attack by any external party. The mutual enemy at the time of establishment was the communist Soviet Union and its allies, which, in 1955, established a similar military alliance, the Warsaw Pact. Today, NATO has 26 member states.

The parties of NATO have agreed that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all. Consequently they agree that, if such an armed attack occurs, each of them, in exercise of the right of individual or collective self-defense will assist the party or parties being attacked, taking such actions as they deem necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, NATO stated that the attack was not only an attack against the US but against all NATO states. Since then, NATO has contributed to the US's so-called war on terrorism.

On 28 February 1994, NATO took its first military action, shooting down four Bosnian Serb aircraft violating a UN-mandated no-fly zone over central Bosnia and Herzegovina. A NATO bombing campaign began in August, 1995, against the Army of Republika Srpska, after the Srebrenica massacre. On 24 March 1999, NATO saw its first broad-scale military engagement in the Kosovo War, where it waged an 11-week bombing campaign, which NATO called Operation Allied Force, against what was then the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The damage to Serbian infrastructure was extensive. A formal declaration of war never took place. Yugoslavia protested against the offensive and claimed it was an act of war and a violation of the UN Charter. A NATO led peace force under UN mandate has operated in Kosovo since the end of the war in 1999. In 2003, NATO began its first ever mission outside Europe when establishing the ISAF force in Afghanistan.

NATO nuclear policy

Nuclear weapons have been an important part of NATO's common defense policy since the founding of the organisation in 1949. According to the NATO defense doctrine from 1949, part of NATO's defense policy includes to "insure the ability to carry out strategic bombing including the prompt delivery of the atomic bomb". According to the doctrine, the US holds the main responsibility for making sure this works.¹

NATO describes its nuclear sharing policy in very positive terms. NATO nuclear weapons in Europe contribute to peace and stability, says the alliance, deterring attacks against NATO member states in a way conventional forces cannot. "By promoting European stability, helping to discourage threats relating to the use of weapons of mass destruction, and contributing to deterrence against such use, NATO's nuclear posture serves the interests not only of the Allies, but also of its Partner countries and of Europe as a whole", says the NATO Handbook on nuclear policy of 2002.²



Many states and civil society organisations view NATO nuclear policy in different terms. Instead of creating peace and stability, nuclear weapons in Europe increase international tensions. The report of the Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission (2006) points to the problem that NATO nuclear weapons in Europe block negotiations on further reductions of Russian nuclear arsenals, as Russia obviously considers US nuclear weapon so close to its own territory as a threat.³

Discussions and decisions on NATO nuclear policy take place in the Nuclear Planning Group (NPG). The NPG provides a forum in which member countries of the Alliance can participate in the development of the Alliance's nuclear policy and in

decisions on NATO's nuclear posture, irrespective of whether or not they themselves maintain nuclear weapons. Decisions are taken by consensus within the NPG, as is the case for all NATO committees.⁴

After the Cold War, NATO presented a new direction in its defense policy, to respond to new security threats. NATO declared it had decreased reliance on nuclear weapons to match the new security situation. The Alliance's strategy is still about preventing war, but is no longer dominated by the risk of wars escalating into nuclear war. As NATO puts it: "NATO's nuclear forces continue to play an essential role in war prevention, but their role is now more fundamentally political, and they are no longer directed towards a specific threat".⁵

In 1999 NATO reiterated its policy on nuclear sharing in the strategic concept adopted by member states, making it clear that US nuclear weapons will remain deployed in Europe indefinitely.⁶

In January 2008, a radical manifesto for a new NATO – *Towards a Grand Strategy for an Uncertain World* – was written by five prominent senior military commanders and strategists: John Shalikashvili, Klaus Naumann, Lord Inge, Henk van den Breemen and Jacques Lanxade. The western world must be ready to use nuclear weapons in a pre-emptive attack to prevent the imminent threat of nuclear weapons proliferation, claim the authors of the manifesto. "Regrettably, nuclear weapons – and with them the option of first use – are indispensable, since there is simply no realistic prospect of a nuclear-free world", says the manifesto.⁷

The 150-page report paints a truly frightening scenario of the threats and challenges facing the Western world. Among the greatest threats presented are international terrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, religious fanaticism, climate change, and conflicts over limited natural resources, as well as a weakening of international bodies such as the UN and the EU. The authors call for a review of NATO to meet these threats. Among their suggested changes are decisions by majority vote and not consensus; that all states need not be party to all decisions; and that military interventions can be launched without a UN Security Council mandate.⁸

To many, this kind of NATO would be a nightmare. Decision making by majority rather than consensus would mean that an independent state could no longer block decisions for an armed attack or a military mission in another country. A NATO where not all states are involved in all decision making, but only in decisions affecting the state itself, is also dangerous. According to the authors, only states planning to join an international intervention can be involved in making decisions regarding the same. This gives states with large military and financial capability the possibility to act over other states' heads. Let's take an example: if the US and the UK wish to launch a military invasion of Iran and are prepared to contribute with all the money and armed forces needed, no other NATO states would have the right to stop this. Allowing military intervention without a UN mandate weakens the status of the world organisation and undermines international democracy.

After the NATO summit in Bucharest 2008

Between 2-4 April 2008, state officials and government representatives of NATO states and partners met for a summit in Bucharest, the capital of new NATO member Romania. On the agenda were the expansion of NATO and possible new member states; the NATO intervention in Afghanistan; and a revision of NATO to meet current international security challenges. At the end of the summit, a Communiqué⁹ was issued to summarize discussions and decisions made.

The Communiqué paragraphs concerning nuclear weapons, arms control, and disarmament are interesting and out of the ordinary for NATO. The statement is notable as it does not reiterate the Alliance's usual position that nuclear weapons are an essential element of Alliance security and an indispensable part of the trans-Atlantic link. Germany and Norway have been pressing the Alliance for a comprehensive review of arms control policy, and it appears that this continues. While the Alliance reports achievements in reducing its nuclear forces since the end of the Cold War, there is no indication of future intentions. NATO has, in the past, actively used arms control and nuclear reductions to enhance its security and that of the whole of Europe. In this context, it is disappointing not to see active support for vital non-proliferation and disarmament measures such as the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and the Fissile Material Cut-Off treaty. With the departure of President Bush, the US and NATO policy may become more progressive in this area.¹⁰

NATO nuclear weapons in Europe

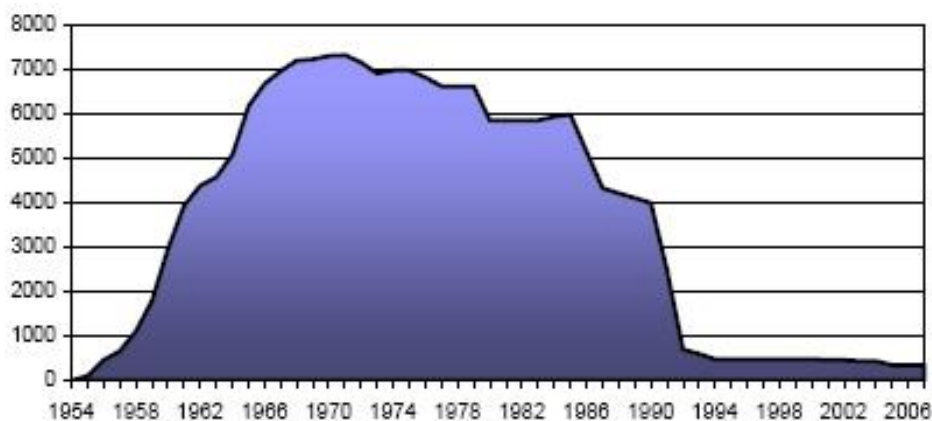


Table: Number of US nuclear weapon sin Europe under the NATO Nuclear Sharing programme between 1954-2006.

Source: Federation of American Scientists

NATO's nuclear policy is based on the concept of nuclear sharing – that is, placing nuclear weapons on the territories of non-nuclear weapon states. Only three of the five NPT nuclear weapon states are NATO member states: the US, the UK, and France. Yet NATO nuclear weapons are deployed in several NPT non-nuclear-weapon states: Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands, Germany, and Turkey.

The first US nuclear weapons in Europe were deployed in the UK in 1954. In March 1957, the NATO Commander-in-Chief confirmed the deployment of NATO nuclear weapons in Germany as well. The nuclear sharing idea is based on placing US nuclear weapons and launching systems on the territories of NATO allies. In times of peace, the nuclear weapons would be under US control, but in the event of war, the US President could issue an order of use of the nuclear weapons and give the hosting state control over the weapons.

The current number – approximately 350 nuclear weapons – is only a fraction of the force level the United States deployed in Europe during the Cold War. That level reached a peak of 7,300 weapons in 1971. The number dropped to 4,000 by the end of the Cold War in 1990, plunged to 700 in 1992, and levelled off at approximately 480 weapons (all bombs) in 1994. This ended the dramatic period of nuclear disarmament initiatives, which has since been replaced by a period of relative stability with slow and gradual reductions. Twenty bombs were withdrawn in 2001 after Greece pulled out of the NATO nuclear strike mission, and another 20 were withdrawn in 2003 when Germany closed Memmingen Air Base.¹¹ There is some uncertainty regarding nuclear weapons at the Ramstein US air base in Germany, but indications are that the US quietly withdrew 130 nuclear weapons in 2005.¹² With this reduction included, the number of US nuclear weapons in Europe today is estimated to be 350.¹³

Although NATO nuclear weapons in Europe have been remarkably reduced, the NATO Nuclear Planning Group (NPG) reiterated as late as July 2007 that NATO places great importance on the continued deployment of US nuclear weapons in Europe. The ability of nuclear weapons to keep peace and prevent war is still referred to. The NPG does not identify a particular enemy from which nuclear weapons are to protect Europe, but clarifies that “we continue to place great value on the nuclear forces based in Europe and committed to NATO, which provide an essential political and military link between the European and North American members of the Alliance”.¹⁴

The governments of NATO countries have a direct role in shaping NATO policy and can insist that these weapons be removed from their territory. The US has taken its weapons home several times before: Canada, Greece, Denmark (Greenland), and Iceland are all now free of US nuclear bombs.¹⁵ Lately, the demands on withdrawing the US nuclear weapons from Europe have increased. On 15 July 2005, the House of Representatives in Belgium adopted a resolution calling for a withdrawal of US nuclear weapons from Belgium and the rest of Europe.¹⁶ In May of the same year, German Minister of Foreign Affairs Joschka Fischer and Minister of Defense Peter Struck raised the same issue. Their statement said it was high time that US nuclear weapons disappear from Europe, and was met positively. But the two soon backed off and toned down their earlier statement. The issue of NATO nuclear weapons is politically sensitive, and many important political issues are embedded in maintaining good relations between Germany and the US.¹⁷

350 nuclear weapons might not sound like many, considering the enormous arsenals kept by the nuclear weapon states during and after the Cold War. But still, 350 nuclear weapons constitute a significant force, roughly corresponding to the nuclear arsenal of France. This is also larger than China's arsenal and larger than then the combined arsenals of India, Israel and Pakistan. Each of these nuclear weapons has a destructive capacity up to ten times that of the bomb that destroyed Hiroshima, and the bombs have a combined power capable of wiping Europe off the map.

NATO nuclear weapons and the NPT

The status of Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands, Germany, and Turkey as non-nuclear-weapon states is therefore questionable. Above all, there is reason to question whether NATO nuclear sharing really is in line with the NPT.

When NPT negotiations began in the 1960s, the NATO nuclear sharing policy was threatened. Was it really legal? The NPT, which entered into force in 1970, established internationally binding legal norms for arms control and disarmament. All NATO member states are also signatories to the NPT, and official NATO documents refer to the responsibility of member states under the NPT.

Article I of the NPT prohibits nuclear weapon states from transferring control of nuclear weapons to any recipient whatsoever. Article II prohibits non-nuclear-weapon states from receiving nuclear weapons.¹⁸

Deploying US nuclear weapons on the territories of non-nuclear-weapon states in Europe should be considered a violation of the prohibition of placing nuclear weapons under the control of any other recipient. NATO argues its nuclear policy is in line with the NPT. During the ratification process of the NPT in the US, Secretary of State Dean Rusk explained to the Senate that the NPT "does not deal with arrangements for deployment of nuclear weapons within Allied territory, as these do not involve any transfer of nuclear weapons or control over them unless and until a decision were made to go to war, at which time the treaty would no longer be controlling".¹⁹ A 1994 NATO factsheet claims that the NATO nuclear arrangement is in line with the NPT, because the nuclear sharing arrangement was already in place when the NPT was negotiated, NATO put the cards on the table throughout the negotiating process, and, no party to the negotiations opposed this.²⁰ Thus, claims NATO, nuclear sharing is legal and in line with the NPT.

The 1985 Review Conference of the NPT made a unanimous but almost unnoticed decision that the Treaty should be implemented "under any circumstances", i.e. also in wartime.²¹ This decision was reiterated in the Final Document of the 2000 NPT Review Conference.²² Thus, there is no doubt that the NATO policy of transferring

control of US nuclear weapons to European non-nuclear-weapon states in the event of war is in violation of the NPT.

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- 1 Note By the Secretary to the North Atlantic Military Committee on the Strategic Concept for the Defence of the North Atlantic Area. M.C.3/2 28 November 1949.
 - 2 NATO Handbook, <http://www.NATO.int/docu/handbook/2001/hb0705.htm>
 - 3 *Weapons of Terror. Freeing the World from Nuclear, Biological and Chemical Arms*. Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission report, 2006
 - 4 NATO <http://www.NATO.int/issues/npg/index.html>
 - 5 NATO <http://www.NATO.int/issues/nuclear/index.html>
 - 6 NATO <http://www.NATO.int/docu/pr/1999/p99-065e.htm>
 - 7 Shalikashvili, John, Naumann, Klaus, Inge, Lord, van den Breemen, Henk och Lanxade, Jacques. *Towards a Grand Strategy for an Uncertain World. Renewing Transatlantic Partnership*. Noaber Foundation, 2007. http://www.ssrnline.org/edocs/3eproefGrandStrat_b.pdf
 - 8 Ibid.
 - 9 NATO <http://www.NATO.int/docu/pr/2008/p08-049e.html>
 - 10 Acronym Institute <http://www.acronym.org.uk/NATO/08com.htm>
 - 11 FAS Strategic Security Blog http://www.fas.org/blog/ssp/2007/07/united_states_removes_nuclear.php
 - 12 Arms Control Association http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2007_09/TacticalNuclearEurope.asp
 - 13 FAS Strategic Security Blog http://www.fas.org/blog/ssp/2007/07/united_states_removes_nuclear.php
 - 14 NATO <http://www.NATO.int/docu/pr/2007/p07-070e.html>
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 - 17 Beste, Ralf och Szandar, Alexander. "Europe's Atomic Anachronism". Der Spiegel International online, 23 maj 2005. <http://www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel/0,1518,357281,00.html>
 - 18 United Nations <http://www.un.org/events/npt2005/npttreaty.html>
 - 19 BASIC <http://www.basicint.org/nuclear/NATO/PENNnote2-nuclearsharing-1997.htm>
 - 20 Nuclear Files <http://www.nuclearfiles.org/menu/key-issues/nuclear-weapons/issues/NATO-nuclear-policies/index.htm>
 - 21 Document NPT/CONF.III/64/I, Annex I.
 - 22 Document NPT/CONF.2000/28 part I of article I and II and the preamble paragraphs I to III.