

Time to remove tactical nuclear weapons from Europe?

*Dr. Rolf Mützenich MdB, SPD Spokesperson on Nuclear Nonproliferation and Disarmament
Patrik Vankrunklesven MP Belgium, PNND Council Member
Sergei Kolesnikov, Member of the Russian Duma, PNND Council Member*

The Commission on Weapons of Mass Destruction (Blix Commission) notes that there are over 400 United States tactical nuclear weapons deployed in Europe and possibly a larger number of Russian tactical weapons deployed in western Russia. The Commission notes that these tactical weapons “would be easier (than strategic weapons) for outsiders to use, such as a terrorist group”, and that “There is a risk of theft or diversion during transport or storage in the field.”

The Commission thus recommends that the US and Russia “should agree to withdraw all non-strategic nuclear weapons to central storage on national territory, pending their eventual elimination.”

Recent developments in Europe give cause for optimism that the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons in Europe and west Russia could soon be abandoned.

In 2001 Greece decided not to retain nuclear strike capability in its air-force thus curtailing its capacity to participate in the US nuclear deployment programme in Greece. It is understood that the US thus quietly removed its tactical nuclear weapons from Greece. This brings down the number of States hosting US nuclear weapons from seven to six.

From 2005-2007 a number of parliamentary initiatives reinforced a growing public antipathy towards deployed nuclear weapons in Europe. These include:

- resolutions adopted in the Belgian and German parliaments calling on NATO governments to work for the removal of US nuclear weapons from Europe,
- a joint statement from parliamentarians from Belgium, Germany, Italy, Netherlands and the United Kingdom calling for the end of nuclear sharing arrangements between US and NATO
- a written declaration from Members of the European Parliament on the withdrawal of US nuclear weapons from Europe
- writs delivered by parliamentarians to



Mayor Stefano Del Cont (Aviano) and Mayor Anna Giulia Guarneri (Ghedì) call for a nuclear weapons free Italy

commanders of nuclear weapon deployment sites asserting that the deployment of these weapons violates the Non-Proliferation Treaty and the law against nuclear weapons affirmed by the International Court of Justice in 1996.

These initiatives were supported in December 2007 by a joint statement of the mayors of all NATO local authorities in which the US has nuclear weapons



*B61 nuclear bomb, the type deployed in NATO countries, being loaded onto a C-17 cargo aircraft
Photo courtesy of Federation of American Scientists*

deployed under NATO nuclear-weapons sharing programmes. The mayors of Peer (Kleine Brogel - Belgium), Aviano and Ghedi (Italy), Uden (Volkel - The Netherlands), Incirlik (Turkey), and Buechel (Germany) noted that following the end of the Cold War “The Soviet Union withdrew its nuclear weapons from the Ukraine and Belarus...Unfortunately NATO didn’t follow Russia’s actions, and U.S. tactical nuclear weapons remained in Belgium, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Turkey and the UK.” However, they said that “membership in NATO does not require any state to accept nuclear deployments. For example Greece stopped hosting U.S. nuclear weapons in 2001. Let us take control of this fast-moving aircraft and, as an important step, remove the last foreign deployed nuclear weapons from the territory of another state. That would also be a step towards a new NATO defence policy not reliant on nuclear weapons.”

According to the Natural Resources Defence Council, the US Air Force discontinued the deployment of nuclear weapons at the Ramstein airbase in Germany in 2007. Hopes that this was the first step in a removal of all nuclear weapons from Germany were dampened when the German government announced in August 2007 that they intend to continue hosting nuclear weapons at Buchel.

A group of retired senior NATO military officials have reacted to the growing momentum for removing tactical nuclear weapons from Europe by releasing a report on 23 January 2008 in which they argued that NATO must retain its nuclear capability and be prepared to carry out pre-emptive nuclear strikes to halt the spread of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction.

The report *Towards a Grand Strategy for an Uncertain World* argues that a "first strike" nuclear option remains an "indispensable instrument" as there is "simply no realistic prospect of a nuclear-free world...The risk of further [nuclear] proliferation is imminent and, with it, the danger that nuclear war fighting, albeit limited in scope, might become possible. ...The first use of nuclear weapons must remain in the quiver of escalation as the ultimate instrument to prevent the use of weapons of mass destruction."



James K Galbraith

The report was countered by James K. Galbraith in an article *A Criminal Idea* published in *The Guardian* on 25 January 2008. Galbraith argues that the use of nuclear weapons in a 'preventive' strike against a State that is suspected of developing weapons of mass destruction - as

proposed by the Grand Strategy - would be a crime of aggression, and that the effects of the use of nuclear weapons would also make such use a violation of international humanitarian law. He also notes that "the planning and preparation for such a war is no less a crime than the war itself."

Galbraith also argues that the doctrine will not act as a deterrent to nuclear war, but will rather act as a recipe for one: "Suppose we stated the generals' doctrine as a principle: that any nuclear state which suspects another state of being about to acquire nuclear weapons has the right to attack that state -- and with nuclear weapons if it has them. Now suppose North Korea suspects South Korea of that intention. Does North Korea acquire a right to strike the South? Under any principle of law, the generals' answer must be, that it does. Thus their doctrine does not protect against nuclear war. It leads, rather, directly to nuclear war."

The retired NATO military officials will be unlikely to quell the growing public support for complete removal of US weapons. A *Spiegel* poll in 2005 indicated that 76% of Germans were in favour of withdrawal while 18% were not. This sentiment was matched in parliament: across the four major parties (SPD, CDU, Gruene, FDP) 77.75% of members supported withdrawal and 18.25% did not.

Similar numbers were reflected in a 2006 Greenpeace poll which found that 69% of citizens in nuclear deployment States supported a nuclear weapons free Europe. This included 88% in Turkey, 71% in Italy, 71% in Germany, 65% in Belgium and 63% in Netherlands, and 56% in Britain.

However, it will be difficult to move towards a complete withdrawal of all US nuclear weapons in Europe if there is not concurrent progress on transparency and control of tactical weapons in western Russia. It is believed that Russia has about 2,330 operational nonstrategic nuclear weapons for delivery by antiballistic missiles, air defense missiles, tactical bombers, and naval cruise missiles and torpedoes - about half of what it had deployed in the early 1990s. However, exact numbers and locations are difficult to determine due to a lack of transparency from Russia.

Russia has indicated some willingness to consider further reducing their tactical weapons stockpile, for example by abstaining on a 2002 resolution at the United Nations General Assembly on the issue (France, the U.K. and U.S. voted against). However, this position



Russian SS-26 (Iskander) tactical nuclear weapon
Photo courtesy of Federation of American Scientists

has hardened since 2003. The 2006 Russian White Paper on Defence makes no mention of Russian tactical weapons, but instead criticizes US deployment of tactical nuclear weapons on foreign soil (in NATO countries). It is likely that the US plans for forward deployment of Ballistic Missile Defences in former Eastern Bloc countries - the Czech Republic and Poland - have also contributed to this hardening attitude.

Thus progress on Russian tactical weapons would be more likely if there are further reductions in US tactical weapons in NATO countries, a change in NATO nuclear policy, or a change in plans for deployment of BMD defences in the Czech Republic and Poland.

Parliamentarians in Russia, US, NATO countries and other European countries can play a role by encouraging progress on all these fronts. This can be done through parliamentary resolutions, questions in parliament, joint parliamentary appeals and through contact with parliamentary colleagues in these countries.