

# Mr. Trump, Post Nuclear Ban Treaty, NATO's Nuclear Weapons in Europe are Obsolete

MUSTAFA KİBAROĞLU\* and TOM SAUER\*\*

**ABSTRACT** *This commentary makes the case as to why the U.S. tactical nuclear weapons that have been stationed in Europe since the 1960s should be removed, and how this could be done in the most effective way under the presidency of Donald Trump. It concludes with a summary of the expected benefits of this move, and a reminder that the costs of continued muddling through are substantial.*

## Introduction

**M**any people in Europe, including Turkey, wonder why there are still some 200 U.S. nuclear weapons on their soil, especially after the Nuclear Weapons Ban Treaty was adopted by a majority of states in the world on July 7, 2017. Nuclear weapons will become obsolete, and among the most obvious are the Cold War leftovers lingering in Europe. These B-61 nuclear gravity bombs were stationed in Europe during the Cold War to deter the Soviet bear. While this extended nuclear deterrent may have made sense (arguably) in the “good old days” of the Cold War, most pundits nowa-

days agree that at least from a military point of view these weapons are irrelevant.<sup>1</sup> Or should we say “agreed”?

The Ukraine crisis does not help our case, at least at first sight. “The prospects for nuclear reductions in Europe are bleak,” as Lukasz Kulesa argued.<sup>2</sup> Some argue that Russia’s invasion of Crimea and its provocations in the Eastern part of Ukraine prove that the threat remains, and that Russia should be contained and deterred as it was during the Cold War. Those who fear the Russian threat point out that such deterrence should include a nuclear component, preferably as close as possible to the Russian border.<sup>3</sup>

\* MEF University, Turkey

\*\* University of Antwerp, Belgium

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To put everything into perspective, it should be acknowledged that even before the crisis in Ukraine, the withdrawal of nuclear weapons was opposed by the Eastern European NATO member states, especially the Baltic States. This issue was at the heart of the internal deliberations of the NATO Deterrence and Defense Posture Review in 2011-2012. At that time, Germany asked for withdrawal, while the Baltic States, supported by France, preferred the *status quo*. Others held in-between positions. Because NATO had agreed to decide with consensus, kicking the can was the result. For those who had already been skeptical of the idea of withdrawal before the crisis, the issue is now dead. We argue that they may be wrong; and, President Trump may prove them wrong.

The cost-benefit calculus of keeping the Cold War weapons in Europe did not change fundamentally, even after the crisis in Ukraine. Just as the cavalry became grotesque in an age of armored vehicles, the remaining U.S. tactical nuclear weapons in Europe are an anachronism dating back to

the high days of the Cold War. It is as if the U.S. forgot to take them away. These weapons of mass destruction in Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, Italy and Turkey<sup>4</sup> are becoming a liability on a variety of fronts.

Despite substantial efforts by different host nations to send them back, the NATO decision-making machinery has proved itself incapable of overcoming niches of resistance, mostly from outside the host nations. There is no consensus on withdrawing them, but at the same time there is no consensus on keeping them. This inertia is a recipe for escalating internal political frictions within the Alliance,<sup>5</sup> and it is all the more problematic in an age where nuclear weapons are being banned. The current stalemate may be seen as an example of what Donald Trump had in mind when he repeatedly –both as a presidential candidate and as president– called NATO “obsolete.”

Russia has a point in asking the United States to withdraw its remaining tactical nuclear weapons back to its own territory before starting up bilateral negotiations, as Moscow had already removed its nuclear weapons from the Central European states two decades ago. Waiting for a NATO consensus provides an ideal pretext for the nuclear czars at NATO headquarters and their colleagues in the defense ministries who prefer a *status quo* because of grooved thinking and parochial interests. President Trump will not abolish NATO, but he might shake up the organization by limiting U.S. military contribution to the Alli-

ance. The withdrawal of the last U.S. nuclear weapons from Europe would perfectly fit his narrative.

This article makes the case as to why these weapons should be removed, and how this could be done in the most effective way. It concludes with a summary of the expected benefits of this move, and a reminder of the substantial costs of continued muddling through.

### **Why Should the Remaining U.S. Nuclear Weapons Be Removed from Europe?**

First of all, weapons of mass destruction are weapons of the past. Modern warfare takes into account the fundamental principles of international humanitarian law, such as proportionality and non-discrimination. The world, including the U.S., only started to take the war in Syria serious once chemical weapons were used. For the same humanitarian reasons, when the United States intervened militarily in Afghanistan and Iraq, it aimed to limit the number of civilian and military casualties on both fronts. Such limitation and discretion are by definition impossible with nuclear weapons, which is also the major reason why atomic weapons have not been used since 1945.<sup>6</sup> Each day the anti-nuclear norm has become stronger.

For the same reason, a majority of states in the world are now banning nuclear weapons. That goal fits the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty

(NPT), which entered into force in 1970 and is the cornerstone of today's global nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament regime. Indicative of this trend is that the final communiqué of the five-yearly NPT Review Conference in 2010 for the first time mentioned the humanitarian consequences of the use of nuclear weapons. Resolutions in this regard in the UN General Assembly or the NPT Preparatory Committee (Prepcom) meetings have attracted a growing number of sponsoring or supporting countries: 14 at the NPT Prepcom in 2012, 33 at the UNGA in the second half of 2012, and 78 at the NPT Prepcom in 2013. NATO member state Norway organized a governmental conference on this subject with the participation of more than 125 countries in the beginning of March 2013, followed by a similar conference in Mexico attended by 143 countries. A third conference took place on December 8-9, 2014 in Vienna.<sup>7</sup> In October 2016, a historic resolution was adopted by the UN General Assembly calling for a conference to negotiate a legally binding instrument to prohibit nuclear weapons, leading towards their total elimination (Nuclear Ban Treaty) to begin in March 2017 and continue in June and July of the same year. That happened, and these negotiations came successfully to an end on July 7, 2017 when 122 nations adopted an international treaty banning nuclear weapons.<sup>8</sup>

Advocates of nuclear deterrence claim that nuclear weapons are not meant to be used. That is only half of the story. The crux of the matter

ARE ALLIES  
ARE UNITED



Britain's PM May, U.S. President Trump and NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg look on as Belgian PM Michel speaks during a working dinner meeting at the NATO summit on May 25, 2017. AFP PHOTO / POOL / MATT DUNHAM

is that nuclear deterrence implies the willingness to use nuclear weapons; otherwise, deterrence becomes meaningless. Tactical nuclear weapons were part of NATO's flexible response strategy during the Cold War when NATO had fewer conventional weapons than the U.S.S.R. This may clarify why NATO still prefers keeping these weapons in Europe, although this time around it is Russia that is "inferior," conventionally speaking, and has more reasons to rely on nuclear deterrence.

As the use of nuclear weapons becomes increasingly regarded as illegitimate and incompatible with modern international law, the golden age of nuclear weapons is over. That may not be the dominant point of view in the nuclear weapon states and some of the aspiring nuclear weapon states. However, it is increas-

ingly the view in the remaining 180 states in the world, including the European host nations of the U.S. tactical nuclear weapons.

Admittedly, the road to "Nuclear Zero" will take time and cannot be realized overnight. The process has started, however, and will be very difficult to stop. It got a significant boost from the high-level support of the idea in the United States, first by the so-called "four horsemen," namely Henry Kissinger, George Schultz, Bill Perry and Sam Nunn in 2007,<sup>9</sup> and another two years later from an impressive speech by President Obama in Prague, in which he stated with conviction—literally and figuratively—that it is in the national interest of the United States to aim for a world without nuclear weapons, not just as a nice long-term goal, but as a concrete and ambitious policy priority.<sup>10</sup>

A central element in further delegitimizing nuclear weapons involves limiting existing nuclear arsenals to very low levels of strategic nuclear weapons, which may serve the interim purpose of minimum deterrence.<sup>11</sup> There is no room for tactical nuclear weapons in a minimum deterrence posture. Another characteristic of minimum deterrence is to limit the stationing of land-based nuclear weapons to one's own territory. The Nuclear Weapons Ban Treaty explicitly prohibits the transfer of nuclear weapons to other states. The United States is currently the only nuclear weapon state that has nuclear weapons stationed on the territory of other countries. If this policy is not reversed in the foreseeable future, one should not be surprised to see it mimicked by other nuclear weapon states. One could imagine, for instance, Pakistani tactical nuclear weapons on Saudi Arabian territory in case Iran goes nuclear. Therefore, the United States should, lead the way by withdrawing the American B-61s from Europe as soon as possible.

Another compelling reason to withdraw the weapons is the reality that the delivery systems for these bombs are tactical aircraft such as F-16s that cannot even reach Russian territory. During the Cold War, these aircrafts were supposed to bomb the Warsaw Pact countries. Today, Central European states like Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, and the Baltic states have become full members of NATO and the European Union. In short, there is no military justification to retain American tactical nuclear weapons on European territory.

**Despite the ineffectiveness of tactical nuclear weapons from a military perspective after the Cold War, one cannot ignore the importance of these weapons for extended deterrence and their symbolic value as a representation of the U.S. commitment to the Alliance**

The fact that these weapons are left untouched creates new security concerns in an age of terrorism, and huge financial burdens. The more these weapons are scattered over different bases, the easier it will be for non-state actors to seize these weapons. In 2001, for instance, Nisar Trabelsi –born in Tunisia, raised in Belgium, and radicalized by his al-Qaeda brothers in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region– reportedly had concrete plans to blow up the Kleine Brogel air base where the U.S. tactical nuclear weapons in Belgium are stored.<sup>12</sup> Luckily, this terrorist plot was thwarted and Trabelsi was taken into custody. In 2010, peace activists succeeded in walking inside the same base for more than one hour without seeing any soldier.<sup>13</sup> Later on, Belgium experienced nuclear terrorism incidents similar to that envisioned by Trabelsi, including sabotage at the Doel 4 nuclear reactor on August 4, 2014, and a surveillance incident in November 2015 that may have led to the kidnapping of a high-



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level nuclear expert by those who are responsible for the Paris and Brussels terrorist attacks. For similar security reasons, the U.S. B-61 bombs were withdrawn from Greece in 2001.

The İncirlik nuclear weapons base in Turkey is stationed close to the Syrian border. The base played a remarkable role during the coup attempt in Turkey on July 15, 2016. The Turkish military commander of the base, who was involved in the coup attempt, reportedly refused to allow a U.S. combat aircraft to land during the episode. At the same time, he allowed Turkish military aircraft to play an active role during the attempted coup. Taking into account the fact that there are nuclear weapons stationed in İncirlik, any security breach there would be like playing with fire.

One might argue that, over time, the problem will automatically resolve when these weapons or their delivery vehicles become outdated. Unfortunately, this is not the case. The nature of nuclear weapons is such that they always have to be kept safe in times of

peace, which requires regular updates and upkeep. Furthermore, nuclear bureaucracies always aim to remain in existence and accrue ever more funds. Both processes have resulted in very expensive modernization plans for the B-61s, including those that are stationed in Europe. In the foreseeable future, the U.S. plans to spend 10 billion U.S. dollars on these 400 B-61 nuclear bombs. That means 25 million U.S. dollars per piece, which is approximately as much as its value in gold.<sup>14</sup> One wonders whether the American taxpayers in times of financial and economic crisis would not prefer having this money spent on defenses systems that could be used on the battlefield, let alone on education or social security. By the way, the modernization will also include a new tail for the B-61 bomb, which will make it even more accurate and “usable.”<sup>15</sup>

Despite the ineffectiveness of tactical nuclear weapons from a military perspective after the Cold War, one cannot ignore the importance of these weapons for extended deterrence and their symbolic value as a representation of the U.S. commitment to the Alliance. The most cited reason why NATO did not agree to withdraw the tactical nuclear weapons during the deliberations of the new NATO Strategic Concept in 2010, or during the Deterrence and Defense Posture Review (DDPR), are concerns on the part of some Eastern European countries and especially the Baltic States. Because of historical experiences, they feel more reassured with these tactical nuclear weapons in place.

At first sight, this is understandable. Their geographical situation makes them feel uncomfortable with Russia nearby. Although it would be far-fetched to argue that Russia would have the intention of attacking any of these countries, the 2008 war against Georgia and the current crisis in Ukraine may be raised as a counter-argument. With that said, the Baltic States, in contrast to Georgia and Ukraine, are members of the Alliance and therefore Article 5 of the Washington Treaty covers them. The major question is whether Article 5 should or should not include an extended nuclear deterrent in the form of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons on European territory. It should be noted that nuclear weapons are not mentioned in the Washington Treaty, let alone in Article 5. It remains a purely political decision to either keep or remove the U.S. nuclear weapons from European soil, just as all U.S. nuclear weapons were removed from South Korean soil in the beginning of the 1990s.

Admittedly, there remains a huge need to reassure the Baltic States. However, there are much more credible means of providing reassurance than the deployment of B-61 bombs in Europe that are not only militarily useless, but also increasingly perceived as illegitimate and, in the not so distant future, even illegal. Indeed, the reaction by the West to the Ukraine crisis supports the idea that these tactical nuclear weapons in Europe are irrelevant. NATO sent conventional, not nuclear, military support in the form of troops and planes to the Baltic States after the

crisis in Ukraine, and even more after the Warsaw Summit in 2016. On May 19, 2014, NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen explicitly excluded the option of stationing nuclear weapons in Eastern Europe, confirming what had been agreed at the 1997 NATO-Russian Founding Act.<sup>16</sup> And rightly so, because nobody believes that NATO is going to use nuclear weapons, even in the extremely unlikely case that the Baltic States were to be overrun by Russia.

Last but not least, if the strength of NATO depends on a few outdated tactical nuclear weapons that will not be used anymore, we are afraid that this state of affairs says a lot about the strength of the Alliance in general. Most observers acknowledge that if the United States decided to withdraw these weapons from Europe, the Baltic States would not resist.

### **How Should the Bombs Be Withdrawn?**

As shown above, the question is not so much *why* the remaining American tactical nuclear weapons in Europe should be withdrawn, but *how* they can be withdrawn. Two decisions have to be made in this regard: first of all, should the withdrawal be linked to a similar move by Russia, and secondly, should the United States seek a NATO consensus?

We believe that the answer to both questions should be a clear and simple no. In an ideal world, Russia should be pressured to reciprocate immediately,

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for instance by relocating its tactical nuclear weapons and moving them to Central Russia. Realistically speaking, however, that may not happen. As mentioned earlier, Russia had already removed its tactical nuclear weapons from foreign soil immediately following the Cold War. Moscow now insists that the Americans should follow suit *before* the negotiations start.

Furthermore, it would not be very smart to begin formal negotiations on this subject. First, Russia will only give up its larger tactical arsenal on the condition that the United States gives up additional weapon systems that are not related to tactical nuclear weapons (e.g., missile defense, strategic nuclear weapons in reserve, or ICBMs with conventional warheads). That is not in the interest of the United States. Better to withdraw them unilaterally and hope that Russia will reciprocate in one way or another.

Second, while Russia may have more tactical nuclear weapons than the West, the overall nuclear arsenal of Russia is quantitatively more or less

identical and qualitatively inferior to that of the United States. The inequality with respect to the overall force structure – nuclear and conventional – is even more in favor of the West. NATO spends more than 800 billion U.S. dollars on defense; Russia 70 billion U.S. dollars equivalent. NATO has 3.6 million armed forces; Russia 0.8 million. NATO has 5,900 combat aircraft (including 2,000 belonging to European NATO member states); Russia 1,571. To conclude, the withdrawal will not make any difference with respect to the overall balance of military power.

Finally, the Cold War is over, and the idea of parity should have long become meaningless, except in the minds of nuclear bureaucrats who use the principle of parity as an argument for keeping and modernizing the stockpiles they are stewarding. If President Trump believes that it would be in the national interest of the United States and its allies to remove tactical nuclear weapons from Europe, he should do so, even if Russia is not prepared to reciprocate immediately. This proposal may offend dogmatic thinkers, but partial unilateral nuclear disarmament may indeed sometimes be in the national interest.<sup>17</sup> Of course, such a step requires political leadership.

To make this move politically more attractive for a president who has to operate in a highly polarized domestic environment on a daily basis, the alternative consists of approaching the Russians in advance, and to informally agree that Moscow will





U.S. Defense Secretary James Mattis and the defense ministers of the Baltic States, where NATO is deploying battle groups for the first time, held talks.

AFP PHOTO / PETRAS MALUKAS

respond with a positive step after the withdrawal by the United States. Despite the lack of intricate verification mechanisms, these informal reciprocal steps are sometimes more effective than formal bilateral arms control agreements with extensive verification schemes. The largest nuclear reductions ever achieved were realized thanks to the unilateral and reciprocal Presidential Nuclear Initiatives enacted between 1990-1991, when President Gorbachev and President Bush Sr. withdrew and eliminated thousands of tactical nuclear weapons. This example can now be repeated, if on a smaller scale. NATO and the U.S. clearly recognize the possibility of informal reciprocity, as indicated in NATO's Strategic Concept of 2010<sup>18</sup> and the 2010 U.S. Nuclear Posture Review.<sup>19</sup>

The second question is whether there should be consensus within NATO

before the weapons are withdrawn. The latter is currently the point of view of the Alliance. The result, however, is a *status quo* that does nothing to mitigate the underlying differences of opinion. NATO is just kicking the proverbial can down the road. It is not difficult to predict that the uneasiness regarding these atomic weapons in countries like Germany, the Netherlands, and Belgium is only going to rise. Three indications of this trend include: (1) a tough parliamentary resolution in the Dutch parliament (including the Christian-Democrats) in December 2012, asking the government to regard the withdrawal as a 'hard objective,' (2) a statement by former Dutch Prime Ministers Ruud Lubbers and Dries van Agt (both Christian-Democrats) that there are still nuclear weapons in the Netherlands and that this policy is outdated, (3) and a row between the Dutch and the U.S. government

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about the financial liabilities in case of a nuclear weapons accident on Dutch territory.<sup>20</sup> In Belgium, a national protest meeting was organized on October 20, 2013, and the Flemish Parliament agreed on a resolution asking for withdrawal in April 2015. The German government's declaration in 2009 had already proposed the withdrawal.

Over the last two decades, the United States has withdrawn thousands of nuclear weapons from around the globe, including from Europe (the United Kingdom, Greece, and partially from Germany) without much fanfare, let alone a formal consensus. These weapons were both installed and taken away on a bilateral basis. There is no reason to change that process by multi-lateralizing the decision-making process now. President Trump should take the lead and do what is needed and take these weapons home as soon as possible.

### Conclusion

The benefits of immediate withdrawal are numerous. First of all, as already

stated, the withdrawal will put an end to an unpleasant and at times acrimonious debate inside the Alliance that has already gone on since the 1990s. Positively framed, the legitimacy of the Alliance in countries like Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium will rise if these weapons are withdrawn. Second, the withdrawal may improve the soured relationship between Russia and the United States, and open the door to further reductions in other weapon systems, through formal or informal agreements, in the future.

Third, the withdrawal may stimulate a debate inside Europe about the further role of the British and the French nuclear weapons. Of course, the American nuclear weapons should not be replaced by EU nuclear weapons. Fourth, withdrawal will make it much more difficult for other nuclear weapon states to start deploying nuclear weapons on other states' territory. Finally and most importantly, the withdrawal may give a boost to the global non-proliferation and disarmament regime, which is currently under heavy fire. Reducing the number of states with nuclear weapons on their territory from 14 to 9 would signal to the non-nuclear weapon states that their initiative for a Nuclear Weapons Ban Treaty is paying off. ■

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