

HCSS Security

Snapshot - NATO Nuclear Sharing and the future of Nuclear Deterrence in Europe

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Since the dawn of the atomic age, nuclear deterrence in Europe has been primarily provided by the US, first through bilateral alliances and later within the NATO framework. Within this structure, US tactical nuclear weapons (TNWs) are currently based in the Netherlands (although this has never been confirmed nor denied by The Hague) and four other European non-nuclear NATO allies, and US strategic nuclear weapons cover European NATO territory. In recent years the strength and cohesion of NATO has been jeopardized by rising tensions in the transatlantic relationship based on disagreements on defense spending. At the same time, Russia has been accused of violating the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty,¹ while EU-Russia relations have significantly worsened because of a series of other conflicts. This dynamic has weakened the perception of extended deterrence and increased the fear of decoupling USA and EU. It has prompted recent debates in EU states, for instance in Germany, on whether a European nuclear deterrent may be the way forward.² This snapshot gives a concise overview of the status quo of nuclear deterrence in Europe and the design of NATO nuclear sharing, explains the theoretical concept of extended nuclear deterrence, and offers a set of policy options for the EU and its member states to start addressing their changing strategic environment.

NATO Nuclear Sharing

One of NATO’s three core tasks is collective defense, which includes the notion of deterrence. Deterrence is the ‘discouraging of an enemy from taking military action by posing for him a prospect of cost and risk outweighing his prospective gain’³; this is achieved through both conventional and nuclear capabilities. Two European NATO countries – France and the UK – are nuclear powers, however most of NATO’s nuclear deterrence is provided by the US. UK nuclear weapons are also committed to NATO. France’s nuclear arsenal, on the other hand, is not.⁴ To counter the threat of Soviet invasion, US nuclear warheads have been positioned in several European NATO countries since the 1950s; this is known as extended nuclear deterrence, forward deployment, or nuclear sharing.

Despite the dissolution of the USSR in 1991 and the rapprochement between NATO and Russia throughout the 1990s and 2000s,⁵ US TNWs remained in Europe. TNWs are also called “theatre” weapons, since they are meant to be used in theatres of war, on the battlefield against an enemy army (tactical level), not on strategic targets. TNWs are smaller than strategic nuclear weapons in terms of yield (i.e. size of the explosion) and range (i.e. distance it can reach), and those currently in Europe are all B61 gravity bombs to be delivered by aircraft. Countries hosting US TNWs are called NATO nuclear host states: the TNWs are under US custody, but in case of nuclear war are to be delivered by the host state’s dual capable aircraft (DCA), making it a de facto nuclear weapon state. This is known as the ‘dual-key arrangement’: the host state has the power to veto delivery of nuclear weapons stationed on its soil, but at the same time it cannot deliver them without US’ consent. Five European countries are currently assumed to be host states: Belgium, Germany, Italy, The Netherlands, and Turkey.⁶

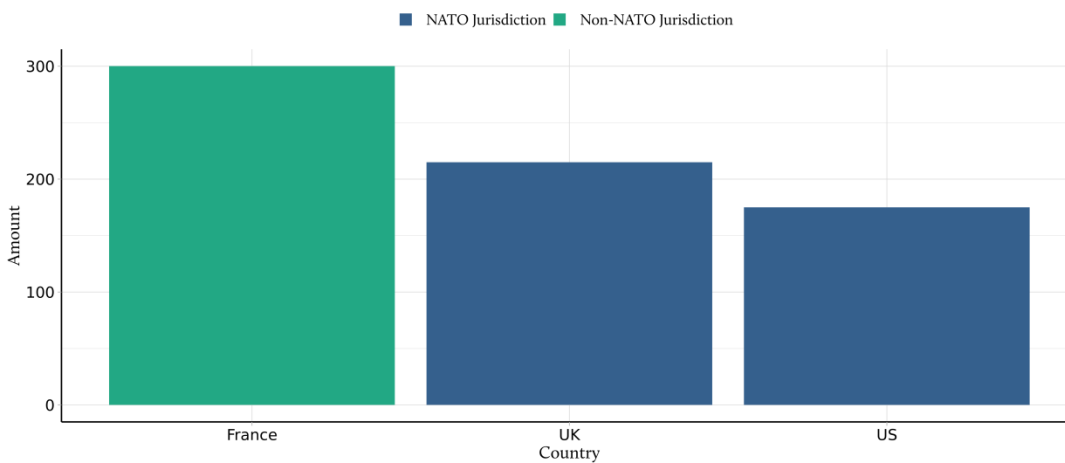


Figure 1: Number of Nuclear Weapons in Europe 2018. Source: SIPRI.

Theoretical foundations

The underlying theory of extended nuclear deterrence is that when a state is unable to pursue a nuclear armament program of its own, it will join an alliance with another state that is prepared to offer extended deterrence.⁷ The deterrer (or patron) commits to protecting the protégé and can demonstrate this in a variety of ways, for example by placing nuclear weapons on the latter's soil. The stronger the patron signals its commitment to the protégé, the stronger the deterrence vis-à-vis a potential adversary. This is precisely the policy followed by the US during the Cold War, when it deployed up to 7300 nuclear weapons (in 1971) in Europe.⁸ Both the US' most recent Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) of 2018 and the nuclear aspect of Russia's New Generation Warfare (NGW) doctrine underscore the importance of nuclear weapons, and more specifically low-yield nuclear weapons.⁹ The theoretical role of these is to use them in a conflict on the tactical level, while their main and practical role is to deter the adversary by "escalating-to-deescalate". This means threatening to use these smaller nuclear weapons (therefore not threatening the destroy entire cities) and thereby dissuading the adversary from executing a conventional incursion.

Transatlantic and EU-Russia relations

Europe is facing a developing and twofold strategic dynamic in which (nuclear) deterrence has become a timely issue again. On the one hand, EU- and NATO-Russia relations have worsened with the 2008 Georgian war, the EU's support of the 2014 Euromaidan revolution in Ukraine and the subsequent annexation of Crimea by Moscow, the ensuing conflict in Eastern Ukraine, and Russia's backing of Assad in Syria. Suspicions by US intelligence services that Russia has been violating the INF Treaty by testing and deploying a prohibited intermediate-range cruise missile with a range of over 500 kilometers, have further contributed to increase of the perceived Russian threat in Europe.¹⁰ On the other hand, US-European relations are experiencing increased tension relating to – in the eyes of Washington DC – the lack of defense spending by European allies. This irritation originates from long before Trump entered the political landscape.¹¹ Of course, since the 2016 election, Trump's statements on NATO's obsolescence¹² and implicit doubtcasting on whether the US will uphold NATO's Article 5¹³ have done nothing but further strain the transatlantic alliance.

What way forward for the EU?

This changing strategic environment has resulted in a situation that is unprecedented since the end of World War II. Russia is once again perceived (or framed) as threatening, but the degree of engagement and commitment by the USA to European security, including nuclear deterrence, is uncertain. So, what are the options for the European (non-) nuclear weapons states and the EU?

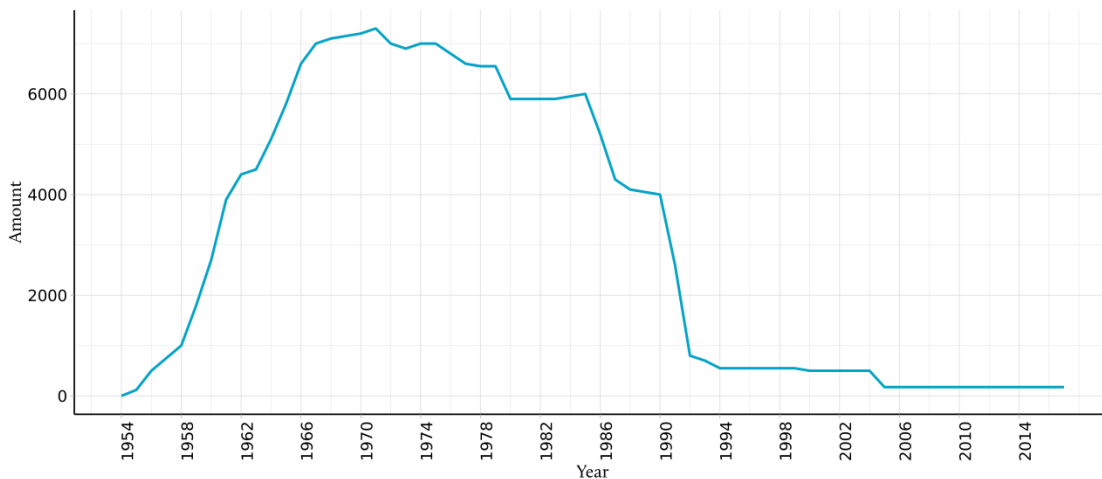


Figure 2: Number of US Nuclear Weapons in Europe. Source: Federation of American Scientists.

Option one is maintaining the status quo: keeping NATO’s current nuclear sharing architecture in place, along with engagement of US’ strategic nuclear forces with European security. This would require an overhaul of transatlantic relations to function in the long run. Certainly, there is a future beyond the Trump administration – be it in 2020 or 2024 – when a less controversial president may be in office, bringing the possibility of restoring the relationship rather quickly to what it usually has been. With this option UK nuclear forces would also remain committed to NATO, regardless of Brexit. This path would contribute little, if at all to Europe’s strategic autonomy, with the US still having the first and last word on nuclear deterrence and security in Europe.

The second option is the withdrawal of US weapons from Europe. The latest Nuclear Posture Review has concretely alluded to this possibility, stating that the US will “modify a small number of existing submarine launched ballistic missiles (SLBM) warheads to provide a low-yield option, and in the longer term, pursue a modern nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM).”¹⁴ This fully bypasses the current dual-key arrangement, “does not rely on host nation support”,¹⁵ and is in line with Trump’s ‘America First’ policy.¹⁶ The explicit delineation of such prospects in US policy brings the likelihood of US nuclear weapons being withdrawn from Europe much closer. A further separation between the USA and European NATO member

states could even cause the end of NATO's collective defense in its current form or the end of NATO itself. In this case option three comes in sight.

Option three is the creation of a (extended) nuclear deterrence for Europe by a European nuclear weapons state. This option would mean the end of hosting US TNWs. This would not be unprecedented as the UK, Canada, and Greece have all ceased being nuclear hosts. The UK acquired its own nuclear arsenal, while Canada and Greece stopped hosting in 1984 and 2001, respectively. Depending on the evolving transatlantic relations and the level of responsibility the EU and its member states will take for European security, this option could fit within a NATO as well as a EU framework. In each case it would signify and require a transformation in existing partnerships. Three countries could provide a European nuclear deterrence capability, being the UK, France or in future possibly Germany, depending on the outcome of the ongoing debate in this country. With the upcoming Brexit the UK distances itself from the EU and its member states, and is therefore unlikely to take on this leading role in Europe.

Besides the UK, France is currently the only alternative. France has been a nuclear power since 1960 and it defines and understands the concept and the importance of strategic autonomy most clearly.¹⁷ Extending the French umbrella could include forward deployment of French nuclear arms in other European states, replacing the existing US dual-key arrangement. However, such an arrangement would require a fundamental debate in France, which currently does not provide any sort of extended nuclear deterrence. A fundamental debate is currently ongoing in Germany, triggered by the dynamics in transatlantic and EU-Russia relations.¹⁸ This debate on whether Germany should develop its own nuclear arsenal could substantially affect the feasibility of this option. The ongoing debate puts forward the different possibilities for Germany in this: an indigenous German nuclear capacity, a latent German nuclear technology capacity, a dual-key arrangement with France (or the UK), and a pan-European deterrent (or Eurodeterrent).

This brings us to option four: the creation of a European deterrent. Certainly, for purely practical reasons, a 'Eurodeterrent' would for the time being need to be based on the French nuclear arsenal, giving France a central role. The main difference with option three would be that other EU member states would contribute to establishing a European trident (land, sea, and air launched nuclear weapons) with regional reach, ensuring the EU has strategic autonomy whilst giving participating member states a say in matters of nuclear deterrence. Creating a 'European Nuclear Security Council' consisting of the major contributors to the Eurodeterrent (e.g. France, Germany, Italy, Poland, plus one rotating member) could mitigate the danger of immobility arising from unanimous decision-making with 27 members. This option would not include the development of new nuclear weapons; merely a reorganization of decision-

making. Clearly signaling and underlining that a Eurodeterrent would be a reorganization and not rearmament will be pivotal to manage the perceptions (and reactions) of Moscow, which may feel threatened by this new development.

What about arms control? One could argue that creating a Eurodeterrent would undermine the EU's reputation and aspiration as a global liberal, peace-propagating actor. This does not have to be so; if anything, it would reinforce it. To be sure, the Eurodeterrent would not include a nuclear rearmament of the European continent, but only a rearrangement of competences and decision-making. Arms control is part of deterrence, can crucially contribute to its effectiveness, and can lead to disarmament, resulting in a securer European continent. Clear signaling by the EU that it is willing to engage in arms control talks would be pivotal in mitigating the dangers of adversaries using the creation of a Eurodeterrent to further develop their own nuclear capabilities. A Eurodeterrent would make the EU a more credible regional and global actor, thereby also improving its capabilities as a peace promoter. Moreover, and to conclude, modernizations of existing nuclear arsenals, as discussed earlier, are already happening. A Eurodeterrent would give nuclear security and strategic autonomy to European countries that may be capable of gaining their own nuclear capacity (e.g. Germany), making a Eurodeterrent more legitimate, necessary, and welcome than a new nuclear arms race.

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Endnotes

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