

# After the Bombs are Gone: Thinking about a Europe Free of US Nuclear Weapons

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**Oliver Thränert**

Imagine that it is May 2019. Almost exactly sixty-five years after the first US nuclear weapons arrived in Europe in 1953–54, the last of the remaining American nuclear bombs have now been withdrawn from the old continent. All nuclear weapons that remain in Europe are deployed in those countries that own them: France, the UK and Russia. All other European countries are nuclear-free. During the Cold War, the possible use of nuclear weapons had scared European populations and politicians alike. Since the end of the East–West confrontation, however, the presence of US nuclear forces in Europe had become widely ignored by European populations. Some European governments increasingly described US non-strategic nuclear weapons (NSNW) based in Europe as relics of the Cold War and pressed for their withdrawal. Others did not share this view. At the time of the Lisbon summit of November 2010, the Alliance still described deterrence based on an appropriate mix of nuclear and conventional capabilities as a core element of its overall strategy. But it also aimed at further reductions in its nuclear forces based in Europe. By 2019, however, it had come to the view that deterrence could be maintained without the basing of any US nuclear weapons on European soil.

When thinking about the ramifications of such a scenario, we first need to clarify what exactly is meant by saying that ‘no US nuclear weapons remain in Europe’. Next, we need to discuss the circumstances under which the US and NATO arrived at such a decision. Has it been a result of arms control negotiations with Russia? Or has the withdrawal become inevitable because European partners were not capable or willing to modernise the respective delivery systems? Or has there even been an almost-successful terrorist assault on one of the US nuclear bases in Europe, as a consequence of which the US president decided to bring all non-strategic nuclear weapons home? Did NATO successfully establish missile defence architectures in close co-operation with Russia as a substitute for the deployment of nuclear weapons in Europe? Or has that not been possible because the Alliance could not reach agreement on such an approach with Moscow? Did the NATO missile defence plans materialise or did they have to be delayed due to budget constraints? And did Iran continue with its nuclear programme? Did it develop a nuclear weapons option or even conduct a nuclear test? Or had it been possible to convince Tehran in the course of successful negotiations to limit its nuclear activities to peaceful applications? In case Iran did openly go nuclear, did its neighbours such as Egypt or Saudi Arabia, or even NATO’s partner Turkey, already begin to develop their own nuclear options in response?

The answers to these questions may vary in numerous ways. The withdrawal might have been a result of arms control negotiations, while at the same time NATO established missile defences in close co-operation with Russia. Or NATO withdrew its nuclear bombs unilaterally, without carrying on with missile defence projects. Against the background of an ongoing financial and economic crisis, costs may have limited such ambitions. A diplomatic solution to the Iranian nuclear problem may also have contributed to a NATO decision to delay missile defence. Or NATO may have withdrawn its nuclear forces as a result of negotiations, without being able to carry on with its missile defence plans, despite Iran proceeding with its nuclear weapons efforts. This paper will try to identify positive, as well as not so positive, consequences of a US nuclear withdrawal that could be expected under different circumstances.

### **What Exactly Does ‘Withdrawal From Europe’ Mean?**

To begin with, we need to define what exactly is meant by ‘all US nuclear weapons have been withdrawn from Europe’. Have all B-61 warheads been destroyed or only redeployed to storage sites in the US? And are European NATO partners modernising their dual-capable aircraft (DCA) in a way that would leave the option open to use them in future nuclear contingencies if the Alliance would deem this necessary? After all, even if the Europeans decided to rule out all nuclear options, the US Air Force (USAF) might continue with its current plans to replace its ageing F-16 aircraft with modern dual-capable F-35 Joint Strike Fighters. If the B-61s had only been stored and not destroyed, Washington could decide to redeploy its nuclear capabilities to Europe in a very short period of time, provided airbases had been maintained to host nuclear weapons. Such a move, however, would not go unnoticed. In fact, if US nuclear forces returned to nuclear-free NATO Europe, this would occur because the Alliance felt the need to improve its extended deterrence credibility. Hence, NATO would want the opponent to know about the nuclear redeployment. At the same time, European populations would only welcome US nuclear forces in the case of a severe crisis. Otherwise, such a move would be strongly opposed. Therefore, the return of US nuclear forces to Europe is a scenario that is difficult to conceive. For the purpose of this paper, it is assumed that ‘withdrawal’ means that a redeployment of US nuclear forces to Europe would only be possible under extreme circumstances.

### **Arms Control and Non-Proliferation**

Those who currently promote a US nuclear withdrawal from Europe believe that such a move would have a positive effect for the nuclear non-proliferation effort. If such a move took place as a result of successful US–Russian negotiations, or reciprocal moves like the co-ordinated, unilateral reductions of non-strategic nuclear forces undertaken by Presidents George H W Bush, Michail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin in the aftermath of the Cold War, this would mean that the two countries still maintaining the largest nuclear arsenals would have accomplished yet another success in nuclear

disarmament. This would take the wind out of the sails of those non-nuclear countries which time and again complain that the nuclear powers do not meet their disarmament requirements under Article VI of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Moreover, the lingering criticism expressed by a number of non-nuclear states, that NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements violate the NPT's provision, would be invalidated. As a result, the nuclear non-proliferation campaign would be strengthened. It might become more likely to improve its verification provisions through universalising the Additional Protocol to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards, a move that is urgently needed.

However, a US nuclear withdrawal from Europe could also negatively impact wider arms control and non-proliferation efforts. An urgent concern would apply in a scenario in which the US had removed its NSNW unilaterally, NATO was not capable of establishing effective missile defences for all its members, and Iran had developed a nuclear weapons option or begun conducting nuclear tests. Under such circumstances, Turkey may decide to begin its own nuclear weapons programme, at first clandestinely and then in open breach of the NPT, to ensure its national security. Such a move in addition to an Iranian nuclear break-out would certainly be the last nail in the coffin of the NPT. Had the US not withdrawn all its nuclear bombs from Incirlik airbase, Turkey might have been convinced that US extended nuclear deterrence still applied. A Turkish nuclear component would therefore be deemed unnecessary. Alternatively, an effective NATO missile defence system that convinces the Turkish leadership that all Turkish territory would be covered might prevent Ankara from going nuclear.

### **Extended Deterrence**

Extended deterrence based on the threat of punishment has always been the bedrock of NATO's nuclear policy. The United States guaranteed its European non-nuclear partners, as well as Canada, that its nuclear forces would not only counter a potential Soviet attack on the US homeland, but also one on the territories of its allies. More specifically, a special arrangement called 'nuclear sharing' was established, according to which European delivery systems and their crews were prepared and trained to deploy US nuclear weapons based in Europe in times of war. Extended deterrence has never been an easy undertaking, mainly because the requirements of deterrence and assurance are often not identical. What has become known as the 'Healey Theorem' illustrates this best: 'It takes only five per cent credibility of US retaliation to deter the Russians, but ninety-five per cent credibility to reassure the Europeans.'

Today, in 2011, the political environment is changing dramatically. NATO–Russia relations in particular are steadily improving. At its Lisbon summit, the Alliance made clear that it wishes to intensify its co-operation with Moscow.

Russia's President Medvedev participated in NATO's Lisbon Summit and welcomed an invitation to work closely together in terms of missile defence. There are indications that the Russian political elite is beginning to realise that NATO is not a threat anymore but that there are other challenges such as those posed by China or radical Islam to consider. On NATO's part, new Alliance members, which still struggle to come to terms with their memories of Soviet occupation and which have traditionally had difficulties perceiving Russia as a partner, are softening their stance. However, lingering suspicions on both sides remain. Indeed, it can hardly be expected that Western and Russian interests will become identical in the near future. This is due to a number of reasons: Russia's sheer size, making it both a European as well as an Asian player; its possession of a nuclear arsenal comparable only to that of the US; as well as its domestic development, which combines both democratic and autocratic elements, the latest proof of which has been the criminal case against Michail Khodorkovsky. Moreover, it remains unclear whether NATO and Russia will find common ground on important strategic issues such as missile defence. At this point it seems difficult to predict the direction in which the NATO–Russia relationship will develop.

In a positive scenario, NATO–Russian relations would continue to improve. Nuclear deterrence *vis-à-vis* Moscow would become increasingly irrelevant. In a negative scenario, however, NATO partners neighbouring Russia would feel increasingly uncomfortable. Even though a military confrontation between NATO and Russia would still remain a remote possibility, these and also other NATO partners would feel less secure (see the Healey Theorem above). As a consequence, NATO might begin a debate about the redeployment of US nuclear forces to Europe so as to reassure European allies. But this in itself would heighten tensions with Russia. Threat perception among NATO members might vary, giving cause to ongoing struggles within the Alliance about nuclear issues.

But even in a positive NATO–Russia scenario, extended deterrence would not become negligible for NATO. Rather, extended deterrence could be expected to change its focus from Russia to the Middle East. We do not yet know whether by 2019 the E3+3 (the UK, France, Germany, the US, China and Russia) would have been successful with their two-track approach of sanctions as well as incentives in stopping Iran from developing a nuclear weapons option. Nor do we know whether military action would have been taken to end Iran's controversial nuclear projects, or what the result of such military operations would be. What we know is that an Iranian nuclear capability – even if Tehran does not withdraw from the NPT and openly test nuclear weapons – would definitely change NATO's security environment significantly, although it will never be comparable to the threat posed by the Soviet Union during the Cold War. NATO partners at its southern flank would not be the only ones to feel less secure. If Iran should develop nuclear weapons

and ballistic missiles that could reach Berlin or Brussels, Central European NATO countries would also need to be reassured and protected. In addition, NATO could hardly be indifferent if Israel or any of the Arab countries that participate in NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue or the Istanbul Co-operation Initiative were to become the victim of Iranian military pressure. In sum, as a consequence of a possible nuclear dynamic in the Middle East, this region would gain importance for NATO.

If the US withdraws all its nuclear assets from Europe, NATO would lose an important option. Today, NATO partners that participate in nuclear sharing could conduct manoeuvres to demonstrate solidarity in the face of Iranian misbehaviour, or in a crisis with any other nuclear-armed opponent. If nuclear sharing is abandoned, such an option would cease to exist. Still, NATO's extended deterrence would not be profoundly weakened. The Iranian leadership would be aware that the US, and possibly the UK and France for that matter, could conduct a nuclear counterstrike should Iran dare to attack Israel or one of its Arab neighbours with nuclear weapons. Besides, Israel could target Iran with nuclear weapons by itself.

Moreover, NATO missile defences might gain more strategic prominence. First, defence against limited nuclear attacks conducted by nuclear newcomers such as Iran becomes feasible. Despite all their technical limitations, missile defences could provide a damage limitation option. Secondly, a nuclear Iran is unlikely to be as irrational as to directly attack NATO, which is still the most powerful military alliance in the world. But Iran might undertake acts of aggression towards its non-nuclear neighbours. NATO, as an alliance that feels responsible for maintaining world order, and which can be mandated by the UN Security Council for military operations to reconstitute order, could one day find itself in a situation where it would need to decide whether it wants to use its conventional forces against aggression in a contingency that might result in severe damage to its own populations caused by the use of nuclear ballistic weapons by the aggressor. Deliberately accepting one's own vulnerability, as was the case during the Cold War, does not seem the appropriate strategic approach in such a context.

Good relations with Russia would certainly make it easier for NATO to concentrate on establishing missile defences. Otherwise, the Alliance may have difficulties explaining to Moscow that its defence efforts were not directed against Russian security interests. This may limit NATO's defence programmes.

There is only one possible scenario left, one in which NATO establishes a stable relationship with Russia and which attains a diplomatic solution for the Iranian nuclear challenge. In that case, extended deterrence, as such, would become less important for NATO.

**NATO Cohesion**

The stationing of US nuclear forces in Europe has frequently been described as an essential transatlantic link. However, these weapons often caused transatlantic controversies, particularly in the first half of the 1980s when NATO's double-track decision was implemented. After the end of the Cold War, many politicians and non-governmental experts claimed that US non-strategic forces remained a link to the American strategic nuclear assets. These systems would also help to maintain allied cohesion and solidarity. Others pointed out that NATO cohesion cannot be made to depend upon weapons that were of questionable military value.

In fact, NATO would change as an alliance should it end its nuclear sharing arrangements. NATO allies that currently participate in it would lose nuclear competences. Hence, the value of consultations within the NATO Nuclear Planning Group (NPG) would decrease. If all things nuclear were only directly relevant for the US, the UK and France (which does not take part in NPG meetings) the impact of non-nuclear NATO members would diminish. But this would not necessarily result in a weakening of NATO.

In a best-case scenario, relations with Russia would continue to improve and a sustainable diplomatic solution be found for the Iranian nuclear problem. NATO would most probably tackle other challenges such as the resolution of conflicts in various regions. NATO cohesion and solidarity would depend upon developing common approaches dealing with such issues. Nuclear weapons would lose prominence.

A more likely scenario, though, is one in which the Alliance is confronted with nuclear challenges in the Middle East. In that case, as described above, missile defence would become more important. Such assets will have an alliance dimension. A NATO effort to establish missile defences would keep the US committed to European defence. Moreover, allies could find new opportunities to actively participate in NATO force planning through arrangements similar to the NPG. Therefore, if NATO substituted current nuclear sharing arrangements with an effective Alliance missile defence architecture, NATO would not be weakened, but perhaps might even be strengthened. This would particularly apply if missile defence co-operation with Russia could be established.

**Conclusion**

The ramifications for NATO of a complete removal of US nuclear forces from Europe are scenario-dependent. Today, many believe that it is appropriate to simply retire the threat of a possible nuclear confrontation in Europe into the history books. But if the US withdrew its NSNW from Europe, the consequences would not be as clear-cut as many pundits suggest. It may have positive, as well as more negative, effects on nuclear disarmament

and non-proliferation. Others maintain that US nuclear forces in Europe are needed to keep the US connected to European security, and that NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements provide European partners with adequate opportunities for participation in NATO decision-making. Again, as far as extended deterrence and NATO cohesion are concerned, much will depend upon the concrete circumstances, as well as NATO's capability to substitute current nuclear sharing arrangements with other activities. Particularly, an Alliance-wide missile defence would keep the transatlantic link and give NATO members a say in the Alliance's strategic affairs.

***Dr Oliver Thränert** is a Senior Fellow in International Security at the German Institute of International and Security Affairs (SWP). He is an expert on issues including the proliferation of nuclear, biological and chemical weapons, international arms control regimes, international non-proliferation policy and missile defence.*