

To Preserve Extended Nuclear Deterrence in Europe an American Should be SACEUR

April 2025 **Eric S. Edelman and Franklin C. Miller**

Introduction

Recent press reports suggest that Pentagon leaders are considering a dramatic organizational change: relinquishing the traditional U.S. role of providing NATO with its Supreme Allied Commander (SACEUR).¹ This would be deeply unwise and potentially dangerous for the United States, as well as for our European allies. Since December 1950, when General Dwight D. Eisenhower became the first Supreme Allied Commander of the newly created North Atlantic Alliance, the position has been filled by an American. This is not spelled out in any formal document. Rather, it is a norm that has been honored by the Alliance for almost 80 years because the United States is the alliance's strongest member. It also serves as an important sign of Washington's commitment to European defense. And it underpins the forward deployment of U.S. nuclear weapons on the territory of select European NATO members, which remains central to extended deterrence.²

When Eisenhower assumed command he was able to build up the integrated military structure of NATO in less than two years. This accomplishment was due in large part to his stature and coalition building experience as the organizer of Europe's liberation during World War II, and was achieved in the face of ambivalence on the part of many Europeans and Americans. When he departed Paris in spring 1952 to return to the United States, it was explicitly to ensure that the green shoots he had planted would survive the vicissitudes of American politics.³

As far back as 1948, Eisenhower was accustomed to American politicians and civic leaders beseeching him to run for President. Ike, however, was reluctant to enter the political fray. As the definitive history of the 1952 election notes, "it would not be the appeals of outsiders that would push Eisenhower into declaring his candidacy. Rather it would be his belief that he had to save the country, and the collective security of the world, from Robert Taft." Before he went to assume his role at NATO in 1950, Eisenhower met secretly with the Ohio Senator and putative front runner for the 1952 GOP nomination to oppose President Truman. Ike was prepared to issue a Shermansque statement eschewing any effort to become a candidate himself if only Taft, who had opposed the North Atlantic Treaty in the United States Senate in 1948, would agree to support NATO and collective security. Taft refused and ultimately Eisenhower yielded to the entreaties of conservative internationalists in the

¹ Courtney Kube and Gordon Lubold, "Trump Admin Considers Giving Up NATO Command That Has Been Exclusively American Since Eisenhower," *NBC News*, March 18, 2025 at: <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/national-security/trump-admin-considers-giving-nato-command-exclusively-american-eisenho-rcna196503>.

² Why Has SACEUR always been an American? at: <https://shape.nato.int/page214845858#:~:text=Even%20since%201950%2C%20when%20the,no%20specific%20individual%20is%20recommended.>

³ Alexander M. Bielakowski, "Eisenhower: The First NATO SACEUR," *War and Society*, 22:2 pp. 95-108.

Republican party who wanted to avoid an isolationists foreign policy. As Ike eventually told reporters in June 1952, “I am running because Taft is an isolationist. His election would be a disaster.”⁴

Eisenhower assumed the Presidency against a backdrop of dramatic developments in national security – the Soviet test of a nuclear weapon that ended the short-lived U.S. nuclear monopoly, the Communist victory in the Chinese Civil War, and the invasion of South Korea by Communist forces from North Korea (with the blessing of both Stalin and Mao tse-Tung). National security professionals, including Eisenhower, believed the war on the Korean Peninsula could be a precursor to Soviet aggression in Europe. Under these conditions, Eisenhower launched a policy for European defense that remains the cornerstone of U.S. security policy for Europe to this day – the forward deployment of both U.S. conventional military forces and U.S. nuclear weapons.⁵

Aware that Europe would be unlikely to meet the ambitious goals he had urged the allies to set in early 1952, Ike ordered a review of U.S. national security strategy, which concluded that “within the free world, only the United States can provide and maintain, for a period of years to come, the atomic capability to counterbalance Soviet atomic power.” But this strategy would necessitate U.S. “overseas bases...for some years to come. Such bases will continue *indefinitely* [authors emphasis added] to be an important additional element of U.S. strategic air capability and to be essential to the conduct of the military operations on the Eurasian continent in case of general war.” Winning over allies to U.S. requests for base access, however, would be very ticklish since discussions of atomic weapons usage was politically problematic for them. As Paul Nitze observed, base access was a matter of the “utmost delicacy.”⁶

The need for bases, however, underscored the importance of allied willingness to provide consent, access, and cooperation. U.S. allies would “assume the risks entailed only if convinced that their own security will thereby be best served.” It fell to Eisenhower’s Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, to sell this to America’s European allies. The “primary purpose of the United States...was to deter aggression and prevent the outbreak of war,” Dulles argued in closed sessions of the Alliance’s Foreign Ministers. He also pledged to consult and cooperate closely with allies, a process that he described as “the essence of collective security.” Dulles was successful and at the end of 1954 NATO approved a strategy document, MC48, which called for ready conventional capabilities, including American forces, backed by nuclear weapons. As Dulles reported to Eisenhower, “if an all-out Soviet attack occurred, whether atomic or otherwise, the NATO response would be a defense employing atomic weapons.” That basic strategy – the integration of the Alliance’s conventional and nuclear deterrent operations – has underpinned NATO’s strategy for the past seventy years. It is also increasingly relevant at a time when Russia wages a pitiless war of aggression against Ukraine, threatens the U.S. with nuclear attacks, and menaces American allies along the frontline in eastern Europe.⁷

4 John Robert Greene, *I Like Ike: The Presidential Election of 1952* (Lawrence KS: University of Kansas Press, 2017) p. 34; William B. Pickett, *Eisenhower Decides to Run: Presidential Politics and Cold War Strategy* (Chicago: Ivan Dee, 2008).

5 Walter LaFeber, “NATO and the Korean War: A Context,” *Diplomatic History*, 13:4, pp.461–477; Robert Jervis, “The Impact of the Korean War on the Cold War,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 24:4, pp. 563–593.

6 NSC 162/2 in *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1952–1954, Vol II, Part 1, National Security Affairs* (Washington D.C: Government Printing Office, 1984) p. 583. Nitze’s comment is on page 203 of the same FRUS volume.

7 Dulles’s remarks to the North Atlantic council in *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) 1952–1954 Vol. V, Part 1, Western European Security* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1983) pp. 509–514, and his report to Eisenhower, p. 561. The text of MC 48 can be found at <https://www.nato.int/docu/stratdoc/eng/a541122a.pdf>.

Fundamentally, the forward deployment of U.S. nuclear weapons requires that they remain under firm U.S. control. This is one reason why the senior NATO military commander in Europe, the SACEUR, has been a four-star U.S. officer. Even today, SACEUR's role as part of the nuclear chain of command remains necessitates keeping an American in the position. Just a few weeks ago, the current SACEUR, General Christopher Cavoli, testified to the Senate Armed Services Committee that the United States provides:

a certain amount of nuclear force to NATO to be employed by SACEUR. So, we have some nuclear weapons that in a conflict upon the agreement of the United States, and the rest of the nations would be turned over to SACEUR to be delivered by a variety of nations who are involved in this program, all of them NATO nations. That all happens under the command and control of SACEUR. If SACEUR were not an American officer, we would have to find some other way to do that, and it would certainly not be as integrated with the rest of SACEUR's operations as it is now. ... as the American Commander, [I] have those weapons in my possession, and at the time of need as instructed, I would pass them to myself as the Supreme Allied Commander to employ in accordance with the 32 nations.⁸

Recent press reports suggest that Secretary of Defense Hegseth's "Interim National Defense Strategy" calls for maintaining the U.S. nuclear umbrella over NATO – A wise and judicious decision.⁹ It would be undercut, however, if Washington elected to relinquish the SACEUR role. Doing so would shatter the shared nuclear risk and responsibilities that has kept the peace in Europe during the Cold War and after, without gaining any benefit in return. It is hard to imagine the system of U.S. extended nuclear deterrence in Europe surviving such a dramatic change in settled command arrangements.

Finally, and most pointedly, it is critical that Americans understand that U.S. deployed forces in Europe – as well as those in the Pacific – are in fact defending our homeland. Americans have learned to our sorrow that hostile enemy powers dominating the European continent or the Pacific expanse– let alone both – pose an unacceptable threat to our security at home. Our forces in both regions, combined with those of our allies, provide a strong deterrent against hostile aggression against American interests in either part of the globe.

⁸To Receive Testimony on the Posture of the United States European Command and United States Africa Command in Review of the Defense Authorization Request for Fiscal Year 2026 and the Future Years Defense Program," Senate Armed Services Committee, April 3, 2025, 119th Congress (Testimony of General Christopher Cavoli), pp.30-31 at <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/4325fulltranscript.pdf>.

⁹ Alex Horton and Hannah Natanson, "Secret Pentagon Memo on China, homeland has Heritage fingerprints," *Washington Post*, March 29, 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2025/03/29/secret-pentagon-memo-hegseth-heritage-foundation-china/>.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Ambassador Eric S. Edelman is Counselor at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments. He retired as a career minister from the U.S. Foreign Service on May 1, 2009. He has served in senior positions at the Departments of State and Defense as well as the White House. He served as U.S. ambassador to Finland in the Clinton administration and Turkey in the Bush administration and was Vice President Cheney's principal deputy assistant for national security affairs. He was chief of staff to Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott, special assistant to Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Robert Kimmitt, and special assistant to Secretary of State George Shultz. Ambassador Edelman has been awarded the Department of Defense Medal for Distinguished Public Service, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Joint Distinguished Civilian Service Award, the Presidential Distinguished Service Award, and several Department of State Superior Honor Awards. Ambassador Edelman serves as the Vice Chair of the National Defense Strategy Commission and served on the bipartisan board of directors of the United States Institute of Peace, 2011-2022.

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