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An Ongoing and Necessary Renaissance: NATO's Nuclear Posture

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Introduction

President Putin's nuclear saber-rattling while the war in Ukraine has raged, along with lurid nuclear threats by Russian officials and propagandists, have once again focused attention on NATO's nuclear mission. As the alliance approaches a summit in Washington later this summer, it is an appropriate time to review its nuclear posture.

For decades, NATO's nuclear weapons have played a critical political and military role in underpinning alliance unity and deterring Russian intimidation and aggression. Today, NATO is also in the process of replacing its 1960's-era nuclear bombs with updated weapons, as well as upgrading the 1980's-era F-16 and Tornado aircraft that carry them with modern F-35A fighters.[1]

Nevertheless, given Russia's recent behavior and the prospect that it could become even more reliant on its nuclear forces due to conventional military losses in Ukraine, now is the time to explore other potential changes to NATO's nuclear posture, to include broadening the participation of its members in nuclear sharing and forward-stationing nuclear weapons on the territory of member states that have joined since 1997—notably Poland, which has suggested its willingness to host.

The Post-Cold War Decline

At the height of the Cold War NATO deployed on the order of 7000 US nuclear weapons in Europe. This included a very wide variety of naval (anti-submarine, anti-surface, and strike warfare), air (strike), and ground (artillery, short- and medium-range missiles, anti-aircraft, and land mine) systems. Many of these were assigned to the forces of the European nations, under the control of SACEUR and supported by US custodial units. Designed as an element of NATO's military capability against Soviet aggression, these systems also created an opportunity for a significant number of NATO governments to share the political burdens and military risks of participating in the Alliance's nuclear deterrent mission.[2] This provided not only a deterrent

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[1] As a matter of official policy neither the United States nor NATO reveals in which Alliance countries US nuclear weapons might be stationed. The future of NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements, however, have become a matter of public debate. For background on the history of the alliance's nuclear sharing arrangements and the current debate see: Hans M. Kristensen, Matt Korda, Eliana Johns & Mackenzie Knight, "Nuclear weapons sharing, 2023," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 79:6, pp. 393-406, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/00963402.2023.2266944?needAccess=true; Malcolm Chalmers and Simon Lunn, "NATO's Tactical Nuclear Dilemma," *Occasional Paper,* Royal United Services Institute, London, 2010, https://static.rusi.org/201003_op_natos_tactical_nuclear_dilemma.pdf; Emmanuelle Maitre, "NATO, F-35 and NATO's Nuclear Dilemmas, *Notes de la FRS*, No. 08/2016, February 22, 2016, https://www.frstrategie.org/en/publications/notes/nato-f35-european-nuclear-dilemmas-2016.

[2] In addition to the military sharing arrangements, by the mid-1960s NATO had created a political consultative body, the Nuclear Planning Group (NPG), which evolved to include all NATO nations (except France which has refused to participate on national grounds) in discussing and formulating NATO nuclear deterrence policy. This finessed the question of an independent West German deterrent, which would have been uncomfortable for

against the Soviet Union, but also assured US allies that its security guarantees were iron-clad, thereby precluding those allies from seeking their own nuclear capabilities.[3]

The breakup of the Warsaw Pact in July 1991 and the subsequent demise of the Soviet Union six months later eliminated the principal military rationale for these systems.[4] Reflecting the improved strategic environment, in 1991 President George H.W. Bush agreed to eliminate the vast majority of US and NATO short-range nuclear weapons. The United States implemented its portion of these Presidential Nuclear Initiatives (PNI) rapidly. Despite the concurrence of Soviet President Gorbachev and later Russian President Yeltsin, Russia never did.

Throughout the 1990s and until 2010, NATO was preoccupied with the Balkan wars and counterterrorism in Southwest Asia; its nuclear mission, reduced to air-delivered bombs assigned to rotating US air force squadrons and allied units in select European NATO member states, was largely neglected. In fact, when NATO began its post-Cold War process of enlargement in the late 1990s, the document negotiated by the Clinton Administration with Foreign Minister Yevgeniy Primakov, which became the NATO-Russia Founding Act, stipulated that:

> The member States of NATO reiterate that they have no intention, no plan and no reason to deploy nuclear weapons on the territory of new members, nor any need to change any aspect of NATO's nuclear posture or nuclear policy – and do not foresee any future need to do so. This subsumes the fact that NATO has decided that it has no intention, no plan, and no reason to establish nuclear weapon storage sites on the territory of those members, whether through the construction of new nuclear storage facilities or the adaptation of old nuclear storage facilities. Nuclear storage sites are understood to be facilities specifically designed for the stationing of nuclear weapons and include all types of hardened above or below ground facilities (storage bunkers or vaults) designed for storing nuclear weapons.[5]

As recently as 2010, NATO's revised "Strategic Concept" barely mentioned nuclear weapons. Worse yet, in a beggar-thy-neighbor move that same year, the ruling German coalition called for the removal of nuclear weapons from German soil and the termination of the Luftwaffe's nuclear role—all the while continuing to request extended nuclear deterrence from US central systems. Similar short-sighted proposals emerged in other allied countries. All the while, Russian armed forces were violating the PNI's, retaining older tactical nuclear systems, and augmenting those forces with newer ones. Russia also began covert development and deployments of medium-range ground-launched nuclear systems explicitly banned by the 1987 Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. Meanwhile, President-for-life Vladimir Putin and his senior officials began explicitly threatening nuclear strikes against NATO states to intimidate them, an irresponsible development that has only accelerated with the unfolding war in Ukraine.

NATO Begins to Respond

many allies and, as Moscow frequently made clear, intolerable from a Russian point of view. The emergence of the NPG provided a mechanism for precluding an independent nuclear option without singularizing Germany and gave allies a voice on US nuclear posture in Europe. Indeed, the combination of deployed US weapons with allied units and the creation of the NPG has served as a powerful "anti-proliferant" for the vast majority of NATO nations, assuring them they were under a nuclear umbrella and did not need to develop their own nuclear weapons.

[3] The Russian Federation and various Western anti-nuclear groups have occasionally asserted, quite falsely, that the US deployments in NATO Europe are inconsistent with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). In fact, those deployments were the subject of considerable negotiation between the US and the then-USSR governments as the NPT was being developed. The diplomatic record, and then-Secretary of State Rusk's statement to the Senate during the NPT ratification debate, make it clear that the presence of these weapons is fully consistent with the NPT.

[4] Indeed, anticipating these developments, NATO Defense Ministers had agreed in late 1989 that the alliance's shorter-range ground-based nuclear systems were no longer necessary and ended modernization programs for them.

[5] https://www.nato.int/cps/su/natohq/official_texts_25468.htm. Full disclosure: the authors both played a role in negotiating the text.

Following Russia's support for proxies waging war in eastern Ukraine and its illegal seizure of Crimea, NATO's Wales Summit Declaration explicitly touched on the Alliance's deterrent, which represented a break from prior post-Cold War Summit Statements. In 2018, NATO Heads of State and Government further endorsed the deterrent value of both US nuclear weapons based in Europe and the allied forces assigned to carry them. In this same period those same allied governments began making decisions to replace their F-16s and Tornado aircraft with the fifth generation F-35A, thereby ensuring that NATO will pose a formidable threat to penetrate enemy territory successfully. Simultaneously, the United States finalized the design and development of the latest generation of NATO's air delivered bomb, the B61-12, and began the process of replacing the 1960's version of the weapon (which relied on vacuum tube technology) with a more modern, reliable, and capable weapon. As a result of these steps, by the end of the 2020's, NATO's European-based nuclear deterrent will be completely modernized. In the future, depending upon developments in Russian policy and air defense capabilities, NATO may need to examine whether it is necessary to develop and deploy an air-launched stand-off system to augment the ability of the F-35 with its B61-12 gravity bombs to penetrate improved Russian integrated air and missile defenses.

A more pressing question for NATO, one with major political implications, is whether the Alliance will actually take the steps to "to develop concepts for how to ensure the broadest possible participation of Allies concerned in their nuclear sharing arrangements," a promise contained in NATO's 2012 Deterrence and Defense Posture Review and repeated in successive Summit Statements, but never fully realized.

Given the military situation in Europe after Russian invasion of Ukraine as well as the recent addition of Finland to the alliance (with Sweden hopefully to follow soon), the question of how the members of NATO who have joined since 1997 can contribute to the alliance's nuclear deterrence mission has become more urgent. As noted by the International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS) in September 2023,

> On 30 June 2023, Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki declared Poland's interest in hosting nuclear weapons under NATO's nuclear-sharing policy, citing the reported deployment of Russian nuclear weapons to its Kaliningrad region and to Belarus. Soon after, the head of Poland's National Security Bureau, Jacek Siewiera, said Poland was interested in certifying its F-35A Lightning II aircraft (due to be deployed in 2024–25) to deliver B61 free-fall nuclear bombs, in preparation for possible inclusion in NATO's arsenal of dual-capable aircraft.[6]

Morawiecki's expression of willingness to host nuclear weapons is only the latest example of Poland's interest in participating in NATO's nuclear missions. Experts, including the authors, have for years discussed and examined the possibilities for including some of the new members of the alliance in NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements and as the post-1997 member with the largest military and which borders both Belarus and Kalingrad, where Russia is believed to have stationed nuclear weapons, it makes sense to begin any discussion of inclusion with Poland with an understanding that arrangements with Warsaw would likely serve as a template for other new members who might wish to join in the nuclear sharing arrangements.[7]

[6] https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-comments/2023/polands-bid-to-participate-in-nato-nuclear-sharing/.

[7] Brad Roberts, *The Case for Nuclear Weapons in the 21st Century*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015) pp. 194-195; Evan Montgomery, *Extended Deterrence in the Second Nuclear Age*, (Washington DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2016), p. 32; Eric S. Edelman and Whitney M. McNamara, *U.S. Strategy for Maintaining a Europe Whole and Free* (Washington DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2017) p.47; Matthew Kroenig, "Toward a More Flexible NATO Nuclear Posture: Developing a Response to a Russian Nuclear De-Escalation Strike" (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, Brent Scowcroft Center on International Security, November 2016).

We see three broad options for NATO and for Poland:

1. Poland is fully integrated into NATO's DCA and nuclear basing mission:

   Poland and the US agree that the F35s Poland will acquire will be nuclear-capable. The US establishes a nuclear storage site at a Polish airfield, deploys a custodial unit, and certifies Polish aircraft and crew to carry nuclear weapons. The Polish unit is incorporated into the NATO nuclear release system.

2. Poland is fully integrated as a DCA nation but its planes with a nuclear role must operate out of an existing (non-Polish) nuclear base:

   Poland and the US agree that the F35s Poland will acquire will be nuclear-capable. The US also certifies Polish aircraft and crew to carry nuclear weapons. The Polish unit is incorporated into the NATO nuclear release system. In times of crisis/war, designated Polish aircraft deploy for operations to one of the existing NATO nuclear storage sites.

3. Polish pilots are capable of flying the DCA mission but as part of existing NATO units at their bases:

   Selected Polish F35 pilots are vetted and selected to be trained for nuclear operations. Those pilots are seconded to an existing NATO DCA unit and operate as an integral part of that unit, including for nuclear missions.

We believe the first option is unrealistic. While neither of us has ever been accused of being overly solicitous of alleged Russian concerns, moving nuclear weapons close to Russia will be highly provocative, to say nothing of placing them under the threat of very short time of flight missiles as well as Russian ground forces and artillery. In effect, the U.S. would find itself in the same position it did in the late 1950s when it quickly discovered, as some of the smartest nuclear strategists of the era pointed out, that the hasty deployment of Jupiter missiles to Italy and Turkey created more risk of preemption than it did assurance for allies. Additionally, given the US Air Force's ambivalence to the allied support mission, we suspect that the service would oppose building and staffing a new nuclear weapons storage site in Europe.

The second option is, in principle, achievable. That said, from a practical standpoint, keeping Polish aircraft and pilots fully certified for nuclear missions would place an additional burden on SHAPE and USAFE, two organizations that are already over-tasked and undermanned in the current security environment. If it were the only option for broadening participation to include Poland or if there were a further deterioration requiring a fundamental expansion of NATO's DCA force, it might conceivably be worth it.

This leads to the third option. Practically speaking, the third option is highly preferable. Integrating Polish pilots into existing NATO DCA units will be a prima facie demonstration of NATO's increased interdependence and interoperability. It would obviate the need for new facility construction or for an extension of SACEUR's nuclear command and control systems. Finally, it can be accomplished relatively quickly and at least cost. And it should also serve as a template for integrating other new members of the Alliance, notably Finland and potentially others who also are acquiring F35s, thereby enabling them to meaningly participate if they were to seek direct inclusion in the Alliance's nuclear mission.

A major advantage to option 3 is the time factor—embedding a few Polish (or other) Allies into existing DCA units to get them trained and certified using the F-35 is something which can be implemented now, as DCA Allies are currently in the process of training and certifying their own units with the F-35 transition. Thus, the Poles could be brought in almost from the beginning, before they even have F-35s, to begin understanding and practicing the mission. Either options 1 or 2 would have to wait until Poland receives F-35s, gets them certified, trains the units, etc. - and they couldn't begin this process until after the current DCA Allies transition to F-35s are complete; this could take well into the next decade.

The provision of extended nuclear deterrence to its European allies remains a fundamental element of U.S. national security policy and, in the current circumstances of strategic competition with an actively revanchist Russia and a rising People's Republic of China, is likely to take on even more importance. As demands for Europe to do more in its own defense increase on this side of the Atlantic broadening the participation among NATO allies of the shared burdens and risks of nuclear deterrence has never been more timely.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Eric S. Edelman

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.

Franklin C. Miller

The Honorable Franklin Miller is a principal at the Scowcroft Group in Washington, DC. He dealt extensively with nuclear policy and nuclear arms control issues during his 31-year government career, which included senior positions in the Defense Department and on the NSC staff. He was directly in charge of US nuclear deterrence and targeting policy from 1985 to 2001 and also chaired NATO's senior nuclear policy committee, the High-Level Group, from 1997 to 2001. He was a member of the Defense Policy Board from 2008-2020. He served on the 2008 Secretary of Defense Task Force on DoD Nuclear Weapons Management (Schlesinger Task Force), on the 2013-2014 Congressional Advisory Panel on the Nuclear Security Enterprise (Mies-Augustine Panel), and was a member of the recently concluded Congressional Commission on Strategic Posture. He has been awarded the Defense Department's highest civilian award, the Defense Distinguished Civilian Service Medal, five times, the Department of State Distinguished Honor Medal, the Department of the Navy Distinguished Public Service Medal, the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff Joint Distinguished Civilian Service Medal and the National Nuclear Security Administration Administrator's Gold Medal for Distinguished Service. Mr. Miller has also been awarded an honorary knighthood by Queen Elizabeth II and other senior awards from the Norwegian, French, and Japanese governments.

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