



## NATO Watch Comment

Promoting a more open, transparent and accountable NATO

**For Immediate Release:** 5 November 2009

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### **20 years after the velvet revolution: time to remove US nuclear weapons from Europe**

#### **Liberate NATO from a Cold War posture to concentrate on today's challenges**

At a [press conference](#) on 3 November following a meeting with German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle, NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen was asked if he thought the removal of all US nuclear warheads from Europe and in particular from Germany would be conducive to Alliance security.<sup>1</sup> In reply the Secretary General said:

*It is only natural that there is a political discussion and a discussion in our publics about our nuclear strategy. Having said that, I also think it's of outmost importance that any step, that any decision on this takes place within the Alliance in a multilateral framework and that no unilateral step is taken, because this is a question which concerns all allies.*

While a political discussion and public debate on NATO's nuclear strategy is long overdue, this should not be used to unduly delay action on the ground. Nor is it necessary to get too hung up by whether progress is achieved by universal steps or through a multilateral framework. In an ideal world, the withdrawal of *all* US nuclear weapons in Europe would take place as part of a coordinated effort to [progressively devalue Alliance nuclear weapons](#) within the framework of a new Strategic Concept. However, the current policy of consolidating US nuclear weapons in Europe has largely taken place through unilateral (or bilateral) steps with minimal discussion among allies, at least not in public.<sup>2</sup>

The principle of nuclear burden-sharing first began to unravel before the end of the Cold War in 1995 when nuclear weapons were withdrawn from Turkish bases at Akinci and Balikesir. Further unilateral and secretive withdrawals took place from German bases at Memmingen and Norvenich in 1996; from the Greek base at Araxos in 2001; from Ramstein in Germany in 2005; and from Lakenheath in the UK in 2008.

In the short term, what is at stake is not whether NATO should be protected with nuclear weapons, but why it is still necessary to deploy US tactical nuclear weapons in Europe. Japan and

South Korea are also covered by the US nuclear umbrella, but without tactical nuclear weapons deployed in Asia. France and the UK also retain strategic nuclear arsenals.

If Greece and the UK can withdraw completely from this arrangement with no severe consequences for NATO deterrence or unity, so can the other European host countries that currently perform the NATO nuclear strike mission. Of course, the fewer host states the more sensitive this issue becomes. Nonetheless, if done within an open and multilateral framework, the US and NATO could use the political leverage from such a move to engage Russia to drastically reduce the large number of Russian non-strategic nuclear weapons.

And if agreement to these ends cannot be reached within the Alliance's Strategic Concept review process, then the German and Belgian governments should press ahead unilaterally. Another round of consolidation would just be a slower step toward the inevitable US nuclear withdrawal from Europe and provide real interim security benefits to NATO.

**Notes:**

1. Germany's new coalition government has said that it will ask Washington and NATO to remove US nuclear weapons from the country. There are thought to be 18 nuclear weapons left in Germany after Washington withdrew 130 bombs in 2004. Belgian lawmakers are also considering legislation that would call on the United States to pull the weapons from their nation. The United States is believed to keep roughly 200 B-61 gravity bombs at six sites in five European states -- Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Turkey. The weapons are the remains of the thousands deployed during the Cold War. See: [Federation of American Scientists](#).
2. It is likely that previous withdrawals were discussed behind closed doors in the Nuclear Planning Group or High Level Group, but this hardly constitutes a "multilateral framework". Only minimal consultation among Ministers is likely to have occurred with little or no parliamentary or public debate in NATO Member States. They can be characterised, therefore, as a unilateral or bilateral steps taken by the US and the host state.
3. NATO Watch is a new, independent project that collects and disseminates information and research on NATO and Euro-Atlantic security issues. It is the only independent NGO with a remit to monitor and analyse NATO on a daily basis. A web-based information portal [www.natowatch.org](http://www.natowatch.org) will be launched shortly to provide comprehensive, accurate, reliable and up-to-date information about NATO.