



NATO Watch Comment

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Don't Mention the Cold War: Lord Robertson's Basil Fawlty Moment

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The German government's effort to remove the remaining US nuclear weapons from its and European soil were ridiculed in a briefing note, [Germany opens Pandora's box](#) published earlier this week by the Center for European Reform in London. While reading the briefing co-written by Franklin Miller, George Robertson and Kori Schake, we were reminded of the BBC television sitcom, [Fawlty Towers](#). The guests at the hotel were typically comic foils to Basil Fawlty's anger and outbursts. None more so than in the episode, '[The Germans](#)', when Basil, suffering from concussion and with a party of Germans staying at the hotel, makes the prudent decision not to mention the war, but of course he cannot help it ("Listen, don't mention the war! I mentioned it once, but I think I got away with it all right"), and his constant chatter drives one of the Germans to tears.

The briefing note contains similarly intricate and farcical moments, involving omissions, cross-purposes, exaggerations, unsubstantiated claims and, of course, the Germans as the fall guys. Even though they hardly mention it, all the authors (a former George W. Bush official, a former Secretary General of NATO and a former advisor to the John McCain and Sarah Palin presidential campaign) really talk about is the Cold War and how it never ended. The report is another example of how the backlash against calls for NATO to reconsider its nuclear posture as part of a wider [Strategic Concept review](#) is motivated by those who cannot get over the fact that the world has changed and that NATO needs to move on, if it is to remain relevant.

The plot line in the briefing can be summed up as follows. In October 2009, the new German government called for the removal of all US nuclear weapons from Germany. But the authors of the briefing are aggrieved that Germany wants to continue to claim protection from NATO's nuclear umbrella without sharing the risks associated with hosting nuclear weapons. In addition, they claim

that removing tactical nuclear weapons would destabilise the alliance: Turkey could feel compelled to develop its own nuclear weapons, while some NATO members in Central Europe would feel even more threatened by Russia. In a final plot twist, they argue that the German proposal could have some merit if it encouraged NATO and Russia to start talks on reducing their tactical nuclear arsenals.

Where to start with the rebuttal? First, the German government's decision is not a ploy to somehow "remain under the US nuclear umbrella while exporting to others the obligation of maintaining it", as the paper claims. Foreign Minister Westerwelle has repeatedly pointed out that NATO nuclear weapons have not contributed to German security for some time. And the report doesn't even try to make the case as to how 20 US nuclear bombs, deployed near the German border with Luxembourg, actually improve Germany's security.

In addition, Berlin wants to have the weapons removed from Europe to support the US administration's vision of a world free of nuclear weapons. The German government rightly argues that true transatlanticists these days support Washington's efforts to devalue nuclear weapons. This is not "self-serving" as the paper argued. Instead, by arguing that nuclear weapons should remain part and parcel of NATO's defence policies, the briefing paper's authors are turning Europeans against the United States and sowing the seeds of disunity in NATO.

Second, neither is the German government's position the result of a conspiracy led by the new Foreign Minister Westerwelle, who has consistently advocated nuclear disarmament and changes in NATO's nuclear posture, as have his predecessors. Instead, Chancellor Merkel's conservatives were the odd ones out. Until the elections they were the only party in Parliament to openly support Germany's continued involvement in nuclear sharing. The briefing also incorrectly claims that an earlier proposal advanced by then-Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier to have the weapons removed was rejected by Chancellor Merkel, whereas in fact she cautioned against unilateral moves but otherwise remained quiet. And the suggestion that the coalition government "agreed to the nuclear weapons pledge in order to offset anti-nuclear activists' concern about extending the life of Germany's nuclear power plants" is fanciful nonsense. The bottom line is that many prominent conservatives within the German coalition support the new policy, as long as it is pursued in a consensual manner. Only the German MoD is resisting, partly for reasons of bureaucratic inertia.

Third, nor are the Germans alone in demanding change. Parliaments in Belgium and Norway also advocate changes to NATO's Nuclear Posture and the Dutch government is also under pressure to end nuclear deployments. All three countries have indicated a willingness to engage on the issue. Indeed, when made aware of the fact that their nations are still hosting US nuclear weapons, [public](#)

[opinion](#) regularly supports such withdrawal. A 2007 [opinion poll](#) suggested that over 95% of the German population thinks their government should pursue the goal of reducing and/or eliminating nuclear weapons, and even in Turkey (which the briefing's authors highlight as a country placed under particular pressure as a result of "Germany's unilateral announcement"), almost 60% of the population would support a government request to remove the nuclear weapons from their country.

Fourth, and most significantly, the briefing regularly misrepresents the German Government position, which is clearly seeking withdrawal of tactical nuclear weapons from all of Europe and not just Germany, as Foreign Minister Westerwelle has made apparent on several occasions. Thus, there is no possibility that Germany would unilaterally and without agreement in NATO demand withdrawal. In any case, the claim that "newer NATO members in Central Europe, who see in the nuclear weapons a symbol of US commitment to defend them, would be left feeling vulnerable" hardly fits with the Polish Foreign Minister Radek Sikorski's recent call (in a [joint op-ed](#) with Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt) for their removal from Russia and Europe. Similarly, the muted Polish and Czech reaction to President Obama's decision to cancel the third BMD site in Europe suggests that the fears about adverse impact on Alliance security and solidarity are exaggerated. While Poland has sought Patriot missiles (and financial compensation), the sky has not exactly fallen-in, as many critics were predicting. We should expect the same low-key reaction to withdrawal of tactical nuclear weapons.

And what of the briefing's "better way"? This envisages either the Russians agreeing to tactical nuclear weapon parity (200 weapons apiece) or common percentage cuts, which effectively amount to unilateral reductions on the part of the Russians at a time when they face a huge conventional weapon disparity with the Alliance (although admittedly most of that conventional superiority is drawn from the United States rather than European NATO). It is so unlikely that the Russians would agree to these proposals that they are simply a recipe for stalemate and inaction. They also completely miss the point that President Obama wants to include tactical nuclear weapons in the next round of talks with the Russians, to begin this year.

It is hoped that such talks, when they occur, contain more enlightened thinking than in this briefing, which harks back to the Cold War simplicity of Russia as NATO's enemy. For example, the authors' suggest that if US tactical nuclear weapons are withdrawn, NATO would need to "compensate" with increased war plans and exercises, and more darkly, that it could lead to the de-coupling of US forces from Europe. But at a time when NATO forces, both European and American, are fighting a war side-by-side in Afghanistan, the idea that NATO nuclear forces are an essential bond between Europe and America is anachronistic and indeed dangerous because it distracts the Alliance from focusing on the real issues.

The main heavy-weight among the briefing's authors is Lord Robertson of Port Ellen, former UK Defence Secretary and the 10th Secretary General of NATO (1999-2003). What makes his position even more surprising is that he is also a member of the [Top Level Group of UK Parliamentarians for Multilateral Nuclear Disarmament and Non-Proliferation](#) established in September 2009. When the new German Government announced its policy one month later, [Des Browne](#), also a former British defence minister and Chair of this cross-party Top Level Group, was more sympathetic: "These moves bring out into the open a topic which for too long has been discussed by diplomats and technocrats only. [It] makes possible a genuine debate between allies about the role of nuclear weapons in Nato strategy, as set out in the strategic concept which guides alliance generals".

In contrast Lord Robertson and his co-authors denigrate and belittle the German position, and would seem to prefer that the nuclear debate, if it happens at all, should take place behind closed doors among the diplomats and technocrats within NATO. It is to be hoped that these days of secretive diplomacy are finally over and NATO itself deserves praise for initiating a [broader debate on its new Strategic Concept](#).

In one sense, however, the authors are correct. The demand for withdrawal is only going half the distance and is somewhat inconsequential. A mere removal of US tactical nuclear weapons does not answer the question: what is nuclear deterrence good for these days? An honest assessment would show that the only conceivable purpose of nuclear weapons after the Cold War is to deter an attack by another nuclear-armed state. And for that mission, US nuclear weapons in Europe and associated nuclear sharing arrangements are superfluous. If the German and other NATO European governments are serious about reforming NATO nuclear policies, then they need to carry the courage of their convictions and initiate a debate that includes the option of ultimately ending 'nuclear sharing' altogether.

The kind of reactive nonsense set out in the Centre for European Reform briefing should actually encourage NATO members to move down this road because it demonstrates that supporters of nuclear sharing remain stuck in the Cold War (even if like Basil Fawltly they don't talk about it).

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