

EGMONT PAPER 110

**BELGIUM SHOULD NOT CHANGE
STRATEGY ON HER CONTRIBUTION
TO NATO'S NUCLEAR ROLE SHARING**

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Table of Contents

Introduction / Executive summary	2
Many challenges in the European security environment	2
NATO's deterrence: aggression of any kind is not a rational option	3
NATO's "collective defence": one for all and all for one	4
Allies remain committed to arms control, non-proliferation and disarmament	5
NATO's Nuclear Planning Group (NPG)	6
NATO's Nuclear Forces	6
1. "La France ne dépend d'aucune autre puissance pour ce qui est de sa sécurité"	7
2. UK: "a nuclear deterrent to autonomously protect the UK"	8
3. US: the only Ally applying nuclear role sharing	8
NATO's nuclear role sharing: US nuclear weapon carried by European DCA	9
1. Nuclear role sharing: the US maintains full control and custody over its capabilities	10
2. Is storing American nuclear weapons on the European continent indispensable?	11
3. Nuclear role sharing: Allies are contributing with DCA role to the supreme guarantee	13
4. The current DCA-countries should hold on to the status quo	14
Recommendations for Belgian foreign security policy and defence	15
Notes	16

INTRODUCTION / EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In this policy brief, the author focusses on NATO's nuclear dimension. He highlights key challenges in the European security environment and explains essential characteristics of NATO's deterrence and collective defence, and its contribution to arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation.

He then briefly describes the contributions of NATO's nuclear states (and in particular France's) to collective security and defence. All Allies (except France) participate in the Nuclear Planning Group (NPG), NATO's senior body on nuclear matters.

NATO's nuclear role sharing is at the heart of this policy brief: US nuclear weapons carried by European dual-capable aircraft (DCA). The author argues emphatically as to why American nuclear weapons should be kept on European soil and the current DCA countries should maintain the status quo. Tangible recommendations follow on in terms of Belgian's foreign security policy and defence, many of which are also highly likely to apply to other DCA countries.

MANY CHALLENGES IN THE EUROPEAN SECURITY ENVIRONMENT

With the 2009 Treaty of Lisbon, the 27 European Union (EU) Member States¹ have the mutual assistance and solidarity clauses regulating some form of defence cooperation and their response to a threat. However, currently, the EU has neither the organisation, the political will nor the defence mind-set to ensure her own collective defence as national sovereignty and European politics are generally hampering European supranational military integration and preventing a true European defence cooperation. With 21 Member States also NATO Allies² and with Finland and Sweden as very close NATO partners, the Treaty indicates that the Alliance³ is for Europeans "the foundation of their collective defence and the forum for its implementation". **As Europeans we can or even should regret this, but the hard truth is that European security still needs American involvement in European security.**

Brexit is a major blow for European defence as it harms the idea of defence integration in the EU and makes it much harder for the remaining Member States to meet the EU's set defence objectives. The UK still possesses substantial armed forces, despite cuts in past years; the UK has been one of the two EU Member States with nuclear weapons and with a permanent seat in the UN Security Council. British authorities have officially declared that the UK will remain committed to European security and defence, but mainly or even exclusively through membership of NATO.

In the East, president Putin's **Russia** has ambitions to regain her status as a global superpower. Vladimir Putin's autocratic leadership style can cause Russia to act unpredictably. Especially European nations on the Eastern borders increasingly view Russia's continued use of "hybrid tactics" with considerable worry, even fear. For the first time since World War II, she has redrawn borders on the European continent with the use of military power as a result of her illegal annexation of Crimea (2014), although Moscow was one of the guarantors of Ukraine's territorial integrity (Budapest Memorandum, 1994) in return for the soviet nuclear weapons and systems that were stationed there. She has created a series of frozen conflicts on her western flank to prevent former allies from joining the EU or NATO.

Russia's covert development, production and deployment of the SSC-8/9M729 intermediate range cruise missile were a violation of the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. The weapon system unequivocally gives Russia a flexible, and hard to detect, platform for use against European cities with very little warning and is a significant asset should gamesmanship be involved. The Western call for a nuclear disarmament is not matched by the Kremlin. **For the West, both credible conventional and nuclear deterrence are increasingly important.**

NATO'S DETERRENCE: AGGRESSION OF ANY KIND IS NOT A RATIONAL OPTION

Deterrence aims to persuade a potential adversary that any gains from whatever (reckless or undesirable) action(s) it may be intending are significantly outweighed by the risks and costs; in other words, the outcome has a potentially much higher probability of being worse than the current situation. The credibility of defence is vitally important should deterrence itself fail.

The communiqués produced after each NATO summit of heads of state and government provide full details to the wider Allied public and third countries on the strategic role that nuclear weapons play in achieving deterrence. However, third parties have to rely on a degree of guesswork in dealing with NATO as it does not publicise (the majority of) its policies, decisions or potential actions. NATO deliberately ensures a high degree of uncertainty and **constructive strategic ambiguity** on the nature, scale, timing and scope of its possible responses to any challenges. A potential adversary's perception based on his speculative assessment of his opponent's willingness to use nuclear weapons is a key aspect for an effective nuclear deterrence.

In this light, but also for other political reasons, the policy of "neither confirm, nor deny" is generally respected by all Allies while NATO makes it crystal clear in its

declaratory policy that it has at its disposal a **credible nuclear deterrence**. The possible presence of US nuclear weapons in Belgium is considered to be the country's "worst-kept secret"⁴.

"As long as nuclear weapons exist, NATO will remain a nuclear alliance." This sentence has been used frequently in NATO's declaratory policy on the role of the nuclear weapon in deterrence and defence, has stood the test of time and never really been questioned. Indeed, the recent deteriorating European security environment suggests that this assertion will continue to be appropriate for at least the foreseeable future. Clearly, the world would become far less safe and much more insecure for the Allies were NATO not to possess nuclear weapons, especially as other global actors would continue to have them.

As a result of the dramatic events on the Crimean peninsula and Russia's hybrid threats, the Warsaw Summit (2016)⁵ communiqué of NATO's heads of state and government devoted considerable attention to the nuclear deterrent and significantly tripled the amount of space given to nuclear capability compared to the previous summit (Wales 2014). "NATO's nuclear deterrence posture (...) relies, in part, on United States' **nuclear weapons forward-deployed in Europe and on capabilities and infrastructure provided by Allies** concerned. These Allies will ensure that all components of NATO's nuclear deterrent remain **safe, secure, and effective**." Also, they expressed their resolve to inflict unacceptable damage on a potential adversary: the Alliance "has the capabilities and resolve to impose costs on an adversary that would be unacceptable and far outweigh the benefits that an adversary could hope to achieve".

NATO'S "COLLECTIVE DEFENCE": ONE FOR ALL AND ALL FOR ONE

Collective defence is the *raison d'être* of the Alliance: one for all and all for one, united and strong in the protection and defence of each other. The key driver for the unity of the Alliance is the need for stability, security and mutual defence. **The Alliance does not consider any country to be its adversary.**

The Washington Treaty (1949) lays the foundation for the Alliance as a whole. **"NATO is a defensive Alliance.** NATO's greatest responsibility is to protect and defend the territory and the populations of its Allies against attack. Any attack against one Ally will be regarded as an attack against all, as set out in Article 5 of the Washington Treaty."⁶ Art. 5⁷ can only be invoked if all Allies agree to do so consensually in the North Atlantic Council (NAC), the Alliance's supreme decision-making body with all 30 Allies represented in this political-civilian forum.

The many challenges in European security environment have led to a bolstering of deterrence and defence with an increased readiness and preparedness of national forces, and a forward military presence in the Baltic and Black Sea regions. The main drivers at the Brussels Summit (2018)⁸, that are also applicable to NATO's nuclear deterrent, were **increased political and military responsiveness**, heightened readiness and the improved reinforcement of NATO's forces. Furthermore, heads of state and government stated that "the fundamental purpose of NATO's nuclear capability is to preserve peace, prevent coercion, and deter aggression. **Given the deteriorating security environment in Europe, a credible and united nuclear Alliance is essential.**" Allies have clearly agreed consensually to a renewed "nuclear mindset"⁹ in the face of the threat posed by Russia and that NATO would remain a nuclear Alliance.

ALLIES REMAIN COMMITTED TO ARMS CONTROL, NON-PROLIFERATION AND DISARMAMENT

The Allies are committed¹⁰ to "engage actively to enhance international security, (...) by contributing actively to **arms control, non-proliferation and disarmament**; (...)." The Alliance seeks its security at the lowest possible level of forces and is resolved "to seek a safer world for all and to create the conditions for a **world without nuclear weapons** in accordance with the goals of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, in a way that promotes international stability, and is based on the principle of undiminished security for all." During the discussions in the NAC on the Strategic Concept, Belgium has strongly supported and has stood particularly firm on these wordings.

At the Warsaw Summit (2016)¹¹ NATO heads of state and government recognised that the conditions for achieving any further disarmament were unfavourable due to Russia's aggressive actions and military build-up. And at their Brussels Summit (2018)¹² they recalled again that "NATO has a long track record of doing its part on disarmament and non-proliferation. After the end of the Cold War, NATO dramatically reduced the number of nuclear weapons stationed in Europe and its reliance on nuclear weapons in NATO strategy. We regret that the conditions for achieving disarmament have not become more favourable since the 2016 Warsaw NATO Summit. **Allies remain collectively determined to uphold existing disarmament, arms control, and non-proliferation agreements and commitments.**"

NATO'S NUCLEAR PLANNING GROUP (NPG)

As, in the 1960s, the Allies were losing confidence in the US' commitment to European security and defence and also complained that the US had too much control and power over Europe's nuclear defence, Washington deployed intermediate range nuclear missiles on European soil to restore trust in the American commitment. At the same time, Washington proposed the creation of a MultiLateral Force (MLF) in order to convince Germany and France not to have their own nuclear forces. By 1965, the idea of such a European nuclear force under American control had been abandoned as this MLF had proven to be **military feasible but politically undesirable**. "The debates over the MLF showed the **preference of most of European countries for either American or national nuclear deterrence over European cooperation in the nuclear field.**"¹³ The following year, général de Gaulle withdrew France from NATO's military integrated structure with Belgium becoming the new host nation for the NATO headquarters. NATO's **Nuclear Planning Group (NPG)** was created as a consequence of the French withdrawal. It provided a forum for political consultation and discussion on nuclear issues which had become a growing concern, especially for the smaller Allies.

Since then, the NPG is NATO's senior body on nuclear matters and is the only formal body dealing with nuclear affairs. All Allies, except France, participate in the deliberations in the NPG. It meets at least annually in the format of 29 NATO Defence ministers and, as required, at the level of permanent representatives (ambassadors). It is important to realise that "**all NATO nuclear decision-making is done at the political level**, through the NPG. NATO does not delegate any decision about the use or employment of nuclear capabilities to military commanders. **Absolutely no delegation to commanders in the field.**"¹⁴

NATO'S NUCLEAR FORCES

Three of the five "nuclear-weapons states" of the Non-Proliferation Treaty¹⁵ (NPT, 1967) are NATO Allies: France, the UK and the US.

In the 2010 Strategic Concept the Allies agree that the "supreme guarantee of the security of the Allies is provided by the strategic nuclear forces of the Alliance, particularly those of the **United States; the independent strategic nuclear forces of the United Kingdom and France**, which have a deterrent role of their own, contribute to the overall deterrence and security of the Allies."¹⁶ "These Allies' separate centres of decision-making contribute to deterrence by complicating the calculations of potential adversaries."¹⁷

In line with the 2010 Strategic Concept NATO leaders later encouraged¹⁸ the **“broadest possible participation of Allies concerned in their agreed nuclear burden-sharing arrangements”** so that as many Allies as politically and militarily possible would share a role or responsibility in support of the nuclear mission of the Alliance. In the 2010 Strategic Concept these arrangements were called “peacetime basing of nuclear forces, and command, control and consultation arrangements”.

1. **“La France ne dépend d’aucune autre puissance pour ce qui est de sa sécurité”**

France relies on her nuclear deterrence as the ultimate guarantor of her national security and independence against any form of aggression¹⁹. She applies the three principles of ‘permanence, credibility and strictly sufficient’ to her nuclear deterrence (“la force de frappe”).

In 2009, France re-joined NATO’s integrated military structure with two particular objectives in mind: “increasing French presence and influence in the Alliance, and facilitating the strengthening of a “Europe of defence””. There were a number of fundamental conditions underpinning her decision including “the retention of its nuclear independence, France thus decided not to join the NPG”²⁰. **France continues to retain the political position on multilateral consultation she has held since the 1960s.**

French president Macron put forward new proposals²¹ at the beginning of 2020. At the same time, he reiterated that nuclear deterrence remains a corner stone of French security; he reconfirmed that France would continue not to participate in the nuclear planning mechanisms of the Alliance and would never do so as he does **“not want to dilute French nuclear forces in NATO”**. However, he remains committed to France continuing to promote the nuclear culture of the Alliance at the political level. Turning to purely European matters, as France will be the only EU Member State with a nuclear capability post-Brexit, Macron has expressed a hope that Europeans will engage in dialogue on **a possible role for French nuclear deterrence in the collective security of Europe**. He sees moving in this direction as a natural expression of solidarity by France in bolstering her commitment to European security and defence although Macron is unwilling to give up French independent national decision making. In the first place, he would like to see strategic dialogue with the other four EU countries²² that can and remain committed to delivering NATO’s nuclear weapons through nuclear role sharing. Macron’s proposals were met with a distinct lack of enthusiasm at the level of the EU and NATO.

France has never given any internal consideration to stationing its nuclear-armed Rafale outside French territory or deploying them on the French aircraft carrier. It therefore looks doubtful that France would want to replace NATO’s nuclear sharing

arrangement with a European version of “extended nuclear deterrence”. For the foreseeable future, nuclear role sharing within NATO remains the only realistic and viable option for Europe’s security and defence.

2. UK: “a nuclear deterrent to autonomously protect the UK”

London maintains a nuclear deterrent to protect the UK and, since 1969, has operated “an independent deterrent”²³ with at least one of four nuclear-armed submarines being on patrol at any one time: the “continuous at sea deterrence” (CASD). The UK maintains sovereign and total control when it comes to the use of her nuclear assets and all associated decision-making.

The UK is an actively participating Ally in the NPG and assigns all its nuclear weapons to the defence of NATO.

3. US: the only Ally applying nuclear role sharing

Even as early in the 1960s, US has given solid assurance of solidarity indicating “that the United States will continue to make available for the Alliance nuclear weapons adequate in number and kind to meet the needs of NATO defence. The US has a comprehensive programme for supplying nuclear weapons or for supporting its own and other countries’ forces earmarked for SACEUR²⁴ [...]”²⁵.

The US has at his disposal of a full ‘nuclear triad’ with a mix of air-, ground- and sea-based nuclear systems, covering strategic and sub-strategic²⁶ nuclear weapons.

Of the three NATO Allies that are nuclear-weapons states, only the US applies a **nuclear role sharing**, which will be further elaborated on later in this policy brief. Furthermore, it is only the US that has the potential to draw on the broad and full spectrum of military power.

Notwithstanding that (former) president Trump regularly questioned the value of the NATO Alliance to the US and placed conditions on providing the American hard security assurance, it is worth noting that there is currently no credible alternative to the way in which Europe can receive strong security guarantees other than through the NATO framework.

NATO'S NUCLEAR ROLE SHARING: US NUCLEAR WEAPON CARRIED BY EUROPEAN DCA

Nuclear role sharing represents **the only common nuclear deterrent capability within the Alliance**. Nuclear weapons of the B61-family²⁷ are forward deployed on European soil by the United States and the US maintains absolute control and custody. Infrastructure is provided by the NPG Allies and in the spirit of solidarity Belgium, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands, as well as Greece²⁸ and Turkey²⁹ provide **dual-capable aircraft (DCA)** to the Alliance's nuclear deterrence mission. These fighter aircraft can execute conventional air operations, however, at the same time they are available for nuclear roles at various levels of readiness, and are equipped to carry also nuclear bombs in a conflict. Pilots and personnel are trained accordingly. The DCA role has the effect of (re)assuring European nations that the US continues to extend its nuclear deterrence through NATO: both are mutually self-reinforcing. **Nuclear role sharing nurtures transatlantic burden and risk sharing**. Some other Allies provide military support for the DCA strike mission with conventional forces and capabilities.

The arrangement has evolved over time and largely as a means of reassuring European Allies on the US' nuclear commitment to them. Accordingly, some European Allies have purposefully not developed their own nuclear capabilities and joined the **NPT** as non-nuclear weapon states, even in times when the USSR and the Warsaw Pact threatened them existentially with their considerable military advantage in the 1960s and later. Over the years, nuclear sharing has been considered as the **ultimate proof of the transatlantic bond**. Today, there is no genuine political will for European Allies (except in France and the UK) to develop and/or possess nuclear weapons; for some Allies even being able to agree to nuclear sharing arrangements is less than straightforward and they certainly do not wish to engage in this any more fully than they already do today.

Nuclear role sharing is also viewed as **a political instrument in the hands of the 30 NATO Allies** who can visibly escalate warnings to deter any potential adversary thinking of acting foolishly. To achieve this, they demonstrate their collective willingness by having **a mix of flexible (de-)escalatory options** available which includes Allies being able to further raise readiness levels, to move aircraft and/or weapons closer to the disputed area or to the potential adversary, and ultimately to launch a strike mission. One obvious and unique advantage for the gravity bomb B61 is that it can ultimately be recalled right up to the moment it is due to be released. Clearly NATO's nuclear deterrent is a military instrument to support the political decision-making of the 30 Allies. There is no consensus to substantially change NATO's nuclear posture at the present time.

The destructive **impact of a B61 gravity bomb** delivered by a fighter aircraft is much less than that of a strategic missile. However, this limitation can be used to good advantage as it provides more options than otherwise would be the case in being able to counter Russian limited-use tactics (even though the Alliance refuses to engage in tit-for-tat tactics).

Current warfare operating procedures are likely to prioritise the use of stand-off weapons above gravity bombs. Consideration could therefore be given for relying entirely on the powerful and modern weapons in the US' vast nuclear arsenal³⁰ in fulfilling the role of "the supreme guarantee of the security of the Allies". Of course, the quantity and the quality of the US' nuclear arsenal is more than sufficient to ensure deterrence and defence. But, again, there is no consensus among Allies to change the present nuclear sharing *modus operandi* and arrangements. Over-reliance on the US' vast nuclear territorial arsenal would erase the Allies' "broadest participation in nuclear burden sharing" as well as their interest and involvement in nuclear consultations: transatlantic collective security would be diluted and European Allies would increasingly question American commitment to European security; some European Allies could even start looking for undesirable remedies. Furthermore, the European Allies will not accept a sole and direct dependence on the US' vast nuclear arsenal without having access to a collective (albeit smaller) weapon on European soil or a political say in the decision-making process which should be multilateral; one should not forget that the use of such nuclear weapons would be on the European continent. NATO's nuclear sharing at least provides European Allies with a decision-making capability in the worst case. Furthermore, while Europe is not ready or capable of assuring her own deterrence and defence, there would be a very high risk of decoupling European and American security as the US would be far less critically involved in European security: the European 'supreme layer' would be non-existent and European Allies could be more easily exposed to coercion. One should recall that, historically, the US has created the mechanism of nuclear burden sharing with American nuclear weapons on European soil in order to meet European security concerns and to prevent nuclear proliferation on the European continent: these objectives have not changed.

It is clear that the **political benefits of nuclear role sharing in the NATO framework outweigh the military limitations.**

1. Nuclear role sharing: the US maintains full control and custody over its capabilities

The **US maintains full control and custody over its nuclear capabilities** whether on US territory or European soil. In the latter case, the US has "munition support squadrons"³¹ geographically co-located on NATO air bases where they operate together with an air wing of the host nation. These squadrons are under USEUCOM³²'s

command and control, who as SACEUR (dual-hatting) has the delegated authority to task directly NATO's delivery air bases; in other words, if the Alliance decides collectively on (de-)escalatory measures, one person commands and controls all the units that could be tasked for these most sensitive missions. This approach satisfies the NPT since the nuclear weapons remain wholly under American custody and control. The **survivability and operational readiness** of units required to undertake a strike mission are enhanced by storing the special weapons as close as possible to the strike aircraft, avoiding any reduction in operational readiness and negative impact on the deterrence and defence role of the capabilities.

2. Is storing American nuclear weapons on the European continent indispensable?

Against the general backdrop of the current security environment and that nuclear weapons will not vanish from the face of the earth in the foreseeable future, there are a number of additional critical concerns that undeniably and fundamentally **support the retention of American nuclear weapons on the European continent**:

- Sub-strategic nuclear deterrence continues to have a **valid role in the prevention of war** and could eventually lend its weight to international negotiations aiming at **multilateral nuclear arms control**; only through such negotiations can a verifiable and credible nuclear disarmament programme be envisaged. Unilateral initiatives in the past have not led to (global) nuclear disarmament and any such action today would appear at best naïve. Without the US B61 and European DCA, the Alliance and the majority of European Allies would have very little³³ to offer in any negotiations on arms control and/or disarmament, particularly in recognising that Russia has thousands of tactical nuclear weapons and is unwilling to give these up. **Giving away bargaining chips before the discussion begins diminishes the chances for success**;
- Unilateral removal of NATO's weapons will inherently entail the **risk of exposure to coercion** for European countries; they would face a much higher degree of uncertainty, and security on the European continent would consequently suffer at times when Europe has no European alternative at her disposal;
- European Allies often feel the need for reassurance from the US that it views their security and survival as seriously as they do themselves. Their apprehension rests on the **credibility of the security commitments for extended deterrence** which only works if all domains of the military power are covered, including the nuclear domain. By extending its conventional and nuclear deterrence, the US demonstrates in a credible and convincing way that the security of all the Allies is as crucial and important to it as its own national security interests. **NATO's current nuclear role sharing is extremely important as it goes beyond pure perception**

and delivers the necessary reassurances in very concrete terms due to the fact that American nuclear weapons are stationed on European soil and are thus clearly available to the Alliance. It is noteworthy that NATO's nuclear sharing is often described as 5% to deter the Russians and 95% to reassure the European Allies;

- NATO's nuclear role sharing is **the only collective option on European soil** to guarantee European security. France eventually sharing its "force de frappe" in a EU framework will not be a viable option for the foreseeable future for a number of reasons, inter alia it will be extremely hard and very time consuming to reconcile national positions of the EU Member States on the matter of nuclear weapons;
- It is highly unlikely that the US would accept an arrangement in being **the only Ally to provide a nuclear shield for Europe's security and defence without support** or cooperation of other Allies;
- The European Allies are unlikely to **accept dependence on the US' nuclear arsenal solely on American soil without having a political say** given that they currently have it in NATO's multilateral decision-making process, which is regularly exercised. Currently, all European Allies sit at the NATO table and decide consensually on (de)-escalatory options;
- Removing American nuclear weapons from Europe would not only of itself psychologically and overtly **weaken deterrence in global, political terms** but it would also be an irretrievable step in fundamentally changing the European security architecture such that future infrastructure could be lacking and NATO air bases would not be sufficiently ready or equipped to execute a nuclear strike mission. Another consequence is that the Alliance would almost certainly find it politically much harder to reach unity and consensus in a time of crisis when deciding on how to achieve the intercontinental transfer of the nuclear weapons to Europe, even assuming that European Allies were still militarily ready to participate in a nuclear strike mission and that the necessary infrastructure was still in place (etc.).

In short, **the removal of American nuclear weapons from the European continent would severely restrict the deterrence and defence options for the European Allies. It would undoubtedly end nuclear role sharing and bring into question the US' supreme guarantee** as it exists today. The only winning party in such a scenario, apart from any potential adversary, would be the US that would have to invest less in European security. **There is a real risk of decoupling European from American security.**

In addition, there would be **major global consequences**. As a consequence of European circumstances, the US' allies and partners that currently rely on the

American nuclear umbrella may well review their dependence on it and possibly consider developing their own national nuclear armament programmes. This in turn would cause ramifications elsewhere in the world; for example, by leading nations in and around the Pacific to develop their own nuclear weapons with the further consequence of new and dangerous arms races. What happens in Europe, does not remain without consequences outside Europe.

3. Nuclear role sharing: Allies are contributing with DCA role to the supreme guarantee

Non-nuclear European Allies with a DCA role participate in the planning and the execution of the Alliance's nuclear mission. Other non-nuclear European Allies are encouraged to (also) contribute to the nuclear sharing role through SNOWCAT. All these Allies view this as their way of contributing to the Alliance's supreme guarantee.

While European Allies are able to communicate on their national contributions to the DCA role, Allies will always '**neither confirm nor deny**' when it comes to the presence (or not) of any nuclear weapons on their territory as these are under American custody.

In NATO's early years, nuclear deterrence was needed to compensate for the imbalance in the number of conventional forces compared to the Warsaw Pact. Coincidentally, many DCA Allies (with Belgium a textbook example) are among the poorest performing Allies on the burden sharing scale and, in a way, they partly compensate for their conventional underperformance through their contributions to NATO's nuclear role sharing. Without these contributions they would have to invest considerably (very much) more in their conventional capabilities to achieve even a similar level of deterrence.

DCA Allies have the capabilities, the know-how and the expertise to conduct nuclear strike missions. They must have the best capabilities at their disposal including combat ready pilots at the highest operational readiness, the best, or most modern, fighter aircraft and equipment; trained personnel and procedures that have been exercised frequently and evaluated against the highest NATO standards and requirements. It is therefore quite clear that the air forces of these countries are able to conduct other defensive and offensive air operations for NATO and/or the EU with the same airframes and pilots. **Politically, this provides DCA Allies with many further military options when it comes to participating in conventional air operations; this offers further opportunities at the national political level.**

DCA Allies' commitment is important in the continuous debate on **risk and burden sharing** among the 30 Allies. For smaller nations, like Belgium and the Netherlands, operating DCA undoubtedly gains them respect among the Allies, particularly the US,

but also France and the UK. Some argue that DCA nations “are punching above their weight” as they have a seat at the “big boy table”³⁴. This is certainly reflected in the **consequent influence they hold at the political level of the Alliance.**

Finally, nothing stands in the way of European Allies continuing with a DCA role while politically also calling for arms control and disarmament. **The policy of pursuing such a dual track approach accordingly remains fully credible and valid** even though today there is little hope for realistic and verifiable arms control, non-proliferation and disarmament. Their calls would be ignored were it not for their DCA responsibilities. In recent months, the leadership of the Germany centre-left party SPD has reignited the debate on the storing of US nuclear weapons on German soil³⁵. However, the German MFA, Heiko Maas (also SPD), argued in the debate that “unilateral steps that undermine trust will not bring us any closer to the goal of a nuclear weapons-free world” and that if such steps were taken “Germany would no longer be sitting at the table” in terms of anything of importance associated with disarmament processes. This dual track approach is highly relevant politically for (not only) Belgium.

4. The current DCA-countries should hold on to the status quo

Controversial discussions such as those in Germany may cause other Allies, e.g. the Netherlands, Belgium or Italy to similarly raise such issues and follow a German decision³⁶. Also, a parliamentary debate³⁷ was held in Belgium on a resolution demanding both the removal of US nuclear weapons stationed in Belgium and joining the UN treaty on the prohibition of nuclear weapons (TPNW); it was only narrowly³⁸ rejected early this year.

DCA locations are a legacy of where nuclear weapons were stationed during the Cold War. They needed to be at an acceptable distance from, but close enough to, the borders of the Warsaw Pact countries in order to deter them from attacking NATO territory. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the implosion of the USSR, NATO's borders have shifted eastwards as a result of NATO enlargement. The co-location of the aircraft and weapons is of paramount importance to avoid any reduction in operational readiness and negative impact on the deterrence and defence role of the capabilities. Today, Poland with strong support from the Baltic states argues that American nuclear weapons should be stationed closer to NATO's eastern border; that is, on its territory. However, most Allies would view this as a contravention of the **NATO Russia Founding Act and, in particular, its “three no’s”**³⁹; they want to ‘hold the higher morale ground’ in continuing to respect the Act, even though Russia clearly stopped doing so from the time of the Ukraine crisis.

However, eastern Allies do not accept that their security should depend on an Act which was drawn up at a time when they were not yet members of NATO. Eastern

Allies “might wish to take the role (...) in nuclear sharing” in wanting “to change NATO’s nuclear posture in Europe in order to adjust it to the challenge of dual-capable land-based missile system deployed by Russia, that was the reason for the termination of the INF Treaty. This might lead to deepening intra-European and US-European rifts and decrease the cohesion of NATO.”⁴⁰ In May 2020, the US ambassador in Warsaw even suggested relocating US nuclear weapons from Germany to Poland “on NATO’s eastern flank”. Such a move would undoubtedly be regarded by Russia as extremely provocative and would also make the B61 bombs more vulnerable.

If the US and the eastern Allies would opt for an arrangement whereby the US cooperates bilaterally with central and eastern European beneficiaries⁴¹, just like the European Deterrence Initiative (EDI)⁴², would bring a **worst case or nightmare scenario** closer to reality. Whilst such a bilateral approach for nuclear sharing would ensure the continuation of the supreme guarantee for the applicable nations, it would also bring to an end NATO’s collective political control over the nuclear weapons on European soil. In addition, it is even likely that NATO would not be able to overcome such a major upheaval at a time when Europe lacks any equivalent alternative. Admittedly, the risk for such a scenario has conceivably reduced with the incoming Biden Administration; however, this reduction may well not last given the perceived growing instability in American foreign policy. Current DCA countries should hold on to the status-quo that is providing predictability and stability to the European security environment. As long as nuclear weapons exist, NATO will remain a nuclear alliance.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BELGIAN FOREIGN SECURITY POLICY AND DEFENCE

Since the author inherently has a much better understanding of Belgian affairs, his recommendations are intrinsically focused on Belgian foreign security policy and defence. That said, many of his recommendations are likely to also pertain to other DCA countries.

Europeans may (rather: should) regret this, but today there is no alternative to NATO’s nuclear role sharing at hand in an exclusively European context. As long as nuclear weapons exist, NATO will remain a nuclear alliance. Nuclear role sharing in the NATO framework is the only available option for Europe’s and Belgium’s security and defence. There is no room for unilateral decisions on our DCA role and on our policy regarding the stationing of American nuclear weapons on European soil. Such decisions would have serious and undesirable strategic ramifications in Europe and

globally. Nuclear role sharing remains of vital importance to Belgium's multilateral cooperation which is a corner stone of our foreign security policy.

Belgium's DCA role allows her to pursue in a credible manner a double track policy of coupling deterrence and defence with calls for global nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament. Nuclear sharing in the NATO framework underpins Belgium's support for NATO's strategic objective of security at the lowest possible level of forces. Indeed, Belgium should continue to pursue a safer world for all and continue to create the conditions for a world without nuclear weapons.

Belgium should significantly increase her efforts in the conventional domain and meet all the capability requirements that the other Allies expect of her. Even if this were to be done with an immediate and lasting sense of urgency, this nonetheless represents a long-term endeavour which is likely to be achieved within 10 years at best, or perhaps more realistically even 20 years.

On the basis of the evidence put forward in this paper, it is clear that Belgium unilaterally is neither in a position to reconsider her DCA role nor decide to remove the ability to station American nuclear weapons on her territory. Decisions of this kind would denigrate her international standing and erode her traditional role on arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation. Thus, and in taking into account the prevailing European and global security environment, maintaining the status-quo is the only recommendation that can be made and it should be viewed as a lasting option for the time being as there is simply no alternative for NATO's nuclear role sharing.

NOTES

- ¹ Member State(s) indicate member states of the European Union (EU).
- ² Allies indicate member states of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO).
- ³ The Alliance indicates the group of Allies, including the organisation of NATO.
- ⁴ "Belgium debates phase-out of US nuclear weapons on its soil"
<https://www.euractiv.com/section/defence-and-security/news/belgium-debates-phase-out-of-us-nuclear-weapons-on-its-soil/>
- ⁵ Warsaw Summit Communiqué – Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Warsaw 8-9 July 2016
https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_133169.htm
- ⁶ Brussels Summit Declaration Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Brussels 11-12 July 2018
https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_156624.htm
- ⁷ "The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all and consequently they agree that, if such an armed attack occurs, each of them, in exercise of the right of individual or collective self-defence recognised by Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties,

such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area. (...)"

⁸ Brussels Summit Declaration, o.c.

⁹ Karl-Heinz Kamp: "NATO's coming existential challenge"
<http://www.ndc.nato.int/news/news.php?icode=1301>

¹⁰ Active Engagement, Modern Defence – Strategic Concept for the Defence and Security of the Members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation adopted by Heads of State and Government in Lisbon, 2010

https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_68580.htm

¹¹ Warsaw Summit Communiqué, o.c.

¹² Brussels Summit Declaration, o.c.

¹³ https://www.cvce.eu/content/publication/1999/1/1/937a5818-7fea-47da-944e-11114da4e0a3/publishable_en.pdf

¹⁴ "NATO nuclear policy in a post-INF world", speech by NATO deputy secretary general Rose Gottemoeller at the University of Oslo, 9 September 2019.

https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_168602.htm

¹⁵ Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) – Text of the Treaty

<https://www.un.org/disarmament/wmd/nuclear/npt/text>

¹⁶ Active Engagement, Modern Defence – Strategic Concept, o.c.

¹⁷ Warsaw Summit Communiqué, o.c.

¹⁸ Warsaw Summit Communiqué, o.c.

¹⁹ « La France ne dépend d'aucune autre puissance pour ce qui est de sa sécurité. »

<https://www.defense.gouv.fr/actualites/articles/la-dissuasion-nucleaire>

²⁰ Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires Etrangères – France in NATO, Permanent Representation of France to NATO – The return of France to NATO's integrated military structures

<https://otan.delegfrance.org/France-and-NATO-presentation-1217>

²¹ "Dissuasion nucléaire: Emmanuel Macron tend la main à ses partenaires européens"

<https://www.latribune.fr/entreprises-finance/industrie/aeronautique-defense/dissuasion-nucleaire-les-quatre-convictions-d-emmanuel-macron-839281.html>

https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2020/02/11/dissuasion-nucleaire-le-discours-de-macron-embarrasse-bruxelles_6029191_3210.html

²² The « Fondation de la recherche stratégique » (FRS) believes that about 140 to 150 nuclear « gravity » bombs B61 are kept in Germany (Büchel), the Netherlands (Volkel), Belgium (Kleine Brogel), Italy (Aviano and Ghedi Torre) and Turkey (Incirlik). None of those countries will confirm or deny their role. President Macron is looking at Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands and Italy.

Hans M. Kristensen & Matt Korda (2019) Tactical nuclear weapons, 2019, Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, 75:5, 252-261, DOI: 10.1080/00963402.2019.1654273

²³ Defence Nuclear Organisation – Policy paper – The UK's nuclear deterrent – Updated 19 February 2018

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-nuclear-deterrence-factsheet/uk-nuclear-deterrence-what-you-need-to-know>

²⁴ Supreme Allied Commander Europe (in the SHAPE headquarters in Mons, Belgium) has always been an American general since NATO's inception. The first SACEUR was general Eisenhower (currently: general Tod D. Wolters). The general leads Allied Command Operations (ACO).

²⁵ Nuclear Planning Group – 50th Anniversary of the First Meeting of the NPG

https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/3/pdf/200305-50Years_NPG.pdf

²⁶ *NATO definitions:*

Strategic nuclear weapons are designed to engage adversaries in geographically remote regions (over 5500 km) in achieving the aims of any strategic mission. These weapons can be used in undertaking operational missions, but only in exceptional circumstances.

The term "sub-strategic nuclear forces/weapons" refers primarily to air-delivered weapons for NATO's dual-capable aircraft (DCA) and to a small number of United Kingdom Trident

warheads used in a sub-strategic role.

<https://www.nato.int/docu/glossary/eng-nuclear/eng-app3.pdf>

- ²⁷ B61-12 is the latest variant of the B61 family of air-launched nuclear gravity bombs and carries a low-yield nuclear warhead to destroy military targets with minimum collateral damage as it has an estimated accuracy of approximately 30m; its warhead has four yield options reaching from 0,3 up to 50kt.
Source: <https://www.airforce-technology.com/projects/b61-12-nuclear-bomb/>
- ²⁸ “The United States removed the last of its nuclear weapons from Greece in spring 2001, according to a study released yesterday by the Natural Resources Defense Council. U.S. President Bill Clinton authorized the removal of 20 bombs in late 2000, the Associated Press reported. The removal makes Greece the first NATO member from which U.S. nuclear weapons have been completely withdrawn, the NRDC study says. The U.S. Defense Department has not publicly confirmed the move, AP reported.”
<https://www.nti.org/gsn/article/us-has-removed-all-nukes-from-greece-study-says/>
- ²⁹ In contrast to the other four NATO “nuclear delivery states (Belgium, Germany, Italy, The Netherlands), Turkey no longer appears to have an active nuclear weapons delivery mission using bombers and its NC3 system is likely dormant. Yet, in a hypothetical TNW scenario, the Turkish Air Force would manage the Incirlik base and air traffic for the US air wing, and would probably provide the strike package with fighter escort.”
<https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-special-reports/turkey-and-nuclear-command-control-and-communications/>
- ³⁰ Active Engagement, Modern Defence – Strategic Concept, o.c., paragraph 18
- ³¹ The mission of these squadrons is to “receiving, storing, maintenance and maintaining custody and control of NATO assigned special USAFE (US Air Force in Europe) munitions until further notice. When directed [they] provide the special munitions to the NATO strike wing commander. Therefore [their] mission is one of the most critical within their theatre of operations.”
<https://www.spangdahlem.af.mil/About-Us/Fact-Sheets/Display/Article/293616/52nd-munitions-maintenance-group/>
- ³² Currently, US European Command is headquartered in Stuttgart, Germany. The commander of USEUCOM is the American general Tod D. Wolters, who is also SACEUR.
- ³³ In the 1980s, Belgium’s participation in the GLCM program led to the deployment of American cruise missiles on the air base of Florennes. Belgium (and Germany with Pershing II) has stood fast and did deploy the systems. This did away with an entire class of weapons and has led to the INF Treaty.
- ³⁴ US nuclear weapons give Belgium a seat at ‘big boy table,’ top military official says, 16 July 2019
<https://www.brusselstimes.com/belgium/60781/us-nuclear-weapons-give-belgium-a-seat-at-big-boy-table-top-military-official-says/>
- ³⁵ SPD leadership reignites German debate on US nuclear weapons, 06 May 2020
<https://www.euractiv.com/section/defence-and-security/news/us-nuclear-weapons-german-social-democrats-play-down-recent-statement-but-demand-a-debate/>
- ³⁶ (Nuclear) Sharing is caring: an introduction – European Views on NATO Nuclear Deterrence and the German Nuclear Sharing Debate
<https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/nuclear-sharing-caring-introduction>
- ³⁷ Belgium debates phase-out of US nuclear weapons on its soil, 17 January 2020
<https://www.euractiv.com/section/defence-and-security/news/belgium-debates-phase-out-of-us-nuclear-weapons-on-its-soil/>
- ³⁸ 66 parliamentarians voted in favour (francophone and Flemish socialists (PS, SP-A) and greens (Ecolo, Groen), francophone christian-democrats cdH, the former communist and nowadays the ‘workers party’ PVDA and the francophone party DéFi). 74 members of parliament rejected the resolution (the Flemish nationalist N-VA and christian-democrats CD&V and far-right Vlaams Belang, together with the francophone and Flemish liberal parties (MR, Open-VLD)).
- ³⁹ In 1997, Russia and NATO established a formal relationship with the NATO Russia Founding

Act. Key in this Act is the commitment by the NATO Allies 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 aspects of NATO’s nuclear posture or nuclear policy – and do not foresee any future need to do so. (...) in the current and foreseeable security environment, NATO plans to carry out its collective defence and other missions by ensuring the necessary interoperability, integration and capability for reinforcement rather than by additional permanent stationing of substantial combat forces. Accordingly, the Alliance will have to rely on adequate infrastructure to allow for reinforcement if necessary.”

⁴⁰ (Nuclear) Sharing is caring: an introduction – European Views on NATO Nuclear Deterrence and the German Nuclear Sharing Debate

<https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/nuclear-sharing-caring-introduction>

⁴¹ Namely Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Romania

EDI enables the United States to enhance the U.S. deterrence posture, increase the readiness and responsiveness of U.S. forces in Europe, support the collective defense and security of NATO allies, and bolster the security and capacity of U.S. allies and partners. The FY 2020 EDI funding supports the presence of additional rotational U.S. forces in Europe.

<https://www.eucom.mil/doc/39550/fy-2020-european-deterrence-initiative-edi-fact-sheet>

⁴² European Deterrence Initiative – Department of Defense Budget Fiscal Year (FY) 2020, Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller), March 2019

https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/fy2020/fy2020_EDI_JBook.pdf

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