



## PERSPECTIVES

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# US Nuclear Weapons Deployment in Turkey

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BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,217, July 4, 2019

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The American nuclear weapons that remain on Turkish soil – an anachronistic reference to the Cold War – are tactical only. They nevertheless raise questions, not only because of the deterioration in relations between Washington and Ankara, but because of security and safety risks at the Turkish base where the weapons are stored – close to the Syrian border.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was established between North America and ten Western European countries to protect the member states from Soviet aggression. Over the years, more countries have joined NATO – including Turkey, which joined in 1952.

NATO developed a nuclear doctrine aimed at deterring the Soviet Union from using nuclear weapons against the West. In this context, a “Nuclear Sharing” program was agreed upon. This program entailed the deployment and storage of American nuclear weapons in five NATO member states: Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy, and Turkey.

The main advantage of this program to the US was the shortening of the distance between its nuclear weapons and the Soviet Union, which would likely increase the probability of the US’s survival in the event of a large-scale Soviet attack. It is also reasonable to assume that from an American point of view, Western European countries’ participation in nuclear deterrence would strengthen the West’s position vis-à-vis the Warsaw Pact.

The number of US nuclear bombs currently stored in Europe under NATO auspices is estimated at between 160 and 240, of which 50 to 90 are stored in Turkey. No American nuclear weapons were stored in Britain and France, though they are members of NATO, because both countries have their own nuclear arsenals.

The American nuclear weapons currently stored in Europe and Turkey are B61 bombs. Their explosive yield can be adjusted between 0.3 and 340 kilotons, so they can be used both tactically and strategically. However, according to NATO's current deterrent strategy, they are intended only for tactical use. In contrast to past years, when some American nuclear weapons in Europe were installed as warheads on ballistic missiles, the B61 bombs are intended to be carried only by aircraft.

The responsibility for maintenance and guarding of US nuclear bombs stored in Europe during peacetime rests with the US Air Force, and the Permissive Action Link codes are under American control. In an emergency or upon the outbreak of war, this arsenal is to be installed on aircraft of the countries in which it is stored, but it will remain under the command and control of the US Air Force in coordination with NATO.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the end of the Cold War, the question of NATO's continued relevance was raised. It was decided that NATO forces would continue to operate in various arenas around the world. This came into play in 1991, in the war against Iraq to liberate Kuwait, and again in 1999, when NATO entered the war in Yugoslavia to put an end to the civil war in Kosovo. The US also received backing from NATO in Afghanistan when war broke out there in 2001. In 2003, US-led NATO forces invaded Iraq to overthrow the regime of Saddam Hussein. More recently, Russia's use of force toward neighboring Georgia and Ukraine has gotten NATO's attention.

There is now considerable tension between the US and Russia, and even a kind of arms race. This is reflected, *inter alia*, in the proliferation of military incidents between Russian and Western military forces. In recent years, NATO has closely monitored developments in the Middle East in light of the threat of ballistic missiles and the fear of Iran's development of nuclear weapons.

In response to the weakening of the nuclear threat from Russia at the end of the Cold War, the US drastically reduced the number of nuclear bombs it stockpiles on the European continent, but it has not removed them all. This is ostensibly to continue to maintain NATO's deterrent capability, and also serves as a political signal of America's commitment to the security of its allies. But as time passes, the question of the necessity of American nuclear weapons in Europe is increasingly raised, particularly with regard to Turkey.

The original justification for the placement of American nuclear bombs on European soil is now obsolete. Moreover, these weapons are suitable for carrying only by European fighter jets, rather than as nuclear warheads installed on ballistic missiles. Fighter craft (with the exception of stealth jets) are quite vulnerable and can be intercepted more easily.

As for the positions of the European countries holding the American weapons, the Dutch parliament, as well as members of the coalition currently ruling Germany, have expressed doubts about the need to maintain the “Nuclear Sharing” program. In Germany, despite these concerns, voices have recently been heard calling for an independent German development of nuclear weapons. This is in response to Russia’s aggressive policy of recent years, as well as the February 2007 announcement by the US and Russia that they are suspending the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty signed in 1987.

As for the Turkey deployment, the matter of continuing to store nuclear bombs at the Incirlik American Air Force Base has raised concern. In the background is the tension between Trump and the tyrannical Erdoğan. Particularly worrisome is Turkey’s recent request to purchase advanced S-400 air defense batteries from Russia – a remarkable request, as Turkey participates in the production of F-35 stealth aircraft and wants to purchase 100 F-35s from the US. The US is understandably concerned that technical details about the F-35 will be diverted by Ankara to Moscow.

In 2010, the Turkish air force had little to do with the nuclear bombs stored at Incirlik. Only a small number of its F-16s were suitable to carry the bombs, and its participation in NATO air exercises was minimal.

But the location of the Incirlik base is troubling. It is located in southern Turkey, near Adana on the Mediterranean coast, only 110 kilometers from the Syrian border. The internal situation in Syria, which is still unstable, could worsen the security and safety risks of storing the bombs there. Consider, for example, what happened during the unsuccessful coup in Turkey in July 2016. Senior Turkish military officers at Incirlik were arrested, and Ankara cut off power to the base for almost a week.

In the words of Harvey Sapolsky, professor emeritus at MIT, “The US must quickly reconsider storing nuclear weapons in Turkey and giving Ankara a shared finger on the nuclear trigger under the NATO nuclear sharing program.”

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