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TACTICAL RETREAT?

THE CHALLENGE OF REDUCING AND ELIMINATING TACTICAL NUCLEAR WEAPONS

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Tactical Retreat?

The Challenge of Reducing and Eliminating Tactical Nuclear Weapons

Dr. Tim Street

Introduction

This paper considers the reduction and elimination of tactical nuclear weapons (TNW), and whether it is a desirable, justifiable, and realisable enterprise. The first thing we need to address is what is meant by tactical (or nonstrategic) nuclear weapons, which have been defined in several different ways. Some consider TNW to be battlefield weapons, which operate on a smaller scale than strategic nuclear forces. Others focus on range and explosive yield, the nature of the target, or the implications for the conflict in which the weapons are used. TNW can also be defined by what existing US-Russia strategic arms agreements do not cover.¹ Yet this would mean defining certain nuclear weapons owned by the seven other nuclear possessor states as TNW—which these states treat as strategic.

Hans Kristensen and Matt Korda therefore observe that:

the distinction between a strategic and nonstrategic nuclear weapon or mission is inherently fuzzy and will probably remain so, given that strategic nuclear weapons can be used in a tactical manner and that any use of a nuclear weapon, no matter how small the yield or short the range, would have far-reaching strategic consequences.²

¹ Center for Arms Control and Nonproliferation (2021) Fact Sheet: United States Nonstrategic Nuclear Weapons, <https://armscontrolcenter.org>

² Hans M. Kristensen and Matt Korda (2019) Tactical nuclear weapons: 2019, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 75:5, p.254

Of the 'smaller' nuclear possessors, only Pakistan has explicitly developed TNW as part of its expanding nuclear arsenal.³ China, meanwhile, does not define its shorter-range nuclear weapons as tactical, although the US military does.⁴ However, whilst it would be pertinent to discuss China and Pakistan in this paper, I have chosen to simplify matters by only discussing the US and Russia's TNW. I begin by briefly reviewing the history of these two nations' possession of TNW, before considering the domestic and international obstacles to, and opportunities for, reducing and eliminating TNW.

1. United States of America

The US has an estimated 230 TNW and is the only nuclear possessor deploying nuclear arms on foreign soil. An estimated 100 B61 gravity bombs are deployed by the US across five European NATO member states. The other 130 TNW are centrally stored in the US, for the purpose of, according to Kristensen and Korda, "backup and potential use by US fighter-bombers in support of allies outside Europe, including northeast Asia."⁵ NATO's TNW are hosted in six bases, including in Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Turkey. In late 2019, a so-called 'low-yield' warhead, the W76-2, was also deployed on a US ballistic missile submarine. As Mike Sweeney notes, this is "the first time in three decades that U.S. tactical nuclear weapons are again at sea".⁶

Why Does the US Still Have TNW in Europe?

Following the end of the Cold War, President George H.W. Bush's Presidential Nuclear Initiatives led to the number of US TNW falling dramatically, from a total of approximately 9,000, but they were not completely withdrawn from Europe.⁷ TNW have been deployed by

³ Ibid, p.252

⁴ Ibid. pp.259-260

⁵ Hans M. Kristensen and Matt Korda (2021) United States nuclear weapons: 2021, Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, 77:1, p.56

⁶ Mike Sweeney (2020) The US Should Remove Its Nukes from Europe, www.defenseone.com, 2 October

⁷ Susan J. Koch (2012) The Presidential Nuclear Initiatives of 1991–1992, Center for the Study of Weapons of Mass Destruction, National Defense University; Hans M. Kristensen and Matt Korda (2019) Tactical nuclear weapons: 2019, Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, 75:5, p.252

the US in Europe since the mid-1950s in an arrangement known as nuclear sharing.⁸ The justification given for the deployment of these weapons was the need to deter an attack on European NATO allies by the Soviet Union's superior numbers of conventional military forces. The US spread its nuclear weapons across several bases in Europe, supposedly providing the alliance with a 'flexible response', meaning the ability to control escalation during a conflict, with the first use of nuclear weapons not ruled out.⁹

The nuclear sharing arrangement continues to have significant political implications. For example, all alliance members (except France) have a degree of influence over nuclear strategy via the Nuclear Planning Group (NPG) and are allowed to veto the use of nuclear weapons under NATO command, though cannot order their use.¹⁰ Maintaining NATO nuclear sharing has thus been seen as a way of maintaining alliance unity as these weapons provide an important political link between Washington and European capitals. In addition, proponents of nuclear sharing argue that it prevented regional nuclear proliferation. The reasons to doubt this have been highlighted by Tom Sauer, including French nuclear acquisition, the domestic barriers to Germany seeking the bomb, and the lack of a significant external security threat to Turkey.¹¹

More recently, Russia's invasion of the Ukraine in 2014, and growing tensions between Moscow and NATO, have been used to justify the continued deployment of US TNW in Europe. For example, former Supreme Allied Commander at NATO, Admiral James Stavridis, stated that "withdrawing our relatively few weapons would be the absolute wrong signal."¹²

⁸ Richard Weitz (2012) 'The Historical Context', in *Tactical Nuclear Weapons and NATO* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute), p.4

⁹ Mike Sweeney (2020) *Reconsidering U.S. Nuclear Weapons in Europe*, www.defensepriorities.org, September

¹⁰ Martin Butcher et al (1997), *NATO Nuclear Sharing and the NPT-Questions to be Answered*, June, <https://www.bits.de/public/researchnote/rn97-3.htm>

¹¹ Brad Roberts (2021) *Germany and NATO's Nuclear Deterrent*, Federal Academy for Security Policy, www.baks.bund.de; Tom Sauer (2010) *U.S. tactical nuclear weapons: A European perspective*, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 66(5), p.69

¹² Ralph Vartabedian and W.J. Hennigan (2014) *NATO nuclear drawdown now seems unlikely*, www.latimes.com, 19 September

However, several analysts pointed out the inability of NATO's TNW to provide reassurance to the alliance's Eastern European members during the Ukraine crisis.¹³

US TNW: Costs, Risks, and Controversy

The revived salience of TNW in US nuclear doctrine, US plans to spend enormous sums modernising its nuclear arsenal, the huge expense of procuring next generation nuclear-capable strike aircraft for certain host states, and the fragility of Turkey-NATO relations, have all raised questions about the costs and risks of TNW and NATO nuclear sharing.¹⁴

The TNW assigned by the US to NATO are part of a wider 'family' of B61 bombs. These bombs are undergoing a highly expensive life extension (to the 2040s) and modernisation programme. This involves the four existing versions of the B61 bomb being consolidated into one type—the B61-12.¹⁵ The modifications to these weapons will make them more accurate, and, according to the former head of US Strategic Command, General James Cartwright, they "likely could be more usable".¹⁶ The B61-12 will begin being deployed in Europe between 2022 and 2024.

Critics highlight the need for the US to abide by its international non-proliferation and disarmament obligations rather than developing new and improved nuclear capabilities. A common view in Europe and beyond is that the continued deployment in Europe of US TNW is a contravention of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty (NPT), which commits its members to "further diminish the role and significance of nuclear weapons in all military and security concepts, doctrines and policies".¹⁷ A range of civil society groups have thus called for the US to realise its NPT obligations by repatriating its TNW to US soil prior to their dismantlement.¹⁸

¹³ Tom Sauer (2014) Ukraine shows uselessness of NATO nukes in Europe, <https://thebulletin.org>, 23 June; Hans Kristensen (2014) Nuclear Exercises Amidst Ukrainian Crisis: Time For Cooler Heads, <https://fas.org>, 16 May

¹⁴ Tim Street (2018) NATO Nuclear Sharing, ORG Explains, June, p.1

¹⁵ Hans M. Kristensen (2014) The Future of the B61: Perspectives from the United States and Europe, Federation of American Scientists, p.2

¹⁶ Julian Borger (2015) America's new, more 'usable', nuclear bomb in Europe, www.theguardian.com, 10 November

¹⁷ ICAN (2018) New research: 35 states are sabotaging the NPT, www.icanw.org, April

¹⁸ Susi Snyder and Wilbert van der Zeijden (2011) Withdrawal Issues: What NATO countries say about the future of tactical nuclear weapons in Europe, <https://paxforpeace.nl>, p.2

NATO's conventional superiority in relation to Russia is often cited as the reason why there is no military need for the alliance to deploy TNW. If these weapons no longer have a meaningful military role, it is argued, they are also no longer politically justifiable and could be replaced by conventional capabilities.¹⁹ In response, the value of NATO's TNW as a bargaining chip in arms control and disarmament negotiations with Russia is sometimes raised.²⁰ However, Amy Woolf persuasively states that this type of argument should be seen "as an excuse for continued funding for all nuclear weapons programs in the future" rather than "as an explanation of the conditions that contributed to arms control in the past".²¹

Despite former President Obama's much publicised rhetoric on the need for concrete action towards a nuclear weapons free world, work on the modernisation of US B61 bombs began under his administration and received continued support from President Trump. The Trump administration's 2018 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) emphasised "great power competition" over strategic stability, setting the stage for a more aggressive nuclear posture.²² President Joe Biden's administration has begun its own review of US nuclear weapons policy, which is set to be published in early 2022.

Analysts Kingston Reif and Shannon Bugos have suggested that the forthcoming NPR is set to disappoint those hoping for a reduction in the US's reliance on nuclear weapons. This is because Biden's "first budget request proposes to continue every part of the unnecessary and unsustainable nuclear weapons spending plans it inherited from the Trump administration", including existing plans for the B61-12 bomb and the development of a new 'low-yield'

¹⁹ Steven Andreasen, Malcolm Chalmers and Isabelle Williams (2010) NATO and Nuclear Weapons Is a New Consensus Possible?, RUSI, August, pp.20-21

²⁰ Oliver Schmidt (2010) The Utility of U.S. Tactical Nuclear Weapons in NATO: A European Perspective, <https://carnegieendowment.org>, 27 April

²¹ Amy Woolf (2020) Bargaining With Nuclear Modernization: Does it Work?, www.armscontrol.org, October

²² Anna Péczeli (2018) The Trump Administration's Nuclear Posture Review: Back to Great Power Competition, *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament*, 1:2, p.238; Adam Mount (2018) Letting it be an arms race, www.theatlantic.com, 12 January

nuclear sea-launched cruise missile.²³ Twenty-nine Democrat members of Congress have strongly opposed the Biden administration's nuclear weapons spending plans.²⁴

Other areas of political controversy for NATO nuclear sharing involve safety and security issues. For example, the 2016 attempted coup in Turkey raised the issue of how secure nuclear weapons were at the Incirlik airbase, which is also close to the Syrian border.²⁵ Such concerns have led opponents of the weapons, such as German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier, to describe them as “absolutely senseless”.²⁶

2. Russia

Russia has a far larger number of TNW than the US, which are employable by ships, planes, and ground forces. Best guesses from analysts suggest Russia has 1,910 TNW—though the precise amount is shrouded in secrecy.²⁷ Moscow insists upon the removal of US TNW from Europe before it engages with Washington and NATO on accounting for and reducing these weapons.²⁸ Certain analysts believe Russian nuclear strategy today includes a significant role for TNW. For example, Kristensen and Korda argue that some TNW “potentially could be used if Russia was losing a conventional war with NATO”.²⁹

Why Does Russia Still Have TNW?

Russia's current reliance on nuclear weapons was not inevitable and needs to be understood in its historical context, particularly if we are to imagine how such reliance may be reduced.

²³ Kingston Reif and Shannon Bugos (2021) Biden's Disappointing First Nuclear Weapons Budget, www.armscontrol.org, Volume 13, Issue 4, July 9

²⁴ Sara Sirota (2021) Rep. Pramila Jayapal leads Democrats in urging Biden to limit nuclear weapons, <https://theintercept.com>, 10 September

²⁵ Sébastien Roblin (2019) Turkey fired on U.S. special forces in Syria. It's absurd that it still has U.S. nukes, www.nbcnews.com, 18 October

²⁶ Eric Schlosser (2016) The H-Bombs in Turkey, www.newyorker.com, 17 July

²⁷ Hans M. Kristensen and Matt Korda (2019) Russian nuclear weapons, 2021, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 77:2, p.101

²⁸ Miles A. Pomper, William Potter and Nikolai Sokov (2009) Reducing and Regulating Tactical (Nonstrategic) Nuclear Weapons in Europe, www.cns.miis.edu, p.vii

²⁹ Hans M. Kristensen and Matt Korda (2019) Tactical nuclear weapons, 2019, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 75:5, p.252

In terms of TNW, Moscow had deployed significant numbers of these weapons throughout the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe by the mid-1980s.³⁰ But by the late 1980s and early 1990s, as the USSR was breaking up, Moscow decided to remove TNW from the former Soviet Republics. President Mikhail Gorbachev's disarmament initiatives in 1991 were an attempt to exert political control over nuclear weapons decision-making, hitherto dominated by military-industrial interests.³¹ Moreover, his brand of 'new thinking' prioritised disarmament as a means of reorienting the Soviet economy away from military spending and reducing tensions with the West.

David Cortright argues that Gorbachev's strategic concessions and sweeping economic and political reforms, in tandem with the popular movements in Eastern and Western Europe, presented a golden opportunity to realise nuclear abolition and build "more reliable structures of peace and international cooperation". Instead, the theory of "cold war triumphalism", whereby military power broke the Soviet economy, embedded itself in US strategic thinking.³² Some analysts argue that, as the 1990s wore on, Russian military strategists increasingly valued TNW. It is posited that this was a response to the far superior NATO conventional military forces which threatened Russian borders and could provide precision strikes.³³

According to Nikolai Sokov, following NATO's bombing of Serbia in 1999, Moscow decided to "enhance reliance on nuclear weapons in a departure from all documents adopted in the 1990s".³⁴ However, TNW, for Sokov, occupy a different, "special" place in Russian nuclear policy, as "assets that Russia apparently does not need, but continues to hold on to" because of "domestic politics" rather than "strategic planning".³⁵

³⁰ Gunnar Arbman and Charles Thornton (2003) *Russia's Tactical Nuclear Weapons, Part 1: Background Policy and Issues*, www.foi.se

³¹ Alexei Arbatov, Vladimir Dvorkin and Sergey Oznobishchev eds. (2012) *Russia and the Dilemmas of Nuclear Disarmament* (Moscow: IMEMO RAN), p.112

³² David Cortright (2008) *Peace: A History of Movements and Ideas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp.150, 323

³³ Richard Weitz (2011) 'Russian Tactical Nuclear Weapons: Current Policies and Future Trends' in Stephen J. Blank ed., *Russian Nuclear Weapons, Past, Present and Future* (Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute), pp.365-371

³⁴ Nikolai Sokov (2011) 'Nuclear Weapons in Russian National Security Strategy', in Stephen J. Blank ed., *Russian Nuclear Weapons, Past, Present and Future* (Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute), p.205

³⁵ *Ibid.* p.216

Reviewing developments in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Andrei Zagorski summarised the strategic situation for Russia as follows:

Moscow no longer concentrates only on nuclear balance with the US or third nuclear powers. Apart from the conventional disparities that emerged in Europe after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the eastward extension of NATO, it includes in its strategic calculation advanced military capabilities, such as precision-guided munitions, ballistic missile defence, long range conventionally armed weapons that can be assigned strategic goals, and the possibility of the weaponization of outer space.³⁶

Recently, regimes without nuclear weapons in the Middle East (and during the Arab Spring), have either been toppled by the US, or fallen with its support. Nuclear weapons are thus perceived by the Kremlin as a way of preventing the West from meddling too much in its affairs and threatening regime change.³⁷ If the threat posed today by the US weren't enough, Russia also has China to worry about. Beijing's relatively small—but growing—nuclear arsenal may not strike fear into Russian hearts, but the superiority of its large and well-armed military cannot be ignored and remains in the background of Russia's nuclear planning. Whilst experts disagree on the role TNW might play in deterring China, Sokov has described how Russia partly retains its nuclear arsenal “just-in-case” China “becomes a foe...or attempts to transform Russia into a subordinate power”.³⁸

Russia's TNW: Costs, Risks, and Controversy

Amy Woolf has provided an apposite summary of debates concerning Russia's TNW, observing that “there is widespread agreement that Russia is pursuing a broad-based modernization program for its nonstrategic nuclear weapons, although experts disagree on

³⁶ Andrei Zagorski (2011) *Russia's Tactical Nuclear Weapons: Posture, Politics and Arms Control* (Hamburg: IFSH), p.3

³⁷ Tim Street (2021) *The Politics of Nuclear Disarmament: Obstacles to and Opportunities for Eliminating Nuclear Weapons*, (Abingdon: Routledge), p.141

³⁸ Nikolai Sokov (2011) *Nuclear Weapons in Russian National Security Strategy*, in Stephen J. Blank ed., *Russian Nuclear Weapons, Past, Present and Future* (Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute), p.198

the pace, direction, and rationale for this program.”³⁹ The Trump administration’s NPR stated that “Russia’s non-strategic nuclear weapons modernization is increasing the total number of such weapons in its arsenal.”⁴⁰ However, Kristensen has asserted that Russia has actually reduced its TNW stockpile over the last ten years.⁴¹

Russia’s recent nuclear policy announcements have also led some analysts to assert that Moscow is raising the salience of TNW in its nuclear doctrine. A heated debate has ensued over whether Russia, in Woolf’s words, “might *threaten* to escalate to nuclear use as a way to deter a conflict that would threaten the existence of the state”.⁴² Furthermore, those who believe Moscow has expansionist aims present Russia’s TNW as a threat to NATO members in Eastern Europe and the Baltics.⁴³ Whilst the deployment of the W76-2 warhead was justified by the US as necessary to counter Russian TNW, several critics have argued that it increases the risk of nuclear conflict and is intended to provide more usable nuclear options against a range of US adversaries.⁴⁴

In February 2019 the US declared a suspension of its obligations under the, now defunct, Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. Washington claimed that Russia’s new nonstrategic nuclear-capable cruise missile was in violation of the rules. Russia denied this, pulled out in response, and made the counter claim that the US deployment of a missile defence system capable of launching offensive missiles was itself in material breach of the treaty.⁴⁵

3. Opportunities for and Obstacles to TNW Reductions and Disarmament

The dire state of relations between the US and Russia means that discussions of nuclear arms control and strategic stability should be the immediate priority to repair the damage done in

³⁹ Amy Woolf (2021) Nonstrategic Nuclear Weapons, Congressional Research Service, p.21

⁴⁰ US Department of Defense (2018) Nuclear Posture Review, <https://dod.defense.gov>, p.9

⁴¹ Hans M. Kristensen (2019) Is the Pentagon Exaggerating Russian Tactical Nuclear Weapons? www.forbes.com, 7 May

⁴² Amy Woolf (2021) Nonstrategic Nuclear Weapons, Congressional Research Service, pp.28-31

⁴³ Paul K. Davis et al (2019) Exploring the Role Nuclear Weapons Could Play in Deterring Russian Threats to the Baltic States, www.rand.org

⁴⁴ Nikolai Sokov (2020) Russia Clarifies Its Nuclear Deterrence Policy, <https://vcdnp.org>, June; William Arkin (2020) Risk of Nuclear War Rises as U.S. Deploys a New Nuclear Weapon for the First Time Since the Cold War, www.democracynow.org

⁴⁵ Tim Street (2021) The Politics of Nuclear Disarmament: Obstacles to and Opportunities for Eliminating Nuclear Weapons, (Abingdon: Routledge), p.138

recent years.⁴⁶ Nuclear reductions are at the lower end of the disarmament spectrum, with more far-reaching and permanent steps involving elimination at the higher end. Deeper disarmament measures will likely require a combination of mutually reinforcing political developments at the domestic and international levels, involving public and elite support in Russia and the US.

This section therefore begins with a review of current arms control proposals and initiatives involving TNW, before considering the issue of abolition, including the impact of the Treaty on the Prohibition on Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). This treaty entered into force in January 2021, prohibiting nuclear weapons development, testing, production, possession, stockpiling, use and threat of use, as well as the stationing or deployment of another country's nuclear weapons on a state party's national territory under international law.⁴⁷

Arms Control and Disarmament Initiatives for TNW

As Tytti Erästö and Matt Korda note, “some essential building blocks” have recently been agreed between the US and Russia, which could form the basis for future nuclear weapons reductions, including TNW. For example, in February 2021 the two nations extended New START (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty) for five years and in July 2021 the Strategic Stability Dialogue was begun.⁴⁸ However, given disparities in the size of Russia and the US’s TNW arsenals, the different role these weapons have in each nation’s nuclear doctrine, as well as the need to address divergent security concerns caused by the strategic power imbalance, agreeing a treaty limiting TNW is likely to be fraught with difficulty.⁴⁹

To begin addressing such challenges, experts have proposed a series of progressive measures, including to facilitate the inclusion of TNW in wider nuclear arms reduction talks:

⁴⁶ Liana Fix et al (2021) Körber Strategic Stability Initiative, www.strategicstability.org; Arbatov, Alexei (2017) Understanding the US–Russia Nuclear Schism, *Survival* 59(2); Arbatov, Alexei (2019) Mad Momentum Redux? The Rise and Fall of Nuclear Arms Control, *Survival*, 61(3)

⁴⁷ ICAN (2021) The Treaty, www.icanw.org/the_treaty

⁴⁸ Tytti Erästö and Matt Korda (2021) Time to factor missile defence into nuclear arms control talks, www.sipri.org

⁴⁹ Amy Woolf (2021) Nonstrategic Nuclear Weapons, Congressional Research Service, p.42

- The major powers should make clear their intentions over future plans for military modernisation. For example, former US Ambassador Steven Pifer has recommended that Russia and the US enact: i) confidence building and transparency measures; ii) parallel unilateral steps to freeze or reduce TNW stockpiles; and iii) begin negotiations aimed at a legally binding TNW treaty with verification measures.⁵⁰ Others, such as Zagorski, question the value of a TNW treaty and prefer a “gradualist” approach, which would allow the sensitive issue of “internationally verifiable” TNW reductions to be sought in the “longer term”.⁵¹
- Pavel Podvig and Javier Serrat argue that TNW should continue not being deployed during peacetime and that this should be codified into a “legally binding, verifiable arrangement” to reduce crisis escalation and the risks of nuclear war.⁵²
- Russian officials argue that a future arms control agreement on TNW with the US should also include limits on missile defense, strategic-range weapons carrying conventional warheads, and space-based weaponry.⁵³
- Susi Snyder and Wilbert van der Zeijden have made proposals on how NATO can achieve “a consensus decision to end TNW deployment in Europe”. This would involve NATO “sacrificing” its TNW first in an attempt to break the impasse and find “reciprocity” with Russia.⁵⁴

US Nuclear Politics and the Prospects for Disarmament

⁵⁰ Steven Pifer (2011) NATO, Nuclear Weapons and Arms Control, www.brookings.edu, Paper 7, July, pp.2-4

⁵¹ Andrei Zagorski (2011) Russia’s Tactical Nuclear Weapons: Posture, Politics and Arms Control (Hamburg: IFSH), p.4

⁵² Pavel Podvig and Javier Serrat (2017) Lock them Up: Zero-deployed Non-strategic Nuclear Weapons in Europe, <https://unidir.org/>, p.3

⁵³ George E. Hudson and Evgeny Buzhinski (2012) ‘Influences on Russian Policy and Possibilities for Reduction in Non-Strategic Nuclear Weapons’ in Tactical Nuclear Weapons and NATO (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute), p.192

⁵⁴ Susi Snyder and Wilbert van der Zeijden (2011) Withdrawal Issues: What NATO countries say about the future of tactical nuclear weapons in Europe, <https://paxforpeace.nl>, p.25

Concerning support for nuclear arms control and disarmament in the US today, the evidence shows a mixed picture. Some trends and data provide encouragement to those favouring disarmament, including involving TNW. Yet there are also substantial barriers to progress in this area which must be recognised. For example, as Lewis Dunn observes, “there is now a fragile center-right political consensus for modernizing the U.S. strategic force posture and nuclear infrastructure. But that consensus has opponents in Congress, the think-tank community, and the broader American public.”⁵⁵ The US opposes the TPNW and in October 2020 wrote to treaty signatories urging them to withdraw their support.⁵⁶ There are currently several Congresspeople who publicly support US action on nuclear disarmament and signing the TPNW.⁵⁷

Reviewing the positions of Democratic Presidential candidates for the 2020 election, research by the Outrider Foundation found that several of the most prominent candidates variously supported a No First Use policy, the extension of New START and the ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, whilst opposing the development of new ‘low-yield’ nuclear weapons.⁵⁸ These positions are in-line with recent US public opinion polls.⁵⁹ For example, almost as many Americans (49%) support the total elimination of all countries’ nuclear weapons as support more limited policy objectives, such as the US only using nuclear weapons in response to a nuclear attack (50%).⁶⁰ However, whilst the Democratic party may appear to have more progressive policies on nuclear weapons than Republicans, when in office Democrats do not always choose (or are unable) to put these policies into practice.⁶¹

In terms of the American public’s views on the value of TNW, Jonathan Baron and Stephen Herzog’s polling results show significant scepticism. As the authors explain,

⁵⁵ Lewis A. Dunn (2016) *Redefining the U.S. Agenda for Nuclear Disarmament* (Livermore, CA: Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory), p.39

⁵⁶ Edith M. Lederer (2020) US urges countries to withdraw from UN nuke ban treaty, <https://apnews.com>, 22 October

⁵⁷ ICAN (2021) United States, www.icanw.org

⁵⁸ Tara Drozdenko (2020) Where Do the Democratic Candidates Stand on Nuclear Weapons?, <https://outrider.org>

⁵⁹ Steven Kull et al (2019) Americans on Nuclear Weapons, <https://cissm.umd.edu>

⁶⁰ NuclearBan.US (2019) New US poll shows strong support for elimination of nuclear weapons, www.nuclearban.us, 23 September

⁶¹ Hans M. Kristensen (2014) How Presidents Arm and Disarm, <https://fas.org>, October

Only 34 percent of Americans support the longstanding policy of providing the nuclear umbrella in principle, and that number drops to 27.9 percent for nuclear deployments in Europe...Men and Republicans remain the most supportive of the nuclear umbrella and forward-deployed B61 nuclear bombs. Women, Democrats, and Independents respond less favorably. Additionally, Americans who came of age during the Cold War are more favorable toward these policies than their Millennial and Generation Z counterparts.⁶²

The gap between Democrats and Republicans on the nuclear issue is replicated in several other areas of public policy.⁶³ This national divide is significant because it is difficult to imagine significant progress on US nuclear arms control and disarmament without a bipartisan consensus on the matter in Congress.⁶⁴ On the other hand, Woolf argues that US Presidents can make reductions to the nuclear arsenal “unilaterally, or as the result of a nonbinding political agreement” and “in parallel with Russia”, without seeking Congressional approval.⁶⁵

European Views on NATO Nuclear Weapons

Studies and opinion polls conducted over the last ten years show that a large number of NATO member states, as well as many experts, civil society groups and significant numbers of citizens in these countries, support (or would not object to) US TNW being removed from Europe.⁶⁶ Opposition to the status quo also exists amongst the NATO nuclear host states. For example, the Belgian, German and Dutch governments have all previously officially acknowledged that they favour the withdrawal of TNW from their territories.⁶⁷ As Beatrix Immenkamp observes, if any of the NATO nuclear sharing states were to sign the TPNW, “the

⁶² Jonathon Baron, Stephen Herzog (2020) Poll: What the American public likes and hates about Trump’s nuclear policies, <https://thebulletin.org>, 27 April

⁶³ Martin Wolf (2021) The strange death of American democracy, <https://www.ft.com>, 28 September

⁶⁴ Tom Sauer (2005) Nuclear Inertia: US Nuclear Weapons Policy After the Cold War (London: I. B. Tauris), p.167

⁶⁵ Amy Woolf (2014) Next Steps in Nuclear Arms Control with Russia: Issues for Congress, Congressional Research Service, p.2

⁶⁶ Richard Lennane and Tim Wright (2021) A Non-Nuclear Alliance: Why NATO Members Should Join the UN Ban on Nuclear Weapons, www.icanw.org, pp.29-33; Susi Snyder and Wilbert van der Zeijden (2011) Withdrawal Issues: What NATO countries say about the future of tactical nuclear weapons in Europe, <https://paxforpeace.nl>

⁶⁷ Johan Bergenäs, Miles A. Pomper, William Potter, and Nikolai Sokov (2010) Reducing and Regulating Tactical (Non-strategic) Nuclear Weapons in Europe: Moving Forward? April, www.nonproliferation.org, p.4

stationing of nuclear weapons on their territory would become illegal, thus weakening the Alliance's nuclear deterrent".⁶⁸

Michal Smetana, Michal Onderco and Tom Etienne thus sense that the time may be ripe for "a new push for the removal of nuclear weapons from Germany", which would "likely create a domino effect", boosting opponents of nuclear sharing in Europe and supporters of the TPNW.⁶⁹ Ideas for how to use the TPNW to "increase the credibility of the EU as a supporter of multilateral disarmament" are outlined in a June 2021 report prepared for the Greens/European Free Alliance Group in the European Parliament. The report suggests actions focused on the EU developing "a more coherent" approach towards nuclear disarmament, including by it proposing "nuclear risk reduction measures and steps toward more transparency on nuclear weapons" and providing "practical and financial support...to assist victims of nuclear weapons and remediate the environmental damage caused by nuclear weapons-related activities."⁷⁰

Notwithstanding such constructive initiatives, withdrawal of US TNW from Europe can only take place if there is consensus on the move by all 30 NATO members, though more limited changes may be made bilaterally or via the NPG. The range of different positions within NATO on nuclear matters, for example, on the value of deterrence and disarmament, help explain the alliance's inherent caution and conservatism regarding nuclear decision-making. In addition, whilst there is evidence for significant opposition to NATO nuclear sharing amongst the public in—and some governments of—nuclear sharing states, it is unclear how highly arms control and disarmament ranks as a political priority for these actors.

Notably, Susi Snyder and Wilbert van der Zeijden's research shows that France is "the most vocal opponent" of TNW being removed from Europe, principally due to Paris wanting to

⁶⁸ Beatrix Immenkamp (2021) Treaty on the prohibition of nuclear weapons – The 'Ban Treaty', www.europarl.europa.eu, January, p.5

⁶⁹ Michal Smetana, Michal Onderco and Tom Etienne (2021) Do Germany and the Netherlands want to say goodbye to US nuclear weapons?, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 77:4, p.220

⁷⁰ Tytti Erästö, Moritz Kütt, Oliver Meier, Maren Vieluf (2021) A Fresh Breeze for Nuclear Disarmament in Europe? Making Best Use of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, *The Greens / EFA in the European Parliament*, pp.5-6

protect its own nuclear status.⁷¹ As Rebecca Johnson has noted, in February 2020 French President Emmanuel Macron called for a discussion in Europe concerning how France's nuclear arsenal can "provide the nuclear deterrence role in an integrated EU defence policy".⁷² This move was seen as an attempt by Paris to achieve its long-held ambition of supplanting NATO nuclear weapons with a European capability.

Russian Nuclear Politics and the Prospects for Disarmament

Moscow views arms control with Washington as a means of building confidence, transparency, and a sense of strategic parity, so there is scope to revive such initiatives—although moves to include TNW will continue to be challenging. The idea of eliminating Russia's nuclear arsenal is an entirely different question. Russia refuses to sign the TPNW and argues that it undermines the NPT.⁷³ Ultimately, the Kremlin views calls for Russia to disarm as a trick or plot by the West. The 'managers of democracy' in the ruling United Russia party claim nuclear possession protects the nation against external threats, which they can hype up as necessary for domestic political gain. Despite the Kremlin's shutting down of dissent, significant opposition to Putin's rule still exists across Russia.⁷⁴ However, public opinion polls appear to show that Russians are generally supportive of their government's nuclear weapons policy.⁷⁵ Global opinion polls also consistently show the Russian public to be among those with the most negative views of the US.⁷⁶

Yet the fact remains that the antagonism between East and West—and Russia's current high valuation of nuclear weapons, including TNW—was not inevitable. It is thus possible that, if relations between Russia and the West improve, a bold initiative by Washington to remove

⁷¹ Susi Snyder and Wilbert van der Zeijden (2011) *Withdrawal Issues: What NATO countries say about the future of tactical nuclear weapons in Europe*, <https://paxforpeace.nl>, p.12

⁷² Rebecca Johnson (2020) *Macron's Post-Brexit Nuclear Ambitions Are Destined to Fail*, www.theguardian.com, 10 February

⁷³ Vladimir Baranovsky (2021) *The TPNW: Russia's Perspectives*, <https://toda.org/>, January

⁷⁴ Samuel A. Greene and Graeme B. Robertson (2021) *Putin's new war on the opposition suggests he sees it as a real threat*, www.washingtonpost.com, 27 January

⁷⁵ Pavel Podvig (2020) 'Russia', in *Assuring Destruction Forever: 2020 Edition* (New York: Reaching Critical Will/WILPF), p.93

⁷⁶ John Gramlich and Kat Devlin (2019) *More people around the world see U.S. power and influence as a 'major threat' to their country*, www.pewresearch.org, 14 February; Jacob Poushter (2018) *6 charts on how Russians and Americans see each other*, www.pewresearch.org, 4 October

TNW from Europe might force Moscow's hand. On the other hand, seasoned observers have suggested that such developments might not be welcomed by Russia as it would require a response, upsetting the status quo.⁷⁷ For example, given Russia's strategic inferiority, its focus has been on developing conventional military capabilities and Moscow may not give up, what it sees as, relatively inexpensive TNW, at least until it feels it has a suitable replacement for them.⁷⁸

Given the various benefits nuclear weapons have for Russian elites—including as a means of remaining at the 'top table' of nations—conducive domestic and international trends will need to align if disarmament is to become a possibility again. On the domestic front, a far more democratic regime will need to be in place if Russia's nuclear weapons are to be delegitimised. In addition, Russia needs to find a new basis for its national security and an alternative purpose beyond achieving 'great-power status'. Clearly, to support these developments, Russia will need to be included in cooperative proposals coming from the West that recognise its legitimate security fears and concerns, including relating to the US's advanced military capabilities.

Conclusion

Moscow and Washington's commitment to conventional and nuclear weapons modernisation, in addition to the ongoing freeze in Russia-NATO relations, rising authoritarianism, and attacks on democracy, means that achieving progress on TNW arms control and disarmament is likely to continue to be difficult in the near-term. Yet whilst the obstacles are clearly substantial, they are not insurmountable. Opportunities exist on the domestic and international fronts, including for NATO member states to press for the withdrawal of US TNW from Europe in support of the TPNW. Reducing and eliminating Russian TNW is a greater challenge and will likely at least require cordial relations between Moscow and Washington, alongside significant democratic reforms taking place in Russia focused on exerting control over the military.

⁷⁷ Nikolai Sokov (2012) 'Russian Perspectives on Non-Strategic Nuclear Weapons' in *Tactical Nuclear Weapons and NATO* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute), p.220

⁷⁸ Leonid Polyakov (2012) 'Aspects of the Current Russian Perspective on Tactical Nuclear Weapons' in *Tactical Nuclear Weapons and NATO* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute), p.159

The immediate focus for Russia, the US—and China—must be stable relations and making the possibility of nuclear conflict as distant as possible. The US's military superiority and global presence means that Washington has the responsibility to make the first move. Opposition to NATO TNW in the US and Europe—in addition to public disapproval regarding nuclear weapons modernisation, possession and use more widely—needs to be harnessed by President Biden. The spectre of Donald Trump returning to the White House greatly raises the stakes of the current administration not reducing nuclear dangers whilst there is the possibility of doing so.

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