

Reassessing the Role of U.S. Nuclear Weapons in Turkey

NATO is revising its Strategic Concept; the alliance is due to complete work on the document in November. A key issue in the revision is the deployment of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons in Europe as part of the alliance's policy of extended nuclear deterrence. Although Turkey has long been in agreement with its allies on the value of these forward deployments, it may soon find itself in a delicate position on the question of how to continue the policy effectively.

With other NATO countries such as Luxembourg and Norway supporting them, Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands have indicated a desire to reassess the case for continued deployment of U.S. nuclear weapons on their territories. Should these countries advocate with-

drawal of U.S. weapons from Europe, Turkish decision-makers might conclude that two fundamental principles of the alliance, namely solidarity and burden sharing, have been seriously weakened. Those principles have been the basis for Turkey's agreement, since the early

1960s, to the deployment of U.S. nuclear weapons on its soil.

The issue is contentious within NATO, which makes its decisions by consensus—an approach that was reaffirmed by the alliance's foreign ministers at an April meeting in Tallinn, Estonia, and by an Experts Group report released in May.

Although final decisions on the deployment of U.S. nuclear weapons probably are not imminent, the debate has already been joined, and Turkey should be an active participant. If Turkey continues to sit on the sidelines of that debate, as it has done until now, it could find itself in an uncomfortable spot: A decision to remove the U.S. weapons from Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands would likely leave Turkey and Italy as the only NATO members with foreign nuclear weapons on their soil.¹ Such a situation would put pressure on Turkey to reverse its long-standing policy of hosting U.S. nuclear weapons on its territory—even more so if the U.S. nuclear weapons are removed from Italy as well. Turkey's calculus must include an additional element because it has Middle Eastern neighbors that are a source of concern to some allies but with whom Turkey is developing

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increasingly close diplomatic ties after a long period of animosity that extended beyond the end of Cold War rivalry.

The most sensible course for Turkey is to support the efforts of other host nations to create a consensus within the alliance that would lead to a withdrawal of U.S. nuclear weapons from Europe. That step would help Ankara to continue cultivating relationships with its non-European neighbors and could be achieved without undermining extended nuclear deterrence.

NATO's New Strategic Concept

Since 1999, when NATO last revised its Strategic Concept, the world has undergone dramatic changes and witnessed tragic events, such as the September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States, followed by others in Bali, Istanbul, Madrid, London, and Amman. Since the September 11 attacks, NATO, while maintaining its identity as a collective security organization, has accelerated the pace at which it is transforming itself from one focused on defending a particular geographical area against a well-known enemy to one that would be capable of dealing with emerging threats such as international terrorism, which may manifest itself in different forms and almost anywhere in the world.

This process of transformation within NATO has called into question the relevance of the 1999 Strategic Concept to

the challenges and threats that the allied countries are facing now and are likely to confront in the future.

The Strategic Concept has therefore been under revision since the alliance summit convened in Strasbourg/Kehl, on April 3-4, 2009. At the summit meeting, NATO heads of state and government tasked the secretary-general with assembling and leading a broad-based group of qualified experts who would lay the groundwork for the new Strategic Concept with the active involvement of NATO's highest decision-making body, the North Atlantic Council.² The report, "NATO 2020: Assured Security; Dynamic Engagement," was released May 17.

The details of the new Strategic Concept are not yet final, but the Experts Group report and media accounts of the ongoing deliberations give an idea of the general principles that are likely to govern the new document. For instance, during their April 22-23 meeting in Tallinn, Estonia, NATO foreign ministers discussed ways to modernize the organization and held talks on the new Strategic Concept. In those discussions, they shared the view that "the new concept must reaffirm NATO's essential and enduring foundations: the political bond between Europe and North America, and the commitment to defend each other against attack," according to a NATO press release.³

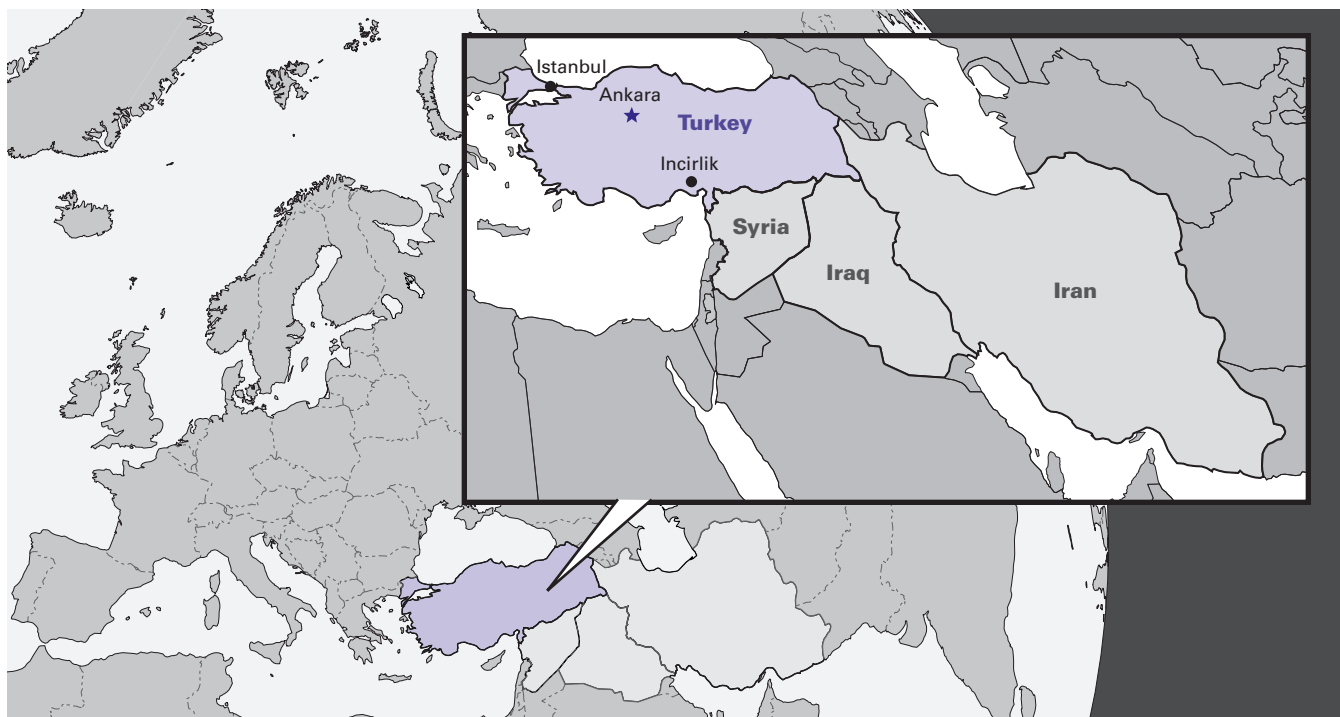
More specifically, concerning the

nuclear strategy of the alliance, Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen has said that, "in a world where nuclear weapons exist, NATO needs a credible, effective and safely managed deterrent."⁴

That statement suggests that nuclear weapons are likely to retain their central role in NATO's forthcoming Strategic Concept. That would satisfy Turkey's expectations; Ankara is looking for the continuation of extended deterrence, which has traditionally relied on U.S. nuclear weapons deployed in Europe.

Nevertheless, the positions of the European allies are not fully compatible with that of Turkey. Some western European allies have expressed strong reservations about the presence of U.S. nuclear weapons on their territories, while some central and eastern European allies still support the deployment of these weapons in Europe as a visible sign of U.S. security guarantees for Europe.

The foreign ministers of Belgium, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and Norway stated in a February 26 letter to Rasmussen that they "welcome the initiative taken by President Obama to strive toward substantial reductions in strategic armaments, and to move towards reducing the role of nuclear weapons and seek peace and security in a world without nuclear weapons."⁵ The letter emphasized that there should be discussions in NATO as to what the allies "can do to move closer





A U.S. Air Force F-16 fighter jet prepares to land at Incirlik Air Base in November 2001.

to this overall political objective.”⁶

Some central and eastern European allies of NATO attach great importance to the continuation of the extended nuclear deterrence strategy of the alliance and the forward deployment of U.S. nuclear weapons, which they consider to provide credible assurances against the potential threat that they perceive from Russia.⁷ There is unanimous support for including tactical nuclear weapons in the next round of nuclear arms control, and there are also views suggesting concomitant withdrawal of all Russian and U.S. tactical nuclear weapons from Europe.⁸

However, even the central and eastern European countries that favor the continuation of nuclear sharing do not want to commit themselves to any obligation to host U.S. nuclear weapons on their territories.⁹ This was, in fact, an agreed-on principle within the alliance at the time of their admission so as not to provoke Russia, which was adamantly opposing the eastward expansion of the alliance throughout the 1990s and beyond.

According to the terms of agreement of the NATO-Russia Founding Act of 1997,

which was negotiated prior to the admittance of the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland to NATO, the alliance declared it had “no intention, no plan and no reason to deploy nuclear weapons on the territory of new members, nor any need to change any aspect of NATO’s nuclear posture or nuclear policy.”¹⁰ Hence, it would be fair to assume that if nuclear weapons are withdrawn from Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands, there are no new candidates to take them.

Should this be the case, Turkey might have to revise its stance vis-à-vis the U.S. nuclear weapons on its soil.¹¹

U.S. Nuclear Weapons in Turkey

Turkey has hosted U.S. nuclear weapons since intermediate-range Jupiter missiles were deployed there in 1961 as a result of decisions made at the alliance’s 1957 Paris summit. Those missiles were withdrawn in 1963 in the aftermath of the Cuban missile crisis. Since then, no nuclear missiles have been stationed in Turkey. The only nuclear weapons that have been deployed are the bombs that would be delivered by U.S. F-16s or Turk-

ish F-100, F-104, and F-4 “Phantom” aircraft at air bases in Eskişehir, Malatya (Erhac), Ankara (Akinci/Murted), and Balıkesir.¹² All such weapons, whether on U.S. or Turkish aircraft, have been under the custody of the U.S. Air Force.

Turkey still hosts these U.S. tactical nuclear weapons on its territory, albeit in much smaller numbers.¹³ They are limited to one location, the Incirlik base near Adana on the eastern Mediterranean coast of Turkey.¹⁴ All other nuclear weapons have been withdrawn from the bases mentioned above.¹⁵ Moreover, the Turkish air force no longer has any operational link with the remaining tactical nuclear weapons deployed at Incirlik.¹⁶ F-104s have not been in service since 1994. F-4s are still in service after modernization of some 54 of them by Israeli Aerospace Industries in 1997. Yet, only the F-16 “Fighting Falcons” of the Turkish air force participate in NATO’s nuclear strike exercises known as “Steadfast Noon,” during which crews are trained in loading, unloading, and employing B61 tactical nuclear weapons.¹⁷ The Turkish aircraft

in these exercises serve as a non-nuclear air defense escort rather than a nuclear strike force.¹⁸

There were two main reasons for Turkey to host U.S. nuclear weapons. First and foremost has been the deterrent

be diluted. To live up to their commitment to solidarity, which was reaffirmed in Tallinn, the five countries that currently host these weapons should continue to do so for the foreseeable future, the official said.²⁰

still face a dilemma in its foreign and security policies if it sees the hosting of U.S. nuclear weapons as the only way for it to fulfill its burden-sharing obligations.

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value of these weapons against the threat posed by the nuclear and conventional weapons capabilities of its enormous neighbor, the Soviet Union, during the Cold War. Similarly, after the Cold War, these weapons were believed by Turkish military commanders to constitute a credible deterrent against rival neighbors in the Middle East, such as Iran, Iraq, and Syria, which used to have unconventional weapons capabilities as well as delivery vehicles such as ballistic missiles.¹⁹

A second reason for Turkey to host U.S. nuclear weapons has been the burden-sharing principle within the alliance. Turkey has strongly subscribed to this principle since it joined NATO in 1952. In fact, Turkey had already displayed unequivocally its willingness to share the burden of defending the interests of the Western alliance by committing a significant number of troops to the Korean War in 1950, even before NATO membership was in sight.

Yet, if Turkey is likely to be left as the only country, or one of only two countries, where U.S. nuclear weapons will still be deployed after a possible withdrawal of these weapons from other allies and no other NATO country will be willing to assume the burden of hosting nuclear weapons, Turkey may very well insist that the weapons be sent back to the United States. From Turkey's current standpoint, this would not be the desired outcome of the current deliberations within the alliance.

According to a Turkish official, the principle of burden sharing should not

Deterrence Against Whom?

Because of the view that NATO's deterrent will be more credible with the presence of forward-deployed U.S. nuclear weapons in the allied territories in Europe, Turkish diplomats believe that the burden of hosting these weapons should continue to be shared collectively among five allies, as has been the case over the last several decades.

Even if all of Turkey's allies accept this proposal and act accordingly, Turkey will

territory could be justified only if there were a threat from the military capabilities of Turkey's neighbors, the two most significant of which would be Iran and Syria, and if the Western allies shared that threat assessment. There can be no other meaningful scenario that would justify Turkey's policy of retaining U.S. nuclear weapons on its territory as well as leaving the door open for the deployment of U.S. missile defenses in Turkey in the future. Recent trends, however, appear to be



At an April 22 press conference in Tallinn, Estonia, NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen said that "in a world where nuclear weapons exist, NATO needs a credible, effective and safely managed deterrent."



Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu speaks during a press conference in Istanbul May 18, a day after signing an agreement in Tehran with his Brazilian and Iranian counterparts on Iran's stockpile of low-enriched uranium.

moving from such a threat assessment by Turkey. Over the last few years, Turkey has experienced an unprecedented rapprochement with its Middle Eastern neighbors.

Last year, Turkey held joint ministerial cabinet meetings with Iraq in October and Syria in December. Until recently, Turkey had treated both countries as foes rather than friends. These meetings have produced a significant number of protocols, memoranda of understanding, and other documents on a wide array of issue areas including the thorniest subjects, such as ways and means of dealing with terrorism effectively and using the region's scarce water resources more equitably.

Moreover, these high-level meetings resulted in the lifting of the visa requirement for Turkish citizens traveling to Syria and vice versa. That action has paved the way to an opening of the borders between the two countries; the borders had stayed closed for decades due to the presence of large numbers of heavy land mines on both sides. The mines will soon be cleaned up with a view to opening huge land areas to agriculture.

In addition to improvements in bilateral relations with its immediate neighbors, Turkey has become more involved in wider Middle Eastern political affairs than it ever has been since the establishment of

the Republic of Turkey in 1923. A key part of this regional involvement is mediation efforts between Israel and Syria. Another element is a willingness to take on a similar role in Iran's dispute with the international community over the nature and scope of Tehran's nuclear program, which is generally considered by Turkey's NATO allies to have the potential for weaponization and thus further proliferation in the region. Top Turkish political and military officials have suggested on various occasions that the most promising way out of the conflict in the longer term would be the creation of a nuclear-weapon-free zone in the Middle East. Against that background, the continued insistence of the Turkish security elite on hosting U.S. nuclear weapons has drawn criticism from Turkey's Middle Eastern neighbors.²¹

Some of these neighbors, such as Iran and Syria, criticize Turkey's policy of retaining nuclear weapons because they see the weapons as being directed against them.²² Others in the Arab world, such as Egypt, portray these weapons as a symbol of Western imperialism.

Turkey therefore will have to seriously reconsider its policy on U.S. nuclear weapons. For this to happen, a debate should take place in the country in various platforms, in closed as well as open forums,

with the participation of experts, scholars, officials, and other concerned citizens.

There is a common belief in Turkey that the U.S. weapons constitute a credible deterrent against threats such as Iran's nuclear program and the possible further proliferation of nuclear weapons in the region in response to Tehran's program. Others contend that if Turkey sends the weapons back to the United States and Iran subsequently develops nuclear weapons, Turkey will have to develop its own such weapons. These observers argue that even though they are against the deployment of U.S. nuclear weapons on Turkish soil in principle, the weapons' presence in the country will keep Turkey away from such adventurous policies.²³ Similar views have also been expressed by foreign experts and analysts who are concerned about Turkey's possible reactions to the developments in Iran's nuclear capabilities in case U.S. nuclear weapons are withdrawn from Turkish territory.²⁴

The negative effects of the weapons deployments on Turkish-Iranian relations need to be assessed as well. Some Iranian security analysts even argue that the deployment of the weapons on Turkish territory makes Turkey a "nuclear-weapon state."²⁵ There is, therefore, the possibility that the presence of the weapons could actually spur Iranian nuclear weapons efforts. This issue may well be exploited by the Iranian leadership to justify the country's continuing investments in more ambitious nuclear capabilities.

Conclusion

A key question for NATO's new Strategic Concept is whether burden sharing will continue to be construed as it has had for many decades, as suggested by Turkey, or whether it will be altered in response to the combined negative stance of some western European allies regarding the forward deployment of U.S. nuclear weapons.

This situation could lead to a divisive and unnecessary controversy between Turkey and its long-standing allies in the West. By insisting that the weapons remain on European territory, Turkey would not only alienate some of its Western allies that truly want to move the weapons out of their territories, but also create tension in its relations with its neighbors and newly emerging partners in the Middle East.

On May 17, Turkey signed a joint declaration with Brazil and Iran, providing for

the safe storage of Iran's 1,200 kilograms of low-enriched uranium fuel in Turkey in return for the delivery by France, Russia, the United States, and the International Atomic Energy Agency of 120 kilograms of fuel needed for the Tehran Research Reactor.²⁶ This "nuclear fuel swap" is potentially a breakthrough in the long-standing deadlock in Iran's relations with the West over Tehran's nuclear program. There is no question that the degree of trust that Turkey has built with Iran, especially over the last several years with the coming to power of the Justice and Development Party in Turkey, had a significant impact on getting this result.

Iran has so far adamantly refused all other offers. Hence, the Iranian political and security elites who have been closely interacting with their Turkish counterparts at every level over the past several months and years prior to the fuel swap announcement may raise their expectations in turn. They may press for withdrawal from Turkey of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons, which they fear may be used against them, as a way for Turkey to prove its sincerity regarding its stance toward Iran and, more broadly, its commitment to creating a nuclear-weapon-free Middle East.

Turkey clearly has to tread carefully, but the risks should not be overstated.

One concern might be the contingencies in which the security situation in Turkey's neighborhood deteriorates, thereby necessitating the active presence of an effective deterrent against the aggressor(s). Yet, given the elaborate capabilities that exist within the alliance and the solidarity principle so far effectively upheld by the allies, extending deterrence against Turkey's rivals should not be a problem. Turkey would continue to be protected against potential aggressors by the nuclear guarantees of its allies France, the United Kingdom, and the United States, the three NATO nuclear-weapon states. Turkey's reliance on such a "credible" deterrent, which will not be permanently stationed on Turkish territory, is less likely to be criticized by its Middle Eastern neighbors²⁷ and should not engender a burden-sharing controversy with its European allies.

One cannot argue that once U.S. nuclear weapons that are stationed in Turkish territory are sent back, the nuclear deterrent of the alliance extended to Turkey will be lost forever.

Currently, three NATO members are

nuclear-weapon states. Of the NATO non-nuclear-weapon states, only five, as mentioned above, are known to host U.S. nuclear weapons. The remaining 20 members have no nuclear weapons on their territories. Yet, these members enjoy the credible nuclear deterrent of NATO, which remains the most powerful military organization in the world. Hence, the simple outcome of this analysis is that, for NATO members to feel confident against the threats posed to their national security, they do not have to deploy U.S. nuclear weapons on their territory.²⁸ Turkey need not be an exception to this rule. **ACT**

ENDNOTES

1. Italy is believed to host U.S. nuclear weapons, but it is not clear whether it wants to get rid of them. For an account of U.S. nuclear weapons deployed in Italy, see Hans M. Kristensen, "U.S. Nuclear Weapons in Europe: A Review of Post-Cold War Policy, Force Levels, and War Planning," *Natural Resources Defense Council*, 2005, p. 9.

2. NATO, "NATO's New Strategic Concept – Why? How?," May 2010, www.nato.int/strategic-concept.

3. NATO, "NATO Foreign Ministers Hold Talks on New Strategic Concept," April 22, 2010.

4. Ibid.

5. Jean Asselborn et al. to Anders Fogh Rasmussen, February 26, 2010. For the full text of the letter, see www.armscontrol.org/system/files/Letter%20to%20Secretary%20General%20NATO.pdf.

6. Ibid.

7. Latvian ambassador, personal communication with author, Ankara, March 31, 2010. For a similar approach from the region, see Lukasz Kulesa, "Extended Deterrence and Assurance in Central Europe," in *Perspectives on Extended Deterrence*, No.3/2010 (Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique, Paris, 2010).

8. Carl Bildt and Radek Sikorski, "Next, the Tactical Nukes," *The New York Times*, February 1, 2010.

9. Latvian ambassador, personal communication with author, Ankara, March 31, 2010.

10. Kulesa, "Extended Deterrence and Assurance in Central Europe."

11. Retired Turkish ambassador, personal communication with author, Ankara, March 31, 2010.

12. See Mustafa Kibaroglu, "Turkey and Shared Responsibilities," in "Shared Responsibilities for Nuclear Disarmament: A Global Debate," Occasional Paper, American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2010, pp. 24-27.

13. Retired Turkish air force commander, per-

sonal communication with author, Ankara, February 15, 2010.

14. Hans M. Kristensen, "U.S. Nuclear Weapons in Europe: A Review of Post-Cold War Policy, Force Levels, and War Planning," p.9.

15. Mustafa Kibaroglu, "Isn't It Time to Say Farewell to US Nukes in Turkey?" *European Security*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (December 2005), pp. 443-457.

16. Retired Turkish air force commander, personal communication with author, Ankara, February 15, 2010.

17. Hans M. Kristensen, e-mail communication with author, April 22, 2010

18. Retired Turkish air force commander, e-mail communication with author, April 23, 2010.

19. Iraq's weapons of mass destruction capability was destroyed following the 1991 Persian Gulf War. Iran and Syria still have such weapons in their military arsenals. Hence, the Turkish security elite still consider extended nuclear deterrence to be significant for Turkey's security.

20. Turkish diplomat, personal communication with author, Ankara, January 29, 2010.

21. Amr Mousa, personal communications with author, Paris, February 1-4, 2010.

22. Mohmood Vaezi and Saghefi Ameri, personal communications with author, Tehran, December 2004.

23. These comments were made by Turkish security experts and analysts in response to a presentation by Mustafa Kibaroglu entitled "US Nuclear Weapons in Turkey and the Evolution of NATO's New Strategic Concept" at the Strategy Group Meeting of the Turkish Foreign Policy Institute in Ankara on March 31, 2010.

24. Various arms control experts, personal communications with author, Washington, April 12-13, 2010.

25. Mohmood Vaezi and Saghefi Ameri, personal communications with author, Tehran, December 2004.

26. Joint Declaration of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Turkey, Iran and Brazil, May 17, 2010.

27. The credibility of NATO's deterrent has been questioned by security analysts both inside and outside of Turkey in various discussion platforms, and some have expressed their concerns about whether NATO countries would really use nuclear weapons against Iran to defend Turkey. There can be no clear answer for such a question, which relates to a dilemma that is inherent in the concept of deterrence.

28. Dutch Foreign Minister Maxime Verhagen also suggested there are other means for maintaining alliance cohesion: "A more modest option would be for NATO to retain a nuclear task without U.S. nuclear weapons being stationed in Europe." Daryl G. Kimball and Greg Thielmann, "Obama's NPR: Transitional, Not Transformational," *Arms Control Today*, May 2010.