

NATO's Nuclear Sharing Arrangements

Overview

NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements ensure that the benefits, responsibilities and risks of nuclear deterrence are shared across the Alliance. The arrangements consist of nuclear capabilities, aircraft and infrastructure provided by a number of NATO countries for the collective defence of all. To guarantee the security of its Allies, the United States has deployed a limited number of B-61 nuclear weapons to certain locations in Europe, which remain under US custody and control in full compliance with the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). The United States follows strict procedures to guarantee the safety and security of the weapons stationed in Europe at all times.

If NATO was to conduct a nuclear mission in a conflict, the B-61 weapons would be carried by certified Allied aircraft, known as dual-capable aircraft (DCA), and supported by conventional forces from across the Alliance. However, a nuclear mission can only be undertaken after explicit political approval is given by NATO's Nuclear Planning Group (NPG) and authorisation is received from the US President and UK Prime Minister. Within NATO, the NPG provides a forum for consultation, collective decision-making, and political control over all aspects of NATO's nuclear mission, including nuclear sharing. By design, therefore, NATO's nuclear sharing is the sharing of the Alliance's nuclear deterrence mission and the related political responsibilities and decision-making. It is not the sharing of nuclear weapons.

NATO's nuclear forces

Three NATO members - the United States, France and the United Kingdom – are nuclear weapons states. Their strategic nuclear forces, particularly those of the United States, are the supreme guarantee of the Alliance's security. The independent strategic nuclear forces of the United Kingdom and France have a deterrent role of their own and contribute significantly to the overall security of the Alliance. NATO's nuclear deterrence also relies on US nuclear weapons deployed in Europe and supporting capabilities and infrastructure provided by Allies.

Why is nuclear sharing unique?

NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements are at the heart of the Alliance's deterrence and defence posture. These arrangements demonstrate unity and cohesion amongst all Allies - by sharing both the political burden and operational risks involved with the nuclear deterrence mission. They give a decision-making role to Allies on NATO's nuclear policy and posture, which otherwise they would not have. Operationally, nuclear sharing provides military and political tools for deterrence and can be used to manage escalation in a crisis. In a more unpredictable and challenging world, NATO's nuclear deterrence is essential to preserve peace, prevent coercion and deter aggression. Furthermore, NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements are the most visible expression of the US extended deterrence guarantee for the security of its Allies and help prevent further nuclear proliferation in Europe.



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Dual-capable aircraft

Currently, seven Allies voluntarily participate in the NATO nuclear mission by contributing DCA. As implied by its name, DCA serve two roles. The first is to provide conventional air power capabilities, such as air policing and combat support, on a day-to-day basis. The second is to operationally deploy nuclear weapons in a conflict, following a political decision by the NPG. DCA are also a visible and valuable instrument for strategic communications. In a crisis or conflict, DCA could be used to send deterrence signals about operational readiness or to demonstrate resolve.

Historical background

Extended deterrence has been a key component of NATO's collective security from its inception. The first US atomic weapons arrived in Europe in 1954. It took several years of political and military deliberation to put in place nuclear sharing arrangements. In 1966, the NPG was formally established to exercise collective political control over NATO's nuclear mission. The NPG provided a platform to non-nuclear NATO Allies to shape the Alliance's nuclear policy and planning as a mean to guarantee their security without acquiring nuclear weapons.

NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements were, and remain, in full compliance with the NPT. When the deliberations of the NPT began in the 1960s, NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements already existed and were known to the Soviet Union. During their bilateral discussions on the draft NPT, both the US and the USSR carefully negotiated text to ensure that no provisions prohibited NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements, which were viewed by both actors as necessary to prevent further nuclear weapons developments by European nations. The drafting of the NPT was concluded in 1968 and it entered into force in 1970.

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