

Why Europe Still Needs Nuclear Deterrence

By [Imants Liegis](#)

May 23, 2012

The  **Moscow Times**

In recent months, we have joined discussions led by former U.S. Senator Sam Nunn, former British Defense Minister Desmond Browne and others to find a way to reduce nuclear weapons in Europe. Although we fully endorse the aim of working toward a world free of nuclear arms, we firmly believe that NATO must remain a nuclear alliance so long as these weapons continue to exist around the world.

It is abundantly clear that there are a number of powerful reasons for maintaining NATO's current mix of capabilities, including the presence of U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe.

For starters, there remains an overwhelming disparity between the United States and Russia on nonstrategic nuclear weapons in Europe, with roughly 200 for the former and an estimated 2,000 for the latter. Every effort must be made to reduce these numbers, but only by reciprocal measures.

Indeed, there are serious doubts that unilateral withdrawals by NATO would encourage President Vladimir Putin to review his country's deepening reliance on nuclear deterrence. Given that our countries are very close to Russia's deployed nuclear arsenal, an increasing nuclear disparity between NATO and Russia resulting from NATO reductions would be of paramount concern to our citizens.

That ongoing disparity should and must remain a concern for NATO as a whole. Let us not forget that, only a few years ago, Russia and Belarus conducted joint military exercises according to a scenario that included a nuclear attack on Poland.

Second, it seems unlikely that there will be much progress in talks with Russia on reducing tactical nuclear weapons in the near future — and certainly not until after November's U.S. presidential election. We regret this. Our countries welcomed the ratification in 2011 of the New START agreement between Moscow and Washington, a positive outcome of U.S. President Barack Obama's policy toward Russia of reducing strategic nuclear weapons, and we hope that there will be no backtracking on this treaty.

But the fact is that there is no follow-on process in sight to make good on this goal. Moreover, missile defense cooperation has stalled over fundamental differences in political approaches.

Nunn has rightly pointed out that NATO and Russian threat perceptions will never completely overlap. Yet a great number of the threats facing the two sides are increasingly shared and can often best be confronted together.

Finally, reducing the presence of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons in Europe would add to the concerns expressed by many European leaders about U.S. long-term commitments to the continent. Thanks to U.S. leadership, Poland, Latvia, Lithuania and other European countries have enjoyed historically unsurpassed security since joining NATO, but that security should not be taken for granted.

All of the NATO allies must understand that the global security landscape is changing. Cyber threats and energy security have come to the fore. The situation in the Asia-Pacific region requires moving U.S. troops who were once based in Europe to Australia. But we believe that the ongoing reductions of U.S. conventional forces in Europe should not yet be compounded by any possible reduction in U.S. nuclear capabilities there.

Nuclear disarmament needs to remain high on NATO's agenda, but new and creative approaches are needed if disarmament is to enhance, rather than undermine, the allies' security. Only those approaches that ensure reciprocity, transparency, cohesion and undiminished security for all of NATO's members have a chance for success.

Imants Liegis is former defense minister of Latvia. Linas Linkevicius is former defense minister of Lithuania. Janusz Onyszkiewicz is former defense minister of Poland. © Project Syndicate

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