

Nuclear Sharing

“Nuclear sharing” generally refers to a system under which nuclear weapons of a nuclear-weapon state are deployed in a non-nuclear-weapon state as a guarantee of security, and there are consultations on nuclear missions between the parties. In the case of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), there is a so-called strategic consultation process in which NATO member countries discuss the deployment of sub-strategic nuclear weapons (*tactical nuclear weapons) through the sharing of information under NATO’s Nuclear Planning Group (NPG). Additionally, nuclear-weapon states share sub-strategic nuclear weapons with non-nuclear-weapon states that are NATO members. In the event of a conflict where a nuclear mission is politically approved by the NPG and receives authorization from the leaders of the United States and the United Kingdom, a force-sharing structure has been adopted in which the countries that host these sub-strategic nuclear weapons carry and operate them via their dual-capable aircraft (DCA), which as the name implies are capable of carrying both conventional and nuclear weapons.¹ Past and present host countries include West Germany, Belgium, Italy, Turkey, the Netherlands, Canada, Greece, and the United Kingdom. Unlike the deployment and operation of nuclear weapons by the United States and the United Kingdom outside their territories during the Cold War,² in NATO’s nuclear sharing arrangement described above, the nuclear weapons remain in the custody and control of nuclear-weapon states in peacetime, while in a conflict, the nuclear-weapon states share NATO’s nuclear deterrence-related political obligations and decision-making by carrying and operating nuclear weapons in the host state’s DCA. Under NATO’s nuclear sharing arrangements, the United States has historically reduced the scale of its sub-strategic nuclear weapons in phases, removing them from Canada by 1984, Greece by 2001, and the United Kingdom by 2009.³

In the mid-2000s, momentum for reviewing NATO’s nuclear

sharing arrangements increased significantly, and there were debates on the benefits and drawbacks of removing sub-strategic nuclear weapons, particularly in Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands. However, there was strong opposition from the member states of NATO's eastward expansion area, such as Eastern Europe and the Baltic states, which were not hosts of nuclear weapons.⁴ Later, controversy over the removal of sub-strategic nuclear weapons resurfaced in Germany in 2020 as it prepared to update its Tornado fighter jets, a type of DCA. This time, the debate distinguished between the end of force-sharing and the continuation of strategic consultations.⁵ Although the debate eventually died down, some criticized that if Germany, which has the greatest DCA capability among NATO member countries, were to drop out, it would demonstrate the weakening of NATO's unity as a nuclear alliance to the outside world, and that NATO would consequently suffer significant damage.⁶ On the other hand, there are cases of countries such as Poland which have consistently shown interest in hosting sub-strategic nuclear weapons.⁷

NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements have taken many twists and turns politically, and there is also a variety of debate over their legal status. The relationship between the nuclear sharing arrangements and nuclear non-proliferation obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) has been criticized at the NPT Review Conferences,⁸ and it has been pointed out that the countries concerned should thoroughly discuss the legality of the arrangements.⁹ On the other hand, a paper published by a NATO member country research institute has noted that during the NPT negotiations in 1963, the United States, under the recognition that any treaty would have to be approved first by the United States and the USSR, presented the USSR with a treaty draft including three provisions, with one particular provision carefully worded to preserve the right for NATO or the Warsaw Pact Organization to create a multilateral nuclear force or to establish multinational consultative procedures. Thus, the interpretation of this research is that NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements are not inherently in violation of the NPT.¹⁰

In June 2023, at a time when European security was shaken by the Russo-Ukrainian War, Russia announced in a statement that it would deploy tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus and that the management

of these weapons during peacetime would be handled by Russia as a nuclear-weapon state.¹¹ On the other hand, in the same year, it was pointed out that the United States might again engage in nuclear sharing with the United Kingdom by sharing its B61-12 nuclear gravity bombs,¹² indicating signs of yet another shift in the debate over the composition of nuclear sharing in Europe.

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