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President Obama Must Not Remove Nuclear Weapons from Europe

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In April 2009—less than three months into his term of office—President Barack Obama laid out the centerpiece of his foreign policy vision for his Administration: the global eradication of nuclear weapons. Citing America’s atomic strikes against the Japanese Empire during World War II, President Obama stated that America has a “moral responsibility” to walk the “road to zero.”

This ideological positioning has set off a series of calls from European leaders for the removal of America’s nuclear arsenal from European soil. At this time, however, a withdrawal of America’s nuclear arsenal from Europe would send the message that transatlantic security is no longer indivisible. It would also give Moscow a blank check to pursue its long-sought-after sphere of privileged interest and, ironically, could pave the way for further nuclear proliferation.

The destabilization brought to the European continent from a premature removal of American nuclear weapons, or an unacceptable degradation of its force, would be a major setback for global security and stability.

The Need for Nuclear Weapons in Europe. From a strategic standpoint, a proactive national defense relies on the ability to defend physical territory, as well as the ability to deter an enemy attack in the first place. In a highly dangerous world where hostile states—such as Iran and North Korea—possess both nuclear and conventional forces capable of striking the U.S. and its allies, a credible nuclear deterrence, not unilateral disarmament, is the best

chance for peace. Therefore, the U.S., in consultation with its allies, should use nuclear weapons in Europe and in the U.S. to protect and defend the U.S. and its allies against strategic attack.

This position is consistent with a more defensive, broader strategic posture that would require the deployment of robust defensive systems, including ballistic missile defenses. This posture would also require modernizing the nuclear weapons in the U.S. arsenal, including their delivery systems, to make them better suited to destroying targets that are likely to be used to launch strategic attacks against the U.S. and its allies, as well as targets whose destruction requires the more powerful force of nuclear weapons. These targets could include missiles in hardened silos, deeply buried command and control facilities, and heavily protected nuclear weapons depots.

A Threat to NATO. Not since radical leftist sentiment gripped Western Europe in the 1980s has the transatlantic relationship faced such a serious ideological challenge to the mutual security of North America and Europe. The removal of American tactical nuclear weapons from European and NATO bases would spell the end of the alliance and the concept of indivisible security.

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The Russian militarization of the Baltic enclave of Kaliningrad and Moscow's recent simulation of a nuclear attack on Poland require a robust response from NATO, reinforced by America's continued nuclear guarantee. Moscow's simulation—in which Russian armed forces invaded Poland and its air force fired nuclear missiles against Warsaw and acted in conjunction with Belarus to suppress Polish minorities in Belarus—was codenamed “West” and labeled Poland as the aggressor country. Following this exercise, as well as President Obama's ill-defined policy of “resetting” relations with Russia, Central and Eastern Europe has sought specific assurances as to the indivisibility of the alliance's security. In addressing these concerns, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has stated:

I want to reaffirm as strongly as I can the United States' commitment to honor Article 5 of the NATO treaty. No Ally—or adversary—should ever question our determination on this point. It is the bedrock of the Alliance and an obligation that time will not erode. Our nation faces threats elsewhere in the world, but we view peace and stability in Europe as a prerequisite for addressing all of the other challenges.

A nuclear pullout from Europe does not comport with Secretary Clinton's commitments outlined above. Rather than pulling back from the alliance's commitments, the U.S. should honor Article 4 of the North Atlantic Treaty and plan against Moscow's threat to the territorial integrity, political independence, and security of one of its members. This preparation should be underpinned by the sanctity of Article 5, America's tactical and strategic nuclear insurance.

Achieving the Exact Opposite. The vast majority of America's allies in Europe have not sought to join the club of nuclear weapons powers, largely because they enjoy the comfort of the U.S.'s nuclear umbrella. However, America's unilateral nuclear disarmament may prompt some nations—particularly Poland in light of Moscow's war gaming and Warsaw's general sense of a transatlantic distancing—to seek alternate security insurance. Indeed,

Turkey and countless other non-nuclear powers under the NATO umbrella could further be tempted to fill the security vacuum created by America's unilateral disarmament by seeking their own weapons or forming alliances with other nuclear powers.

The removal of American tactical nuclear weapons could also encourage a hostile nation to seek similar weapons if it perceives America's indifference to the transatlantic alliance. Russia and rogue states such as Iran and Syria could be emboldened by America's retreat from its security commitments to Europe. Russia has already proved itself to be an authoritarian power, seeking to regain influence over its former satellites. In short, the ramifications of this measure are unpredictable and likely to be contrary to President Obama's goal of nuclear disarmament.

Critical Factors Ignored. This week, President Obama reaffirmed his commitment to reducing America's nuclear stockpile, stating that he wants to see transformational change in the U.S. nuclear posture. However, his policy preferences should be only one part of the equation. The position of America's friends and allies, the strategic concept of the NATO alliance, and transatlantic stability should also factor into his decision.

Strategically, eliminating the U.S. tactical nuclear arsenal in Europe cripples deterrence, stripping away an important pillar of transatlantic security and placing European force posture at a disadvantage. Calls by Germany and other pacifistic and demilitarized European nations to denuclearize the continent fail to take into account the growing threat of rogue states and the reemergence of old strategic competitors, and it may condemn to history the world's greatest military alliance.

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