

NATO's nuclear deterrence policy and forces

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Nuclear weapons are a core component of NATO's overall capabilities for deterrence and defence, alongside conventional and missile defence forces. NATO is committed to arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation, but as long as nuclear weapons exist, it will remain a nuclear alliance.



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- Credible deterrence and defence, based on an appropriate mix of nuclear, conventional and missile defence capabilities complemented by space and cyber capabilities, remains a core element of NATO's overall strategy to prevent conflict and war.
- The credibility of NATO's nuclear forces is central to maintain deterrence, which is why the safety, security and effectiveness of these forces are constantly evaluated in light of technological and geo-strategic evolutions.
- NATO's current nuclear policy is based on NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept and the 2012 Deterrence and Defence Posture Review, as well as guidance from Heads of State and Government at NATO summits, most recently at the 2023 Vilnius Summit.
- The Nuclear Planning Group provides the forum for consultation on NATO's nuclear deterrence.

NATO's nuclear deterrence policy

The fundamental purpose of NATO's nuclear capability is to preserve peace, prevent coercion and deter aggression. As long as nuclear weapons exist, NATO will remain a nuclear alliance. NATO's goal is a safer world for all; the Alliance seeks to create the security environment for a world without nuclear weapons.

NATO's current nuclear policy is based on two public documents agreed by all Allies:

- The [2022 Strategic Concept](#)
- The [2012 Deterrence and Defence Posture Review](#)

NATO continues to affirm the importance of nuclear deterrence in light of evolving challenges. Allies have reiterated this principle at successive summit meetings since 2014, including the 2022 Madrid Summit, where Heads of State and Government agreed the 2022 Strategic Concept – the Alliance's guiding document and blueprint for adaptation. The 2022 Strategic Concept sets out deterrence and defence as one of the Alliance's core tasks. It states that NATO's deterrence and defence posture is based on an appropriate mix of nuclear, conventional and missile defence capabilities, complemented by space and cyber capabilities.

Furthermore, the Strategic Concept states that: "NATO will take all necessary steps to ensure the credibility, effectiveness, safety and security of the nuclear deterrent mission. The Alliance is committed to ensuring greater integration and coherence of capabilities and activities across all domains and the spectrum of conflict, while reaffirming the unique and distinct role of nuclear deterrence. NATO will continue to maintain credible deterrence, strengthen its strategic communications, enhance the effectiveness of its exercises and reduce strategic risks."

The Alliance reaffirms the imperative to ensure the broadest possible participation by Allies concerned in the agreed nuclear burden-sharing arrangements to demonstrate Alliance unity and resolve.

The Deterrence and Defence Posture Review (DDPR) was endorsed by Allied Heads of State and Government at the 2012 Chicago Summit. The DDPR stressed that the fundamental purpose of Alliance nuclear forces is deterrence, which is essentially a political function. While the Alliance focuses on the maintenance of effective deterrence, political control of nuclear weapons will be kept under all circumstances and nuclear planning and consultation within the Alliance will be in accordance with political guidance.

Nuclear consultation

The key principles of NATO's nuclear policy are established by all NATO Heads of State and Government. The development and implementation of NATO's nuclear policy are the responsibility of the [Nuclear Planning Group \(NPG\)](#). The NPG provides the forum for consultation on all issues that relate to NATO nuclear deterrence. All Allies – with the exception of France, which has decided not to participate – are members of the NPG.

The role of NATO's nuclear forces

The fundamental purpose of NATO's nuclear forces is for deterrence. Nuclear weapons are unique and the circumstances under which NATO might have to use nuclear weapons are extremely remote. Furthermore, any employment of nuclear weapons against NATO would fundamentally alter the nature of a conflict.

Should the fundamental security of any NATO Ally be threatened, NATO has the capabilities and the resolve to impose costs on the adversary that would be unacceptable and far outweigh the benefits that any adversary could hope to achieve.

Strategic nuclear forces

The strategic forces of the Alliance, and particularly those of the United States, are the supreme guarantee of the security of the Alliance. 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. These Allies' separate centres of decision-making contribute to deterrence by complicating the calculations of any potential adversaries. In other words, should an adversary decide to attack NATO, they must not only contend with NATO's decision-making, but also make a judgment about decision-making from the leaders of the United States, the United Kingdom and France.

Dual-capable aircraft

NATO's nuclear deterrence posture also relies on the United States' nuclear weapons forward-deployed in Europe, as well as on the capabilities and infrastructure provided by Allies concerned. A number of NATO countries contribute a dual-capable aircraft (DCA) capability to the Alliance. These aircraft are central to NATO's nuclear deterrence mission and are available for nuclear roles at various levels of readiness. In their nuclear role, the aircraft are equipped to carry nuclear weapons in a conflict, and personnel are trained accordingly.

The United States maintains absolute control and custody of their nuclear weapons forward-deployed in Europe, while Allies provide military support for the DCA mission with conventional forces and capabilities. Nuclear sharing arrangements play a vital role in the interconnection of the Alliance and remain one of the main components of security guarantees and the indivisibility of security of the whole Euro-Atlantic area.

Exercises

To ensure the credibility, effectiveness, safety and security of the nuclear deterrent mission, the Alliance conducts regular exercises. [Exercise Steadfast Noon](#) is the Alliance's annual nuclear exercise. A routine training activity, it has been conducted for over a decade and is the current iteration of a long line of NATO nuclear exercises. The exercise involves fighter aircraft capable of carrying nuclear weapons, but does not involve any live weapons. The exercise is not linked to current world events. A different NATO Ally hosts Steadfast Noon each year.

At the 2023 Vilnius Summit, Allies emphasised that they will strengthen training and exercises that simulate a conventional and, for Allies concerned, a nuclear dimension of a crisis or conflict, facilitating greater coherence between conventional and nuclear components of NATO's deterrence and defence posture across all domains and the entire spectrum of conflict.

Evolution of NATO's nuclear policy

Nuclear deterrence has been at the core of NATO's mutual security guarantee and collective defence since the creation of the Alliance in 1949. The very first NATO Strategic Concept (1949) referenced the requirement to "ensure the ability to carry out strategic bombing promptly by all means possible with all types of weapons without exception." The United States subsequently committed nuclear weapons to NATO in July 1953, with the first American theatre nuclear weapons arriving in Europe in September 1954. NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements, which were already in place by the time negotiations for the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) began in the 1960s, were codified by the United States and the Soviet Union as a precursor for the final agreed NPT text. The United Kingdom has also assigned its nuclear forces, including its current single submarine-based system and Continuous At-Sea Deterrent, to the protection of NATO Allies since 1962.

NATO is fully committed to arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation. Since the height of the Cold War, it has reduced the size of its land-based nuclear weapons stockpile by over 90 per cent, reducing the number of nuclear weapons stationed in Europe and its reliance on nuclear weapons in strategy.

In response to Russia's unprovoked and unlawful war against Ukraine, at the extraordinary Summit on 24 March 2022, NATO Heads of State and Government affirmed that NATO will significantly strengthen its longer-term deterrence and defence posture and develop the full range of ready forces and capabilities necessary to maintain credible deterrence and defence. They further committed to enhancing preparedness and readiness for chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear threats.

At the 2023 Vilnius Summit, Allies reiterated that NATO will take all necessary steps to ensure the credibility, effectiveness, safety and security of the nuclear deterrent mission. This includes continuing to modernise NATO's nuclear capability and updating planning to increase flexibility and adaptability of the Alliance's nuclear forces, while exercising strong political control at all times.