

A Nuclear Veto? The Credibility– Consensus Trade-Off and NATO Nuclear Use Procedures

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Do NATO allies have a veto over the use of American nuclear weapons stationed in Europe? While the alliance has publicly indicated that a NATO nuclear mission would require consensus approval from the Nuclear Planning Group, NATO allies have limited practical means to veto American unilateral use of these weapons. The authorization procedures within NATO for the use of American nuclear weapons stationed in Europe pose inherent trade-offs between credibility and consensus. Meaningful consensus decision-making undermines the credibility of the American nuclear weapons on European soil, but enhancing credibility raises the risk of American nuclear use emanating from Europe that is unwanted by NATO allies. Given the recent erosion of the security environment and allies' trust in the US, there are reasons to think that the tension between credibility and consensus might become more salient within NATO.

The United States deploys an estimated 100 B61 nuclear bombs in five NATO countries: Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Turkey.¹ The US has custody and control over these nuclear weapons, which are fitted with Permissive Action Links to prevent unauthorized use.² In wartime, some of these bombs are designated to be delivered by NATO allies under nuclear sharing arrangements, while others would be delivered by American forces stationed in Europe. Allies can deliver these weapons only if the US first authorizes their use and releases them to the ally. Therefore, only the US has positive control over the American nuclear weapons stationed in Europe.

Do NATO allies have *negative* control over weapons stationed in Europe? In other words, do they

have the ability to *prevent* nuclear use *after* American authorization? If NATO allies have veto power over the use of nuclear weapons stationed in Europe, what are the implications for these weapons' credibility as deterrents? If not, what are the implications for alliance unity if nuclear use becomes a realistic prospect?

The authorization procedures for the use of American nuclear weapons stationed in Europe pose inherent trade-offs between credibility and consensus. This problem is not new and can be traced to the Cold War. During the Cold War, the Americans were unwilling to commit to consensus decision-making on nuclear use because of their fear that it would undermine the credibility of its nuclear weapons in Europe.³ European allies, while concerned about the

1 Hans M. Kristensen, Matt Korda, Eliana Johns, and Mackenzie Knight, "Nuclear Weapons Sharing, 2023," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 79, no. 6 (November 2, 2023): 393–406.

2 Kristensen et al., "Nuclear Weapons Sharing, 2023," 395.

3 Jeffrey H. Michaels, "'No Annihilation Without Representation': NATO Nuclear Use Decision-Making During the Cold War," *Journal of Strategic Studies* (May 11, 2022): 6.

credibility of the American extended deterrent, also feared the prospect of American unilateral nuclear action in Europe undermining their interests.⁴ The US sought to protect its flexibility, while NATO allies pushed for a meaningful say in decision-making on nuclear use.⁵ According to the available evidence, the issue of ensuring both timely release and allied consultation was obfuscated rather than resolved during the Cold War.⁶ After the fall of the Soviet Union, the issue retreated into the background.

Given the recent erosion of the security environment and trust in the US, there are reasons to think that the tension between credibility and consensus might become more salient within NATO today. As in the Cold War, allies cannot guarantee that their views on nuclear use will always align with those of the US. Concerns about entrapment, escalation, the costs of war, and national sovereignty provide incentives for European politicians and citizens to worry about unwanted nuclear use and push for further guarantees of preventative control over weapons stationed on their soil or elsewhere in Europe.⁷ President Donald Trump's unprecedentedly hostile attitude toward NATO allies will likely amplify these concerns. Further, discussions of nuclear use, consultation, and authorization will only become more important as the security environment continues to deteriorate. However, any attempt to secure a credible veto over nuclear weapons in Europe will diminish these weapons' credibility and will likely be opposed by both the US and insecure allies; if these opposing concerns become politically salient and cannot be resolved, increased intra-alliance tensions are the likely result.

Why Nuclear Deployments in Europe?

This analysis is limited to the approximately 100 nonstrategic nuclear bombs that are stationed in Europe, not the totality of the American nuclear arsenal. While these weapons represent a fraction of the total American nuclear stockpile, they take on a unique role within NATO. Analysts that support the continued deployment of these weapons argue that they fill a gap on the escalation ladder, providing a more limited nuclear option to respond to Russian aggression in cases where "strategic retaliation would be disproportionate."⁸ The US and hosting allies have invested in upgrades to the B61 bomb, dual-capable aircraft, and the air bases that host these capabilities.⁹ In light of Russia's increasingly aggressive stance and large nonstrategic nuclear arsenal, some commentators and politicians have called for various augmentations of nuclear sharing in NATO, including proposals to increase nuclear deployments to Europe, expand the number of nuclear host sites, and expand participation in the dual-capable aircraft (DCA) mission.¹⁰

Experts have extensively debated the operational value and military credibility of these weapons in the post-Cold War environment.¹¹ Previous work has also analyzed the importance of NATO nuclear sharing as a "tool of alliance management" and as a symbol of the US's extended nuclear commitment and alliance cohesion.¹² However, the potential issues related to authorization of American weapons deployed in Europe since the end of the Cold War have not received as much attention. Allies' concerns about preventative control and how those concerns might undermine allied unity in the post-Ukraine invasion environment have not been extensively discussed.¹³ The secrecy surrounding NATO nuclear sharing provides some limitations to the analysis of

4 Michaels, "No Annihilation Without Representation," 6.

5 Michaels, "No Annihilation Without Representation," 6; see also Kristensen et al., "Nuclear Weapons Sharing, 2023," 399–400.

6 See Michaels, "No Annihilation Without Representation."

7 On unwanted use theory, see Lauren Sukin, "Credible Nuclear Security Commitments Can Backfire: Explaining Domestic Support for Nuclear Weapons Acquisition in South Korea," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 64, no. 6 (July 2020), especially 1014–16.

8 Alexander Mattelaer, "Nuclear Sharing and NATO as a 'Nuclear Alliance,'" in *Alliances, Nuclear Weapons and Escalation: Managing Deterrence in the 21st Century*, ed. Stephan Fruhling and Andrew O'Neil (ANU Press, 2021), 123–31.

9 Kristensen et al., "Nuclear Weapons Sharing, 2023."

10 Frank Kuhn, "Making Nuclear Sharing Credible Again: What the F-35A Means for NATO," *War on the Rocks*, September 14, 2023, <https://warontherocks.com/2023/09/making-nuclear-sharing-credible-again-what-the-f-35a-means-for-nato/>; Michael John Williams, "To Deter Russia, NATO Must Adapt Its Nuclear Sharing Program," *Atlantic Council*, July 30, 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/to-deter-russia-nato-must-adapt-its-nuclear-sharing-program/>; "Poland's Bid to Participate in NATO Nuclear Sharing," *Strategic Comments* 29, no. 7 (August 9, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1080/13567888.2023.2258045>.

11 See, for example, Karl-Heinz Kamp and Robertus C. N. Remkes, "Options for NATO Nuclear Sharing Arrangements," in *Reducing Nuclear Risks in Europe: A Framework for Action*, ed. Steve Andreasen and Isabelle Williams (Nuclear Threat Initiative, 2011), 76–95; Kuhn, "Making Nuclear Sharing Credible Again"; Petr Suchy and Bradley A. Thayer, "Weapons as Political Symbolism: The Role of US Tactical Nuclear Weapons in Europe," *European Security* 23, no. 4 (October 2, 2014): 509–28.

12 Linde Desmaele, "Still a Useful Myth? NATO's Theater Nuclear Weapons as Tools of Alliance Management," *The Nonproliferation Review* (March 3, 2025): 1–24; Mattelaer, "Nuclear Sharing and NATO as a 'Nuclear Alliance'"; Suchy and Thayer, "Weapons as Political Symbolism."

13 For analysis of the evolution of nuclear sharing in NATO and how control relates to allied fears of abandonment and entrapment in the past and today, see Richard K. Betts, "Nervous Allies and Trump: Nuclear Lessons from NATO," *The Washington Quarterly* 48, no. 1 (April 8, 2025): 7–22.

these issues, as much of the relevant data is classified. Nevertheless, material available from the Cold War and today allows for the assessment of the extent and implications of an allied nuclear veto in NATO. The interest in preventative control during the Cold War demonstrates that NATO allies can push for more of a say on nuclear use decisions, despite—or even because of—an insecure international environment, making these topics highly relevant today.

Does an Allied Veto Exist?

An allied nuclear veto has two potential mechanisms. First, given that the use of American nuclear weapons in Europe would be a NATO operation, a veto could exist at the multilateral level. Second, since weapons are stationed on the host's territory and require a prior agreement with the host, a veto could also exist at the bilateral level. While the US has made formal commitments to consensus decision-making on the multilateral and bilateral level, the practical ability of allies to actually veto American nuclear use is debatable. Nuclear hosts, especially in cases where their forces are tasked with the delivery of these weapons, have more practical tools available to prevent unwanted nuclear use than non-hosting allies.

Multilateral Veto: Formal Commitments

NATO's policy as of 2022 has been to use consensus decision-making to authorize NATO nuclear missions. A NATO factsheet on nuclear sharing states: "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."¹⁴ Full consensus of the NPG—which includes all allies except France—would likely be difficult to achieve.¹⁵ Even if responding to a nuclear strike, which would be the most likely circumstance for full approval, NPG consensus on nuclear retaliation would not

be guaranteed. For example, if faced with a limited nuclear strike, or in a situation in which Russia was losing a conflict, allies may take different positions on the moral appropriateness and strategic utility of a nuclear versus a conventional military response.

NATO's official position of consensus is puzzling if one views European nuclear deployments only through the lens of credibility. During the Cold War, the US resisted a NATO-wide veto over nuclear use decisions for this reason, instead providing a more limited commitment to consult with allies if time and circumstances permitted.¹⁶ However, whether NATO's commitment to consensus fully amounts to a multilateral veto depends on the practical ability of NATO allies to prevent the US's unilateral use of its nuclear weapons in Europe.

Multilateral Veto: Practical Considerations

Aside from Washington's commitment "on paper" to consensus decision-making, there are also operational implications if the US fails to gain NPG approval for a nuclear mission. Several non-host NATO allies support NATO's nuclear missions through Conventional Support for Nuclear Operations (CSNO)—previously known as Support of Nuclear Operations With Conventional Air Tactics (SNOWCAT)—which includes the Czech Republic, Denmark, Hungary, Poland, and two unconfirmed allies as of 2023.¹⁷ The CSNO mission includes support such as providing midair refueling, reconnaissance, and suppression of air-defense systems. Attempting to trigger nuclear use outside of an official NATO channel could mean that CSNO would not be available to the US.

The US could, however, use its own forces to support nuclear employment. Depending on the target, some participants in CSNO might also agree to provide conventional support even without NATO approval. Overall, there appear to be only limited practical means by which non-host allies can prevent the US from employing its own nuclear weapons, even when those weapons are stationed in Europe.

14 NATO, "NATO's Nuclear Sharing Arrangements," February 2022, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/2/pdf/220204-factsheet-nuclear-sharing-arrange.pdf.

15 Tytti Erästö, "More Investment in Nuclear Deterrence Will Not Make Europe Safer," *SIPRI*, December 5, 2023, <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/essay/2023/more-investment-nuclear-deterrence-will-not-make-europe-safer/>; Kristensen et al., "Nuclear Weapons Sharing, 2023," 399; Edmond Seay, "NATO's Incredible Nuclear Strategy: Why US Weapons in Europe Deter No One," *Arms Control Association*, 2011, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2011-11/natos-incredible-nuclear-strategy-why-us-weapons-europe-deter-no-one>.

16 William Burr, ed., "The US Nuclear Presence in Western Europe, 1954–1962, Part II," Briefing Book #722, *The National Security Archive*, September 16, 2020, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/nuclear-vault/2020-09-16/us-nuclear-presence-western-europe-1954-1962-part-ii>; Kristensen et al., "Nuclear Weapons Sharing, 2023," 399; Catherine McArdle Kelleher, "NATO Nuclear Operations," in *Managing Nuclear Operations*, eds. Ashton B. Carter, John D. Steinbruner, and Charles A. Zraket (Brookings Institution, 1987), 445–69; Michaels, "No Annihilation Without Representation."

17 Kristensen et al., "Nuclear Weapons Sharing, 2023," 395. Greece and Turkey also participate in the nuclear mission by providing DCA "in a reserve and contingency role" (394).

Bilateral Veto: Formal Commitments

Available records show that the UK, Canada, Italy, and West Germany have negotiated bilateral consultation agreements or joint authorization agreements with the US for the weapons stationed on their soil, although the terms of these agreements were not uniform.¹⁸ For example, in 1968 West Germany negotiated a limited bilateral consultation agreement, which was not part of their original nuclear stockpile agreement.¹⁹ Conversely, in 1962, the Italians and Americans finalized both their nuclear stockpile agreement and a consent for nuclear use agreement, which explicitly called for joint authorization:

*In connection with the stockpiling of United States atomic weapons in Italy, it is understood that the decision to employ these weapons will be taken only in agreement with the Governments of Italy and the United States of America. The agreement of the two Governments would be given in light of circumstances at the time and having regard to the undertaking they have assumed in Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty.*²⁰

The Canadian stockpile agreement, signed in 1963, called for joint authorization and consultation “where practical”:

*The release of nuclear warheads to meet operational requirements will be the subject, where practical, of prior intergovernmental consultation. They will be used, when authorized by both Governments, only in accordance with procedures established by the appropriate Allied Commander or by the Canadian and United States military authorities as applicable.*²¹

Details of the procedures for the use of nuclear weapons stationed in Canada were finalized in 1965, with an exchange of notes on the “Authorization for the Operational Use of Nuclear Weapons.”²² This document set out the “emergency” circumstances in which the commander of the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) could bypass Canadian authorization—for example, if the USSR attacked North America or another NATO ally.²³

The contents of other bilateral stockpile agreements covering NATO hosts are still classified; therefore, it is uncertain whether and when these NATO hosts were able to negotiate their own joint authorization or consultation agreements during the Cold War. In 1968, NATO agreed that “special weight” would be given to host countries when the alliance was considering nuclear use.²⁴ This special status was also to be conferred upon the country providing or employing the delivery vehicles for the nuclear weapons.²⁵ This did not amount to a “formal veto,” however, making the implications of “special weight” in NATO decision-making unclear.²⁶

Bilateral Veto: Practical Considerations

Several commentators have highlighted NATO nuclear hosts’ practical ability to veto nuclear use originating from their soil, particularly where the host controls the means of delivery.²⁷ In these cases, host states can order their forces to stand down despite US authorization, preventing nuclear use by refusing to deliver the weapons. This “practical veto,” however, has limitations.

Not all host states are tasked with the delivery of all the weapons on their soil. In some cases, American forces stationed in the host state take on this

18 Matthew Jones, “A Matter of Joint Decision: The Origins of British Nuclear Retaliation Procedures and the Murphy–Dean Agreement of 1958,” *The English Historical Review*, October 18, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ehr/ceae161>; Michaels, “No Annihilation Without Representation,” 6–12.

19 William Burr, “Consultation Is Presidential Business: Secret Understandings on the Use of Nuclear Weapons, 1950–1974,” Briefing Book #159, *The National Security Archive*, July 1, 2005, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB159/>; Burr, “The US Nuclear Presence in Western Europe, 1954–1962, Part II.”

20 RG 59, CDF, 611.57/1–1762, US Embassy Italy Despatch 525 to State Department, “Transmitting Documents Constituting Military Atomic Stockpile and ‘Consent’ Agreements,” January 17, 1962, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/28556-document-18-us-embassy-italy-despatch-525-state-department-transmitting-documents>.

21 John Clearwater, *Canadian Nuclear Weapons: The Untold Story of Canada’s Cold War Arsenal* (Dundurn Press, 1998), 243. Nuclear weapons were withdrawn from Canada in 1984.

22 Clearwater, *Canadian Nuclear Weapons*, 246–56.

23 Clearwater, *Canadian Nuclear Weapons*, 246–56; Michaels, “No Annihilation Without Representation,” 8.

24 Kelleher, “NATO Nuclear Operations,” 462; Kristensen et al., “Nuclear Weapons Sharing, 2023,” 399; Michaels, “No Annihilation Without Representation,” 17.

25 Kelleher, “NATO Nuclear Operations,” 462; Kristensen et al., “Nuclear Weapons Sharing, 2023,” 399; Michaels, “No Annihilation Without Representation,” 17.

26 Michaels, “No Annihilation Without Representation,” 17.

27 For example, Yasmin Afina, Calum Inverarity, and Beyza Unal, “Appendix II: Nuclear Sharing,” in *Ensuring Cyber Resilience in NATO’s Command, Control and Communication Systems* (Chatham House, 2020); Kamp and Remkes, “Options for NATO Nuclear Sharing Arrangements,” 93; Kelleher, “NATO Nuclear Operations,” 463.

role, giving the US control over both authorization and delivery of these weapons. For example, while Italian forces and aircraft are tasked with the employment of the estimated 10–15 nuclear bombs at Ghedi Air Base, the 20–30 nuclear bombs at Aviano Air Base are slated for delivery by American aircraft and personnel.²⁸ In Turkey, the 20–30 bombs at Incirlik Air Base are designated for American delivery.²⁹ Unlike Aviano, however, the US is not permitted to permanently station its aircraft at Incirlik, meaning that American forces would need to “fly in during a crisis to pick up the weapons, or the weapons would have to be shipped to other locations before use.”³⁰ In these cases, the US has more flexibility to act unilaterally. Even when host state forces are tasked with delivery, the US retains the option of not releasing nuclear weapons to hosts and flying their own nuclear-capable aircraft into or the nuclear bombs out of the host state.

There are also possible limitations to the ability of the US to unilaterally transport nuclear weapons into and out of the host state without their consent. Given that the nuclear weapons are stationed on the host’s territory and at their military bases, host states can try to prevent the US from using their airspace or obstruct the movement of American dual-capable aircraft or personnel on their territory.³¹ Whether a host would be willing or able to take this kind of action against the US is unclear.

In summary, compared to non-host allies, NATO nuclear hosts have received more concrete commitments for joint authorization and consultation, and have more practical means available to prevent the use of nuclear weapons stationed on their territory. On the other hand, whether hosting amounts to preventative control is debatable. In certain cases, to assert this veto, the host would have to take drastic action to obstruct the US.

If host states have a practical veto, would they exercise it? While this would depend on the circumstances, several factors may increase hosts’ reluctance to authorize nuclear use, which has serious implications for the credibility of the nuclear mission. First, all nuclear hosts are located off the front lines of NATO, making them less exposed than allies on the eastern flank. Unlike during the Cold War, nuclear hosts like Germany are no longer vulnerable

to the threat of a rapid Russian overrun, meaning that they are now more likely to be concerned with the risks of entrapment and nuclear escalation, thus encouraging more caution on nuclear use.³² Second, the populations of Germany, Belgium, and the Netherlands have historically been anti-nuclear and are more likely to oppose nuclear use. While a recent study of attitudes in Germany and the Netherlands has found a rise in pro-nuclear attitudes since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it is unclear whether these changes will persist.³³ And the recent rise notwithstanding, a majority of both German and Dutch respondents still opposed nuclear use, even as a response to a Russian nuclear strike.³⁴ Turkey, while not high in anti-nuclear sentiment, has developed more friendly relations with Russia and has demonstrated willingness to act as a spoiler of alliance consensus when it has suited Ankara’s interests. Finally, multiple host states have experienced growth in the influence of far-left and far-right political movements with NATO-skeptic attitudes and more friendly dispositions towards Russia. These factors also increase the likelihood that hosts will seek reassurance on preventative control. This may put hosts at odds with more vulnerable allies, such as Poland and the Baltics, which might be more concerned with credibility over consensus—particularly given the high value that such states also place on American deployments in Europe.

Between Credibility and Consensus: Why Allies Care About Preventative Control

Given that increasing the number of vetoes on nuclear use risks undercutting the credibility of NATO’s nuclear mission, why would allies push for preventative control? Why would NATO signal that a nuclear mission would require an NPG consensus? While NATO allies have an interest in maintaining the integrity of the alliance’s nuclear deterrent, they cannot guarantee that their interests related to nuclear use will always align with those of the US or with the rest of NATO. Allies therefore have incentives to push for a nuclear veto to ensure that nuclear weapons will not be used in situations that might

28 Kristensen et al., “Nuclear Weapons Sharing,” 398.

29 Kristensen et al., “Nuclear Weapons Sharing,” 398.

30 Kristensen et al., “Nuclear Weapons Sharing,” 398.

31 Afina, Inverarity, and Unal, “Appendix II.”

32 See Dan Reiter, “Security Commitments and Nuclear Proliferation,” *Foreign Policy Analysis* 10, no. 1 (January 10, 2014): 65–66, 77.

33 See Michal Onderco, Michal Smetana, and Tom W. Etienne, “Hawks in the Making? European Public Views on Nuclear Weapons Post-Ukraine,” *Global Policy* 14, no. 2 (May 2023): 305–17.

34 Onderco, Smetana, and Etienne, “Hawks in the Making?” 311.

undermine their interests and security. The US also has incentives to reassure allies that their views and interests will inform nuclear use decisions, to maintain alliance ties and foreign nuclear deployments.

Allies relying on a nuclear patron face the risk of unwanted nuclear use, even if it is done ostensibly on the ally's behalf. Recent research on attitudes in South Korea has found that higher belief in the credibility of a patron's nuclear commitments can increase rather than decrease public support for proliferation in a vulnerable ally.³⁵ According to analyst Lauren Sukin, this is because more credible nuclear commitments can increase allied fears of unwanted nuclear use by the nuclear patron.³⁶ Obtaining an independent nuclear arsenal then becomes a means for the ally "to regain control over their nuclear fate" to avoid entrapment and escalation initiated by a nuclear patron.³⁷ These findings suggest that even vulnerable allies without nuclear weapons on their soil can be concerned with preventative control and that citizens may support drastic action to obtain it.

NATO nuclear hosts face unique risks. Without a credible check on the decision-making authority of the nuclear patron, these allies are vulnerable to nuclear use that is initiated from their territory and uses their equipment and personnel, without any consideration of their interests. Nuclear hosts can therefore become targets of preventative or retaliatory strikes in response to actions they oppose.³⁸ When considering a preventative or preemptive strike against nuclear weapons based in Europe, an adversary is only likely to weigh the preferences of the host state if they can impact decision-making on use. Likewise, an adversary might see a nuclear host state as culpable in an attack initiated from their soil, regardless of whether they authorized it or not, making them a target for retaliation.

Aside from calculations about the threat of entrapment and escalation, concerns about sovereignty also push host states to negotiate a nuclear veto. From this perspective, preventative control is an end unto itself and a matter of national pride. Allies do not need to envision a particular scenario of unwanted use to believe that they should have a

say in decision-making and not simply defer to the United States, particularly for weapons stationed on their soil.

There are many examples of nuclear hosts seeking reassurance on consultation and joint authorization during the Cold War, including Canada, West Germany, Italy, and the UK. In 1963, the Canadian opposition leader, Lester B. Pearson, reassured the Canadian public that, under a nuclear sharing agreement, "a US finger would be on the trigger; but a Canadian finger would be on the safety catch."³⁹ When he became prime minister, he pushed for a joint authorization provision in the 1963 stockpile agreement, even though the weapons stationed on Canadian soil were for the interception of incoming Soviet bombers, which increased the need for rapid release and reduced concerns about entrapment and escalation.⁴⁰ The decision to negotiate for joint authorization overrode the objections of the Canadian military, which argued that a "two key" or "dual control" system was more appropriate for "offensive weapons" rather than for nuclear weapons for air defense, which "could only be used when enemy forces are overhead" and time was of the essence.⁴¹ West Germany "repeatedly sought US assurances about nuclear consultation," revealing that vulnerable allies can be concerned with both abandonment and unwanted nuclear use.⁴² Italy "attached great political importance" and bargained hard in the 1960s for a joint authorization agreement for the American nuclear weapons on their territory, overcoming American resistance to this provision.⁴³ In the UK, parliamentary criticism in the late 1950s about the vagueness of existing consultation agreements between the US and the UK led the British government to negotiate the Murphy-Dean agreement, which provided a more detailed framework for joint authorization.⁴⁴ This example demonstrates that host governments can be pressured at the domestic level to revise existing nuclear agreements.

Nevertheless, the content of these agreements varied, and practical means for preventing unilateral American nuclear use were often limited or unclear. For example, Canada's agreement on use procedures

35 Sukin, "Credible Nuclear Security Commitments Can Backfire."

36 Sukin, "Credible Nuclear Security Commitments Can Backfire."

37 Sukin, "Credible Nuclear Security Commitments Can Backfire," 1012.

38 Reiter, "Security Commitments and Nuclear Proliferation," 65–66.

39 Library and Archives Canada, "Nuclear Weapons—Storage in Canada," L. B. Pearson Papers (MG32 N2), press release, vol. 114, January 13, 1963.

40 Clearwater, *Canadian Nuclear Weapons*, 36.

41 Clearwater, *Canadian Nuclear Weapons*, 36.

42 Michaels, "No Annihilation Without Representation," 9.

43 Michaels, "No Annihilation Without Representation," 9; Burr, "The US Nuclear Presence in Western Europe, 1954–1962, Part II."

44 Jones, "A Matter of Joint Decision."

included a variety of emergency circumstances in which Canadian approval could be bypassed.⁴⁵ In the case of Italy, while joint authorization was negotiated in principle, only the Jupiter missile systems stationed in Italy between 1960 and 1963 were under a physical dual-key system, meaning that their release required physical keys from both Italian and American military personnel.⁴⁶ For other weapons systems stationed on their soil, Italy lacked this practical means of preventing unilateral American nuclear use.⁴⁷ Trust in the US was therefore essential for these agreements to provide reassurance to allies.

Why Today?

For most of the Cold War, the procedure for authorizing nuclear use within NATO was “deliberately vague.”⁴⁸ By not clearly committing to either unilateral American authority or consensus decision-making, the alliance avoided explicitly confronting the implications of adopting either approach. Despite the lack of clear procedures for NATO nuclear authorization, both deterrence and cohesion held.

Today, it is possible that the tension between credibility and consensus will similarly be swept under the rug, avoiding conflict both inside and outside NATO. Increasing concerns about the Trump administration’s commitment to NATO as well as the president’s sensitivity to challenges to his authority might discourage allies from questioning American nuclear deployments. Allies may worry that criticism of use procedures might elicit rebuke from Washington about European ingratitude and encourage the withdrawal of American equipment and personnel from Europe. The increasing salience of NATO’s nuclear mission, given the darkening security environment in Europe, however, may cause allies to scrutinize nuclear authorization procedures in a way that they have not since the end of the Cold War.

While increasing insecurity may promote solidarity within NATO and encourage allies to smooth over political issues related to authorization, there are also reasons to think the opposite. In the 2010s, NATO retained nuclear weapons in Europe primarily for political reasons: to maintain alliance cohesion, to avoid sending a signal of decreased American nuclear commitment, and to use as leverage in bargaining with Russia on reducing Moscow’s own tactical nuclear stockpile. When nuclear weapons are retained

as political symbols or bargaining chips, allies do not need to consider possible nuclear use to grasp their value. When they are perceived as usable weapons of war and credible means of deterrence, allies are more likely to consider the mechanisms that underlie their authorization and release. At the same time, as tensions increase, allies are likely to worry again that these weapons might be either used or targeted—and more insecure allies may increasingly question the credibility of these weapons and the feasibility of consensus decision-making, especially if host states appear reluctant to authorize their use.

This increased salience may have effects outside of elite circles and internal NATO discussions, drawing more public scrutiny onto the alliance’s nuclear mission and decision-making on nuclear use. While public opposition to nuclear hosting has been high in Germany, Belgium, and the Netherlands since the end of the Cold War, this anti-nuclear sentiment did not translate into concrete steps toward withdrawal of nuclear weapons from their territory. This inaction was in part due to the low salience of nuclear weapons, which made it easier for politicians not to address the issue and instead quietly defer to more insecure allies like Poland and the Baltics, which have pushed for nuclear weapons to remain in Europe. As the threat of nuclear war increases, the public might become more interested in the rules and procedures that govern the nuclear weapons on their soil, as well as in their country’s role in decision-making and the extent that these weapons serve national security interests. Continued opacity around the contents of nuclear sharing agreements could fuel this dynamic by obscuring reassurances on joint authorization and nuclear consultation.

Given that the US retains custody and full control of these nuclear weapons in peacetime, trust in the US is an important component in trying to resolve the credibility-consensus dilemma. This trust is based on three beliefs. First, that the US will not act outside of the core security interests of its NATO allies. Second, that the US will honor its agreements on nuclear use and consultation. Third, that the US will competently maintain the security of the nuclear weapons on foreign soil. The Trump administration has given allies reason to doubt the US on all three of these.⁴⁹

The Trump administration has indicated that US interests diverge from and are even in direct opposi-

45 Clearwater, *Canadian Nuclear Weapons*, 246–56.

46 Leopoldo Nuti, “Italy’s Nuclear Choices,” *UNISCI Discussion Papers*, no. 25 (January 2011): 181.

47 Nuti, “Italy’s Nuclear Choices,” 181.

48 Michaels, “No Annihilation Without Representation,” 1.

49 On how the Trump administration might increase both fears of abandonment and entrapment within allies, see Betts, “Nervous Allies and Trump.”

tion to its NATO allies.⁵⁰ For example, Trump's recent rebuke of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and subsequent cutoff of military aid to Ukraine, along with his support for Ukrainian concessions to Russia, has put the US at odds with most NATO allies, who view these moves as weakening Ukraine and emboldening Russia at a critical point in the conflict.⁵¹ Trump also has repeatedly threatened the sovereignty of Canada and Greenland, positioning the US as a potential aggressor against allies it has promised to defend.⁵² In addition, Trump has accused NATO allies of undermining the US's economic interests, threatening to implement a suite of tariffs that would be damaging to European and Canadian economies.⁵³ Given these moves, it may not be so far-fetched for NATO allies to wonder whether American nuclear weapons will be used in service of their security interests or against them.

This lack of trust is compounded by Trump's reputation for unreliability on institutionalized commitments. Trump has repeatedly demonstrated a willingness to break agreements and exit institutions when he deems it to be in his interest. On NATO commitments specifically, Trump has suggested that an ally's eligibility for collective defense under Article 5 should be conditional on their level of defense spending, an unprecedented move that signals a more transactional outlook toward maintaining defense commitments to allies.⁵⁴ In fact, recent polling in several NATO nations "showed a dramatic decline of trust in US collective defense commitments" since Trump has assumed office for the second time.⁵⁵ Even if there is a settled procedure in place to ensure consensus before nuclear use, allies have more reason than ever to wonder whether their supposed veto is real or exists only on paper. Moreover, allies may wonder whether American unreliability, combined with their diverging security interests, undercuts the

credibility gains that come with the current nuclear sharing system.

Finally, the Trump administration's chaotic firing and rehiring of personnel at the National Nuclear Security Administration, along with revelations that officials discussed sensitive information on Signal, might increase allies' concerns about the safety and security of nuclear weapons based in Europe.⁵⁶ While neither of these events is directly related to forward nuclear deployments or nuclear sharing, they could be seen as a worrying trend of an increasingly lax approach toward nuclear safety and information security in the US. The mere perception of a less responsible or capable US could erode allied confidence that hosting American nuclear weapons augments—rather than undermines—that country's national security.

Conclusion

Do NATO allies have a veto over the use of American nuclear weapons stationed in Europe? Officially, NATO maintains a policy of consensus decision-making, with NPG approval needed before a NATO nuclear mission can go forward. Practically speaking, however, non-host allies have few effective means of preventing unilateral nuclear use by the US. Host states have traditionally received more commitments on preventative control and have more tools at their disposal—for example, during the Cold War, the US negotiated bilateral joint authorization agreements with at least three host states, and nuclear hosts were recognized in NATO as having "special status" when considering nuclear use. Through control of delivery systems, personnel, and airspace, host states gain some practical means of obstructing unwanted nuclear use, but it remains debatable whether this

50 Frances Mao, "Can Europe Still Count on the US Coming to Its Defence?" *BBC*, February 26, 2025, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c0l1w1w41xzo>.

51 Erica L. Green, Eric Schmitt, David E. Sanger, and Julian E. Barnes, "Trump Suspends Military Aid to Ukraine After Oval Office Blowup," *The New York Times*, March 3, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/03/us/politics/trump-ukraine-military-aid.html>.

52 Laura Kayali, "Trump Doesn't Rule Out Military Intervention in Greenland—Again," *POLITICO*, March 30, 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/usa-donald-trump-military-intervention-greenland-again-denmark/>; Allan Smith and Peter Nicholas, "Trump's Quest to Conquer Canada Is Confusing Everyone," *NBC News*, March 14, 2025, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/donald-trump/trump-quest-conquer-canada-confusing-everyone-rcna195657>.

53 Elena Giordano, "Trump Threatens EU and Canada with Even Bigger Tariffs as Trade War Snowballs," *POLITICO*, March 27, 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/trump-threatens-eu-and-canada-with-more-tariffs-if-they-cooperate-against-the-u-s/>.

54 Agencies, "Trump Casts Doubt on Willingness to Defend Nato Allies 'If They Don't Pay,'" *The Guardian*, March 7, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/mar/07/donald-trump-nato-alliance-us-security-support>; James FitzGerald, "Trump Says He Would 'Encourage' Russia to Attack Nato Allies Who Do Not Pay Their Bills," *BBC*, February 11, 2024, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-68266447>.

55 Lauren Sukin, Michal Smetana, Marek Vranka, and Ondrej Rosendorf, "Are the United States and Europe Still Allies? The European Public Doesn't Think So," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, March 26, 2025, <https://thebulletin.org/2025/03/are-the-united-states-and-europe-still-allies-the-european-public-doesnt-think-so/>.

56 Jeffrey Goldberg and Shane Harris, "Here Are the Attack Plans that Trump's Advisers Shared on Signal," *Atlantic Monthly*, March 26, 2025, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2025/03/signal-group-chat-attack-plans-hegseth-goldberg/682176/>; Rene Marsh and Ella Nilsen, "Trump Officials Fired Nuclear Staff Not Realizing They Oversee the Country's Weapons Stockpile, Sources Say," *CNN*, February 15, 2025, <https://www.cnn.com/2025/02/14/climate/nuclear-nnsa-firings-trump/index.html>.



amounts to a full-scale bilateral veto in the face of determined US use.

These arrangements thus pose a potential dilemma for the alliance: Consensus undermines the credibility of the nuclear weapons on their soil, but enhancing credibility could raise the risk of American nuclear use emanating from Europe that is unwanted by NATO allies.

Two factors may draw out this dilemma within NATO countries and amplify political debates over nuclear sharing arrangements. First, today's insecure strategic environment has increased the salience of nuclear weapons, which creates conditions for politicians and citizens in NATO ally states to be more interested in the authorization procedures

of the weapons stationed in their countries and on the territory of their neighbors. Second, the Trump administration's stance toward NATO and Europe has eroded a factor that has been necessary to hold NATO nuclear sharing together: trust in the US—trust that the US will use these weapons to defend allies, trust that the US will keep to their agreements on consensus and consultation, and trust in US responsibility in administering its nuclear arsenal all matter greatly. Without trust in the US, NATO allies will not be assured of either credibility or consensus. ●

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