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U.S. Nuclear Weapons Abroad: Where Next?

POSSE Policy Memo

Todd S. Sechser
Assistant Professor of Politics
University of Virginia
tsechser@virginia.edu

The United States currently owns the world's largest nuclear arsenal, with more than 5,000 operational nuclear weapons. Most of these weapons are located inside U.S. territory – in missile silos, on bombers, and inside storage facilities. Others sit on U.S. nuclear submarines, traversing the ocean. Sometimes forgotten, however, are the nuclear weapons that the United States stores on foreign soil. Today, more than two decades after the end of the Cold War, five countries – Belgium, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, and Turkey – host about 200 U.S. nuclear warheads.

In an era when an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) can be launched safely inside U.S. borders and still hit any target in the world, what is the value of stationing nuclear weapons abroad? Is the United States likely to use nuclear deployments as a foreign policy tool in the near future? A study I conducted with Matthew Fuhrmann, an assistant professor of political science at Texas A&M University, helps shed light on these questions. The answer may be surprising: if historical trends are to be believed, foreign nuclear deployments may return to relevance in the foreseeable future.

There are at least three reasons a nuclear power might want to station nuclear weapons abroad. The first reason is nuclear deterrence. During the Cold War, U.S. allies such as West Germany clamored for nuclear deployments, and the United States complied. Thousands of U.S. nuclear weapons were stationed in western Europe as a signal to the Soviet Union that an invasion would be met with a nuclear response.¹ These weapons also served to reassure jittery NATO allies who worried about the strength of the U.S. commitment to their security.

¹ In a separate study, Dr. Fuhrmann and I found that these deployments did not actually strengthen deterrence – U.S. alliance commitments and conventional deployments were more than adequate for this purpose. However, we acknowledge that deterrence objectives nevertheless play an important role in decisions to deploy – and

Second, nuclear weapons are sometimes deployed to countries with special advantages, such as geographic proximity to an adversary. For instance, Great Britain placed nuclear weapons in Singapore during the 1960s so that they could be used against China in the event of war. Since the British did not yet have long-range missiles that could reach China from Europe, these deployments helped the British project their power globally.

Third, nuclear deployments may also be used as carrots to prevent countries from building their own nuclear arsenals. The United States kept nuclear weapons in South Korea during the 1970s and 1980s, for example, partly to alleviate the fears of South Korean leaders who wanted their own nuclear weapons program for security reasons. (Those weapons were withdrawn in 1991.)

How much have each of these factors driven nuclear deployment patterns throughout the nuclear age? To find out, Professor Fuhrmann and I used recently declassified materials to construct a new database listing every known instance in which a country deployed nuclear weapons abroad. Unsurprisingly, the United States features prominently in this database, having deployed nuclear weapons to 14 countries at various times since 1945. Although U.S. deployments to West Germany, Italy, and other NATO countries are well known, the United States also deployed nuclear weapons to less obvious locations such as Morocco and Canada. Equally surprising is the fact that the Soviet Union and Britain also undertook foreign nuclear deployments: the Soviets stationed weapons to countries such as Czechoslovakia, Poland, and even Mongolia, whereas the British deployed nuclear weapons to Cyprus, Singapore, and West Germany.

Using this database, we developed a statistical model that helps us predict when foreign nuclear deployments are likely to occur – and when they are not. We found that the two most reliable

predictors of nuclear deployments were shared alliances and common enemies. Most recipients of nuclear deployments have been countries which have formal nuclear allies and are located near one of their ally's chief rivals. By these standards, it comes as little surprise that the superpowers retained nuclear weapons in East and West Germany for nearly the entire Cold War.

One factor that did not stand out in our analysis was the risk of nuclear proliferation. One might expect, given the example of South Korea, that the United States would be more prone to deploy nuclear weapons to countries seen to be proliferation risks. With its long-standing interest in nonproliferation, stationing a few nuclear weapons on the territory of a potential proliferator might be a small price for the United States to pay to prevent the further spread of nuclear weapons. But our analysis did not bear this out. South Korea stands out as an exception rather than the rule.

What does our study imply about the future of nuclear deployments? One lesson is that leaders continue to see foreign nuclear deployments as important political tools. U.S., Soviet, and British nuclear deployments persisted long after the advent of long-range ballistic missiles appeared to render these deployments militarily irrelevant, and even today official NATO policy holds that U.S. nuclear weapons “make the risks of aggression against NATO incalculable and unacceptable in a way that conventional forces alone cannot.” Even in the ICBM age, nuclear deployments can serve the dual purposes of signaling resolve and reassuring allies.

Further, our model suggests several conditions under which the United States or another nuclear power might be willing to undertake new foreign deployments in the future. One observation is that there is little precedent for the notion that the United States might try to use nuclear

deployments as tools of nonproliferation. For example, even if Japan, South Korea, or another country were to demonstrate interest in building a nuclear bomb, our research suggests that this would not be sufficient to prompt a U.S. deployment. Instead, the deployment strategies of nuclear powers depend on geopolitics: if the U.S.-China relationship were to take a turn for the worse, for example, then Japan, South Korea, or even Taiwan might become prime potential hosts for U.S. deployments because of their proximity to China and close relationship with the United States. Likewise, the most important factor in the termination of U.S. deployments in western Europe is likely to be the status of U.S.-Russia relations. In other words, nuclear deployments are more likely to be dictated by alliance cohesion rather than threats of proliferation.