

NATO Nukes in Romania: Rumor Mill Vs. Reality

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Unconfirmed reports regarding the US moving nuclear weapons it reportedly maintains at Incirlik Airbase, Turkey to Romania (a NATO member since 2004) made the rounds last week. It is just one of many stories surrounding the apparent fallout between the United States and its stalwart ally and fellow NATO member, Turkey.

Following a failed coup in July, Turkey has accused the US openly of orchestrating the attempted overthrow of the government. Despite this, US forces continue operating from Turkish territory, and according to official reports, American nuclear weapons remain in Turkey.

But what if they were being moved? And if not to Romania as Romanian officials insist, to another NATO members state, what would this mean? And if they are not being moved, who started this rumor and why?

NATO Nuclear Sharing

The US currently maintains nuclear weapons in a number of NATO countries (Turkey, Belgium, Italy, Germany and the Netherlands) under a “nuclear sharing” program that dates back to the Cold War. The impact of joining this program is politically and strategically significant. There are risks and responsibilities involved with hosting US nuclear weapons, and those nations that seek to opt out once in the program can struggle for years before these weapons are finally removed from their territory.

A 2009 Der Spiegel article titled, “[Yankee Bombs Go Home: Foreign Minister Wants US Nukes out of Germany](#),” highlights just how difficult this can be, especially considering that as of 2016, US nuclear weapons remain in Germany, and [as Deutsche Welle points out](#), new weapons may even be on their way.

According to a 2010 paper by The Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) titled, “[NATO’s Tactical Nuclear Dilemma](#)” (PDF), part of the reasoning of maintaining nuclear weapons in Europe and Turkey is to give the NATO alliance “credibility” as well as discourage nuclear proliferation both within NATO and beyond it.

The paper postulated that the removal of nuclear weapons from Turkey could unbalance the region strategically and spur nuclear proliferation from Iran to Saudi Arabia and perhaps even force Turkey itself to seek its own nuclear weapons. In regards to Turkey, the paper concluded that maintaining US nuclear weapons there was desirable both for Turkey and for NATO.

Possible Reasons for the Rumors

✖ Considering what were perceived to be the consequences of removing nuclear weapons from Turkey in 2010, the transferring of US nuclear weapons to Romania now would be serious indeed. Thus, floating rumors of the weapons being moved could have been aimed at pressuring Ankara to make concessions regarding any number of current US projects in the region, the most prominent of which would be its ongoing proxy war against Syria, Russia and Iran.

Another possibility may have been to simply add credibility to claims that US and Turkish ties are strained, even unraveling. This might be perceived as necessary considering the lack of actual, quantifiable fallout seen on the ground in Turkey in regards to a continued US presence within its territory, as well as on the ground along the Turkish-Syrian border.

This geopolitical subterfuge might be aimed at Russia and Syria as a means of drawing them in before an inevitable betrayal.

US nuclear weapons stationed in Turkey and throughout Europe have always been somewhat secretive. In the RUSI paper words such as “reportedly” are used in reference to the number and location of US nuclear weapons across the region. This secrecy makes rumors regarding US nuclear weapons and their potential movement from Turkey to Romania particularly attractive in terms of extorting geopolitical concessions and manipulating public perception as they are difficult to confirm or deny.

Rumors Vs. Reality

However, the perceived implications of the move have already been placed in the minds of many.

But regardless of these rumors, the reality of US-Turkish ties remains to be seen on the ground, in Turkey, at Incirlik Airbase, at America’s sprawling complex in Ankara where a variety of diplomatic, political and military activities are organized from and along the Turkish-Syrian border where US forces and various armed proxies are still operating.

When Ankara begins taking concrete steps toward truly ending the war in Syria, such as cutting off supply lines that have fed US, European, and Persian Gulf-backed militants for years, resulting in the collapse of militant forces particularly in Idlib and around Aleppo, there may be proper impetus to make the prospect of transferring US nuclear weapons out of Turkey more believable.

Likewise, should Turkey begin incrementally removing the large presence of US military and diplomatic personnel from its territory to levels more proportionate to those seen in non-NATO member states, the idea of the US moving its nuclear weapons out of the country will not seem so far fetched.

However, even if Turkey wanted to take all of these steps, it would not be easy to immediately implement them. Much of what constitutes current US-Turkish ties has been in the making for decades, forged during the Cold War and tempered further in its aftermath. And if these decidedly smaller steps are difficult to initiate, larger steps like transferring nuclear weapons and altering the geopolitical and strategic lay of an entire region are even more so.

With this in mind, we should consider these rumors as possibly coercive in nature, and even more so, possibly meant to manipulate public perception into believing the fallout between

Turkey and the US is greater than it really is. Regardless, when really put into perspective, the possibility of the US transferring nuclear weapons from Turkey to Romania is still just that, rumors.

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