

NATO to keep its Nuclear Arsenal

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Commander of NATO's Allied Command Transformation (ACT) General Stephane Abrial says the Western military alliance has to keep its tactical nuclear arsenal.

"As long as the world is nuclear, the (NATO) alliance has to keep nuclear weapons," Abrial said in a security conference in Halifax, Canada on Saturday, AFP reported.

NATO leaders are scheduled to meet in the Portuguese capital of Lisbon later this month to map out the future of the Western alliance.

NATO's nuclear arsenal in Europe is a source of friction within the organization. Germany, Poland, Belgium and Sweden want a greater NATO commitment to nuclear disarmament.

In May 2009, Senior Belgian and German officials called for prompt withdrawal of the US atomic arms and pullouts by Russia, saying that the Cold War deployments had outlived their military or political value, Global Security Newswire reported in late October.

According to the report, an estimated 200 nuclear-armed B-61 gravity bombs are stored at six bases in Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Turkey.

Unconfirmed reports suggest that Russia has roughly 2,000 tactical nuclear weapons at bases inside its own borders. Moscow says it regards NATO nuclear arms in Europe as a threat to its security.

But the US and France oppose the alliance's nuclear disarmament, fearing it could heighten pressure on Paris to relinquish its own arsenal.

French forces have roughly 300 nukes, while the continent's other nuclear power, the United Kingdom, has its own stockpile of 225 nuclear warheads.

"There are only two nuclear powers in Europe, and neither Britain nor France are going to give them up at this present [time]," Julian Lindley-French, a scholar at the Netherlands Defense Academy, said in September.

In April 2010, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton appeared to rule out early withdrawal of its nuclear warheads deployed across Europe.

A new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) negotiated earlier this year cuts Russia and the United States limits in deployed nuclear warheads from a figure agreed on in 2002, allowing them a maximum of 1,550 warheads each.

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