United States General Accounting Office

GAO

Report to the Chairman, Subcommittee on Readiness, Committee on Armed Services, House of Representatives

December 1993

NATO NUCLEAR BASES

U.S. Should Seek Needs Reassessment and Increased Alliance Contributions

GAO/NSIAD-94-84

GAO

United States
General Accounting Office
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National Security and
International Affairs Division

B-243638

December 23, 1993

The Honorable Earl Hutto
Chairman, Subcommittee on Readiness
Committee on Armed Services
House of Representatives

Dear Mr. Chairman:

On November 23, 1993, we provided your office with a classified report related to U.S. nuclear bombs stored at North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) nuclear strike bases. This letter contains an unclassified summary that discusses (1) NATO's nuclear strike base requirement, (2) overall U.S. costs directly associated with supporting NATO's nuclear mission, and (3) problems the U.S. Air Forces in Europe has had in implementing and monitoring allied compliance with bilateral agreements. Recommendations were made to the Secretaries of Defense and the Air Force.

We are sending copies of this summary to other appropriate congressional committees; the Secretaries of Defense, State, and the Air Force; and the Director, Office of Management and Budget. We will also make copies available to others.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please call me on (202) 512-3504. Major contributors are Frederick A. Bigden, Thomas J. Denomme, and Samuel L. Hinojosa in Washington, D.C.; and Elliott C. Smith, Jon Chasson, and Donald Heller in our European Office.

Sincerely yours,

Richard Davis

Richard Davis
Director, National Security
Analysis Issues

Executive Summary

Purpose

The Chairman, Subcommittee on Readiness, House Armed Services Committee, asked GAO to report on issues related to U.S. nuclear bombs stored at North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) nuclear strike bases.[1] The objectives of this review were to determine (1) how NATO establishes its requirements for peacetime and wartime strike bases; (2) what the United States spends to support NATO's nuclear capability; and (3) whether the Headquarters, U.S. Air Forces in Europe (USAFE), is monitoring NATO allies' compliance with bilateral agreements governing U.S. personnel stationed at allied strike bases.[2]

Background

To support NATO, the United States stores air-delivered nuclear bombs at U.S. and allied strike bases in Europe. At allied strike bases, U.S. Air Force units maintain peacetime custody of nuclear bombs that could be transferred to the host nation's forces during wartime. According to existing bilateral agreements, the host nations should provide virtually all logistics support and other services required by U.S. custodial units stationed at allied strike bases.

After the demise of the Warsaw Pact, the United States and its NATO allies recognized that tactical nuclear weapons were of increasingly limited value. In October 1991, NATO's Defense ministers asked the Supreme Allied Commander, Europe (SACEUR), its senior military commander, to determine the exact number of nuclear bombs NATO needed to retain, and to develop a plan to distribute the weapons for peacetime storage. The Defense Ministers stated that NATO's nuclear force structure should be flexible, militarily responsive and effective, and structured to allow the continued participation by nations that currently deploy strike aircraft and store nuclear weapons on their territory.

Results in Brief

NATO can maintain a credible and survivable nuclear capability and meet its stated requirements for broad allied participation with fewer strike bases, and the United States may be able to reduce its support costs by consolidating its nuclear bombs at fewer storage sites. NATO's most recent assessment of required nuclear capability reflected the assumption that its

[1]The term strike base is used in this report to identify U.S. and allied air bases that have assigned nuclear roles and where nuclear bombs may be stored, and from which aircraft loaded with bombs could take off during wartime. The term storage site is used to identify strike bases where nuclear bombs are stored.

[2]In this report, the term bilateral agreements refers to the international agreements, implementing technical arrangements, and related supplementary agreements that govern the stationing of U.S. personnel at allied strike bases.

strike bases are vulnerable to a massive and sustained Soviet air attack. However, although the Soviet Union's collapse has greatly reduced the vulnerability of NATO's strike bases, the alliance has not undertaken additional analysis to determine if fewer bases could provide sufficient nuclear capability.

USAFE does not follow Department of Defense (DOD) and U.S. Air Force regulations to implement and monitor allied compliance with bilateral agreements governing support for U.S. Air Force custodial units stationed at allied strike bases. USAFE has failed to identify these problems in its annual evaluations of internal and administrative controls required by the Federal Managers' Financial Integrity Act of 1982. As a result, the United States is spending millions of dollars for facilities, equipment, and other support promised by host nations.

Principal Findings

NATO Examined Strike Capability Needed to Counter Soviet Military Power

To respond to the NATO Defense Ministers' October 1991 request for recommendations regarding an appropriate nuclear weapons stockpile size and the stockpile's distribution, SACEUR relied primarily on a capabilities study that was completed in September 1991, before the Soviet Union's collapse. This study examined the Soviet Union's potential to neutralize NATO's strike capability by destroying runways and aircraft shelters. The study concluded that NATO needed nuclear bombs to maintain a credible nuclear capability and strike bases to ensure weapon and aircraft survivability.

Although the Soviet Union's collapse had reduced the vulnerability of NATO's strike bases, and the Defense Ministers had stated that issues of survivability be included as part of the study's methodology, SACEUR did not update the previous analysis to determine if fewer bases would provide sufficient capability. Instead, the commander stated that NATO nations should maintain an appropriate number of strike bases, but provided no additional guidance. NATO's Defense Ministers accepted the stockpile recommendation for nuclear bombs stored in peacetime at NATO's existing strike bases. In addition, NATO has approved the development of detailed plans to disperse nuclear weapons to additional bases in wartime.

Senior U.S. Military Commanders Recognize Fewer Strike Bases Will Provide Sufficient Capability

To achieve budget and personnel reduction goals, USAFE, believing that NATO could maintain an adequate nuclear capability with fewer strike bases, recommended in July 1991 and again in October 1992 that the United States consolidate its nuclear bombs at fewer storage sites. The U.S. European Command (EUCOM) agreed that NATO's required nuclear capability can be met with fewer strike bases, and recommended that the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) approve a consolidation plan. In August 1992 and again in April 1993, OSD officials said that they were considering EUCOM's recommendations. OSD officials also told GAO that until a decision was reached, OSD would not provide GAO documents regarding USAFE's and EUCOM's assessment of required nuclear capability, the specific basing options that had been considered, and estimated cost savings of the various options. In May 1993, however, OSD announced that one of EUCOM's recommended actions—the closure of one U.S. strike base—had been approved.

After an August 31, 1993, meeting on the results of this review, OSD provided limited information regarding USAFE's and EUCOM's consolidation efforts. According to OSD, EUCOM recommended that the United States (1) cancel plans to store nuclear bombs at one other U.S. strike base and (2) remove nuclear bombs from some allied strike bases. Weapons removed from allied strike bases would be stored at other bases, and could be quickly returned during a crisis or war. U.S. Air Force personnel would periodically deploy to the allied bases for training and to inspect mission infrastructure. EUCOM stated that this plan would allow the United States to retain its existing peacetime and wartime commitment to NATO nuclear missions while significantly reducing mission-related personnel and operating costs. According to OSD, discussions with the allies concerning these recommendations have been completed with one ally and are to commence with an other in December 1993.

United States Spends Millions of Dollars to Support NATO Nuclear Capability

The United States, both directly and through the NATO infrastructure fund, provides substantial resources to support nuclear missions at NATO's strike bases. During fiscal year 1992, the United States spent more than $80 million for mission-related personnel, base operating support, and other required services. In addition, DOD has proposed spending over $49 million for long-term projects such as facilities, communications equipment, and a program to upgrade nuclear bomb storage sites at strike bases. Furthermore, two NATO allies have requested that the United States provide the $6 million to $10 million needed for the modification and certification of aircraft to be used for NATO strike missions.

USAFE Does Not Monitor Compliance With Support Agreements

USAFE does not follow DOD and U.S. Air Force regulations to implement and monitor allied compliance with bilateral agreements governing support for the Air Force custodial units at allied strike bases. USAFE officials were at times unaware of host nation commitments to provide support, and often failed to follow established procedures to request support or report compliance problems. For example, despite one allied government's commitment to provide adequate housing, the United States is constructing a $3.5-million dormitory for custodial personnel in that country. USAFE did not request the government's financial support for this project.

Even when compliance problems were reported to higher-level U.S. Air Force officials, appropriate actions were not always taken to resolve these problems. For example, when a custodial unit commander in another allied country requested USAFE assistance to obtain sufficient barracks space in accordance with bilateral agreements, USAFE took no action. The United States pays an estimated $653,000 annually to rent accommodations at custodial units within that country.

Internal reviews of management controls conducted under the Federal Managers' Financial Integrity Act of 1982 have failed to disclose these problems. As a result, the United States spends millions of dollars to provide facilities, equipment, and other support that host nations promised to provide.

Recommendations

Considering the reduced vulnerability of NATO's strike bases, and the cost to the United States to support the alliance's nuclear capability, GAO recommends that the Secretary of Defense, in cooperation with the Secretary of State, ask NATO to (1) reassess, using updated information, the number of strike bases needed to provide a sufficient nuclear capability, including peacetime requirements and (2) agree to consolidate nuclear weapons at fewer storage sites. To ensure the efficient use of U.S. funds, GAO recommends that the Secretary of Defense defer starting any new NATO nuclear-mission-related construction projects until the reassessment is complete.

GAO recommends that the Secretary of the Air Force direct the USAFE Commander in Chief to (1) follow DOD and U.S. Air Force regulations for implementing and monitoring allied compliance with bilateral support agreements and (2) disclose any material weaknesses in the control and monitoring of bilateral agreements in the next annual statement of

assurance required by the Federal Managers' Financial Integrity Act of 1982.

Agency Comments

DOD partially concurred with the report's findings and recommendations and provided additional comments, which are included in this summary and in the classified report where appropriate. The Department of State fully concurred with DOD's comments.

DOD disagreed with (1) GAO's description of the process used to develop and maintain NATO nuclear force requirements and (2) the reliability of GAO's estimated future costs. DOD believes GAO incorrectly assumed NATO's nuclear requirements are still determined by a Cold War military threat and that GAO erroneously concluded that NATO did not include the changed security environment and political aspects when determining its nuclear requirements. GAO believes that the report accurately reflects the process by which NATO's Defense Ministers and SACEUR developed and approved nuclear force requirements and the political factors related to these requirements. While the report recognizes the validity of NATO's political requirements, GAO found that SACEUR also considered military factors before recommending a final stockpile level and distribution. Documents obtained from SACEUR provide a clear and authoritative description of the process used to formulate the recommendations.

DOD also disagreed with the reliability of GAO's future estimates of the costs for supporting the nuclear mission because some costs (1) are only indirectly related to the nuclear mission and (2) would continue to be incurred even if the number of strike bases and/or storage sites were reduced. GAO believes that the estimated future costs are directly attributable to the nuclear mission. DOD and USAFE data were used to develop the cost estimates, and DOD and USAFE were given the opportunity to review GAO's methodology. DOD did not object to the methodology nor did it provide any evidence showing that some cost categories are only indirectly related to the nuclear mission.

DOD does not agree with GAO's recommendation that NATO reassess its strike base needs. DOD believes that (1) NATO has sufficiently examined its strike base requirement, making a requirements reassessment unnecessary, and (2) EUCOM's plans to consolidate nuclear weapons at fewer storage sites will lead to a reexamination of the strike base requirement. This is not necessarily so, because, as OSD pointed out (1) not every strike base stores nuclear weapons and (2) consolidation of nuclear

weapons at fewer storage sites may not reduce the number of strike bases. DOD further stated that the consolidation plans were provided to GAO. Since DOD gave GAO only a general summary of the EUCOM plan during the comment period, GAO was unable to assess whether the plan addresses the concerns contained in this report. Thus, GAO continues to believe that a reassessment of NATO's strike base requirement is necessary.

DOD does not agree with GAO's recommendation that DOD halt all construction projects until NATO completes a reassessment of its strike base requirement. DOD states that halting all nuclear-mission-related construction in the absence of reduced requirements would lead in many cases to increased costs for projects that would eventually move ahead. GAO agrees with DOD's position. As a result, GAO has modified the recommendation and now recommends that the Secretary of Defense defer starting any new NATO nuclear-mission-related construction projects until a reassessment is complete.

DOD does not believe that further actions by the Secretary of the Air Force are warranted to implement and monitor procedures to ensure allied compliance with bilateral agreements or that the compliance problems constitute a material weakness as defined by the Federal Managers' Financial Act of 1982. DOD believes that because of actions taken by USAFE to improve monitoring and compliance with existing bilateral support agreements, no further direction from the Secretary of the Air Force is needed. GAO continues to believe that further action by the Secretary of the Air Force is needed to ensure allied compliance with bilateral agreements and that such weaknesses are reportable under the Federal Managers' Financial Integrity Act of 1982. A review of a draft of USAFE's guidance on obtaining required host nation support shows that it focuses only on facilities and not other areas of support. Likewise, evidence shows that USAFE officials either failed to follow defined procedures or were unaware of the existence of these procedures, conditions that GAO considers material weaknesses related to internal controls and reportable under the Federal Managers' Financial Integrity Act of 1982.

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