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Ceci n’est pas une…American nuclear weapon in Belgium

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There is hardly anybody in Belgium who publicly defends the continued deployment of US tactical nuclear weapons on Belgian territory. The longer these weapons stay, the more the existing nuclear weapons policy and by extension North Atlantic Treaty Organization itself will be regarded as illegitimate. While one should not expect massive demonstrations similar to that at the beginning of the 1980s, the pressure to protest increases. By describing the different societal and political actors in Belgium and their respective views on the possible withdrawal of US tactical nuclear weapons, this article tries to explain the gap between policymakers and citizens on this issue. The main explanatory variables are a low-profile diplomatic culture and the lack of a strong link between the anti-nuclear movement and the political parties in power, resulting in the absence of political leaders at the governmental level, who clearly speak out in favor of withdrawal.

Keywords: nuclear weapons; nuclear disarmament; NATO; public opinion; peace movements

Introduction

It sounds surreal: more than 20 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, there are still American nuclear weapons in Belgium. Belgium is one of the five remaining host nations for the US B61 nuclear bombs based in Europe. It is also an active participant in North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s (NATO) nuclear weapons policy. Because of the changed circumstances in the international political system, one could have expected that all American nuclear weapons would have been withdrawn from Europe, just like they had been withdrawn from South Korea in 1992. That did not happen, despite the fact that in Belgium (like in Germany and the Netherlands) there is a political consensus in favor of the withdrawal. This article does not want to explain why there are still nuclear weapons in Belgium as this requires an analysis of NATO decision-making procedures and of national positions of some NATO member states (Sauer and Van der Zwaan 2012; Flockhart 2013). This article wants to sketch the growing divide between what societal and political actors within the country think about this issue on the one hand and the limited (public) steps that the Belgian government has taken to remove them on the other. I conclude that the source of the inertia is located in Belgian bureaucratic politics and its low-profile diplomatic culture within NATO.

NATO’s nuclear weapons policy dates back to the Cold War. NATO needed to compensate its conventional inferiority vis-à-vis the Warsaw Pact by means of a nuclear
deterrent. This extended deterrence policy included the stationing of US nuclear weapons on Western Europe’s territory. In the midst of the Cold War – during 1954–1963 – American nuclear weapons were sent to eight European states, including Belgium. The US-Belgian bilateral agreement for cooperation for mutual defence purposes was signed by the Belgian Minister of Foreign Affairs Paul-Henri Spaak on 17 May 1962, and it entered into force on 5 September 1962. The first US nuclear weapons arrived in Belgium in November 1963 (Norris \textit{et al.} 1999). Since its creation in 1967, Belgium is also part of NATO’s Nuclear Planning Group (NPG), the alliance’s consultative body on nuclear issues.

Since 1962, the Belgian government guards its privileges with regard to nuclear weapons policy. During the preparations of the 1962 agreement, Minister Spaak had promised that the Belgian Parliament would be consulted before nuclear weapons were stationed on Belgian soil. These consultations never took place.\footnote{Over time, different nuclear weapons systems were installed in Belgium. During the 1980s, Belgium became one of the host nations for the intermediate-range Tomahawk cruise missiles, albeit only for two years (1985–1987).} Nowadays, according to the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), there remain 10–20 US B61 bombs with a variable destruction power of 5–10 KT to 175–345 KT in 11 WS-3 vaults on Belgian territory. In war, these weapons are meant to be used by Belgian pilots, flying F-16s. Accordingly, Belgian pilots still train for nuclear missions. In peacetime, the weapons remain on Belgian soil under US custody. The bombs are located at Kleine Brogel Air Force Base in Peer in the Northeast Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. The base houses the 31st ‘Tiger’ Squadron and the 349th Squadron, both belonging to the 10th Wing of the Belgian Air Force. The American 52nd Munitions Support Squadron (MUNSS) is in charge of protecting the inner perimeter and the bombs themselves at the Kleine Brogel Air Base. The first B61 bombs probably arrived in 1979 together with the first deployments of the Belgian F-16s.

The Belgian government has never confirmed the presence of these weapons, let alone the exact number. Although most experts believe that the weapons are still there, some argue that these weapons are moved around between different bases in Europe on a regular basis.\footnote{Already in the 1990s, André Dumoulin (affiliated with the Belgian Royal Military School) openly doubted whether there were still American nuclear weapons in Belgium (Dumoulin 1996). However, he did not question the fact that the infrastructure to host these weapons still existed.} This analysis starts from the assumption that there are still US tactical nuclear weapons in Belgium as the government has an interest in announcing the withdrawal for political purposes. Non-nuclear weapon states, like most Non-Aligned Movement states, regularly criticize NATO’s extended deterrence policy. Maintaining an ambiguous declaratory policy without a force structure policy is not credible, especially in the medium and long term. Another reason why we assume that these weapons are still in Belgium is the fact that two former Dutch Prime Ministers (both Christian-Democrat) – Ruud Lubbers and Dries van Agt – in June 2013 openly admitted that there were still American nuclear weapons on Dutch territory (Kristensen 2013). Former Belgian Prime Minister Mark Eyskens did confirm in September 2013 that there are still American nuclear weapons on Belgian territory (Dujardin and Gorle 2013).

This article starts with describing the intensity of the recent debate about the possible withdrawal of the tactical nuclear weapons from Belgium. It then gives an overview of the major domestic political actors involved. It ends with a description of existing government policy and options for the future.
Intensity of the recent debate in Belgium

Belgian politics in general has always been characterized by internal divisions: the Dutch-speaking North versus the French-speaking South; conservatives versus progressives, both with respect to socioeconomic and ethical issues. The linguistic divide, particularly since 2007, has occupied much of the political attention in Belgium. After the June 2010 elections, it took one and a half years to form a new government because of existing nationalist cleavages.

Like in the rest of Europe, the intensity of the debate about the presence of American nuclear weapons in Belgium in absolute terms is rather low. In times of peace and with no major perceived direct threat, people are more interested in welfare and domestic issues than in foreign policy.

In comparison with other states in Europe, however, the issue of the tactical nuclear weapons is more politicized in Belgium, than elsewhere. There are basically two explanations. First of all, the pacifist culture is possibly engrained deeper in Belgium than in other countries. Historically speaking, the relatively small but strategically located territory has been occupied by different tribes, states, and empires, including the Romans, the Habsburgs, Napoleon, and the Dutch. In 1830, Belgium became an independent country. In the twentieth century, Belgium was twice invaded by Germany.3 It is no accident that the country of Flanders Fields has a cultural aversion to war.

Belgium’s history also explains why the pacifist culture is stronger in the Dutch-speaking North than in the French-speaking South (Reychler 1985). The so-called Flemish movement that mobilized against the domination of the French-speaking minority in the country finds its roots in World War I, when Flemish soldiers – who made up 80 per cent of the Belgian army – took orders from French-speaking officers. Many of these soldiers died because they did not understand the orders.4 These grievances on behalf of the Dutch-speaking community were not resolved after World War I. Despite the fact that Dutch had been recognized as an official language in Belgium since the end of the nineteenth century, and despite the fact that the majority of the Belgian people spoke Dutch, French remained the institutional language of the army, diplomacy and the academic world. As a result, the so-called Frontbeweging was born. In short, Flemish nationalism and pacifism go hand in hand. Pacifism was also an important principle of the main Flemish nationalist party after World War II, namely the Volksunie. This principle was at the same time shared by the Flemish socialists (especially since the mid-1970s) and the left-wing section of the Flemish Christian-Democrats. The pacifist culture in Flanders and, to a smaller but still substantial extent, in the French-speaking part of Belgium has an important impact on the debate about nuclear weapons.

The second major reason why the issue of the American nuclear weapons seems to be more prominent in Belgium than in other West European states, has to do with the Euromissile crisis in the early 1980s. This debate had a major impact on Belgian politics, more than in the neighbouring countries, and was partly a result of the pacifist culture. While there had been anti-nuclear marches with more than 10,000 people in Belgium in the early 1960s, it was the installation of Pershing II ballistic missiles and Tomahawk cruise missiles in Western Europe in the 1980s that exposed serious fissures in the Belgian foreign policy consensus.

The gigantic demonstrations gave a boost to the Belgian peace movement. The first manifestation, organized by the newly established VAKA – which stands for Vlaams Aktie Komitee tegen Atoomwapens (Flemish Action Committee against Atomic
Weapons) – and its French-speaking counterpart Coordination Nationale d’Action pour la Paix et la Démocratie (CNAPD) – attracted 50,000 people in December 1979, much more than expected. In 1981, 200,000 people marched in the streets of Brussels, one of the biggest peace demonstrations in Europe that year. The largest rally was the one in 1983, attracting 400,000 people – 4 per cent of the Belgian population. It remains the biggest demonstration ever in Belgium. In March 1985, despite the fact that the Belgian government had decided to proceed with the installation of the missiles a couple of days before a planned demonstration, and despite the fact that the Christian-Democrat trade union decided not to participate in the rally (in contrast to 1983), the protest still attracted 150,000 people (De Ridder 1986, Walgrave 1994). Another 115,000 people demonstrated in October 1985, an event that was planned to be held right before the parliamentary elections. However, because of this planned manifestation, the Christian-Democrat/Liberal government changed gears and decided to organize the elections before the demonstration. Even in 1987 and 1989, each time more than 75,000 people showed up in Brussels to protest against nuclear weapons.

The peace movement was successful in bringing a massive number of people on the streets by connecting with the major societal organizations, such as the trade unions (both Socialist and Christian) and youth movements, as well as the so-called new social movements – born in the 1970s – such as women, environmental, development, and human rights groups. From each village, buses left with protesters for Brussels. It was a grassroots event, which had a considerable impact on Belgian politics for years, if not decades. While the protesters failed to prevent the installation of the cruise missiles in Florennes in 1985, they made abundantly clear that these weapons were very unpopular. More fundamentally, the peace movement in the 1980s changed the Belgian political climate. As Patrick Stouthuysen (Vrije Universiteit Brussel) argues:

> Not only did the peace movement thus prevent this particular matter from being settled as part of the normal governmental routine, its actions and position seemed to be leading to a radical politicization of the entire Belgian foreign and defence policies. The traditional consensus concerning these policy areas broke down. (Stouthuysen 1991, p. 176)

In terms of political parties, the nuclear weapons issue set up the conservative parties (Christian-Democrats and Liberals) against the progressive parties (Socialists and Greens). The Greens in Belgium have their origins in the anti-nuclear movement. The Christian-Democratic party in Flanders – the biggest party in Belgium after World War II, providing most of the Prime Ministers and being part of the government for almost the whole period – was split on this issue between conservative and more progressive factions, the latter including the powerful Christian-Democrat trade union. The progressive faction inside the Christian-Democrat Party was able to postpone the arrival of the cruise missiles, but the conservative faction finally won over. The Christian-Democratic party suffered its largest electoral loss since the Second World War in 1981, in part also due to socioeconomic and institutional issues. However, the party did not lose the elections in October 1985, six months after the introduction of the cruise missiles. Other political issues carried the day during that election period (Deweerdt 1986, p. 374). The Flemish Socialists who made an issue of the Euromissiles also gained votes, but not enough to break into the government in 1985.

It seems unlikely that there will be massive protests regarding the removal of the remaining B61s, at least not of the same order of magnitude as the protests in the 1980s.
People do not feel afraid anymore. The external circumstances are completely different: the Cold War is over; the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact have imploded. Belgium does not face a direct threat anymore. Nevertheless, the potential for protest is probably still larger in Belgium than in the neighbouring countries, due to the pacifist culture and the impact of the Euromissile crisis on Belgian politics. The aversion in civil society against the remaining nuclear weapons seems bigger in Belgium, especially in comparison with Germany and the Netherlands. One indication is the regular ‘Bomspotting’ actions by the radical peace organization Vredesaktie (Peace Action), something that does not exist on a similar scale in neighbouring countries (except the UK). Another example is the relative ease with which the major societal movements signed up to support an anti-nuclear weapons text and a call to protest, for example, after the French nuclear tests in 1995, and again in 2010 with respect to the possible withdrawal of the B61s in the run-up to the NATO Lisbon Summit. The Belgian government, in contrast, seems less enthusiastic to change the existing policy in comparison with the German and maybe even the Dutch government (see further). An overview of the different actors in the debate may clarify this paradox.

The main actors in the current debate
There are a host of institutional and social actors involved in the current debate over non-strategic nuclear weapons. These are discussed below and have illustrated the diversity of the political forces at play, from the involvement of mayors and parliamentary activists to mainstream political parties.

Civil society actors
Under the rubric of civil society, I include public opinion, the peace movement, and academics.

A large majority of the public in Belgium opposes keeping the B61 nuclear weapons on Belgian territory. A 2007 survey by the Flemish Peace Institute – a newly established independent think-tank by the Flemish Parliament – indicates that nearly 70 per cent of the Flemish population is in favor of the withdrawal, less than 20 per cent is in favor of the status-quo, and 10 per cent has no opinion (Verhulst et al. 2007, p. 68).

The Belgian peace movement, for its part, matured as a political actor thanks to the Euromissile crisis (Van Den Begin 1983, Walgrave 1994). After the end of the Cold War, however, the interest in nuclear weapons by most of the Belgian peace organizations decreased substantially. This applies especially to Flanders’ largest peace movement, Pax Christi Flanders, which turned its attention to issues, such as, peace education, conflict prevention, and ethnic conflicts (like in Yugoslavia, Chechnya and the Congo). The left-wing-inspired peace organization Vrede (Peace) also turned its attention away from nuclear weapons.

The nuclear disarmament flame was kept alive at a rather low level after the Cold War by ‘Abolition 2000 Belgium’, a conglomerate of peace organizations (including the two mentioned before) that was set up in the 1990s as a result of the discussions about the extension of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1995, and as a result of the worldwide ‘Abolition 2000’ movement. The Belgian branch organized a protest in Brussels against the resumption of the French nuclear tests attracting 10,000 people in 1995.
Later on, nuclear disarmament was kept in the news by the actions of more radical peace organizations, such as, Vredesaktie and For Mother Earth. The origins of the peace movement Vredesaktie date back to the post-World War II period. Vredesaktie was engaged in the protests against the Vietnam War. At that time it was part of the International War Resistors League. During and after the Euromissile crisis, the movement was based in the ‘Florennade’, a house close to the missile base in Florennes. In 1997, a year after the opinion of the International Court of Justice on the (i) legality of nuclear weapons, Vredesaktie started the Bomspotting project. As part of this project, peace activists gathered at Kleine Brogel Air Base, climbed over the fence, and started looking for bombs. One of the major goals pursued by the Bomspotting actions was to argue before the courts that the use and threat of use of nuclear weapons is illegal. Each time protesters were taken into custody by the military, they were, however, most of the time rapidly released. In the exceptional case that activists were brought to court, the court declared itself incompetent to adjudicate the matter. These Bomspotting actions were perceived as quite daring, the resulting initiative of a few people perhaps. However, more than 1,000 people participated on some occasions, contrary to expectations. In one instance, 800 people scaled the fence. These actions, as can be expected, drew plenty of media attention and included prominent members of parliament.

One of the Bomspotting actions in the beginning of 2010 even attracted international attention when a small team of activists climbed over the fence, walked over the runway, entered the (second) perimeter with the bunkers, inspected the bunkers from the outside, and wrapped one atomic bunker with a tape with anti-nuclear messages. They did not encounter any security for more than one hour. The first soldier they met was a guard at the entrance of the base whose rifle was disarmed. After a short detention, they were able to smuggle out a video of the event, which was posted on YouTube. The latter was shown on blogs, such as the one of Jeffrey Lewis (ArmsControlWonk), and Hans Kristensen (Federation of American Scientists). The action raised eyebrows in the US. It also led to questions in the Belgian Parliament about the lax security levels at the air base. If peace activists can walk around for a whole hour at an air base, which hosts nuclear weapons without meeting a soldier, terrorists can arguably do the same. In 2001, Nizar Trabelsi, a Tunisian raised in Belgium with affiliations to Al Qaeda, had tried to blow up the (same) Kleine Brogel Air Base (Sageman 2009, p. 9).

The discussion about the possible withdrawal of the tactical nuclear weapons in the framework of the NATO New Strategic Concept in 2010 and the resulting NATO Deterrence and Defence Posture Review has led to new bottom-up initiatives in Belgium. Abolition 2000 asked the major societal organizations (trade unions, youth, women, environmental, human rights, and development organizations) to sign a text that required the immediate withdrawal of the tactical nuclear weapons. In 2013, the four major peace organizations (Pax Christi Flanders, Vrede vzw, Vredesaktie, and CNAPD) decided to organize for the first time in more than 20 years a national protest manifestation against the remaining US tactical nuclear weapons in Belgium. This peace action on 20 October 2013 attracted 2000 people and media attention.

Finally, the interest in nuclear weapons inside the Belgian academic world decreased considerably after the Cold War. During the Cold War, courses on international politics consisted of debates about nuclear deterrence and arms control. After the Cold War, other items made their headway into these programs: conflict prevention, conflict management, peace building, ethnic conflicts, environmental security, humanitarian interventions, etc.
Political parties

There is no political party in Belgium that openly claims that it wants to retain US tactical nuclear weapons on Belgian territory. In practice, however, there are substantial different views amongst the political parties. This analysis requires a short introduction to Belgian politics in general.

Since the beginning of the 1970s, Belgium started to regionalize, first in the cultural sphere and, later on, also economically. Three ‘regions’ (Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels), and three ‘communities’ (Dutch-, French-, and German-speaking), which partly overlap, were created. Over time, they received more power to the detriment of the national (or federal) level. Political parties have been split up between the North and the South as well, since the second half of the 1970s. As a result, Flemish voters cannot vote for a French-speaking politician, and vice versa. Consequently, the citizens from both regions do not have a lot of contact with each other; that also applies to the political parties, even of the same ideology.

To make the confusion even greater, the power of the major political families in both parts of the country is asymmetrical: the Christian-Democrats are, or at least were until recently, powerful in the Dutch-speaking part, while the Socialist party in Flanders has always been rather small. It is the other way around in the French-speaking part. As the Christian-Democrats (until recently) have always been the biggest party in Flanders, and as it has more inhabitants (60 per cent) than Wallonia (40 per cent), the Flemish Christian-Democrats have always (until recently) been the most important party in the country. The third major party in Belgium is the Liberal Party.

Since the beginning of the 1990s, however, the Belgian political system began to change: first of all, there was the growth of the extreme nationalist party Vlaams Blok (now called Vlaams Belang) in Flanders with no similar counterpart in the French-speaking part, becoming the biggest party in the Antwerp region. In the last couple of years, that party has lost many votes to the more moderate Flemish nationalist party Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (NVA) that can claim to be the main successor of the defunct Volksunie. The NVA is currently the biggest political party in Flanders. In short, the three classical political parties – Christian-Democrats, Socialist, and Liberal party – lost many votes to (extreme) nationalist, as well as, populist parties. In Wallonia, the Greens are more successful than in Flanders. All this means that the Belgian political landscape is currently characterized by five or six political parties that have more than 10 per cent of the votes. Most of the time the federal level needs six (and sometimes more) political parties to form a national government. Forming a national government, therefore, is not a sinecure, as the 2010–2011 period showed. The same applies to governing itself. That is the reason why government agreements are seen as sacrosanct, but as the anti-nuclear movement has no strong connections in the ruling parties, they never succeeded in making an issue of nuclear disarmament in the government agreement (except in 1999).

With respect to foreign policy, including NATO’s nuclear weapons policy, the Christian-Democrats are more conservative than the Socialists. As the Christian-Democrats have been in power most of the time, it is not surprising to see that the Belgian position on nuclear weapons policy has been rather conservative. This does not mean that the Christian-Democrats publicly defend the presence of American nuclear weapons in Belgium. But they do not seem eager to take the initiative to get rid of them, at least until recently (Lannoo 2013). NATO solidarity is regarded as more important than nuclear disarmament at present.
Socialists, even more in Flanders than in the southern part of the country, are more progressive, also on foreign policy. As already stated, Flemish socialists like Karel Van Miert and Louis Tobback heavily criticized the installation of the Euromissiles in the 1980s. In the government, Defence Minister Guy Coëme (French-speaking Socialist) took the lead inside the Atlantic Alliance not to modernize the Lance short-range missile in 1990 (Coolsaet 1992, p. 25). Since then, however, the Socialists in government have largely abandoned the issue of nuclear disarmament. In the Parliament, Flemish Socialist Dirk Vandermaelen initiated resolutions for the prohibition of land mines and cluster munitions, initiatives that were followed by government action. Vandermaelen has also published op-eds and spoke out in favor of the withdrawal of the US tactical nuclear weapons in Belgium, but this was not followed by government action.

In 2009, French-speaking Senator Mahoux (Socialist) took the (up to now unsuccessful) initiative to ban nuclear weapons in Belgium. Hearings with academics, officials, and members of the peace movement were set up in the Senate in 2010. According to documents that became available through Wikileaks, the US government did not like the initiative of Mahoux. According to the same source, Vincent Mertens de Wilmars, the diplomatic advisor of Defence Minister De Crem (Christian-Democrat) reassured the US by stating: ‘the government will be ready to meet it and will find ways to ensure [the initiative] becomes bogged down in procedures and ultimately fails’ (De Standaard 2011). The government was successful in achieving both.

The government that did most to get rid of nuclear weapons was the Liberal-Socialist-Green government, in power from 1999 to 2003. It was the first time since the 1960s that the Christian-Democrats were not part of the government. This ‘purple-green’ government was also the most ‘anti-American’ in a very long time. The Bush administration did not help very much in this regard. Together with Chancellor Schröder in Germany and President Chirac in France, Belgian Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt (Dutch-speaking Liberal) and Defence Minister André Flahaut (French-speaking Socialist) were openly against the Iraq war in 2003. With respect to nuclear weapons, the government declaration in 1999 contained a paragraph that said that Belgium had to consult with its Allies in order to reduce the number of American tactical nuclear weapons in Europe. Even the editor-in-chief of De Standaard, a conservative newspaper related to the Christian-Democrats (although that has to a certain extent changed since the arrival of the ‘purple’ governments), supported the idea of the withdrawal full-heartedly (Achten 1999). But officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs wondered behind the scenes whether Belgium would be capable of convincing the rest of the Alliance. Then Belgian Defence Minister André Flahaut (French-speaking Socialist) apparently did not push very hard, if at all, during the NATO Defence Ministerial in December 1999.

Historically, the Liberal party is generally considered as being rather conservative. However, the leaders of the party during the last two decades (Verhofstadt, Dewael, De Gucht), at least on the Flemish-speaking part, cannot be typified as conservatives, except in the socioeconomic domain. This also applies to their foreign policy views. As Prime Minister, Guy Verhofstadt took a surprising initiative in 1999 by announcing that he wanted to make public whether there were American nuclear weapons on Belgian soil. The existing policy had always been ‘neither to confirm nor to deny’ the existence of these weapons. Prime Minister Verhofstadt was immediately reprimanded by the Americans. As a second-best solution, Prime Minister Verhofstadt then invited all the parliamentary faction leaders to inform them whether there were nuclear weapons on Belgian soil. Because the condition was that they too were not allowed to tell anybody, all
of the fraction leaders declined the invitation, except the Liberal Excellency Hugo Covieliers, who ironically is no longer a member of the Liberals (Brinckman 2000).

The Flemish-speaking Liberal party also had one of the most outspoken members of parliament against nuclear weapons in its ranks, namely Patrik Vankrunkelsven. He is a Flemish nationalist that had to look for a new party after the Flemish nationalist party Volksunie imploded in 2001, and he ended up with the Liberals. On regular occasions, he climbed over the fence at Kleine Brogel Air Base. He also led the international chapter of the Mayors for Peace.

It remains remarkable that despite the anti-Bush attitude, from 1999 to 2003, and despite the fact that the Greens for the first time ever were part in the federal government, the nuclear weapons issue was not (or could not be) definitely tackled. To the defence of the Belgian government at the time, it must be admitted that the US administration was still not open to the idea of the withdrawal, at least much less than the Obama administration.

Interestingly, the French-speaking Liberals (MR) – which are rather conservative – are not against the withdrawal of the US tactical nuclear weapons either; however, this party – or at least key figures like Armand De Decker – seems to be in favor of replacing them with a kind of Euro-bomb. The latter idea also finds support in some circles of the Christian-Democrats (De Standaard 1995), and even among some (EU-minded and anti-Atlanticist) Socialists.

**Institutional actors**

Under the heading institutional actors, I include mayors, members of parliament, officials, and members of the government.

The aversion for nuclear weapons among the general public is translated into opposition amongst politicians at the local level: 378 Belgian mayors (out of 589), especially in Flanders and amongst them many Christian-Democrats, have signed up as Mayors for Peace, an international network of mayors against nuclear weapons. The list includes Christian-Democrats like Theo Kelchtermans, the (former) Mayor of Peer, where the Belgian B61 bombs are located, and Jean-Luc Dehaene, former Prime Minister, former Mayor of Vilvoorde, and currently member of the European Parliament. The Mayors for Peace movement in Belgium was led for years by Mortsel Mayor Ingrid Pira (Greens). At one point, its international chapter was led by Mayor Patrik Vankrunkelsven. The Belgian branch is one of the biggest sections of the international movement Mayors for Peace. The latter is another indication of the level of aversion of nuclear weapons in Belgium (in comparison with other countries).

Apart from the local level, the Flemish Parliament approved resolution 82/3 on 23 February 2000, which was introduced by all political parties (except the Christian-Democrats and the extreme right party Vlaams Blok). It asked the Flemish government to put pressure on the Belgian government to discuss the issue of tactical nuclear weapons within NATO. Ten years later, on 24 February 2010, the Flemish Parliament adopted a similar resolution in which it supported the Flemish government again to ask the Belgian government to debate this issue within NATO. This time, the Christian-Democrats – as the opposition party – were also on board.

The Belgian Senate and the Belgian House of Representatives adopted, on 21 April 2005 and 13 July 2005 respectively, resolutions in which they asked the Belgian government to take an initiative within NATO regarding the gradual withdrawal of the
American tactical nuclear weapons; at the same time, they wanted NATO to engage with the Russians on this issue within the NATO-Russia Council. The resolutions also denied any role for nuclear weapons in the EU. On 29 January 2009, the Senate adopted a similar resolution as in 2005. Both were also supported by the Christian-Democrats. On 21 September 2009, a group of Belgian members of Parliament wrote a letter to the US Congress asking for the withdrawal of American nuclear weapons from Belgium.

Currently, two resolutions are circulating in the Belgian Parliament: a more progressive one introduced by the Socialists and the Greens; and a more moderate text signed by the Christian-Democrats, Liberals, and Flemish nationalists (NVA). It remains to be seen whether a compromise can be found.

In addition, a Belgian ‘gang of four’ op-ed was signed in 2010 by political representatives of the three major classical political parties (Christian-Democrats, Socialists, and Liberals), and from the two regions (Flemish and Walloon). The text was signed by former Prime Minister and currently Member of the European Parliament Jean-Luc Dehaene (Flemish Christian-democrat), former Minister of Foreign Affairs and former NATO Secretary-General Willy Claes (Flemish Socialist), former Minister of Foreign Affairs and former European Commissioner Louis Michel (French-speaking Liberal), and former Prime Minister and currently Leader of the Liberal Fraction in the European Parliament Guy Verhofstadt (Claes et al. 2010).

More recently, four female (Flemish) politicians – all members of the European Parliament – wrote a similar op-ed in De Morgen: Kathleen Van Brempt (Socialist), Annemie Neyts (Liberal), Marianne Thyssen (Christian-Democrat), and Frieda Brepoels (Flemish nationalist) (Van Brempt et al. 2011). The latter, as chair of the Parliamentarians for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament (PNND) in the European Parliament, wrote a letter to President Obama on 10 March 2010, asking for the withdrawal of tactical nuclear weapons. It was signed by more than 40 colleagues from different factions in the European Parliament.

Although the broad policy lines are supposed to be set out by elected political decisionmakers, officials in the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defence have de facto a lot to say, especially in domains that are rather technical, like nuclear weapons policy. Generally speaking, bureaucrats have no major interest in changing the existing policy, certainly not if it yields less money and less prestige. That also applies to nuclear weapons policy (Ball 1980, Nolan 1989, 1999, Terriff 1995, Sauer 2005). On top of that, a major characteristic of foreign policy in general is continuity. While politicians most of the time do not serve longer than a four-year term in the Executive, bureaucrats tend to follow these issues for a longer period. All this means that in order to change policy successfully, political decisionmakers have to show leadership in the form of knowing the subject, taking the decision to (try to) push through the desired changes, and do everything they can to make it a success. As decisionmakers only have a limited amount of political capital, they have to choose their political battles (Sauer 2005). Such kind of political leadership, in contrast to Germany, does not (yet?) exist in Belgium.

In addition, the dominant culture in the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs is one of moderation, not of change. The Belgian diplomacy sees itself in general as a mediator, a bridge-builder, a producer of compromises in international politics, not one that sets the guidelines (Reychler 1985, p. 7). That also applies to nuclear weapons policy, which is regarded as an issue that has to be debated and agreed upon consensually within NATO. As stated earlier, NATO solidarity is regarded as more important than nuclear
disarmament. According to these officials, there is apparently a contradiction in adapting NATO’s nuclear weapon policy to the changed external circumstances on the one hand, and keeping NATO solidarity and credibility on the other.

For instance, as a reaction to a 2005 parliamentary resolution, the Minister of Foreign Affairs wrote a reply – most likely drafted by officials – in which he emphasized that Belgian foreign policy is conducted within certain parameters, for example, membership in international organizations and respect of international commitments. He also clarified that the way to reach disarmament objectives is a determined but gradual approach. Further in the text, it is repeated that nuclear disarmament requires a step-by-step approach. Nevertheless, he admits that the logical consequence of future arms control and disarmament efforts will be that the European continent may be free of substrategic nuclear weapons. This is a classic reply, used by Belgian Ministers of Foreign Affairs or Ministers of Defence when they answer parliamentary questions on this matter.

Within the Belgian Ministry of Defense, some pilots in the Belgian Air Force do not want to halt the nuclear mission as it is regarded with esteem. ‘You stand where you sit’, as the adage of bureaucratic politics dictates. In addition, as already mentioned, Minister of Defense Pieter De Crem would like to succeed Rasmussen as NATO Secretary-General in 2014, at least according to the rumors.

Belgian Nuclear Weapons Policy

The Belgian official position is (in principle) in favor of withdrawal, but with the important caveats that (a) there should be a consensus within the Alliance and (b) the Russians should reciprocate in one way or another. When the current German government (Christian-Democrats and Liberals) explicitly stated in its September 2009 declaration that it wanted the US weapons on German soil to be withdrawn, the reaction of the Belgian Minister of Foreign Affairs Yves Leterme (Christian-Democrat) was positive. According to Wikileaks, officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs recommended their Minister to react less enthusiastically than he initially did (De Standaard 2010). As stated before, these officials are not eager to change the existing policy due to the diplomatic culture, grooved thinking and parochial interests (including personal prestige) (Sauer 2005).

Belgium was one of the five NATO member states (together with Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, and Luxemburg) that requested the tactical nuclear weapons issue be included in the agenda of the informal NATO Ministerial in Tallinn, in May 2010. However, at the meeting in Tallinn, it was Germany – again – that was the most active, apparently not fully supported by Belgium. After the release of the modest NATO Strategic Concept in November 2010 – at least from the perspective of nuclear disarmament – Belgium was not among a group of NATO member states (that included Germany and the Netherlands) that took the initiative of writing a working paper about nuclear transparency; later on only, Belgium signed it. It was neither part of the Group of 10 – again including Germany and the Netherlands – calling in 2011 to speed up the elimination of nuclear weapons (Golan-Vilella 2011).

The current government, which took power in December 2011, consisting of the three big political families (Christian-Democrats, Socialists, and Liberals) and led by French-speaking Socialist Elio Di Rupo, was apparently not very active with respect to the withdrawal during the last months of the NATO Deterrence and Defence Posture Review
either. In addition, the government agreement did not include a paragraph like the German one of 2009, despite lobbying by the Belgian peace movement.

Interestingly, the government agreement of December 2011 includes a sentence that states that the Belgian government aims for a ban of weapons that are ‘disproportional’.

The latter referred to one of the major principles of international humanitarian law and was apparently introduced with landmines and cluster munitions in mind. Ironically, none of the drafters apparently envisaged that the weapons that are most disproportional, are nuclear weapons. When reminded of this interpretation, government officials came up with the answer that nuclear weapons are not meant to be used. But if these weapons are not meant to be used, how credible is the nuclear deterrent? Another indication of the fact that the drafters of the government declaration did not have nuclear weapons in mind is the voting behavior of Belgium on the annual resolution in the UN General Assembly on a nuclear weapons ban. While 130-plus countries in the world voted in favor, 20-plus states voted against it in December 2011, most of them NATO states, including Belgium (but excluding NATO member state Norway, which abstained).

The Oslo conference on the humanitarian consequences of the use of nuclear weapons in April 2013 was not attended by the Belgian Special Representative for Nuclear Disarmament and Nuclear Proliferation, in contrast to his colleagues from Germany, the Netherlands, and Turkey. Belgium was represented by a lower-level official from the local embassy. This is another indication of the weak interest in nuclear disarmament by the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The Belgian government is certainly not one that stands on the barricades, but if the US would withdraw these weapons, Belgium would not protest either. The weapons can, for instance, be withdrawn if the US and Russia come to an agreement (Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2013). If Germany takes the lead in withdrawing them unilaterally (or bilaterally with the US), the odds are that Belgium (and the Netherlands) would follow Germany.

In the medium term, the question of the possible replacement of the F-16s may determine whether this issue will be resolved by default in case of non-replacement, or in case of replacement by the Eurofighter, which (at least at this point in time) does not seem suited for a dual-capable role, that is, for both conventional and nuclear missions. The replacement of the Belgian F-16s, however, is a bit less urgent than in Germany: the existing F-16s have been regularly upgraded (including in 2002), and can remain in service until at least 2020 (Lamond and Ingram 2010).

In the long term, apart from a major overhaul of the international system, nuclear weapons (in general) will probably become more and more marginalized. Even within foreign policy establishments worldwide, the attitude towards nuclear weapons seems to be changing in favor of eliminating them altogether (Schultz et al., 2007, Acton and Perkovich 2008, Daalder and Lodal 2008). Despite the inertia characterizing the debate in Belgium, these structural factors could precipitate the withdrawal of the remaining US tactical nuclear weapons in Europe.

**Conclusion**

There is more or less an elite consensus both in the US and Belgium that there is no use for the remaining 200 US tactical nuclear weapons in Europe, and if you would ask people on the Belgian streets whether they want to continue or abandon this practice of hosting US nuclear weapons, 7 or 8 out of 10 would be in favor of abandoning the
mission. The logic of withdrawal applies even more to Belgium than to other host nations, as the issue has never been completely absent from the political agenda. This is so because of actions by the peace movement, including Bomspotting actions, and by the views of all political parties (except the extreme right party Vlaams Blok, renamed Vlaams Belang). These actors have spoken out in favor of withdrawal through parliamentary resolutions, op-eds (individual and ‘four horsemen’ type), and participation in actions at Kleine Brogel. The policy inertia on nuclear matters in Belgium is, therefore, even more surprising than in other countries. The disconnect can be explained by a low-profile diplomatic culture in the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the lack of a strong link between the anti-nuclear movement and the political parties in power, resulting in the absence of a political leader at the governmental level who clearly speaks out in favor of withdrawal. The disconnect between anti-nuclear public opinion in Belgium and the incrementalism of the defense community is not sustainable. Resolving the gap is a crucial problem for policymakers to solve as Belgium continues to carve out a space for itself within NATO in the twenty-first century.

Notes

1. According to Prof. Eric David (Université Libre de Bruxelles) in a hearing before the Belgian Senate on 14 January 2010. See: Rapport du groupe de travail ‘désarmement nucléaire’, Belgian Senate, 4-1630/1, 5 May 2010, p. 6.
2. This seems to contradict the so-called low alert-levels of the B61s on European territory.
3. The Netherlands was only once invaded by Germany.
4. Some historians (like Prof.Luc De Vos of the Royal Military School) believe that this is a myth.
5. The peace movement in Western Europe and the US also had a direct influence on the thinking of people like Michael Gorbatchov, who understood that the pressure on the Western governments was such that reasonable arms control proposals by the USSR – needed to reform the economy – had a reasonable chance to be accepted by the West. The Western peace movements, therefore, played an indirect role in bringing the Berlin Wall down (Evangelista 1999).
7. Including from government parties, including Liberals, and at a certain moment in time including a Flemish Minister, more in particular Bert Anciaux (a Flemish nationalist who belonged to the Volksunie, and since the break-up of that party joined the Socialists).
9. On 6 August 2013, Benoit Lannoo – a rather unknown Christian-Democratic party member, wrote an op-ed in De Morgen in favor of the withdrawal of the US tactical nuclear weapons from Belgium. He was supported by former Prime Ministers Jean-Luc Dehaene and Marc Eyskens, and other party members. The article attracted criticism from Belgian Minister of Defense Pieter De Crem (also Christian-Democrat). It is generally known that he is interested in the post of NATO Secretary-General.
10. The reasons why the French-speaking socialists are more conservative on defense (including nuclear) issues than its Dutch-speaking colleagues are: (1) the fact that they are a much larger party and therefore more linked to the establishment; (2) the presence of a larger defense industry in the South of the country (like FN Herstal); and (3) the fact that the French-speaking Socialists more confer with the Socialist Party in France, while the Dutch-speaking Socialists look more for cues from Germany, and Scandinavia.
11. Prof. Coolsaet was member of the cabinet of Coeme at that time.
13. Mr Achten is currently the Head of the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. An earlier editorial in the same journal, however, was more critical (Buyse 1999).
The government pleads for revitalizing and respecting the non-proliferation treaty. It will decisively work for international initiatives that aim to further disarmament – including nuclear – and for a ban on weapon systems with an arbitrary range and/or causing a disproportional number of civilian casualties. [author’s translation].

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