U.S. Nonstrategic Nuclear Weapons

While no consensus definition exists, non-strategic nuclear weapons, otherwise known as ***tactical nuclear weapons***, are generally low-yield nuclear weapons designed for use on the battlefield. They can also be defined as weapons not covered by strategic arms control treaties, such as New START, which encompass nuclear weapons delivered via intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), or heavy bombers. Nuclear mines, artillery, torpedoes and some gravity bombs are considered tactical nuclear weapons.

Since the peak of the Cold War, both the U.S. and Russia have significantly cut their arsenals of tactical and strategic nuclear weapons. Nonetheless, the United States possesses hundreds of tactical nuclear weapons in its stockpile and Russia possesses an estimated 1,912 non-strategic nuclear weapons.

U.S. Tactical Nuclear Arsenal

The current U.S. tactical nuclear arsenal is comprised of approximately 230 B61 gravity bombs in two versions, the B61-3 and B61-4. Dual-capable NATO-designated F-15, F-16, and PA-200 Tornado fighter planes are the current systems capable of delivering the B-61, while the F-35A is slated to become nuclear-certified for future B61 missions.

The U.S. Air Force deploys an estimated 100 B61s at six NATO air bases in five countries. The remaining nuclear weapons are stored in the U.S. for possible overseas deployment.

U.S. Tactical Nuclear Weapons in Europe

Country	Base	Nuclear Weapons
Turkey	Incirlik Air Base	**20**
Belgium	Kleine Brogel Air Base	**15**
Netherlands	Volkel Air Base	**15**
Germany	Büchel Air Base	**15**
Italy	Aviano & Ghedi Torre Air Base	**35**

Source: Hans Kristensen/Federation of American Scientists

While the tactical nuclear arsenal could once be deployed on NATO-designated aircraft within minutes, today the readiness level is measured in months.

Costs and Upgrades

The U.S. is spending around $1.5 trillion to modernize and maintain its entire nuclear arsenal over the next 30 years. Included in this plan is the consolidation of four versions of the B61 bomb (B61-3, -4, -7, -10) into 480 B61-12 bombs, a newly designed version intended for both strategic and tactical delivery. The B61-12 will have variable yield capability – ranging from 98 percent smaller to three times greater than the bomb dropped on Hiroshima – and a new tail kit to increase accuracy. The first B16-12s completed production in late 2021 with deployment in Europe estimated to begin in 2022-2024.

The Trump administration, in its 2018 Nuclear Posture Review, also initiated plans to develop a new nonstrategic nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missile, which had previously been retired from the arsenal in 2011. It remains to be seen whether the Biden administration will move forward on these plans.