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 missile (ICBM), submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM), 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 deploys hundreds of tactical nuclear weapons in Europe and estimates of Russia’s non-strategic nuclear arsenal range from about 1,000 to 4,000 weapons.

U.S. Tactical Nuclear Arsenal

The current U.S. tactical nuclear arsenal is comprised of approximate 500 B61 gravity bombs, which have three tactical versions (the B61-3, -4, and -10). Dual-capable NATO-designated F-15, F-16, and Tornado fighter planes are the current systems capable of delivering the B-61, while the F-35A is slated to deliver the future US arsenal.

The U.S. Air Force deploys 150-200 B61’s at six NATO air bases in five countries. The remaining nuclear weapons are stored in the U.S. for possible overseas deployment.

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 planning to spend up to $1 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 400 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.

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<th>U.S. Tactical Nuclear Weapons in Europe</th>
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*Sources: Department of Defense, Federation of American Scientist, Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Royal United Services Institute, Strategic Studies Institute, Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, and NATO*