



Comment:

## Enter Timmermans - Will the Dutch finally get rid of nuclear weapons?

By Wilbert van der Zeijden

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Promoting a more transparent and accountable NATO

The new Dutch minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Frans Timmermans, has a long track record of calling for an end to the deployment of US nuclear weapons on Dutch territory. As recent as April 2012, he made it clear that he and his Labour Party believe that the Netherlands should negotiate the ending of nuclear deployments with the US - without NATO consensus backing if necessary. Earlier attempts by the Dutch and German governments failed, apparently after huge pressure from NATO allies. Will Timmermans be the one to succeed?

### Gradual Shift

Over the past few years, there has been a noticeable shift in Dutch political discourse about involvement in NATO nuclear sharing arrangements. Now, almost all parties advocate the ending of US deployments in Europe. Some stick to the aim of convincing NATO to do it. Others want to discuss the removal of the last 20 B61 gravity nuclear bombs deployed on Volkel Air Base bilaterally with the US.



*weapons have lost any military significance. For a political role they don't have to be on Dutch territory. My party wants these weapons removed, if necessary in a bilateral context.*

In 2005, Timmermans advocated for the withdrawal of TNW and in 2010 a parliamentary motion called on the government to "inform the US government that it is no longer attached to the protection of the European continent through the presence of US nuclear weapons in Europe and considers their withdrawal desirable." This motion was supported by Timmermans and by almost all the other parliamentarians as well.

The motion was later referred to by the then Minister of Foreign Affairs (Maxime Verhagen) as "supporting existing policy".

(The USAF provides 20 tactical B61 nuclear bombs for use by the Netherlands under the NATO nuclear weapons sharing agreement. These weapons are stored at Volkel Air Base and in time of war they may be delivered by Royal Netherlands Air Force F-16 warplanes - pictured; photo credit: RS Deakin/ flickr)

Timmermans is one of them. He has grown bolder over the past few years advocating for the withdrawal of TNW from Europe, culminating in a statement in Parliament this April saying that:

*As is commonly known, my party is in favor of giving up the nuclear task that the Netherlands still has in NATO. Therefore, there should be negotiations with the US about removing the nuclear weapons that possibly<sup>1</sup> are on Dutch territory. These*

In April and May 2012, Timmermans voted in favour of a series of motions that almost won a majority in parliament, calling for an end to investments in training and infrastructure for the Dutch nuclear tasks, an end to deployment, and an early decision not to buy new nuclear capable aircraft.

In the Netherlands there is no longer really an 'other side' in this debate. No one is calling for retaining TNW for any defence,

<sup>1</sup> He's using 'possibly', not because he doubts there are nuclear weapons on Dutch territory, but because the Dutch government maintains a policy of ambiguity –

that silly game where everyone knows the weapons are there, but no one is allowed to state it as a fact.

deterrence or diplomatic purpose. No one doubts that the weapons *should* go. The only real debate is how actively the Netherlands should pursue the aim to be nuclear weapons free.

### **The bilateral scenario**

Strictly speaking, the Netherlands doesn't need the green light from NATO for withdrawal. Regardless of what NATO staff say, the deployment of nuclear weapons of one country on the territory of another country is an agreement between the two countries involved. No one can force the US to keep deploying nuclear weapons in another country and no one can force the Netherlands to keep hosting US weapons. Negotiations on the relocation of the TNW back to the US are therefore – as Timmermans suggested in parliament – possible.

It has happened before. The most recent examples are Greece in 2001 and the UK around the same time. Both countries, together with the US, came to the conclusion that US nuclear deployments were no longer needed or desirable. The subsequent decision to repatriate them was done without any consultation with allies. NATO was just informed of the decision after the fact.

For the Dutch, the scenario could be like this: Timmermans calls the US Secretary of State and announces the Dutch decision to end the deployment of US nuclear weapons on Dutch territory within a reasonable timeframe. The two countries work out a realistic plan and together announce the decision in the next NATO Nuclear Planning Group (NPG) meeting. They invite the Allies to share their concerns about possible side-effects of the withdrawal decision and their ideas on how to mitigate these effects.

Perhaps a more appropriate way forward would be for the US and the Netherlands to start a round of discussions first with the other four states that currently host US nuclear weapons: Belgium, Germany, Italy and Turkey, to see if any or all of them would choose to follow the same path.

### **Applying pressure**

Some say that this could never work because the Dutch would face severe pressure or even repercussions if they 'go it alone'. The failed attempt of Germany to remove the

weapons from their soil over the past few years seems to confirm this. The 2009 German government coalition agreement states that Germany "*will advocate a withdrawal of remaining nuclear weapons from Germany, both within NATO and vis-à-vis our American allies*"<sup>2</sup>. The idea was pushed most by Liberal Democrat Guido Westerwelle, who said days after being sworn in as the new Minister of Foreign Affairs that he would personally " [...] *enter talks with our allies so that the last of the nuclear weapons still stationed in Germany, relics of the Cold War, can finally be removed. Germany must be free of nuclear weapons.*"

As it turned out, Westerwelle's personal engagement on the subject was not enough. Nor was it enough that he managed to make it the official government policy of his country. The weapons are still there, in Buchel. Lack of support from Angela Merkel, combined with immediate pressure from NATO allies and a subtle campaign to depict Westerwelle as 'weak'<sup>3</sup> killed the German appetite to push for B61 withdrawal. The disheartening result was seen after the DDRP signing in May 2012, when Westerwelle did his feeble best to sell the decision by NATO to change nothing as a 'remarkable' success.<sup>4</sup>

We will probably have to wait for Westerwelle's memoirs to find out exactly how the alliance managed to put so much pressure on him that he started to say things he clearly does not believe. For future attempts, whether it is by Timmermans now, a new German government next year or the Italian ministry of economics trying desperately to save money on useless defence expenditures, the German case tells us that – apparently – the appetite within NATO to force allies into accepting unwanted nuclear deployments is still large. The question is not *if* there will be pressure, the question is *how much, applied by whom* and *for how long* NATO can go on with these mafia-style disciplinary measures without irreversibly damaging internal cohesion and solidarity.

<sup>2</sup> Meier, Oliver, 2009: *German Nuclear Stance Stirrs Debate* <http://www.armscontrol.org/print/3984>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.europeanvoice.com/article/imported/unflappable-liberal/75562.aspx>

<sup>4</sup> Deutsche Welle, 23 May 2012: *Disarmament means increasing security*, <http://www.dw.de/disarmament-means-increasing-security/a-15967956-1>

## **A reminder**

For Timmermans specifically, it would be instructive to recall, when the pressure applied by friends is almost unbearable, why such a broad spectrum of the electorate, for so long, has wanted the B61 to go.<sup>5</sup>

First of all, the Netherlands does no longer regard Russia as a military threat. And it does not see any new useful purpose for the B61 deployments. They are useless militarily and need not be in the Netherlands to fulfil any perceived political role.

Second, keeping the bombs means keeping the nuclear mission for the Dutch airforce. And ultimately that means more investment in new aircraft, infrastructure, maintenance costs and training of pilots and ground personnel.

Third, the secrecy surrounding the nuclear deployments fits awkwardly with 21<sup>st</sup> century practices of governmental transparency and accountability. It irritates citizens that no open debate is allowed.

Fourth, the continued deployment of weapons of mass destruction on Dutch territory stands in the way of a mature and credible role for the Netherlands in international arms control and non-proliferation forums. One doesn't need to think too much to figure out what Iran says when the Netherlands shares its concerns about the Iranian nuclear programme.

Fifth, continued reliance on these weapons stands in the way of the modernisation of NATO as an organisation.

Overall, the pressures brought to bear to keep these weapons on Dutch territory could be enormous. It will be up to Mr. Timmermans to maintain his position and to engage with the US knowing full well that he has the majority of Dutch public opinion supporting his efforts.

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<sup>5</sup>The 2010 election exit poll showed that 87% of the population does not support the deployment of nuclear weapons on Dutch territory. See for analysis: <http://vredessite.nl/kernwapens/2011/ikv1103.html>