

21 March 2024

Hugo Barker

The hosting of US nuclear weapons at RAF Lakenheath

NEW
DIPLOMACY
PROJECT

Background

In March 2023, a [document](#) from the US Office of the Under Secretary of Defense disclosed that £39 million had been allocated to build new facilities that could host nuclear weapons at RAF Lakenheath. Since then, [reporting](#) has identified these to likely be the B61-12, which is a variable yield nuclear gravity bomb, being able to be set to yields of 0.3, 1.5, 10 or 50 kilotons of TNT equivalent (kT) (for context, the missile housed on Trident is 100kT and the bomb dropped on Hiroshima was 15 kT). This would be a significant shift in policy as these types of weapons systems have not been hosted on British soil since 2008. At this stage, it has not been publicly confirmed if this is taking place.

The variable yield aspect of the weapons is important as it means they can be used 'tactically' and 'strategically'. This would differ from the UK's Trident nuclear arsenal, which is a submarine-born Intercontinental Ballistic Missile, a strategic weapon, in line with the UK's policy of only using nuclear weapons strategically. In this context, a tactical use of a nuclear weapon would be to hit large-scale infrastructure such as a dam, airport, seaport, etc. Strategic would be about hitting a major population centre with significant civilian casualties. From a geopolitical perspective, there is a real question if there is any real difference between tactical and strategic, with many experts arguing that any use of a nuclear weapon would be strategic.

As such, a foreign power could see locating this type of weapons system as a change in the nuclear posture on the British Isles, thus changing the strategic and tactical calculations for that nation in relation to the UK.

The United States Air Force has [confirmed](#) the F-35A Lightning II can deliver this weapons system. These aircraft are also hosted at RAF Lakenheath as part of the 48th Fighter Wing. It is also the same aircraft that the UK has in its arsenal. This could lead to a situation where a foreign adversary could see any aircraft of this type launched from the UK, in particular in the vicinity of RAF Lakenheath, possibly hosting nuclear munitions. This, in turn, may lead to UK aircraft being seen as having a different threat potential and, thus, possibly more dramatic countermeasures from an adversary against UK F35s.

It is also worth noting that this thinking will also be in the context of new advancements in nuclear technology, such as hypersonic missiles, Poseidon tsunami nuclear torpedos, space-based nuclear EMPs and the recent public failure of the Trident missile system.

Impact of this development

Maria Zakharova, a spokesperson for the Russian Foreign Ministry, stated "If this step is ever made, we will view it as escalation, as a step toward escalation that would take things to a direction that is quite opposite to addressing the pressing issue of pulling all nuclear weapons out of European countries. In the context of the transition of the United States and NATO to an openly confrontational course of inflicting a 'strategic defeat' on Russia, this practice and its development force us to take compensating countermeasures designed to reliably protect the security interests of our country and its allies."

Given this statement and the ever-increasing global tensions, particularly in Eastern Europe, this could result in a new viable escalation pathway that would include the UK. It is also worth noting that Russia maintains in its military doctrine the ability for it to use nuclear weapons in a tactical sense in defence of its sovereign territory. This, combined with how it views certain parts of Ukraine as its sovereign territory it is feasible that there could be a tactical use of nuclear weapons in Ukraine. If this attack were to be performed, it is also feasible that Russia may look to eliminate or at least closely monitor with a hair-trigger (creating a heightened possibility of accidents) any equivalent tactical nuclear system, such as the ones at RAF Lakenheath, which would likely be one of the closest airborne tactical nuclear assets to the western part of Russia.

As such, it is vital that any UK government, incoming or outgoing, carefully considers what it would mean for the UK's nuclear posture for the US to host such a weapons system at RAF Lakenheath.

The weapons would be hosted at an airbase that sits just northeast of Cambridge and, in turn, not far from London. As such, an attack or fear of an attack in this area, which can be seen as the economic heart of the UK, could be catastrophic to the UK as a whole. It does not mean that the deployment of such a system is necessarily against the interest of the UK but that its pros and cons must be carefully considered, taking into account all possibilities.

Recommendations for Policymakers

Policymakers need to carefully consider what the deployment of these systems would mean for the UK, both in terms of risk and benefits. To do this, effective wargaming needs to be performed by the UK government to determine what this could mean for new pathways for nuclear escalation. This could be done by using [research](#) by Chatham House and the Behavioural Insights Team, looking at the application of behavioural science in nuclear decision-making. Their work highlights the need for small well-signposted changes that deal

with hypercomplex nuclear systems so as not to create unintended escalations due to a lack of cultural understanding. As shown in this brief, the RAF Lakenheath situation could be seen as a significant change that doesn't consider the Russian strategic culture around the use of tactical nuclear weapons.

Once this is done, deconflicting strategies must be developed to prevent unintended escalation. An example of this could be British F35s being mistaken for American nuclear-armed F35s. Along with this, risk assessments need to be made around possible nuclear accidents at RAF Lakenheath, as well as if there was an attack on the base and what this would mean for the southeast of England.

Given that the UK would be taking on many of the strategic and tactical risks by hosting these weapons, careful consideration should be made about whether the UK should have some of its own. This is especially topical given the growing complexities of the Trident and its recent failures. Having these systems in the UK would allow for leverage when it comes to possible NATO negotiations with a future Trump government, so it should be made clear that it is only under the UK's permission that these systems can be located on British soil.

The Author:

Hugo Barker, is a researcher working with the New Diplomacy Project as a science and technology lead. He researches the policy implications in a security and resilience setting of emerging technologies. This research has focused specifically on data privacy concerns around immersive technologies. This work has been fed into policy discussions with departments in the UK Government, parliament and regulators. He has an MSc in Security and Resilience: Science and Technology from Imperial college where he covered material on CBRNE issues, transport security, behavioural security science, cybersecurity and explosive physics. This has supported his strong interest in nuclear strategy and its interaction with emerging technology.

About the New Diplomacy Project:

The New Diplomacy Project is helping Labour to develop a foreign policy for the 21st Century. Our experienced network of foreign policy researchers provides expert advice to Labour MPs and Lords, from real-time reactions to global events to in-depth policy briefings on complex areas of foreign policy. We seek to expand Labour's capacity to think about foreign policy, whilst complementing and bolstering the work of its frontbench team.

www.newdiplomacy.uk

@NewDiplomacyUK