3 February 2012 Last updated at 17:42 GMT

Tactical nuclear weapons 'are an anachronism'

By Gordon Corera Security correspondent, BBC News

Tactical nuclear weapons in Europe are a Cold War anachronism and should be removed from combat bases, argues the group Global Zero in a new report.

Both Russia and Nato maintain such tactical weapons (which are smaller in scale than so-called strategic weapons) even though many experts say their military usefulness is unclear.

When they were deployed, the original targets for those weapons on the Nato side were states in eastern Europe - which are themselves now part of the European Union and Nato.

"This proposal - developed by national security experts - is grounded in the fact that these tactical nuclear weapons in Europe serve no meaningful purpose 20 years after the end of the Cold War, and represent nothing but a financial cost and a security risk," argues Matt Brown, co-founder of Global Zero.

The group (whose UK co-chair is the former Defence and Foreign Secretary Sir Malcolm Rifkind) also argues that removing them from combat bases would greatly increase early warning and decision time, and therefore reduce any remaining concern of a sudden nuclear attack.

There are thought to be about 200 Nato weapons at six combat bases in Europe (they were removed from RAF Lakenheath in the UK in the last decade).

The number of Russian weapons is less clear but there are thought to be perhaps 500-700 at combat bases.

Global Zero has mapped them using commercially available satellite imagery.

The call is to move these away from bases where they are co-located with delivery systems such as planes and missiles and instead place them in national storage facilities.

In the case of US weapons, this would involve taking them back to the continental US itself, to Kirtland in New Mexico and Nellis in Nevada, and in Russia to facilities like that at Belgorad.

Budget constraints
Nato is currently undergoing a Deterrence and Defence Posture Review ahead of its summit in Chicago in May, and US President Barack Obama has committed himself to the goal of nuclear disarmament.

But moving the weapons is a challenging goal. It is election season in both the US and Russia this year.

In the past, European allies in Nato have wanted to maintain the weapons to reassure them of

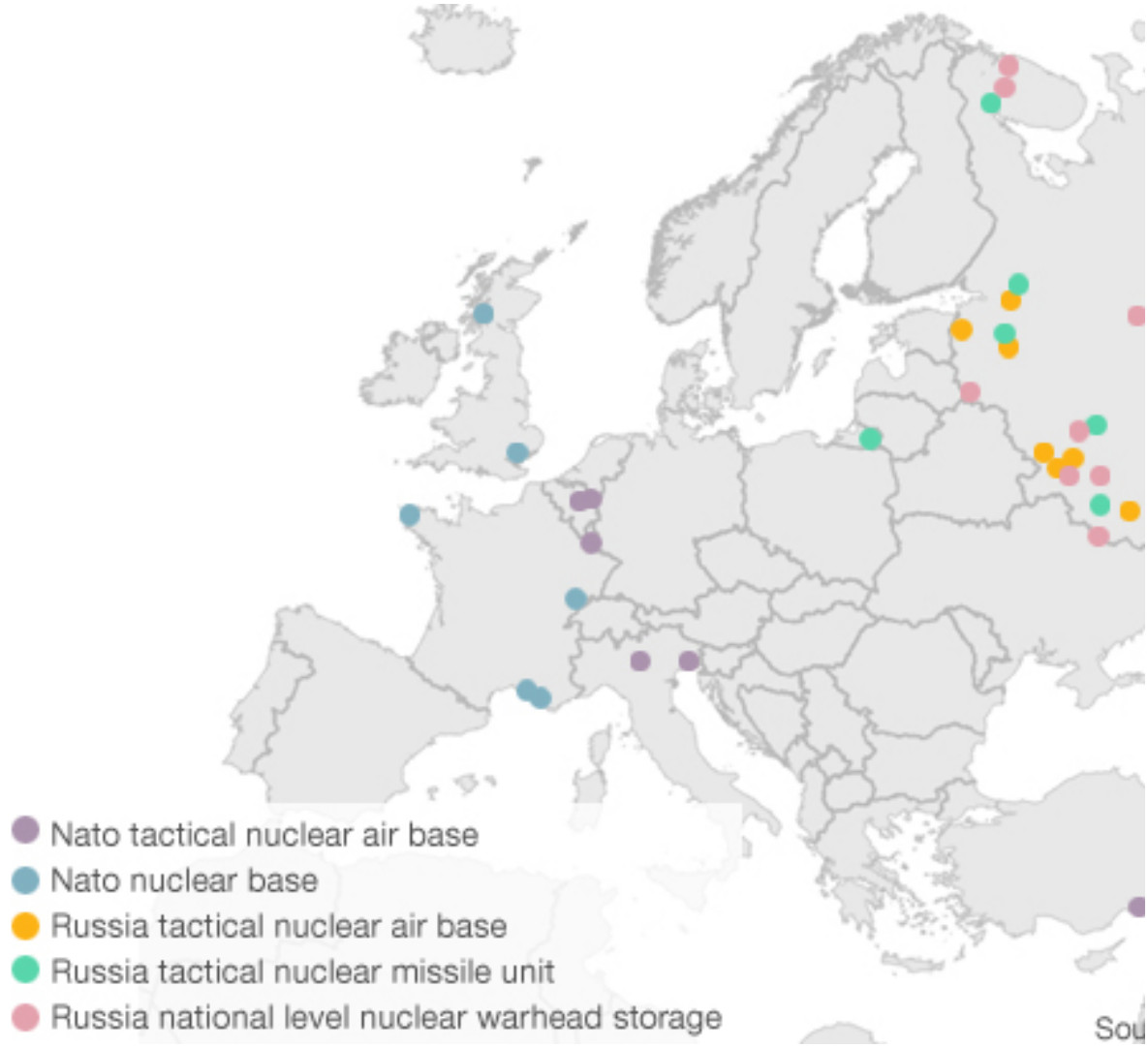
America's commitment to their defence.

Western European nations (where the weapons are housed) have moved away from that position, with some such as Germany calling for their removal - but newer members to the east continue to see them as a guarantee of US commitment to defend them.

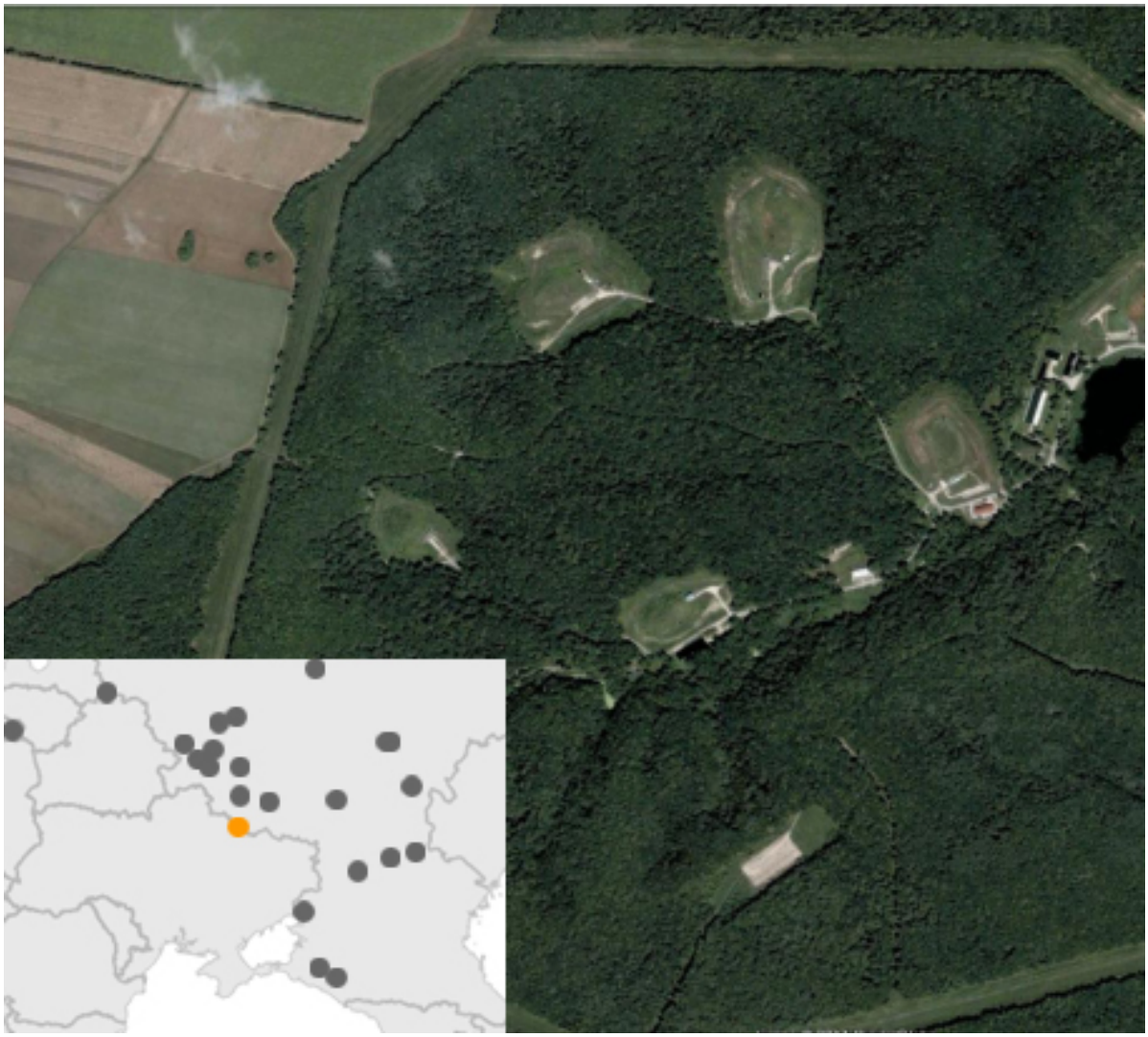
Russia meanwhile has seen such weapons as compensating for relative weaknesses in conventional military force.

Global Zero, which campaigns for the elimination of nuclear weapons, argues there are other ways of providing reassurance. It says this proposal is one way of getting the US and Russia back to the negotiating table and getting a process for first bilateral and then multilateral disarmament back on track.

It also argues that it would improve security for the weapons and lower costs at a time when defence budgets are under strain.



Compared with the Cold War era there are now a handful of tactical nuclear weapons sites in Europe



Belgorod national nuclear warhead storage, Russia

Close-up showing detail of Belgorod nuclear warhead storage areas

Seshcha airbase in Russia

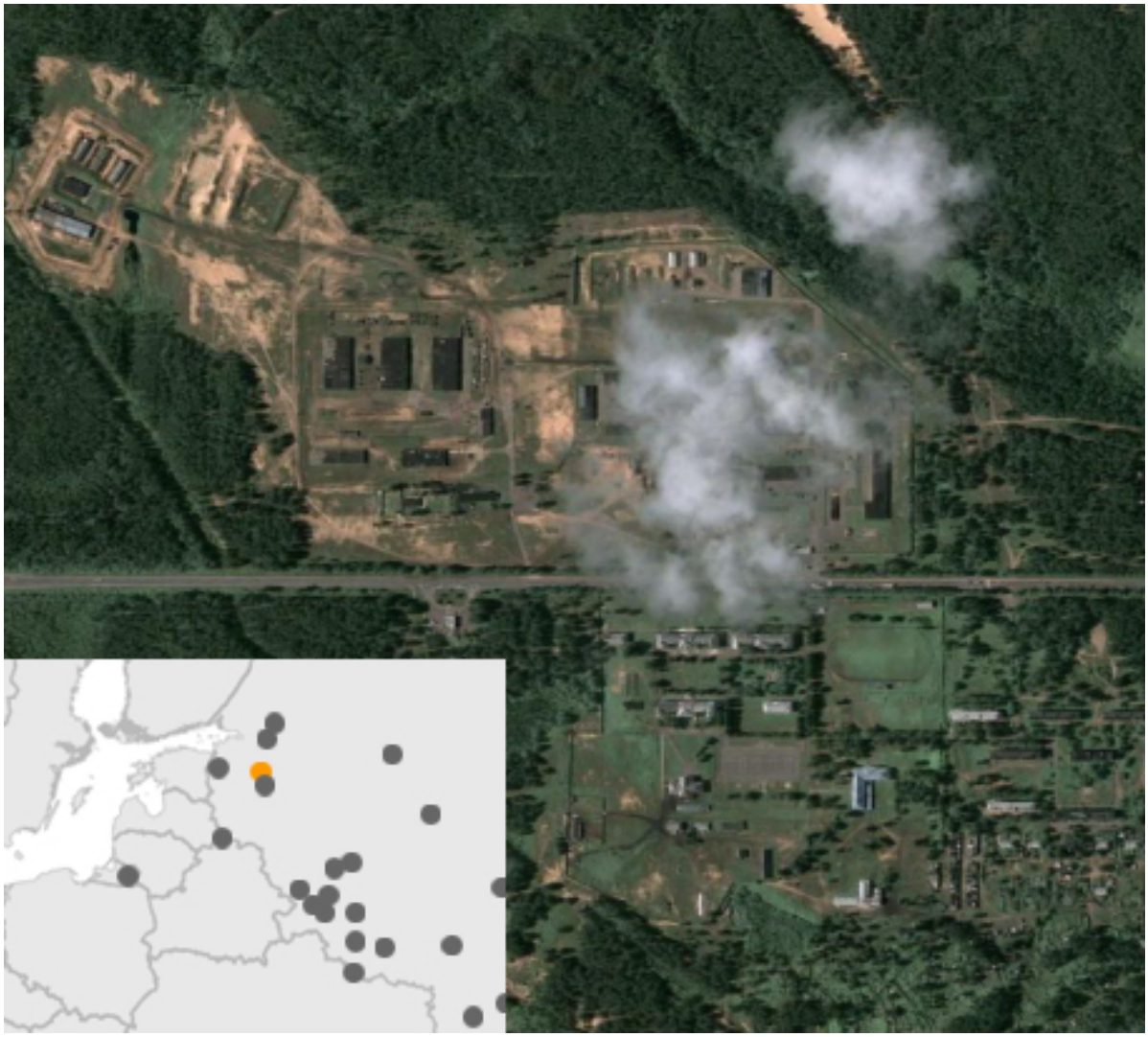
Seshcha airbase in Russia with the maintenance "technical territory" shown in detail

The Russian Sol'tsy airbase near Estonia which houses "Backfire" strategic bombers

Like other bases for Russian tactical nuclear weapons, it has a special area for storing nuclear munitions.

1st Missile Brigade, Krasnodar, Russia

Storage areas of 1st Missile Brigade, Krasnodar, Russia



131st Missile Brigade, Luga, Russia

Storage area of the 131st Missile Brigade, Luga, Russia

Aviano airbase, Italy, one of two tactical nuclear weapons bases in Italy.

Aviano airbase, Italy. Most of the bombs are now stored in vaults under the aircraft hangers.

Ghedi Torre airbase, Italy's other nuclear site which is operated by the Italian air force,

Ghedi Torre airbase, Italy

Büchel airbase, Germany, one of the six tactical nuclear weapons storage sites in Europe.

Büchel airbase, Germany, one of the six tactical nuclear weapons storage sites in Europe. (detail)

Kleine Brogel airbase, Belgium, showing the main runway and facilities

The storage areas for tactical nuclear weapons at Kleine Brogel airbase, Belgium

Incirlik airbase, Turkey. At the height of the Cold War, hundreds of nuclear weapons were stored in Turkey.

Today, Incirlik airbase is the only storage site for nuclear weapons in Turkey.

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