

Mind the Gap

healing the NATO rift over US tactical nuclear weapons in Europe

**NATO's Strategic Concept review needs to include nuclear posture,
in a measured and balanced discussion
with coherence, cohesiveness and security at its heart**

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Introduction

NATO has 28 members and aspires to welcome new ones, by its own standards a measure of extraordinary success in the two decades since the collapse of the Soviet empire; on the surface it is as strong as it ever has been. Yet the Alliance remains haunted by the ghosts of the past, as the members from “new Europe” bring with them their experience of the Soviet boot and their fears for future relations with a seemingly resurgent Russia. It is this weight of history and differences in threat perception that threatens to paralyze the Alliance and drive its members apart. This compels us to search for new and credible solutions to break out of the Cold War mould that bedevils the organization, threatens its cohesion, and brings doubt to its fundamental purposes.

Whilst NATO's nuclear posture is not itself a cause of this challenge, it lies at its heart. Whilst there is little doubt that support for extended nuclear deterrence remains throughout the Alliance, the existence of an estimated 200 forward-deployed so-called ‘tactical’ nuclear weapons in western Europe with limited range is a Cold War relic. Support for their continued deployment appears to revolve largely around the symbolism of American commitment to the continent, and the fear of signals sent were they to be removed.

This paper proposes a two-pronged political approach to overcome NATO's nuclear dilemma. The new German government has come under some criticism for openly questioning the value of these weapons, criticism largely focused on the manner of the approach rather than on the idea of withdrawal itself. BASIC, which has conducted consultations with NATO allies in Washington and London over the last twelve months, believes that NATO could stake out a new position consistent with the Obama administration's disarmament stance by striking out explicit references to US forward deployed nuclear forces in Europe in the new Concept, in recognition that they are no longer central to NATO's strategy, before taking the incremental step of beginning to quietly remove the weapons and investing political and military assets in more effective capabilities. But we simultaneously appeal

to Central and Eastern European governments to show constructive leadership or face the prospect of their countries being marginalized – the realization of their own worst fear.

The advantages of such a policy, which would set a non-proliferation example at a time when non-nuclear weapons states are looking to the declared nuclear states for concrete steps in the context of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference, would outweigh whatever risk there may be. If successful, the goal of achieving NATO unity would be achieved, strengthening the Alliance's hand considerably in future engagement with Russia, and giving further genuine incentive to western Europe and the United States to guarantee security.

Nuclear posture (and Central Europe) cannot be ignored

There is a clear and understandable reaction from many within NATO that when considering the Strategic Concept there is already enough challenge around Afghan operations and the debate over the balance between Article V commitments as against NATO operations further afield, without raising difficult issues around nuclear posture. Raising the lid on this nuclear Pandora's box could create deep problems for the Alliance, and permanently weaken its unity, with dangerous consequences for all. But to separate out nuclear posture in this manner fails to see the critical links with those related debates, and stores up continued future problems for NATO security.

Differences in assumptions and conflicts of value within NATO underpin all these challenges, in particular centering on differing threat perceptions, conflicting ways to counter those threats, and varying confidence in nuclear and other forms of deterrent. Debates around the identity and future of the Alliance are still intimately connected with its nuclear posture, even if indirectly, and that posture represents a very real and concrete expression of that identity.

NATO need not fear strong political demands to abandon the nuclear role at this time. The US Nuclear Posture Review involves an explicit and strong recommitment to extended deterrence on behalf of allies both in Asia and Europe, and US nuclear forces will remain committed to NATO. The essence of the 1999 Strategic Concept words: "the independent nuclear forces of the United Kingdom and France, which have a deterrent role of their own, contribute to the overall deterrence and security of the Allies" is unlikely to change.

Recommitment to extended deterrence still gives significant flexibility in NATO policy, and enables the Alliance to recognize the changed security environment and see the opportunities to strengthen Alliance and global security through reducing the salience of nuclear weapons. Roles for nuclear weapons have been shrinking since the Cold War, a trend continued under President George W. Bush. Deterrence does not always require the threat of nuclear retaliation, but can involve conventional or non-military threats. Specifically, the deployment of vulnerable and indiscriminate free-fall nuclear bombs is now openly questioned by member states.

Why are the weapons still in Europe? The United States has been waiting for an Allied request which has never been forthcoming. Washington worries that removal could send an unintended signal of disengagement or reduced US commitment to European security. West European host states have been reluctant to raise the issue

(prior to the recent German government agreement to do so) for fear of being seen as weak, anti-American, or lacking commitment to the Alliance. Governments of Central European states have stated their opposition to their removal because of the perceived threat from Russia. Without some new thinking, this damaging stalemate is set to continue indefinitely, and could affect Alliance cohesion in the longer term.

BASIC has for over 20 years focused on transatlantic security, and nuclear disarmament and nonproliferation. Alliance cohesion is desirable not only for its direct benefit to the Alliance and its members, but also because it makes it more possible to achieve the lasting benefits from mutual disarmament. Positive decisions on issues surrounding the future of forward-deployed nuclear weapons will be made more durable if Allies are consulted and those decisions taken with the interests of all Allies at heart. To do otherwise could elicit pushback by some members against important security improvements if they come to resent the way certain key decisions are made. Hence, the approach by Central European states is critical, regarding the Strategic Concept, the future of the Alliance, and decisions around Article V and operations out of area.

NATO Deterrence in the European context

Direct Deterrence

It is widely believed that deterrence has played a central role in ensuring the security of the Atlantic Alliance since its inception in 1949. Deterrence is an attempt to change the calculus of competitors, so that they refrain from a course of action they would otherwise execute – it depends upon their capability, intentions and will, and how one can meet them. A great deal depends upon the psychology, history and the framing of communications. With more disagreement in recent years over who those competitors are, and their will, deterrence calculations have become more complex. Faith in deterrence has instead focused on the Alliance's capabilities. This can be dangerous because deterrent effects might be overestimated and the bluff called, or it can mean that costly weapon systems are deployed without any real deterrent benefit.

It is also worth focusing on ambiguity as an element of deterrence theory that has achieved near sacred status within nuclear policy circles. It is seen in the Strategic Concept as useful, “by ensuring uncertainty in the mind of any aggressor about the nature of the Allies' response to military aggression.” [para. 62] From a military perspective, ambiguity complicates the calculations of any potential aggressor, and means they are less likely to attack. However ambiguity is achieved by secrecy and by implicitly expanding the salience and potential roles of nuclear weapons. NATO and its member states need to consider such issues when reviewing the Strategic Concept – there is a direct trade-off with trust, confidence-building, transparency and democratic accountability essential to the global nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation agenda.

Assurance and Cohesion

Assurance exists alongside deterrence. If members of the Alliance are appropriately assured, this builds cohesion and confidence, strengthens the relevance and legitimacy of the Alliance, and may persuade members against certain unilateral courses of action (such as acquiring their own nuclear arsenals) that could be deemed undesirable. The ability to present a united front is perhaps the most important element of NATO's indirect deterrent capability – at least as important as any weapon system – and is carefully guarded by its members. If

any potential adversary is left without doubt as to the willingness of NATO members to execute their Article V 'commitments' to each other, they are far more likely to be deterred from using any aggression against weaker or more vulnerable members. This could be termed indirect deterrence, as it can operate with or without a particular adversary in mind.

Unfortunately, devotion to assurance can act as a deterrent to public debate, unilateral moves or even efforts to open conversation in private. This can, ironically, work against gradualist reform, and lead to more radical or unilateral shifts later on as other factors outside NATO's control determine outcomes. NATO has to evolve to remain relevant to a changing security environment. Second, long-term cohesion may better be supported by paying attention to the management of change dynamics within the Alliance rather than simply burying problems, ensuring all allies are involved. Third, any hint of a tactic that appears to paper over cracks, and avoids discussion or public debate can look weak and itself undermine cohesion. The deployment of nuclear weapons in Europe is generally unpopular amongst most European publics, and could serve to make NATO nuclear posture in many countries more controversial than it need be. It would be a mistake to ignore this.

It has to be asked just how much assurance is provided to Central European states by nuclear forces based in western Europe and under the control in times of crisis of west European air forces with limited range. They are instead looking for reassurance from the Americans directly to come to their assistance, perhaps through the stationing of US forces in their territory, more exercises and contingency planning for operations in their area, and other conventional preparations. An agreement between Poland and the United States has been signed confirming the presence of US troops on Polish soil for the operation of Patriot missiles. It is less the missiles themselves that interest the Poles. Forward-deployment of nuclear forces in eastern Europe is not on the table, primarily because of the NATO-Russia Charter of 1997.

Future deterrent

Without a clear present threat, NATO deterrence policy has also come to focus upon the potential emergence of new threats (usually a resurgent Russia or emergence of a nuclear-armed Iran). Whilst the retention of nuclear capabilities helps to assure allies, it also undermines trust and confidence in those states that consider themselves targets, deepens the perceived salience of nuclear weapons for competitor states, and weakens nuclear arms control and the credibility of disarmament commitments made by member states. Another problem at the heart of this approach – the deployment of a nuclear deterrent on the basis that there could, in the future, emerge a threat demanding a nuclear deterrent, is that at some level this will always be the case. This position plays into the perception frequently voiced at NPT Preparatory Committees and Review Conferences, that despite the rhetoric and the progress in recent years to reduce numbers and the role of nuclear weapons, the nuclear weapon states (and NATO allies) have no intention of fulfilling their Article VI responsibilities to disarm, and that they are members of the Treaty acting in bad faith, weakening the possibility of stronger non-proliferation measures.

Deterring Russia today

In addition, there is a powerful presumption underneath current NATO deterrent policy that often goes unsaid for fear of alienating Russia – that if NATO were to abandon a nuclear posture Russia would act with greater

confidence in bullying neighbors, NATO members or aspirant states. In this sense, whilst Russia is not a strategic existential threat to the Alliance, there remains an active and present direct deterrent role for NATO's nuclear weapons. A credible nuclear posture is seen as desirable to back up (the more militarily credible) conventional military posture simply to deter Russian aggression. This form of deterrence is based upon the concept of 'provocative weakness', first articulated by the Pentagon strategist Fritz Kraemer, the belief that any chink in the armor can be seen as provoking a potential adversary – a reverse to the traditional arms racing thesis. It is a clear reason for the support in some European circles for retaining US B-61 free-fall bombs in Europe.

There are two key problems with this approach. First, such a principle operates from a default position of suspicion and works against any movement towards cooperation, arms control and the global nuclear disarmament advocated by NATO leaders, and endorsed most recently at NATO's annual conference on WMD, arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation, held in Warsaw in December 2009. If the principle has any application at all it has to be limited and specific.

Second, Russia does not itself see these free-fall bombs as a direct threat, with other conventional and strategic systems playing a more credible role in any conceivable scenario. They therefore have no direct military deterrent value on Russian actions, and are more a political and arms control challenge.

The dynamics behind removal

It is often said that the B-61 free fall bombs currently assigned to limited-range Dual Capable Aircraft are militarily useless – that in every conceivable scenario a military planner would chose to use alternative systems – conventional capabilities, or in extremis, strategic nuclear warheads. This point is accepted by most in this debate, but is it sufficient to justify a change in posture as often claimed by some? If removing the warheads from Europe will inevitably send a message that the US is no longer committed to Europe, or that there is reduced resolve in the US and western Europe to honor Article V commitments to eastern Europe, or emboldens Russian influence, whatever the military reality, then European security will be affected adversely by the action. If a weapon system is unusable and yet delivers political benefits, perhaps we get the best of both worlds, one that does not threaten Russia or harm our relations with them, but that assures allies and deepens cohesion?

This plan of inaction is unstable, and in the long run unsustainable. First, the status quo requires us to claim that the B-61 free fall bombs remain fundamental to nuclear deterrence, as the 1999 Strategic Concept does, when this is highly questionable. This, in the longer run, undermines the credibility of deterrence, the Strategic Concept, and ultimately NATO cohesion. Second, host countries have to assess the economic, political and security burdens, at a time when significant investment decisions in replacement DCAs are on the horizon, and concerns over the security of the weapons could increase. Third, retaining nuclear weapons for symbolic value undermines long-term nonproliferation efforts by enticing currently non-nuclear weapons states – states which may actually face more urgent strategic threats – to pursue nuclear arsenals. Thus eventually, political and economic demands, or possibly even a security incident, could force a damaging removal, when the Alliance could have orchestrated their drawdown in a more purposeful way with positive non-proliferation impacts.

The threat perception

Seen from western Europe, the current threat is perceived as so negligent that Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands have held private consultations on the removal of US nuclear bombs from their territory, and described the vision outlined by President Barack Obama for a world free of nuclear weapons as consistent with their withdrawal. Central and Eastern Europe sees things differently, having watched as Russia invaded its (NATO-aspirant) neighbor Georgia, launched a cyber-attack on NATO member Estonia, engaged in economic bullying of its former vassal states and staged massive military maneuvers on their borders. However such concerns could be addressed more productively through the provisions of Article 4 in the NATO charter.

When the Obama administration was considering the future of European-based anti-missile defenses in Poland and Czech Republic, prominent former leaders in Central and Eastern Europe expressed the fear in an open letter to President Obama last July that the US was abandoning the region to focus on more distant threats. Although the letter contained suggestions for the future, its tone was petulant. When the decision was taken to reconfigure the shield, the administration's engagement with the two governments concerned was limited to informing them the day before the announcement. An opportunity to engage European governments in joint decision-making in security decisions was therefore missed.

Turkey, meanwhile, which sees a prestige value in its relations with the United States thanks to the gravity bombs on its territory, may be persuaded that the newly reconfigured US missile defense system would protect it just as effectively from a possible threat emanating from Iran as the nuclear weapons which could take up to a month to be operational. The Turkish position is, in any case, more complex than often assumed by its Allies. Recent statements by Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the Turkish Prime Minister, suggesting that it would be a mistake to pile more sanctions onto Iran, that its nuclear program is civil in nature, alongside a policy of zero problems with neighbors policy and of playing a mediating role between the Middle East and the West, point to a possible ambivalence in official policy towards the existence of US nuclear weapons on Turkish soil.

A deal with Russia?

It is often suggested that NATO should retain the remaining B-61s until Russia would be willing to strike a deal over transparency and reductions in their much larger tactical nuclear arsenal. Attempts to engage on transparency have so far proved futile, however, and Russian tactical nuclear weapons have a completely different posture and purpose. Comparing apples with oranges in arms control is always problematic. Why not wait until the promised next round of negotiations on a follow up to the follow-on START treaty? Because thanks to the German decision, the momentum around Europe is already building and there is no certainty that such US-Russia negotiations will ever conclude. A decision by NATO to quietly remove the US weapons without waiting for a US-Russia treaty would also have the plain advantage of avoiding a bruising US Senate ratification.

The benefits

Defusing long-running tensions over accusations of NPT violations

NATO's nuclear burden-sharing arrangements predate the negotiation and signing of the NPT, and are seen within the Alliance as consistent with the NPT's provisions (specifically Articles I and II). However, this is disputed

by some NPT member states outside the Alliance, which perceive them as breaking the spirit, if not the letter, of the Treaty. The arrangements involve the transfer in control of nuclear warheads in times of conflict, possible only if the NPT were deemed by NATO to cease to apply. To actively plan for such an eventuality shows a certain lack of good faith in the regime, and clearly implies that NPT commitments are conditional. Whatever the rights and wrongs, these arrangements are clearly seen by many member states as undermining the regime, a perception that is to some extent self-fulfilling as it creates a source of friction and undermines the willingness of others to invest in strengthened non-proliferation arrangements, thereby directly weakening Alliance security.

Eliminate a security risk when terrorists are seeking nuclear weapons

The pre-delegation of authority to members who are lower on the chain of command, and the weapons' smaller physical size, may make tactical nuclear weapons more vulnerable to illicit acquisition and use when compared to their strategic counterparts.¹ According to the Air Force's 2008 "Blue Ribbon Review of Nuclear Policies and Procedures," which included site visits to European bases where these weapons are stored, there were a number of concerns that required significant investment in strengthening security around the bases for confidence.² The review found that, "Host nation security at overseas nuclear-capable units varies from country to country in terms of personnel, facilities and equipment."³ The issue is so serious that the report contained the following non-specific warning, "the USAF must continue to emphasize to its host nation counterparts their requirement to honor security commitments."⁴ The report recommended that the Department of Defense "investigate potential consolidation of resources to minimize variances and reduce vulnerabilities at overseas locations,"⁵ implying that security would benefit from consolidation.

Save the US treasury and host allies considerable sums when defense budgets are stretched

The budgets governing the deployment of these weapons are not clearly identified, making estimates of the savings from discontinuing their deployment difficult. BASIC is continuing to explore the extent to which resources could be saved if the B-61s were removed.

However, we do know that these weapons require the following: life extension programs for the gravity bombs, staffing and support services for the warheads, certification, basing, security, the allocation of aircraft, exercises, and military personnel devoted to the mission. For example, the Blue Ribbon Review noted that training resources are much more stretched when dealing with dual capable aircraft:

¹ William Potter and Nikolai Sokov, "Tactical Nuclear Weapons: The Nature of the Problem," *CNS Reports*, January 4, 2001.

² Major General Polly A. Peyer, Chair, "Air Force Blue Ribbon Review of Nuclear Policies and Procedures," Headquarters U.S. Air Force, February 8, 2008, p. 5, available via the website of the Federation of American Scientists, <http://www.fas.org/nuke/guide/usa/doctrine/usaf/BRR-2008.pdf>.

³ Major Peyer, P. 115.

⁴ Major Peyer, p. 54.

⁵ Major Peyer, p. 115.

“Due to high conventional operations tempo in dual capable aircraft communities, exercises supporting the nuclear mission are often cancelled and requirements waived. Nuclear training events in formal training courses are reduced to make room for additional conventional training.”⁶

Preparing for a nuclear mission whose contribution to deterrence is highly questionable, raises questions about the spending priorities for the United States and its allies. In addition, given the concerns about terrorism and the potential for mishaps reminiscent of the Minot-Barksdale incident in August 2007, the security and safety surrounding nuclear weapons must not be ignored. Warning that more money will need to be spent as long as the B-61s exist in Europe, the Blue Ribbon Review concluded, “A consistently noted theme throughout the [inspection] visits was that most sites require significant additional resources to meet DOD security requirements.”⁷

Political fallout

The Obama administration is operating in a highly charged political atmosphere and domestic opponents will seize on any perceived concession to Moscow. The removal of tactical nuclear weapons from Europe will provide such an opportunity although criticism in the US could be blunted through a media campaign that would demonstrate public support in the countries from where the bombs are to be removed. Allied support would also be canvassed in countries where bipartisan coalitions have sprung up in favor of President Obama’s vision of a nuclear weapons free world, and the removal of the TNWs would be shown to be consistent with this. European public opinion would be favorable to the weapons’ removal, insofar as people are even aware of their presence.

NATO should be seen to be acting consistently with the vision of the US administration which has been enthusiastically endorsed by European “wise men” quartets and governments who believe in the Obama administration’s disarmament goal.

Conclusion

The Alliance is considering its response to the transformational vision expressed by a number of leaders in and out of government, most notably by President Barack Obama himself and expressed at the UN Security Council in resolution 1887. The new Strategic Concept will need to reflect this by unambiguously acknowledging the Alliance’s responsibility to play a leadership role in taking cooperative steps to create the conditions for moves towards a world free of nuclear weapons, and outlining a nuclear doctrine that is consistent with these moves, on the assumption that the Nuclear Posture Review will have done so, marrying continued deterrence and stronger non-proliferation measures with significant disarmament steps. However in the interests of Alliance cohesion, the forward-deployed nuclear weapons need not be addressed explicitly in the text of the new Strategic Concept. They have already been removed under bilateral agreements from the UK and Greece. The small number remaining in Germany, Belgium, Italy, Turkey and the Netherlands could be tackled in a similar

⁶ Major Peyer, p. 37.

⁷ Major Peyer, p. 52.

way in consultation with Alliance partners. However, it would be better for cohesion if the Allies could agree amongst themselves that investment would be better placed in other capabilities.

As far as the wording of the Strategic Concept itself, the 1999 text refers to NATO forward-deployed nuclear forces as providing “an essential political and military link between the European and the North American members of the Alliance”. However, the political and military link today does not need to be nuclear in character, and the credibility of an extended NATO nuclear deterrent is not reliant upon forward-deployment. Indeed, consultations BASIC has had with a number of allies suggest that a greater emphasis on conventional deterrence in Central Europe would actually be more credible and have greater assurance value than the basing of relatively short range nuclear weapons in western Europe and under the control of west European states. Indeed, it has been suggested to us by some representatives of Central European states that they would be quite relaxed about the removal of nuclear weapons from western Europe if it were done in a considered and Alliance-wide manner, with adequate view to the unintended signals, and if their security concerns were directly addressed by NATO in other ways. If a decision were made within the Strategic Concept review process to have flexibility around their deployment there is no need to make explicit reference to forward-deployed warheads in the text.

But the greater challenge for NATO is to knit together its western and eastern members divided over Russia policy in order to emerge strengthened, not weakened. Because of their particular experience over 40 years, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, and the Baltic states, have struggled to cast off Cold War thinking, partly because of the reprehensible actions of a neighborhood bully. Yet, whilst Russia’s economic might derives from its natural resources revenue, it remains a state whose military, and population in general, is in decline. The former Warsaw Pact states could demonstrate their confidence in the future within the Atlantic Alliance by looking at more imaginative ways of ensuring their security than by placing their faith in obsolete US tactical nuclear weapons which in a crisis would not be used. Central European leaders would be well advised to become proactive in seeking constructive solutions within NATO for their removal from Europe, thereby ensuring their place at the heart of the decision-making process.