

As Nato gets bigger, can it downsize nuclear risks?

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Introduction

Much has been made recently of NATO's new relationship with Russia and the opportunity to build upon the progress of the NATO-Russia Council established this past spring in Rome. Despite the excitement generated about the new or "transformed" NATO, it is clear that nuclear weapons-paired with distinctly Cold War-reminiscent strategies-remain very much a core part of the alliance. Lord Robertson has said that the concept of deterrence is at the heart of NATO's philosophy and nuclear posture, "and so long as there are nuclear weapons in the world there is a role for NATO's nuclear posture."⁽¹⁾ Perhaps the most tangible reminder of the centrality of NATO's nuclear weapons posture are the estimated 150-180 U.S. tactical nuclear weapons (TNWs) that remain stationed in seven NATO countries in Europe⁽²⁾ and probable thousands of tactical nuclear weapons in various states of repair in Russia.⁽³⁾ The failure to consider nuclear weapons and policies in discussions leading up to the Prague Summit has been short-sighted. By integrating nuclear weapons into the discussion at Prague, NATO would have had the opportunity to set an agenda of leadership on non-proliferation and arms control efforts that would greatly enhance global security.

Nuclear Terrorism and the Problem of Tactical Nuclear Weapons in Europe and Russia

With growing concerns about the threat of nuclear terrorism after September 11, 2001, officials in the United States and NATO have pointed to a lingering problem regarding Russia's tactical nuclear arsenal (a class of weapons similar to the type of U.S. nuclear weapons deployed on the soil of several NATO member states in Europe). TNW's are potentially vulnerable to terrorists or nations who might try to buy or steal them. These weapons are smaller and more portable than strategic nuclear weapons and could be used without the authority of centralized command and control oversight mechanisms.

Despite several decades of nuclear arms control initiatives, non-strategic, or TNWs, are not covered by any formal treaties. The U.S. and Russian Presidential nuclear initiatives of the early 1990's called for voluntary controls on the vast stocks of these weapons. While significant reductions resulted from the Presidential initiatives, they were informal and lacked a codified agreement setting out verification and legal obligations.

Reporting on the progress made in storing, dismantling or eliminating these weapons has been very vague, particularly by Russian officials.⁽⁴⁾ As a result, serious questions remain unanswered about the extent to which progress has been made in recent years on these initiatives. The Russian tactical arsenal is thought to lack stringent centrally coordinated procedures for accounting, securing and ensuring safety procedures for transport and storage. Without reliable data on the vast number Soviet-era tactical weapons, no one can be sure if there have been diversions or thefts.

United States and NATO TNW Concerns

High-ranking former US officials have noted that Russian tactical nuclear weapons "are the nuclear weapons most attractive to terrorists--even more attractive to them than [fissile bomb-making] material, and much more portable than strategic warheads."⁽⁵⁾ U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld told the Senate Armed Services Committee that he wants "to see to it that theater nuclear weapons are brought up and talked about, not from a standpoint of [reductions] but of transparency."⁽⁶⁾ U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell explained that: "Tactical nuclear weapons remain an issue...we have complied with what we said we were going to do on a unilateral basis back in 1991 and '92, the Russians still have quite a few in various states of repair, disrepair, in need of maintenance, and operational. And so all of these issues will have to be worked as part of moving forward."⁽⁷⁾

NATO has also acknowledged that it has had concerns about the uncertainty of Russian tactical nuclear weapons and has called upon Russia "to bring to completion the

reductions in these forces announced in 1991-1992, and to further review tactical nuclear weapons." NATO has proposed a set of transparency measures to Russia in a document titled "Options for Confidence and Security Building Measures (CSBMs), Verification, Non-proliferation and Arms Control". Among other constructive recommendations, NATO has called for reciprocal data exchanges on U.S. and Russian sub-strategic nuclear forces (or TNW) that "would involve conducting a reciprocal data exchange with Russia within the Permanent Joint Council (PJC) context. The objective would be to enhance transparency and knowledge of the size of the U.S. and Russian stockpiles." (8)

Along with previous efforts by NATO to encourage exchanges of information with Russia about their non-strategic nuclear weapons, this effort is commendable. Unfortunately, these proposals and agreements have failed to achieve many tangible results. If "countering terrorism is at the heart of NATO's new relationship with Russia"(9) as Lord Robertson says, the alliance will have to ensure that it implements measures to address at least four current and potential impediments to progress in this area:

1. Outdated NATO Recommendations

The first problem is that NATO's recommendations are out of date. The creation of a new NATO-Russia Council (NRC) -- promoting the concept of including Russia "in NATO at 20" rather than under the previous formulation of "NATO 191" -- is said to be showing promise and likely to be more constructive than the NATO-Russia Permanent Joint Council (June 1997-May 2002).

However, the set of confidence building measures outlined by NATO in December of 2000 should be updated, not only to reflect increased threats of terrorism since September 11, 2001, but also to ensure that data exchanges are effectively addressed in the context of the new NRC. In this way, updated recommendations should facilitate joint action and an implemental plan of data exchanges by NATO and Russia at the highest decision making level. To monitor and ensure that progress is made in this area, substantive reports should be provided to legislative oversight committees in NATO Member States and possibly to the United Nations Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty Preparatory Commission Chairperson. This latter proposal would be a tangible step toward NATO's "determination to strengthen the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and to contribute to the implementation of the conclusions of the 2000 NPT Review Conference."(10)

2. Outdated Political and Military Rationale for TNW

A second reason for lack of progress lies in continued adherence to outmoded military and political justifications for these weapons. Tactical nuclear forces continue to be viewed as an essential security guarantee in both Europe and Russia. NATO has dramatically reduced its nuclear forces in the post-Cold War era, but it still expects participation in nuclear roles by its European allies.

For the alliance, the presence of tactical nuclear weapons on European soil ensures that allies on both sides of the Atlantic are sharing the risk and the burden associated with NATO's nuclear mission. Politicians in Europe are said to prefer to keep the issue of allowing the arsenal to remain in Europe off the table altogether in order to quell public awareness and concern. In effect, NATO is obstructing an obvious opportunity to encourage and assist Russia in addressing a serious proliferation threat.

3. NATO Expansion

A third stumbling block will arise as NATO expands eastward toward the borders of Russia. Russia has continually refused to enter into TNW talks until U.S. nuclear weapons are withdrawn from Europe and assurances that nuclear weapons will not be deployed on the territory of new NATO members are met. Anxieties are bound to resurface as the

Baltic nations prepare to join NATO and questions will likely be raised about what role former Soviet states bordering mainland Russia might play as new NATO members in the Nuclear Planning Group (NPG) or as nuclear-capable members.

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, all countries expected to join NATO as part of this enlargement, recently denied any deployment plans (at least in the “foreseeable future” according to the Estonian spokesperson), and a NATO official stated that Russians concerns about nuclear weapons in the Baltics “were politely rebuffed.”(11) Whether it be political or security related reasons, Russia will likely raise concerns in the future about NATO nuclear weapons in an expanding NATO - particularly in the Baltic region.

By the same token the new NATO countries may also raise concerns about Russia's tactical nuclear weapons. Last year Moscow adamantly denied reports that it had moved tactical nuclear weapons into Kaliningrad -the small Russian enclave located between Poland in Lithuania - but speculation about this possibility raised tensions in the region.(12) Addressing these issues now, while NATO-Russia relations are stronger, may help to inoculate against future dangers and anxieties on all sides.

4. U.S. Nuclear Posture, New Nuclear Weapons

The fourth and final problem relates to U.S. plans to develop new nuclear weapons. Proposed new directions outlined in the U.S. Nuclear Posture Review will have a negative effect on NATO's efforts to work with Russia on TNW control.

Since September 11, 2001, the Pentagon has concluded that deterrence is no longer as central to nuclear planning and has instead increased emphasis upon potential new roles for nuclear weapons in addressing terrorist threats. According to classified excerpts of the U.S. Nuclear Posture Review leaked to the U.S. media, there are demands for the development of new or modified battlefield weapons. The objective is to increase the penetration capability of the B-61 model 11 nuclear bomb, configured as an earth-penetrating bomb designed to defeat hardened and deeply buried targets. In its recently passed Defense Authorization bill, Congress approved a \$15 million administration request to fund the initial stages of this effort with development of a “Robust Nuclear Earth Penetrator (RNEP), but Congress also requested a study to look at how the RNEP would be used and whether conventional weapons could be just as effective.

For now, Washington's current emphasis on development of usable nuclear weapons is out of step with NATO's belief that nuclear forces continue to serve a “fundamentally political purpose to preserve peace and prevent coercion and any kind of war.”(13) But efforts are underway to synchronize the U.S. and alliance nuclear posture. The Pentagon review stated plans to “assess whether any modifications to current posture are appropriate to adapt to the changing threat environment. A plan is underway to conduct a review of U.S. and allied dual capable aircraft in Europe and present recommendations to ministers in summer of 2002.”(14) The NATO Defense Planning Committee and the Nuclear Planning Group did meet in Brussels on June 6, 2002 and adopted a new set of NATO force goals for the period of 2003-2008 in order “to ensure that the Alliance has the structures and deployable forces capable of fulfilling its fundamental security tasks in a changing strategic environment, including responding to the threats posed by terrorism and the proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction.”(15)

While details are sparse on the nuclear aspects of the review, the historically close coordination between U.S. and NATO doctrine and military planning indicate that the updated U.S. nuclear posture foreshadows likely alterations to NATO posture. This could entail providing expanded roles for nuclear weapons by, for example, including threats with weapons of mass destruction, not only threats from nuclear weapons, as justification for a U.S. or NATO nuclear strike. For obvious reasons, the development and intent to use such weapons in war-fighting and pre-emptive counterproliferation roles run contrary to the core nonproliferation goals of the alliance, by providing, rather than reducing,

incentives to other countries to develop their own nuclear weapons and by condoning the use of nuclear weapons.

Although Russia is not necessarily concerned that new nuclear weapons would be used against it, the development of new roles for tactical nuclear weapons (particularly if any reorientation were planned for U.S. weapons on European territory) will provide Russia with little incentive to share information with the alliance about its own tactical weapons.

Recommendations

- NATO must update its December 2000 document on Confidence and Security Building Measures to reflect: a) profound changes in the security environment since then; and b) the fact that a new NATO-Russia Council has been established. As part of this process the alliance should give regular publicly available reports to appropriate legislative oversight committees in member states. NATO should also review the overall “paragraph 32 Process”(16) reassessing the proliferation risks associated with NATO’s nuclear weapons policy in the context of its five year old Strategic Concept document.
- The deadlock on this issue remains because NATO and Russia have diametrically opposed positions on the continued presence of NATO nuclear weapons in Europe. In negotiations Russia has repeatedly asserted that it will not consider negotiations to control its tactical nuclear arsenal if the United States will not remove its nuclear weapons from Europe. NATO must be willing to take the first tangible step and offer inducements to Russia with an eye toward building confidence and reducing threats associated with its tactical nuclear weapons. The United States and NATO could compile and offer the comparable data about their own tactical arsenals that they wish to acquire from Russia. This could include information about numbers, locations and safety conditions of storage of warheads. NATO could also invite Russia to conduct on-site base visits to NATO nuclear weapons storage facilities.
- NATO should allocate funding for and implement threat reduction programs dedicated to accounting for TNWs in Russia. This could follow the contours of existing US-Russia threat reduction programs, such as the Nunn-Lugar program, and build on its computerized data management system.
- NATO should offer unambiguous assurances that it will not modify, redesign, or increase roles for European nuclear forces.
- NATO must give stronger assurances about the commitment to not allow new member states to train to use, or deploy NATO nuclear weapons. In the last round of NATO enlargement NATO stated that has no intention, plan or reason to station nuclear weapons on the territory of the new NATO member states (the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland at the time) and that no storage facilities would be built in the new NATO member states. Before any new members are admitted to the alliance -- rather than a offering reversible statement of intent -- NATO should make a firm codified commitment not to station any nuclear weapons or to build any dual capable or nuclear weapons facilities in any new NATO member states now or in the future.

Endnotes

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(2) Butcher, M., Nassauer, O., and Young, S., “Nuclear Futures: Western European Options for Nuclear Risk Reduction,” BASIC/BITS Research Report, British American

Security Information Council (BASIC) / Berlin Information-center for Transatlantic Security (BITS), December 1998. Also see, Nassauer, O. "NATO's Nuclear Posture Review Should Europe End Nuclear Sharing?", BITS Policy Note 02.1, BITS, April 2002. (The author notes that up to 360 U.S. weapons could be stored at NATO bases, although the actual number might be significantly lower.) According to Hans Kristensen and Joshua Handler's estimates, approximately 3,400 Russian non-strategic nuclear weapons have been "kept for operational use by the Russian Navy, and Air Force, including those for air defense. The remainder . . . are in storage, some or all of which are destined to be dismantled." SIPRI, SIPRI Year Book 2002: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002). William Arkin, Robert Norris and Joshua Handler, note that the remainder could include of 12,000 non-strategic warheads in reserve and/or awaiting dismantlement. See Arkin, W., Norris, R. and Handler, J., Taking Stock - World-wide Nuclear Deployments, (Natural Resources Defense Council, 1998), p.27.

(3) Millar, A., "The Pressing Need for Tactical Nuclear Weapons Control," Arms Control Today, May 2002. pp. 10-13.

(4) See Gordon, M. R., "Misunderstandings Still Hinder Russia-NATO Partnership," New York Times, May 28, 1998.

(5) Nunn, S., Perry, W., and Habiger, E., "Still Missing: A Nuclear Strategy," Washington Post, May 21, 2002.

(6) Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, Testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee Hearings on the Treaty on Strategic Offensive Reductions, July 25, 2002. For relevant excerpt of hearing transcript see Porth, J. "Rumsfeld: U.S. Will Continue to Provide Allies with Nuclear Umbrella" Washington File U.S. Embassy of Japan <http://usembassy.state.gov/tokyo/wwwwhse1540.html>, version current on Nov. 20, 2002.

(7) Secretary of State Colin Powell, Testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Hearings on the Treaty on Strategic Offensive Reductions, July 9, 2002.

(8) For the full report see NATO Press Communiqué M-Nac-2(2000)121, "Report on Options for Confidence and Security Building Measures (CSBMs), Verification, Non-Proliferation, Arms Control and Disarmament," December 14, 2000 <http://www.nato.int/docu/pr/2000/p00-121e/home.htm>, version current on Nov. 20, 2002.

(9) Lord Robertson, "Tackling Terror: NATO'S New Mission," Speech by NATO Secretary General, At the American Enterprise Institute's New Atlantic Initiative, Washington, D.C., June 20, 2002. <http://www.nato.int/docu/speech/2002/s020620a.htm>, version current on November 20, 2002.

(10) Final Communiqué Ministerial Meeting of the Defense Planning Committee and the Nuclear Planning Group, Brussels, December 18, 2001. <http://www.nato.int/docu/pr/2001/p01-170e.htm>, version current on Nov. 20, 2002.

(11) "Baltics Deny They'll Deploy Nuclear Weapons as NATO Members," Associated Press, September 17, 2002. Chalmers, J., "NATO Rebuffs Russia's Qualms on Baltics, Georgia," Reuters, September 25, 2002. Kucia, C., "Baltics Deny Plans to Deploy NATO Nuclear Weapons." Arms Control Today, October 2002, p.26.

(12) Gertz, B. "Russia Transfers Nuclear Arms to Baltics," The Washington Times, Jan. 3, 2001. Rozenbergs, R. "Russian Nukes in Kaliningrad Puts Baltics NATO Bid Back on Front Burner," Agence France Presse, January 8, 2001. Brantsen, J., "Russia: Report of Missile Deployment In Kaliningrad Threats To Upset East/West Ties," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Jan. 11, 2001. <http://www.rferl.org/nca/features/2001/01/11012001122700.asp>, version current on Nov. 20, 2002. Sokov, N., "The "Tactical Nuclear Weapons Scare" of 2001", CNS Reports, Center for Nonproliferation Studies, Monterey Institute of International Studies, January 4, 2001.

(13) Final Communiqué Ministerial Meeting of the Defense Planning Committee and the Nuclear Planning Group, Brussels, December 18, 2001. <http://www.nato.int/docu/pr/2001/p01-170e.htm>, version current on Nov. 20, 2002.

(14) Nuclear Posture Review [Excerpts], Washington, Jan. 8, 2001, p.4. <http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/policy/dod/npr.htm>, version current on Nov. 20, 2002.

(15) Final Communiqué Ministerial Meeting of the Defense Planning Committee and the Nuclear Planning Group held in Brussels, June 6, 2002, <http://www.nato.int/docu/pr/2002/p02-071e.htm>, version current on Nov. 20, 2002.

(16) For more information see Tom McDonald, "Paragraph 32 Process: Final Analysis," BASIC Notes, January 2001. [../pubs/Notes/2001P32.htm](http://pubs/Notes/2001P32.htm), version current on Nov. 20, 2002.

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