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Themes arising from seminar April 2013

Paul Ingram
Executive Director, BASIC

Engaging Russia on Tactical Nuclear Weapons: Next steps on confidence building

Introduction

A group of diplomats and analysts from NATO states met in Brussels on April 15th to discuss how best to engage Russia in discussions on transparency and confidence-building measures regarding theatre nuclear weapons. This paper draws out some of the themes arising from that meeting, but does not reflect the views of any one individual attending the meeting.

The group was meeting in the context of expectations that President Obama would soon be delivering a new speech outlining his second administration's approach to nuclear arms control and disarmament; his recent decision to abandon phase IV of his European Phased Adaptive Approach to missile defence (the plans we had heard the Russians were most concerned about); and the sense that both sides appeared still to be talking past one another. In addition, the new NATO Special Advisory and Consultative Arms Control, Disarmament and Non-Proliferation Committee had just tabled a report from the International Secretariat on options to engage the Russians in dialogue on transparency and confidence-building measures (TCBMs) over tactical/theatre nuclear weapons (TNW)

Engaging Russia

Whether or not Russia is willing to engage with NATO on its existing arms control and disarmament agenda, attempts to continue the dialogue will assist in identifying differences in perspective and overcoming misunderstanding. One of the first questions to be asked is how best to tempt Russia into a dialogue.

What is in it for Russia? At present Russia does not appear interested in this particular arms control agenda pursued by NATO, even on TCBMs over TNW, let alone reductions or elimination. It was suggested by one participant that the pre-conditions they have been giving for talks on non-strategic nuclear weapons appear to NATO to be too onerous to be treated seriously – withdrawal of all NATO TNW from Europe, dismantling of all associated facilities, etc. – unless they are looking for a far wider agenda.

Russia has been calling for a broader European security dialogue, but this has been interpreted by many in NATO as a challenge to its legitimacy, and an attempt to dictate the terms of the debate. Rather than reject the proposition, the Alliance could consult its members on the question of what

they would like from Russia in any possible framework of talks, and approach Russia with a modified proposal. All states have an interest in further developing strategic stability, but the usual assumption that stability is based upon the current arrangement needs to be questioned. Too often the concept of strategic stability is influenced by Cold War notions and situations of severe distrust.

It was suggested in the meeting that a grand agenda, or 'big enchilada of arms control' (referring to the Mexican food in which ingredients are all mixed together), could wrap nuclear weapons up in a broader bundle of security issues including conventional talks post CFE, prompt global strike, missile defense, cyber capabilities, drones and other capabilities. Added together this amounts to a huge and complex program, but also one directly relevant to both Russian security and that of NATO states on the 'front line'.

We were reminded that while Russia worries about conventional imbalances overall, Baltic states worry about Russian superiority within the more sub-regional sphere. Whilst there was general agreement that CFE itself is dead, not least because the nature of armed conflict in Europe has changed beyond all recognition, there are signs of renewed interests on both sides in establishing a process whereby some of the benefits from the CFE treaty – namely inspection and verification, as well as other confidence-building measures – can be kept alive and applied to a new approach towards arms control for the 21st century. Many of the principles of CFE could be applied locally, particularly in the Baltics and Caucasus. But Russia will be particularly interested in proposals that can control or manage the evolution of military technologies that might otherwise destabilise balances and lead to conflict.

Concerns were expressed, though, that the enchilada approach could simply be too complex to negotiate upon or could stretch the Tallinn principles which implied that changes to NATO's doctrine would require reciprocal moves from Russia on their own nuclear holdings specifically.

We discussed the possibility that with such complexity there is more room for Pareto improvements (net benefits for all parties if they are willing to negotiate to find them). One participant suggested that we may already have found ourselves at a Pareto Optimum for all practical purposes, and that efforts to seek breakthroughs could simply lead to an unravelling of the current stability, at a cost to everyone. The implication of this is that it is impossible for any parties to offer anything of interest to their negotiating partners without themselves making net sacrifices.

This difference of belief perhaps goes to the core of the challenge: how to engage if one or more parties believe that they can only lose if they do so? It seems difficult to imagine that it is beyond the wit of politicians and diplomats to come up with proposals that would be a move in the right direction for all parties – this is their very *modus operandi* in other circumstances (political scientists describe this as log-rolling). It may be more accurate to see the problem in terms of the complexity of obstacles thrown up by the tactics adopted by both sides, rather than any lack of underlying gain to be had.

The implication of the discussion was that both sides see their TNW as indirect bargaining chips: NATO retains theirs in large part to negotiate on TCBMs over Russian TNW, and later reductions; Russia retains theirs in part to negotiate over NATO capabilities they worry far more about. There is a danger that the tactics used by both sides puts greater value on the TNW themselves than either side has for them militarily, leaving us in a very poor position with some cost borne by both sides. Unfortunately, it would seem that there is no great enthusiasm for change displayed by either side in this diplomatic engagement, perhaps because of the influence of caution in what many perceive and was expressed in the meeting as irreversible decisions (to abandon TNW), leaving some to conclude in the meeting that it will simply be too hard to reach a compromise agreement.

It seemed a widely-held belief in Brussels that Russia may well have already discounted NATO's

current TNW on the basis that the Alliance would be forced to withdraw them in the end for internal domestic political reasons rather than as a result of arms control negotiations. Whether this is true or not, it was pointed out that for NATO to maintain the status quo over TNW it is going to have to modernise the systems. This in turn will require a great deal of work to build the necessary consensus for this, in the context where many Europeans do not see any particular relevance of these systems to the current security environment. NATO will have to work hard simply to stand still. Other participants pointed out that standing still is not an option – that the systems that NATO depends upon will either be modernised (the F35 will be a stealthy, longer-range delivery system… the B61-12 will be 'smart', with a tail-fin guidance system) or abandoned.

When dealing with uncertainty and complexity it is critical that states and institutions are adaptive. Holding grimly onto compromises made in the past for political reasons that made sense at that time is a recipe for inaction and failure. Whilst there is an attempt to chart the consensus within the Alliance on how best to approach the arms control agenda, the path before us remains unclear. Attachments to a dual-track approach which states may feel worked in the past during the Cold War in pursuing modernisation and arms control at the same time in the belief that we face a similar situation to that in the 1960s and 1980s would be equally problematic.

Several participants referred to there being a high level of uncertainty as a reason for the caution, but one has to ask whether this uncertainty is any greater than it was in, say 1991, or indeed at any time in the last few decades. And prior to that, the certainty we appeared to have was overshadowed by the very real possibility of a nuclear exchange. In other words, the uncertainty in the Cold War was often a cause of sclerosis: an illusion of certainty.

A related angle was the question of whether there are any further good-will unilateral moves that could be made to build further confidence in the process. There is an understandable hesitation about making such moves, both because if rash they may expose the situation to greater insecurity, and also because they could give greater confidence to one's negotiating partner to push for further demands or hold out against negotiations in the hope of a better future deal. There is clearly great sensitivity amongst allies, displayed in comments in Brussels, to what they see as Russian negotiating tactics of opening with a tough hand, making strong demands from a position of weakness, and holding out for the longer game.

However, it was proposed that NATO offer teasers and appetisers to Russia it could not refuse, such as joining in with an inspection of former nuclear sites in NATO states without reciprocity in the first instance. This would not be out of character – there have been many unilateral TCBM moves in the past, such as US and UK declarations to NPT meetings on their nuclear holdings, and the Presidential Nuclear Initiatives of 1991.

It was suggested that longstanding Russian preconditions may give some clue as to what they would find sufficiently attractive for talks. It could also be useful to start a conversation with the Russians on the end-game of any potential engagement, so that they could have an idea of where NATO is expecting to be in 2-3 years' time, and both sides can discuss what is desirable.

NATO deliberations

The debate within NATO has been long and tortuous. One participant said that this should not be surprising – there's even more challenge and difficulty in different domestic government departments (particularly defence and foreign ministries) reaching consensual national positions, let alone for 27 or 28 states… even before we get to the 29 in the NATO Russia Council.

There remains considerable uncertainty and difference of opinion expressed in the meeting over the power and role of the new Special Advisory and Consultative Arms Control, Disarmament and Non-Proliferation Committee, though it is expected in general to be consulted by the United States in advance of and during its bilateral talks with Russia, and to be able to give

advice on its ideas around what the agenda should be. It is also likely to act as a filter for the NRC.

It would seem that the NATO international staff has produced a paper on how best to engage with Russia and that this is currently out for consultation. We were told that there was little of surprise in the paper, that allies would be looking in the first instance for modest, 'baby steps', and hope to engage Russia accordingly. Given the achievements of the past (the INF agreement, for example, was negotiated in under a year), this approach may yet be rather complacent.

We were also urged to consider this process in the context of all the other means by which the United States and its allies consult with the Russians, not least in the P5 process – the latest meeting of which concluded on 19th April 2013 in Geneva, and was hosted by the Russians immediately prior to the NPT Preparatory Committee. By placing the efforts to engage the Russians in arms control and specifically in TCBMs in the context of mutual and developing responsibilities accepted under the NPT regime, this can help support the bilateral and the NATO-Russia dialogue. The nuclear weapon states have a particular responsibility to show some level of concrete progress on their NPT responsibilities to negotiate multilateral nuclear disarmament by next year's 2014 Preparatory Committee.

Pressure will come from Non-Nuclear Weapon States in the Non-Proliferation Treaty, looking for more concrete demonstrations of good faith from the nuclear weapon states and those explicitly sheltering under the nuclear umbrella. It cannot be assumed that their patience will last forever.

Criteria for analysing TCBMs

There are a number of ideas for transparency and confidence-building measures kicking about at present. A previous conference in Warsaw hosted by the Polish and Norwegian governments discussed a number of these, including ideas such as NATO and Russia offering a historic time-series of numbers and types of tactical warhead, mutual inspections of disused warhead storage locations, exchange of information and best practice on the safety and security of facilities, and technical discussions around the possible threat to nuclear weapons facilities from conventional capabilities. These were reported to us in a summary paper prepared by Paul Schulte.

It was suggested that we first ought to have an Alliance-wide discussion (and include Russia) on the criteria to judge potential TCBMs. Such criteria could include:

- the impact on both NATO's and Russia's deterrence and assurance capabilities and broader situation;
- how well they can build trust;
- the costs of implementation, and the costs they might save; and
- how they might best contribute to more concrete arms control and disarmament later on.

There is clearly a job to be done by analysts from NATO states and Russia in building together a cost-benefit matrix analysis from all relevant perspectives.

One participant expressed the opinion that the innate value of TCBMs for the value of trust-building can be rather overstated, and that their value can best be analysed by their direct influence in contributing to security. We should also be careful of being distracted by the symbolism of actions that may not have a big impact on real security. For example, TNW are highly mobile, so re-siting storage areas, or even consolidating warheads, may not be as important for real security as many assume.

Nevertheless, it must surely be true that as future agreement and cooperation is dependent upon the health of relationships and the level of trust involved, then success in agreeing measures that build confidence must have a value beyond their direct contribution to security. Building an effective arms control and disarmament relationship takes time and many steps built upon a learning experience. While we need to control expectations of quick wins and game-changers, small positive steps that stick build trust essential for more radical steps later, and some clarity on

the direction of travel and the shared objectives in reducing nuclear dangers also contribute.

Final thoughts…

So far this process has involved minimal public or parliamentary debate. One participant suggested that in western Europe at least, a process that engaged effectively with the Russians would be popular with the public, who are looking for progress. Such an approach could prove effective for NATO in escaping the dilemma it appears to be in, whereby it has decided that changes in nuclear posture are conditional on reciprocal moves by Russia, but where final authority for investments in the new aircraft required for a continuation of the nuclear mission lie with parliaments likely to block them. If NATO were to transparently offer Russia attractive terms for engagement, and a process started, this could change that dilemma.

One senior Ambassador described his view that the relevance of nuclear weapons in European security was on the wane and could, if we played things right, disappear. This view was challenged directly by another participant who talked of the need to raise our sights above our own perspective to see that nuclear weapons still played an important role in determining relationships in the world. In the end, perhaps the question underlying the whole debate is what could replace the role of nuclear deterrence in the European theatre, assuming this role still has salience? Realistically, missile defense has a long way to go, several decades, perhaps never, before the technology could develop to such a standard that it could undermine deterrence. Conventional capabilities have greater promise, but many remain sceptical that they could ever truly balance in the longer run; there's a lively debate here that includes a revision in how we see the effectiveness of nuclear deterrence. But underneath all this there is a question of how the integration of our economies and social structures affects the strategic calculations of states in future, and whether there is a possibility that nuclear deterrence will thereby be rendered irrelevant.

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