

Revising NATO's nuclear deterrence posture: prospects for change

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Paul Ingram, BASIC Executive Director, with assistance from Laura Spagnuolo

This is a report from a two-day roundtable involving officials and members of civil society at a roundtable in Brussels held on 23-24 May 2011. It was held two weeks prior to the June 2011 NATO Defence Ministerial addressing many of these issues, and in the context of a number of open questions in discussions between officials around Europe on NATO's posture at a time of shrinking defense budgets and differing views on the need for NATO action on disarmament.

Discussion focused upon the following (open) questions:

- 1) What are the links between conventional forces and nuclear, and are they separable?
- 2) Are theatre nuclear weapons (TNW) still an essential transatlantic glue, how does this really work, and has this glue weakened with age so that today it is useless?
- 3) Are there substitutes?
- 4) What are the consequences for Alliance solidarity if nuclear deterrence becomes based exclusively on the strategic forces of UK, France and US?
- 5) Can missile defence provide an effective form of deterrence by denial?
- 6) Should NATO follow the negative security assurances given by the US and UK?
- 7) Would NATO's technical and political nuclear consultation system and burden sharing work sufficiently in the absence of TNW?
- 8) How can one square nuclear disarmament commitments with maintaining TNW? How will the newly-formed WMD Control and Disarmament Committee operate effectively and integrate with the rest of NATO's structure?

There was universal agreement that it was an Alliance responsibility to consider how it might best contribute to establishing the conditions for a world free of nuclear weapons. The disagreement was over how it could best contribute, and what the conditions were. There was a belief by some that NATO as the world's strongest alliance should lead by example and draw others in as they move, whilst others insisted that to lead the Alliance needed to do so from a position of strength and control, maximising diplomatic and strategic leverage.

DDPR

The manner in which NATO's Lisbon summit set up the Deterrence and Defense Posture Review (DDPR) ensured it would be a broad exercise, encompassing not only nuclear but also conventional and missile defense elements. While there had been some controversy at the time based upon worries that this would be too broad a focus, generally the inescapable linkages between these strategic issues meant that most people now welcomed this holistic treatment. Nevertheless,

there should be no avoiding the fact that nuclear issues are at the heart of this discussion. The work will be divided into two stages, the first involving discussion and consultation (until October 2011), the second a complex drafting of the report by allies to be submitted to the next NATO Summit in April 2012. The discussion in our meeting around the DDPR mainly focused upon two issues, namely:

1. Threat assessment and the role and strategy of NATO. The DDPR is an exercise starting with a realistic assessment of the security environment. Three elements were highlighted:
 - state and non state threats – whilst clearly more recently there has been an emphasis on non-state actors, some thought that it would be dangerous to neglect the re-emergence of state-state competition;
 - unfinished business with Russia left over from the Cold War (conventional forces, transparency and confidence building measures, perceptions of spheres of influence); and
 - new security challenges, particularly the threat arising from the proliferation of ballistic missiles was singled out as particularly worthy of attention.
2. The ‘appropriate mix of forces’ and what this means. Several participants thought this implied the full spectrum of capabilities, whilst others pointed to the need for prioritisation at a time of reducing defence budgets and a diversifying set of threats facing the Alliance. There were references made to the DDPR being an attempt to put together the new recipe for NATO’s 21st century capabilities. There was some disagreement as to how important the ‘mix’ was, whether the whole with its inter-relationships could be bigger than its parts, or whether in fact this debate about mix avoided the underlying issue that the absolute level of investment in capabilities does not match the ambitions of some allies, and that this situation is only going to get worse.

Deterrence - theater nuclear weapons and their alternatives

The need for nuclear deterrence was largely unquestioned by officials. Discussion mainly revolved around the need to update the concept to the current international strategic environment, a significant challenge. Most participants appeared to acknowledge that TNW have no credible military use, meaning they have no direct deterrent value. Further, there was some question as to whom they were directed against and whether they could be appropriate to emerging threats. One participant asked: *If you set Russia aside, would there be any need for TNW in Europe?* There were clearly differences of opinion as to whether the continued deployment of TNW in Europe could be relevant in countering any possible emerging WMD threat from the Middle East. Some thought that it would be premature and inappropriate to see them in this way, that any credible deterrence value resides far more in NATO’s conventional capabilities. Their retention could undermine efforts to control the very proliferation they would exist to respond to.

Many officials clearly still see TNW as playing an important role in increasing the credibility of NATO’s nuclear deterrence in so much as their presence (and the burden sharing agreements) demonstrate unity in the face of any severe threats. The debate on the future of TNW could be a proxy for a debate on some member-states’ confidence in NATO. And the problem facing the

Alliance is that whilst it clings onto current arrangements this could end up being counter-productive, driving a wedge between allies. TNW could easily become a major source of disunity between allies both in times of peace and in crisis.

Unity within the Alliance over the issue of TNW deployment has been elusive. There is no secret about the difference of opinion between France and Germany over the nature of Alliance nuclear deterrence, deployments, and the role of missile defense. One participant expressed the view that France “is taking hostage” the entire Alliance, even whilst hung outside the Nuclear Planning Group. Another criticised Germany for not living up to its full responsibility as an Alliance member. Public opinion is even more diverse – the general assumption being that in Germany there would be universal opposition to a continuation of current arrangements, whilst next door in France there is strong support for the retention of an independent nuclear deterrent. Maintaining unity in such circumstances is a severe challenge, one neatly side-stepped in Lisbon. Some expressed scepticism that this could be avoided indefinitely, and in particular in the DDPR process.

Discussion of alternative arrangements such as stationing other US forces, including missile defense installations, exercises and contingency planning, did not fully reassure some participants from the Baltic and central European states either, who expressed the view that no other means of participation could be as effective and comprehensive as nuclear sharing agreements with the United States in Europe. Scepticism was in particular expressed by some in regard to the idea of deterrence by denial through missile defense. They pointed out that it was a different kind of deterrence, that confidence in its reliability was still many years away, that it could be incredibly expensive at a time of shrinking budgets, that it only protected against attacks by missile, and did not rely upon the overwhelming fear of annihilation. Deterrence by punishment through nuclear attack was the ultimate proportional response to existential threats to the Alliance. Therefore, they argued, deterrence by denial could never be quite as potent. In addition, there remained a great deal of uncertainty around the operation and architecture of the system, which inevitably would be even more dominated by the United States and would not significantly contribute to the need for burden sharing. Others nevertheless remained convinced that missile defence, alongside the strategic nuclear assets of the US, UK and of France, and the deployment of conventional capabilities for strategic deterrence and defence purposes would be more than adequate to meet the changing needs of the Alliance.

Reciprocity with Russia

The politics of the situation has already meant state-party agreement expressed in Lisbon that any change in NATO’s policy must be reciprocated by Russian moves, though there remains confusion as to what that reciprocity might mean and how it can be achieved. Greater transparency on the part of Russia was clearly a strong desire expressed at the meeting, and would be a strong initial NATO demand. Of course NATO itself could be a great deal more transparent, something resisted by a handful of member states. Some participants thought that the requirement for reciprocity could become a recipe for inaction, and counselled fellow participants to maintain focus on the need for NATO to consider its deployments independently of Russia, otherwise it could find itself boxed in over the longer term.

There was substantial disagreement around the possibilities of engaging effectively with Russia. Some participants appeared to believe that Russia was not to be trusted. One described the country as an anxious kleptocracy that does not want engagement in the way civil society would like, still caught up in some version of the Great Game. It was said that Russia as currently constituted could never be an ally, though it could be a partner. Others pointed out that the level of trust today is still a great deal higher than it was in the mid 1980s when the US and Russia agreed their historic arms control treaties—the INF, START and CFE. Seen from Moscow the Alliance could easily be seen as a threat to its integrity, even if there was little chance of invasion. One speaker observed that Russia’s apparent paranoia and its demands that NATO move first were not “the most unreasonable” given that “Russia put a lot of effort to secure the nuclear weapons that were out of its territory after the collapse of Soviet Union... and has been waiting for NATO to be doing the same ever since”).

Furthermore some thought Russia may have fewer incentives to engage either on nuclear or conventional negotiations than in the past because the United States will not be willing to put on the table new capabilities such as missile defense and conventional global strike. In this respect some participants stressed the importance of taking together as a holistic package missile defense, TNW and CFE talks if negotiations were to have any chance of succeeding. In the longer run it was generally agreed that engagement with Russia should aim at long-term integration into European institutions in a fashion that would be irreversible.

Declaratory Policy

NATO may well be considering whether to follow the US/UK lead and have a declaratory policy along similar lines within the DDPR. Whilst one participant openly questioned the wisdom of such a move on the grounds that NATO did not have control of nuclear weapons to make a declaratory policy meaningful and that it would be a significant challenge to ensure that it was consistent with the declaratory policies of the US, UK and France, most thought that it would be relevant. As the Nuclear Planning Group clearly discussed scenarios for NATO-sanctioned release of nuclear weapons it surely has the competence to assure other states that they would not be the target of such an attack? It was pointed out that if NATO were not to update its policy this would send a highly undesirable message about the commitment of NATO members to the non-proliferation agenda. On the other hand, it was pointed out that NATO’s policy of ambiguity had significant deterrence value and would create uncertainty in the mind of any aggressor.

Disarmament

The Lisbon summit established a WMD Control and Disarmament Committee, though there remains uncertainty as to how it will fit within existing NATO structures and with its other committees. Some thought it possible the committee could sit “over the top” with a remit to consider how all of the Alliance military roles and tasks, nuclear and non-nuclear, contribute actively to creating the conditions for a world free of nuclear weapons. Others were sceptical and may have felt it was a pointless and confusing exercise. There clearly will yet be a debate as to whether this committee will be enshrined in the structure at the next Summit.

Personal conclusion

Overcoming disagreements at the heart of NATO's DDPR will undoubtedly present a challenge for negotiators. But there is more at stake than the unity of the Alliance over its nuclear policy. It dovetails closely with the debate over expeditionary policy, responsibilities beyond the borders of member-states, NATO-Russia relations and its association with international regimes such as the United Nations and the non-proliferation treaty. President Obama's Prague agenda was not a simplistic disarmament message, but did contain a vision that captured the imagination, one that will not disappear quickly. The next round of negotiations with Russia will undoubtedly prove to be complex. We may at present believe we are at a Pareto optimum when it comes to negotiations arms control with Russia, that it would be impossible to move further now without one party being worse off. But there may be better Pareto optima for everyone beyond the current that requires us to take some level of reasonable risk. At a time of greater security complexity and stretched budgets, we may face no choice.