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Nuclear options for NATO

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Review Conference 2010 Papers – 4

Nuclear Options for NATO

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April 2010

This paper is based upon a presentation given to a roundtable involving NATO Ambassadors and diplomats hosted by BASIC, the Arms Control Association and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung in Brussels on 29 April 2010.

Summary

The debate over the coming months within NATO over nuclear posture could get quite heated. Although there is some agreement on general principles, in particular the over-riding need to maintain strong unity, and a continued commitment to deterrence, there is disagreement on the means. There are a number of nuclear options facing NATO, but one way or another, the status quo now seems much less likely to stick. While Secretary of State Clinton clearly wants to see reductions happen in tandem with reduced threats to Russia, it may take some imaginative unilateral actions by NATO before talks with Russia produce desired results.

Change is on the way

The review of the Strategic Concept provides NATO member states the opportunity to consider the Alliance's strategic deterrence posture and ensure it is relevant to the most important potential threats of the 21st century. Naturally, there is some caution about lifting stones on issues that many Alliance members might prefer left unexposed, particularly when there are differences of view as to the way forward. The Obama Administration experienced this directly when attempting to reach consensus within its own ranks on the Nuclear Posture Review – how much more difficult will it be for the Alliance to achieve it? But premature closing down of options for an easy life will only store up trouble for the future – trouble that could lead eventually to governments reluctantly taking unilateral decisions in response to domestic pressures without adequate consideration of broader Alliance strategy.

NATO's forward-deployed theatre nuclear weapons have emerged as a particularly thorny issue, and the most obvious target for those seeking to reduce the salience of nuclear weapons. On the one hand it is widely recognized that they have no significant deterrence value, and expose NATO members to accusations that their commitment to the global disarmament project is empty. Yet equally they are seen by many as essential reassurance for allies that feel particularly exposed, and as central to burden-sharing and Alliance cohesion.

Considerations affecting NATO's nuclear posture

Deterrence

Contrary to common parlance, deterrence refers not to weapon systems but rather to the impact on the strategic choices of potential competitors. It requires clarity in determining the type of competitor and the nature of its thinking, as well as the tools to deliver the deterrent effect. Deterrence capabilities since 1990 have tended to focus more upon possible future emergence of threat rather than response to clearly defined

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een reluctance to fully adjust to the new realities of a lack of any immediate direct strategic threat to Europe for fear of a resurgence of competition, or new threats to the Alliance – we are still determining tomorrow's potential threats by reference to yesterday's nuclear competition.

There is no indication of disagreement within the Alliance around a continuing need for a nuclear element within its strategic capabilities, but members will need to be clear what they understand a deterrent function to be (nuclear or otherwise), or else it could impact negatively in the long run on the public commitment to the Alliance mission. It could also weaken the fundamental deterrent purpose if competitors begin to believe NATO invests its faith in redundant systems.

The Americans have already tried to do this for themselves. Their new Nuclear Posture Review, released on 6 April, acknowledges a reduced role for nuclear weapons, in current realities and further in the ambition of the Administration. Many roles for nuclear weapons have been replaced by more sophisticated and capable conventional capabilities, the threats to the United States and its allies have dramatically changed, and the credibility of nuclear use has reduced. Contrary to the 2001 NPR that sought new roles for U.S. nuclear weapons, the 2010 NPR actively seeks to reduce them. By declaring explicit security guarantees to those non-nuclear weapon states in compliance with their NPT obligations, they also surrender the jealously-guarded policy of nuclear ambiguity of use, opening the possibility of further limits on the freedom of military commanders in considering nuclear use.

On the other hand, it acknowledges that there will remain a residual, though critical role for nuclear deterrence into the foreseeable future to protect the United States from nuclear blackmail, and to provide for extended deterrence. It keeps open the question of forward deployment in Europe, and announced the plan to extend the life of the B61 warhead in part to do so (to be deployed on B2 and F-35 aircraft). The NPR will undoubtedly have a significant impact on NATO discussions around Alliance nuclear doctrine, and there are many within the Alliance who would like to see a similar declaratory stance that gives clear guarantees to non-nuclear weapon states and further reduces the nuclear role.

The salience of forward-deployed theater nuclear weapons has its own dynamics. Even those that defend a continued presence often acknowledge that the military utility has dramatically reduced, perhaps to zero, even in the face of a possible resurgent Russia. James E. Cartwright, Vice Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff admitted at a recent meeting in Washington that he saw no military mission for such weapons that could not be covered by conventional and other nuclear strategic forces. Attempts to create scenarios where the dual capable aircraft would become the weapon of choice stretch credibility in many people's minds. The Sikorski-Bilt letter in February explicitly said, "the need for deterrence against rogue nations could amply be fulfilled with existing U.S. and Russian strategic assets." There are, though, other reasons to keep them.

Reassurance

It has long been recognized that deterrence and assurance are two related but quite different things. What might deter a potential aggressor may not be judged sufficient by allies to give them a sense of adequate security. This can damage confidence and trust within an Alliance. A critical

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de reassurance. As with deterrence, this is as much about perception and opinion, as it is about any objective measures of capability.

In the case of NATO's theater nuclear weapons the assurance effect is indirect. It is based upon the symbolic coupling of U.S. nuclear forces visible and present on the continent, rather than an unambiguous trust that the hosts will deliver them if the moment of truth is reached. It may be that if the Alliance is to shift its policy with consensus, other forms of reassurance may be required to replace the deployment of theater nuclear weapons.

Cohesion

And it is perhaps for reasons of reassurance more than anything that the internal debate within the Obama Administration ended with the conservative position in its NPR to explicitly support burden-sharing, retain the B61 program and keep all options open for allies. Many Allies question the wisdom of having the nuclear debate at all–worried that proposals to withdraw the warheads from Europe will weaken confidence and that splits will poison relationships and expose the differences of view when it comes to threat perceptions and priorities for the Alliance. And unity itself is a powerful and essential component of deterrence – assuring any competitor that allies stand together in a way that reduces the possibility of them challenging the Alliance.

But such views take inadequate account of the other side of that coin – the cost of current arrangements to Alliance cohesion in the longer run. These warheads have limited direct value to the Americans, so requiring them to maintain the warheads at the expense of other systems with more obvious value to U.S. and Alliance security, especially at a time when the Administration is looking to demonstrate momentum on the disarmament agenda, may strain the commitment of many Americans. Host states are already indicating their desire to see a change in status, where public and parliamentary opinion is more hostile – forcing the issue could expose allied governments in ways that NATO has in the past been sensitive to avoid where possible. Highly public disagreements that pitch government against parliament and public, or government against government, could be extremely damaging.

Recent votes in the Dutch and German parliaments leave their governments in no doubt of the very public support for change in nuclear posture, and in particular for the removal of nuclear weapons from Europe. These pressures are likely to build over coming years, as the lifetimes of the existing dual-capable aircraft (DCAs) start to require investment decisions in the next generation of aircraft, decisions in some cases that will require very public parliamentary approval at a time when defense budgets will be under severe stress. Justifying spending on systems that are controversial and for which few can think of credible use scenarios easily communicated to the public will be a challenge at best. Nuclear issues have become perhaps the hottest issue of the Strategic Concept review, and the status quo will be difficult to retain without some damage to credibility.

Burden-sharing

Secretary of State Hilary Clinton remarked at the April 2010 informal meeting of NATO Foreign Ministers that 'sharing [nuclear] risks and responsibilities is fundamental' to the credibility of NATO's nuclear deterrent. Resentment is likely to build in those states paying for and providing the

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will become more detached from the policy and unable to properly demonstrate their commitment to the nuclear mission. Decisions over policy and deployment will reside only in those countries providing the nuclear weapons, and others will be excluded.

Critics point out that already the great majority of NATO states have no direct connection with nuclear forces, yet still take part in the Nuclear Planning Group to discuss overall nuclear posture. In any case, the Alliance already requires states to engage in specialized tasks – a more efficient way of exploiting the economies of scale a true Alliance affords. Why should nuclear issues be any different? The critical thing is not that each individual member state contribute equally in every aspect of Alliance activity, but rather that there is a general sense of fairness in the willingness of member states to contribute appropriately to the challenges of the Alliance. There is today a debate around this very issue, within which the nuclear angle resides.

But there may be particular features of the nuclear burden sharing arrangements that are more messy and difficult to reproduce in more conventional military preparations. If allies are not prepared to 'dip their hands into the blood' of the morally challenging consequences of nuclear deterrence, then the pressures on the Alliance mission, and in particular its nuclear posture, could increase. States may even be tempted, for global diplomatic reasons, to start to criticize their allies over nuclear policy in international fora.

Another commonly expressed concern is that the removal of forward-deployed nuclear weapons from Europe would be irreversible. Better, it is said, to maintain current arrangements in the event that things turn sour and they are needed in future. The U.S. NPR accounts for this eventuality by committing to maintaining the warheads and infrastructure within the United States to retain flexibility for the foreseeable future–so that warheads would be relocated rather than destroyed–and available for future local deployments if and when necessary. More problematic would be reinstating the capability of non-nuclear allies to deliver the warheads in the future. The irreversibility applies not to capability, but rather to burden-sharing.

Global disarmament agenda

NATO has recognized that it has responsibilities to respond to the global disarmament agenda, as well as the need to adequately provide for strategic defense. A robust global non-proliferation regime is vital to the security of NATO members, even if historically the Alliance itself has chosen to leave such considerations to its member states' foreign policy. Nowhere is this clearer than in the debate over theater nuclear weapons. Criticism of NATO arrangements is likely to arise in debates at the forthcoming NPT Review Conference, not only at the NGO side events but on the floor of the conference itself. Several NATO states are likely to take what is said to heart, and other states could use this criticism to avoid stronger commitments to non-proliferation measures.

Options

Agreement on principles

It is an effective and traditional Alliance strategy to focus first on reaching agreement on common values and interests, and agreeing the principles upon which joint decisions can be based. Secretary of State Hilary Clinton did exactly this at the Foreign Ministers' meeting in Tallinn, when she

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commitment to NATO remaining a nuclear alliance for the foreseeable future; some form of commitment to sharing nuclear risk and responsibility; a reduction in the role and number of warheads; and broadening deterrence. She also said "in any future reductions, our aim should be to seek Russian agreement to increase transparency on non-strategic nuclear weapons in Europe, relocate those weapons away from the territory of NATO members, and include non-strategic nuclear weapons in the next round of U.S.-Russian arms control discussions." Such principles may yet receive unanimous support within NATO, but the challenge will be in considering their consequences for actual deployments. It seems likely that the Strategic Concept may duck such issues if it is to be completed by the end of the year.

Option 1: Informal bilateral deals

There will undoubtedly be a temptation for some states to engage in deals with the United States to withdraw warheads from their territory without strategic agreement from allies, a so-called unilateral option. Previous withdrawals, for example from Greece or the United Kingdom, have taken this path, and they do not need negotiations, nor any public announcements. However, they will further weaken the principle of burden-sharing and the coherence of the nuclear alliance without strategic discussion among the allies, leading to resentment and reduced confidence. For this reason, this option has for now been rejected, but the pressures on host states will not go away, and this option may occur by default.

Option 2: Consolidation

Similar to option 1, though by Alliance agreement, some states may relinquish their status as host states. This has the advantage of relieving the burden from those governments with strong public reactions to the arrangement, achieve economies of scale, improve issues of security, and rationalize the location of the systems where they are more likely to be useful. The downside is that it still weakens the core burden-sharing concept, and could increase pressure on the remaining one or two hosts as the focus of public attention.

Option 3: Multinational control

Along with consolidation, the relevant fighter wing or wings could be made up of multinational personnel from several member states, spreading the burden and involvement of the nuclear mission, and making them genuinely Alliance operations. This may have political attraction, though it could have its own problems in reality. It also does not overcome the more general challenges around finding a credible role for these systems, and become the subject of ridicule.

Option 4: Withdrawal to the United States

All options involving a reduction in the number of states deploying U.S. nuclear forces on their territory could involve repatriation to the United States. The Obama Administration has set in train plans within its NPR to accommodate this possibility – maintaining warheads and infrastructure to enable deployment in the future should conditions change. This would allow warheads to be flown into Europe prior to or in times of crisis to open the option of deployment.

Option 5: Status Quo

The High Level Group report, due to be delivered to NATO Defense Ministers in June is likely to recommend maintaining current arrangements as they are. It fails to account for the strength of feeling from key member states, notably key host governments, and will simply avoid the issue, with potentially serious consequences for Alliance

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n 1 – unilateral actions on the part of west European host states.

Option 6: Formal negotiations with Russia on a treaty

Some suggest that any consensus around further reductions in the deployment of NATO theater nuclear weapons from Europe will *require* reciprocity from Russia. On the one hand this might appear strange. After all, if the reason for the deployment of these warheads has little to do with direct deterrence or any particular strategic relationship with Russia, but rather assurance, cohesion, burden-sharing and coupling U.S. forces in Europe, then why complicate the matter by artificially connecting them with Russia? Would not any such a suggestion simply be another remnant of Cold War thinking?

The idea of holding on to redundant weapon systems for the purpose of negotiating them away is hardly new. Russian tactical nuclear weapons are seen as a very real concern, especially as numbers of strategic warheads and their systems reduce. Opposition in Washington and many parts of Europe to further disarmament as long as these tactical nuclear weapons exist will be very strong. So for political reasons, as well as strategic balance, whatever the direct benefits to NATO of abandoning the deployment of theater nuclear weapons in Europe, many are suggesting that we should for now hold out in the hope that they can be used to secure a better deal with Russia.

Trouble is, Russia sees no direct threat from these weapons, and so there would be little leverage on them in negotiations. The reasons for Russian deployment of theater nuclear weapons, more numerous and diverse than the B61s, are remarkably different, and the Russians are likely to demand additional incentives to cooperate – deals including missile defense, global strike, NATO membership and conventional capabilities – issues that would create major problems for the Americans. And then, several years of negotiations later, as the prospects of the relatively simple new START this year show, ratification of a far more complex treaty would hardly be guaranteed. One can rapidly see that demands that NATO's theater nuclear weapons be tied into a treaty with Russia is simply a recipe for stalemate, that could lead to individual NATO members taking their own decisions.

Option 7: NATO – Russia linked draw-downs

If a comprehensive treaty with Russia is hopeless, and yet politically an agreement with Russia that reduces the threat from Russian tactical nuclear weapons is politically necessary (as well as achieving additional security benefits), what is the solution? The answer may lie in recent history. The Presidential nuclear initiatives in 1991, simultaneous yet unilateral arrangements to dramatically reduce and draw back tactical nuclear weapons from Europe, governed the transition after the Cold War. While not equivalent in terms, their linkage nevertheless enabled each leader to justify the dramatic draw-down to their domestic constituencies. While the Russians believe that they are no longer bound by their 1991 Presidential Directive, there may be scope to reopen that conversation.

Explicitly tied to future arrangements on both sides, unilateral tactical nuclear reductions by NATO for its own interests could enable the Alliance to take a proactive leadership role in achieving mutual arms control, fitting with Secretary Clinton's principle that reductions attempt to achieve reductions in Russian threats.

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position that they will not agree to negotiations involving reductions in their tactical nuclear deployments until the United States withdraws its forward-deployed nuclear weapons from Europe. They point out that the United States is the only state to deploy its nuclear weapons on foreign soil, and the only one to plan to transfer control of its nuclear weapons to non-nuclear weapon states (a legally-controversial arrangement under the NPT).

Conclusion

The likely future options for forward-deployment of NATO's European-based nuclear weapons remain up in the air. It seems likely that the Expert's group, chaired by Madeline Albright and due to report to the NATO Secretary General in May, and the High Level Group, reporting to NATO Defense Ministers in June, will recommend options close to the status quo. But these are unlikely to stem the desire of key members of the Alliance for change. It would be preferable if those desires were proactively accommodated in future plans in such a manner consistent with a consensus desire to see an Alliance nuclear strategy appropriate to this century, rather than one determined by the fears of the last.

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Cover photo: A view of a B-61 nuclear bomb trainer being shown at a static display of a 509th Bomb Group FB-111 aircraft. Pease Air Force Base, 4 October 1989, U.S. Department of Defense, Master Sgt. Ken Hammond.

BASIC would like to thank the Hewlett Foundation, , Nuclear Education Trust, Ploughshares Fund, the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, Polden Puckham, and the Ford Foundation for making its work in this area possible.

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