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Tactical Nuclear Weapons, NATO and Deterrence

Are NATO's TNW actually a threat to the credibility of its own deterrence?

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Introduction

Nuclear sharing arrangements and the active deployment of US theatre nuclear weapons (TNW) in Europe under the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) are viewed as critical components of its deterrence posture. Previously, this nuclear posture was aimed at the former Soviet Union (USSR) and Warsaw Pact alliance during the Cold War. Since the end of the Cold War and the absorption of former Warsaw Pact states into NATO the official justification for those systems remaining is not connected to any specified enemy. Though not an essential part of the overall strategic capability, particularly in a period of peace and stability, NATO's nuclear sharing has been considered important to NATO's internal cohesion and a symbol of US continued commitment to European security. As East-West tension is growing along with fears over Russian aggression and expansionism, particularly due to Russia's actions taken within Ukraine over the past two years, support for continued deployment of these systems can be expected to strengthen. Yet, ironically, now it may be more important than ever to move beyond symbolism and consider not only the dangers of continued deployment by contributing to tensions and insecurity, but also the manner in which they undermine NATO cohesion and could come to threaten the credibility of NATO's nuclear deterrence, particularly in a crisis.

Deterrence, in the traditional sense

Deterrence is premised upon being able to dissuade your adversary from attack by threat of overwhelming retaliatory punishment.¹ This concept is often credited with keeping the Cold War 'cold', as both the US and USSR feared nuclear use through the credible notion that such use could occur. However, if your willingness or ability to punish is called into question your deterrence is undermined.

During the Cold War both sides of the bipolar system genuinely believe that the other could use its nuclear arsenal in a strategic confrontation.

Relying solely on nuclear deterrence to prevent strategic attack is seen as dangerous in that it creates a gap in the middle of the escalation ladder, giving incentive to an opponent to escalate to the point where you are prepared to contemplate the use of nuclear weapons in response. If it is clear that NATO is not prepared to mobilise its capability (particularly its nuclear weapons) in response to provocation, the deterrence is not seen as credible. This has particularly been the case in the recent conflict over Crimea and eastern Ukraine. The nuclear deterrent is disproportional and therefore simply not relevant against small scale conventional

¹ Powell (2003) p88, Waltz (1981)

attack. This is consistent with customary international humanitarian law which outlines military response must be proportional to maintain a legal standing, further weakening the utility of NATO's TNW deterrence.

Smaller battlefield tactical or theatre nuclear weapons were deployed in their thousands in the European theatre during the Cold War, occupying the rungs of the ladder between massive conventional troop movements and the use of strategic 'city-busting' nuclear weapons in a flexible response posture, to the credibility of the nuclear deterrent. This is no longer the role of the 200-odd TNW warheads left in Europe. Popular belief dispels that TNW have military utility.² They are there more to symbolize the US nuclear commitment (not really necessary given that the US would use their strategic warheads first), and to give the allies some sort of a nuclear role in the event of a crisis.³ Yet the point of keeping them - to show united Alliance resolve - is actually their most fundamental weakness.

Cohesion, consent, and credibility: requirements for deterrence

The effectiveness of the Alliance depends upon a transparent, strong solidarity. There will always be an incentive for any adversary to probe differences, test weak spots and to divide the Alliance. NATO operates on the basis of consensus. If NATO were to sanction the use of nuclear weapons it would need the consent of all NATO member states, and those TNW based in Europe are seen as a physical manifestation of that unity. In theory, deploying TNW would show unity of resolve and signal to any potential aggressor the need to back down. That's the theory. The practice is very different. As Paolo Foradori notes, NATO's deterrence shield has been seriously compromised by the lack of credibility in its reliance on a nuclear posture.⁴

² Neuneck (2012) p267

³ Roberts (2012) p396

⁴ Foradori (2012) p283

Threat perceptions and beliefs over the appropriate use of nuclear threats are so diverse across the Alliance, that this attachment to artificial cohesion undermines credibility and therefore leads to a major vulnerability.⁵

Turkey, for example, as a result of its geographic proximity to the Middle East, national security concerns and the implied status it confers within the Alliance, is supportive of the policy to station NATO TNW on its territory as part of the overarching NATO posture. Further, Turkey has always been skeptical about American commitments to defending the south east corner of the Alliance, so TNW are seen as an effective assurance through burden sharing and a symbol of Alliance commitment to Turkish security.⁶ Withdrawal of the NATO nuclear capability from their territory would be received by the Turkish elite as a repeat of the experience of losing US Jupiter missiles after the Cuban missile crisis without consultation and resulting feelings of US abandonment that still have impact today.

Former Baltic Soviet states in NATO: Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, alongside Poland, are strongly supportive of retaining NATO nuclear bombs in Europe. Fears of Russian expansionism have increased in countries that experienced the impact of Soviet occupation within living memory.⁷ They would fiercely oppose any attempts to remove TNW, even though they realize that such weapons provide little practical defense against Russia.

Perceptions are very different in those north-west European states hosting the weapons themselves. Germany has in recent years an active public debate on the removal of TNW from its territory while also carefully balancing its position in NATO.⁸ However, recent events

⁵ Childs, N. (2012) p308

⁶ Stein (2012) p3, Browne (2011) p7, Bernstein (1980) p99

⁷ Pifer (2012) p416

⁸ Sauer and Van Der Zwaan (2011) p13

will at least for now take the public pressure off the government to make any moves to change their nuclear status. The Dutch parliament recently voted not to invest in a new generation of nuclear-capable aircraft for NATO's nuclear mission, though the government itself responded soon afterwards to say that it would not feel bound by this vote.

Even before Russian action in Ukraine and its nuclear posture since, NATO appeared to be committed to maintaining the current posture. Today that commitment seems even stronger. But an effective Alliance deterrence posture requires more soul-searching. The symbolic and military-irrelevant deployment of TNW may weaken the political resolve to committee to other means to stabilize the worsening relationship with Russia - be that strengthening conventional deterrence or engaging in more constructive diplomacy and negotiation.

According to Powell, states involved in a crisis will put pressure on each other to take further risk in a conflict.⁹ However, if the deterrent posture over-emphasises the most extreme (nuclear) level then options are severely limited in responding to aggression. In a crisis with Russia it is highly likely that more exposed NATO states will make very public requests to mobilize nuclear assets and threaten dire consequences, that host states may feel obliged to turn down, fearful that such escalation could get quickly out of control. This leaves the Alliance very exposed to crisis division, something that Russia is all too well aware of.

NATO deterrence depends upon unity. But depending upon systems that could highlight disunity in moments of crisis is deeply dangerous. Although the most recent NATO Deterrence and Defence Posture Review cites a nuclear capability as a 'core component' of deterrence,¹⁰ this inability of

NATO states to address these matters on the basis that shifts from the status quo will only highlight divisions is simply postponing the inevitable and disguising deep vulnerabilities. NATO deterrence does not stem from the stationed TNW across Europe, but the unity of the Alliance and avoidance of fragmentation. But that is currently a fragile thing. Whilst the TNW element of NATO deterrence remains incredible, discussion of shifts to the nuclear posture of NATO would no doubt cause disagreement.

Conclusion

Retaining forward deployed TNW under NATO to support the deterrence posture of the Alliance is an option weakens credibility. However, genuine discussion of the role of TNW is still off the table because of simplistic responses to Russian aggression and the fear that opening the discussion will open rifts between member states. Burden sharing in general is fundamental to the workings of the Alliance, but the nuclear angle is artificial. NATO has the largest, most capable conventional forces ever seen, and more focus on combining those forces more effectively would be a better and more sustainable use of resources to create a real and sustainable deterrent.

⁹ Powell (2003) p90

¹⁰ NATO (2012) II.8

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