



British American Security
Information Council

BASIC Backgrounder

New U.S Global Military Strategy could hint at future moves to reduce dependence on tactical nuclear weapons in Europe

President Barack Obama made an historic visit to the Pentagon on January 5, 2012 to deliver his remarks on the release of the United States' "New Global Military Strategy". During the two-part press conference, he and other defense leaders carefully chose their words to forewarn other American policymakers that big changes will be coming to the U.S. military, and that allies should be ready for big changes too.

Although the near-term focus will be on the cost and program implications for the United States as the Administration rolls out its budget in a few weeks, the principles reflected in the new defense strategic guidance are also expected to eventually influence NATO's own "deterrence and defense posture review", or DDP. NATO has been waiting on the conclusion of U.S. military reviews before more fervently moving ahead with decisions on its own posture. The defense strategic guidance in the United States reflects principles that may lead to changes in U.S. nuclear forces - possible changes which are wrapped up in a specific review process following on from the 2010 Nuclear Posture Review. Nuclear weapons are also on the agenda of NATO's DDP process.

The biggest strategic implication for NATO is that the United States will continue to intensify its focus on East Asia and the Middle East as the source of the most serious threats to U.S. national interests. Although officials did not reveal specific details during the press conferences, they made several remarks that are worth keeping in mind when considering the context for next steps on NATO and U.S. tactical nuclear weapons (TNWs) based in Europe.

Referring to shifting strategic priorities and tightening budgets, the President said during his speech that the United States would "continue to get rid of outdated Cold War-era systems"¹, although he did not

¹ "We'll continue to get rid of outdated Cold War-era systems so that we can invest in the capabilities that we need for the future, including intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, counterterrorism, countering weapons of mass destruction and the ability to operate in environments where adversaries try to deny us access."

specifically refer to the basing of U.S. TNWs in Europe since that era, nor did he refer to nuclear weapons at all.

The President's intervention was followed by Defense Secretary Leon Panetta, who said he thought the "country [is at a] strategic turning point," which calls for a strategic shift, regardless of economic hardships. Principal emerging threats included violent extremism, proliferation, North Korea, Iran, dramatic changes in the Middle East, rising powers in Asia, and also the national debt. As far as changes to military programs, he said that everything is on the table, including politically sensitive areas.

Secretary Panetta conveyed that these changing U.S. priorities will require an "innovative presence" and cooperative activity that move away from the United States being the principal security provider toward a relationship based on partnership: "our European allies and partners will be critical to addressing the challenges of the 21st century". He emphasized every word in this part of his presentation, as if to take extra care in reassuring allies:

"The U.S. military's force posture in Europe will, of necessity, continue to adapt and evolve to meet new challenges and opportunities, particularly in light of the security needs of the continent relative to the emerging strategic priorities that we face elsewhere. We are committed to sustaining a presence that will meet our Article 5 commitments, deter aggression, and the U.S. military will work closely with our allies to allow for the kinds of coalition operations that NATO has undertaken in Libya and Afghanistan."

The statement indicates that NATO allies should prepare themselves for the United States to alter its military forces more drastically during the coming decade but that such changes should not be construed as a devaluation of the overall transatlantic relationship.

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey, further elaborated on the point: "all of the trends, demographic trends, geopolitical trends, economic trends and military trends are shifting toward the Pacific. So our strategic challenges in the future will largely emanate out of the Pacific region, but also the littorals of the Indian Ocean, for that matter... We have to pay attention to those shifts. But what we do will always be built on the strong foundation of our traditional strategic partnerships, and NATO is chief among them... [we] will be in dialogue with them about what it means."

During the second press conference, Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Michèle Flournoy was asked about consequences of shifts in priorities for the U.S. nuclear triad. She acknowledged that the United States could probably meet deterrence needs at lower levels of nuclear forces, but deferred to the budget release for further details.

The defense paper lays out the main points of the new defense strategic guidance, including summaries of key current and emerging threats to the United States, and establishes the primary missions of the U.S. armed forces. On nuclear weapons, it reaffirms that:

“As long as nuclear weapons remain in existence, the United States will maintain a safe, secure, and effective arsenal. We will field nuclear forces that can under any circumstances confront an adversary with the prospect of unacceptable damage, both to deter potential adversaries and to assure U.S. allies and other security partners that they can count on America’s security commitments. *It is possible that our deterrence goals can be achieved with a smaller nuclear force*, which would reduce the number of nuclear weapons in our inventory as well as their role in U.S. national security strategy.” [p. 5, original emphasis]

Peppered through-out the speeches and the strategy document were the key words of “quick” and “flexible”, and the idea of efficiently deterring new threats, especially in East Asia and the Middle East. Continued basing of the B-61 bombs in Europe do not match up well with this thinking, and their contribution to nuclear deterrence has already been increasingly questioned. Taken together, the document and officials’ remarks could be interpreted as, or used for, setting the stage for eventual change regarding those TNWs. To what extent allies still see those bombs as reassuring, even with this new U.S. strategic vision, is still up for more discussion and decision-making.

Links:

-New Defense document: *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense*, January 5, 2012, U.S. Department of Defense: http://www.defense.gov/news/Defense_Strategic_Guidance.pdf

-Transcript of remarks by President Obama, Secretary of Defense Panetta, and General Dempsey: <http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=4953>

-Transcript of remarks by Deputy Defense Secretary Carter and Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Flournoy: <http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=4954>