



COMMENTARY

**NUCLEAR STRATEGY IN
NATO'S NEW STRATEGIC
CONCEPT:
WHAT IMPLICATIONS FOR
THE NUCLEAR
NONPROLIFERATION REGIME?**

NATO is beginning a process of consultation that will lead to the adoption of a new Strategic Concept by the end of 2010. This document will serve as a guide for the Alliance as it enters what can be called the "post-post Cold War" world. In view of the wide range of challenges facing the Alliance, it is unclear how much attention will be paid to the sensitive and controversial question of nuclear weapons and the role they should play in NATO strategy. Yet, serious disagreements emerged regarding the weight to be accorded the nuclear component in defining NATO's strategy of deterrence and defense during the drafting of the *Declaration on Alliance Security* adopted at the Strasbourg Summit in April 2009. That document asserts that there is still a role for nuclear weapons, but language was added referring to disarmament, arms control, and nonproliferation to satisfy the concerns of several members. While no member questioned the role for nuclear weapons, the episode indicates the balancing act the Alliance will need to achieve to satisfy the different interests and concerns of members regarding nuclear weapons and disarmament.

NATO's insistence on a continuing role for nuclear weapons may appear to be counter to the spirit of the times in which nuclear abolitionists seem to be in the ascendance. The Global Zero initiative, launched by some hard-nosed figures of the Cold War such as Henry Kissinger and George Shultz, has been endorsed by a variety of international statesmen, including several from NATO countries. Most significantly, President Obama voiced his support for the complete elimination of nuclear weapons, albeit with qualifications on the timeframe, and announced his intention to pursue a new round of strategic arms reduction talks with Russia. Given this *zeitgeist*, it might seem odd

that the foremost military alliance of progressive democratic states would take such an apparently regressive stance. Indeed if NATO reaffirms the role of nuclear weapons in the new Strategic Concept, including the existing arrangements for extended deterrence, critics likely will argue that it is sending precisely the wrong message on the Global Zero initiative and undermining attempts to strengthen the nonproliferation regime at the next review of the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) in 2010. [1]

Are nuclear weapons likely to remain a part of NATO strategy despite the fact its members all abide by the terms of NPT and support nonproliferation efforts? The short answer is that nuclear weapons continue to play an important *political* role in the Alliance as the ultimate deterrent against the unknown. Moreover, the arrangements for extended deterrence have assumed a symbolic significance for several of the new members that will be difficult to disturb.

Nuclear Weapons in NATO Strategy

Nuclear weapons have played a role in NATO strategy since the beginning of the Alliance. In the early years, NATO strategy was explicit that, in the event of conflict with the Soviet Union, the Alliance would use nuclear weapons from the outset. The result of this strategy was the European stationing of U.S. platforms capable of striking the Soviet Union – long-range bombers, then medium-range ballistic missiles – and a substantial array of tactical nuclear weapons with U.S. and Allied forces. These nuclear warheads were kept under U.S. control to be released in wartime for use by the national authorities where they were based. However, the realization of the unacceptable choices that this reliance implied for decision makers led to the demand for greater flexibility in response options rather than simple massive retaliation. The result was the eventual adoption of the strategy of flexible response, which called for options at all levels of escalation, including the increasingly controversial short-range systems.

The development of intercontinental ballistic missiles had made redundant the deployment in



Europe of U.S. systems capable of striking the Soviet Union, but their withdrawal left a degree of uncertainty in some European circles as to the reliability of Washington's commitment. This desire for visible "coupling" was a major determinant in the 1979 Dual Track decision to deploy Cruise and Pershing missiles in Europe while simultaneously negotiating their elimination. It continues to be a prominent consideration today.

With the end of the Cold War, NATO's nuclear strategy underwent substantial adjustment. According to the Strategic Concept of 1991, the strategic nuclear forces of the Alliance continued to provide "the supreme guarantee of the security of the Allies." [2] However the number of short range systems was reduced dramatically and emphasis was placed firmly on the political purpose of NATO's nuclear forces: "to preserve peace and prevent coercion and any kind of war by ensuring uncertainty in the mind of any aggressor about the nature of the Allies response to military aggression." The language in the 1991 Strategic Concept was carried forward in the 1999 Concept, which added that because of the radical changes in the security situation, the circumstances under which the use of nuclear weapons might have to be contemplated "are therefore extremely remote." [3]

Both Strategic Concepts addressed the issue of extended deterrence by stressing that a credible Alliance posture requires widespread participation by European Allies in planning, peacetime basing, and command, control and consultation arrangements, thus reinforcing the link between Europe and North America. These arrangements consist of "adequate sub-strategic forces based in Europe which will provide an essential link with strategic nuclear forces, reinforcing the transatlantic link. These will consist of dual capable aircraft and a small number of UK Trident warheads." [4]

By some press accounts, the current arsenal in Europe within the nuclear sharing arrangement is now estimated to be as low as 200 warheads with the air forces of Belgium, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands maintaining the dual capable aircraft (DCA) that can carry nuclear weapons and pilots trained for nuclear missions. [5] NATO has made substantial reductions to the nuclear forces assigned to its own strategy. However, the reliance on the nuclear component remains, including the

requirement for the deployment of nuclear warheads in Europe. Moreover, according to informed sources, studies by NATO's High Level Group on future requirements have thus far indicated support for a continuation of the current arrangements.

National Views and Other Factors that May Influence NATO Policy

As the provider of the nuclear weapons in NATO strategy, the views of the United States are crucial in deciding Alliance nuclear policy, particularly now in view of the President's endorsement of the Global Zero initiative. The U.S. administration's soon-to-be-completed Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) could have a significant effect on the direction of Alliance strategy. Pressure for the Alliance to adjust its current strategy, however, could also come from other sources. First, the Group of Experts created to generate ideas for the new Strategic Concept is likely to address the issue, and its conclusions will affect the direction of the debate at NATO headquarters. Second, all of the states that maintain DCA are faced with costly decisions in the near future. The Netherlands faces the most pressing problem in this regard, but the other states may also have to replace aircraft in coming years. Third, several Alliance members are eager to be seen as responding to the goals of the Global Zero initiative and bolstering the NPT regime. Finally, there will be those who will seek to leverage reductions in NATO nuclear systems to achieve reductions in the substantial numbers of equivalent Russian systems.

In addition, the question of public opinion and the traditional sensitivity to nuclear weapons is critical. It is difficult to know whether public opposition will be the force it was during the Cold War, but it is probably safe to assume that in several countries it has the potential to cause problems, particularly if NATO is seen to be sticking with the status quo.

National attitudes in NATO member countries toward the existing arrangements vary considerably. The presence of U.S. nuclear warheads in Europe has assumed enormous political significance for the new members as they are seen as symbolizing the U.S. commitment to Europe. In the words of one ambassador from a new member state: "Nuclear deterrence by the United States and through NATO with the presence of American warheads is the



ultimate test of NATO's credibility." [6] The newer members of the Alliance in close proximity to Russia are especially eager to ensure that nothing is done to weaken the concept of extended deterrence. Those states see an increasingly assertive Russia as a potential hazard, and the 2008 Georgia-Russia conflict only served to underline those concerns. They argue that removing short-range nuclear weapons would weaken the core mission of the Alliance: ensuring the security of its members through a shared commitment to defend their territorial integrity. As another ambassador from a new member state said, "The basic issue is one of confidence in the transatlantic link. People feel that removal weakens the link." [7]

The DCA countries accept the mission but without great enthusiasm and would not be unhappy if it was discontinued. The non-DCA members accept the arguments expressed in the 1991 and 1999 Strategic Concepts concerning the importance of participation and risk and burden sharing to Alliance cohesion, but several countries increasingly believe that these benefits could be maintained under different and less problematic arrangements. For the moment, however, the choice is between maintaining Alliance cohesion or contributing to the goal of reducing the role of nuclear weapons and furthering the cause of disarmament.

One point in common across the Alliance is that few members would welcome a public debate on nuclear strategy. As noted above, it is not clear whether the public's opposition to nuclear weapons is as strong as it was during the Cold War. Some of the older members of the Alliance have constituencies that question the continued relevance of nuclear sharing, and those doubts have been given a higher political profile by the recent, albeit highly qualified, statement of the new German governing coalition that it would like to see the eventual removal of all U.S. nuclear weapons from Germany. The member countries that host nuclear weapons on their territory have always faced some domestic political opposition to the practice, but in the current security environment the arguments against basing nuclear weapons in those countries may gain in popularity. According to press accounts, one base in Belgium with nuclear weapons was already a target of a foiled terrorist plot, and undoubtedly some portion of the population sees such bases as more of a liability than an asset. [8]

Discussions within the context of the new Strategic Concept will obviously have to weigh all factors - the advantages and disadvantages of staying with the existing arrangements or moving away from them. Among the variety of factors, two competing pressures dominate: the need to ensure Alliance cohesion and the commitment to reduce the role of nuclear weapons. These two pressures can be reconciled. An interim solution, for example, could reduce even further the number of warheads and centralize them at one or two sites. Whatever changes are agreed, however, will need to be done within an overall assessment of NATO's strategy of deterrence and defense that takes into account the security concerns of all members, including a confirmation of the continuing validity of the commitment enshrined in Article 5 of the NATO Treaty, specifically that an attack against one is an attack against all.

The Nonproliferation Implications of NATO's Nuclear Strategy

Many people in the nonproliferation community argue that NATO should divorce itself from nuclear weapons altogether and that the continued existence of nuclear sharing casts a pall over the 2010 review of the Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). The argument centers on an interpretation of the NPT that suggests an apparent conflict between the basic principles of the NPT and nuclear sharing. Under the terms of the treaty, the permanent nuclear states are prohibited from transferring nuclear weapons to non-nuclear weapons states. Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Turkey are all signatories to the treaty as non-nuclear weapons states. Thus, some people argue that those states and the United States are in violation of the NPT. [9] As long as they remain so, it will be difficult to rein in proliferators who see a double standard in action. The long-standing response to this claim is that the weapons are based in those countries but remain under the control of the United States until the outbreak of war. In the event of war, the NPT is no longer in force, so by this interpretation nuclear sharing is not a violation of the treaty.

This debate has become a part of nonproliferation theology and is not likely to be resolved anytime soon. A more relevant critique, however, is that the continued emphasis on nuclear weapons as



the “supreme guarantor” of peace both sends the wrong message to potential proliferators and stands as a major encumbrance to significant nuclear disarmament.

NATO officials have made it clear in their statements that they see little evidence that NATO nuclear policy increases proliferation risks. In support of this view they cite detailed analyses of why states decide to pursue nuclear weapons showing that states make their proliferation decisions based on regional security contexts or domestic political considerations. [10] The fact that NATO continues to promote the nuclear sharing policy which has been in existence for longer than the NPT does not necessarily affect those calculations. The symbolism of NATO giving up on nuclear sharing might be valuable, but it is worth noting that the deep reductions in both U.S. and Russian nuclear arsenals since the end of the Cold War had no effect on the nuclear calculations of Pakistan, India, North Korea, or Iran.

To the contrary, some proponents of the arrangement argue that the continuation of a nuclear role in NATO strategy might constrain proliferation. [11] Their argument is twofold. First, nuclear sharing increases the credibility of nuclear deterrence against states that could threaten the European allies, thereby diminishing perceptions in such states of the utility of nuclear weapons and decreasing their incentives to proliferate. Second, the nuclear sharing arrangement in Europe helps to prevent proliferation within Europe itself. In the Pacific region, where the nuclear guarantee is not as explicit, U.S. allies such as South Korea, Taiwan and even Japan have all considered the possibility of developing nuclear weapons programs. Some people worry that they will consider it again if they lose confidence in the U.S. security guarantee, a decision that will be shaped, at least in part, by the United States’ decisions with respect to NATO. [12] It has been suggested that, given its proximity to Iran, the withdrawal of U.S. nuclear weapons from Turkey could prompt that country to consider developing its own national deterrent force. [13] Turkish officials have dismissed such claims, however, and they are opposed to changing existing DCA arrangements.

Current attitudes suggest that NATO is unlikely to make any substantial changes in the role of nuclear weapons in Alliance strategy.

While Alliance members regularly express their support for measures in support of arms control, disarmament and nonproliferation, NATO itself is not a party to such negotiations and agreements. At best it provides a forum for consultation on national policies and a platform for declarations of support. This in turn places a particular significance on what NATO does and says with its own strategy. In this respect and, given the general acceptance of a nuclear component in NATO strategy, the most likely option to demonstrate movement in the right direction lies with the small number of nuclear warheads deployed in Europe.

Retention of the nuclear component, however, will be accompanied by a parallel effort to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in NATO strategy to a minimum and provide active support to disarmament and nonproliferation. In this sense there could be efforts to redefine the requirements of extended deterrence. This will require careful Alliance management and a careful balancing of competing priorities. The development of a new Strategic Concept provides the Alliance with the opportunity to ensure that its strategy meets the needs of all members in the evolving security environment, but also attempts to reconcile the needs of deterrence and defense with a commitment to reducing the role of nuclear weapons.

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► SOURCES AND NOTES

[1] See, for example, “NATO and Nuclear Weapons: NATO’s Nuclear Sharing: A Cold War Anachronism that Undermines the NPT,” Acronym Institute for Disarmament Diplomacy, 2007, <http://www.acronym.org.uk/nato/npt2007.htm>.

[2] “1991 NATO Strategic Concept,” paragraph 54, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_23847.htm.

[3] “1999 NATO Strategic Concept,” paragraph 64, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_27433.htm.

[4] Ibid.

[5] “Germans Press for Removal of U.S. Nuclear Weapons in Europe,” *Guardian*, November 6, 2009.

[6] Author interviews with ambassadors to NATO, 2009.



- [7] Author interviews with ambassadors to NATO, 2009.
- [8] "Al-Qaeda Suspect Tells of Bomb Plot," BBC News, May 27, 2003, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/2941702.stm>.
- [9] Laura Spagnuolo, "NATO Nuclear Burden Sharing and NPT Obligations," BASIC Getting to Zero Papers, No. 13, <http://www.basicint.org/gtz/gtz13.pdf>.
- [10] See, for example, Scott Sagan, "How to Keep the Bomb from Iran," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 85, No.5, Sept/Oct. 2006, pp.45-59.
- [11] Michael Ruhle, "NATO and Extended Deterrence in a Multinuclear World," *Comparative Strategy*, Vol. 28, 2009, pp.10-16.
- [12] "Why Japan Might Build Nukes," *Business Week*, January 20, 2003. p.52.
- [13] Oliver Thränert, "U.S. Nuclear Forces in Europe to Zero? Yes, But Not Yet," *Proliferation Analysis*, December 10, 2008, <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=22533>.

RIGHT-SIZING THE "LOOSE NUKES" SECURITY BUDGE PART 1

Highlighting the danger posed by nuclear terrorism and the need for an effective response, President Barack Obama came to office promising to "secure all vulnerable nuclear materials around the world within four years." The necessity of this goal is unquestioned. Over the past six years, at least four official government reports have been published that criticize the adequacy of the U.S. government's response to the threat of nuclear terrorism. The ability to achieve this objective, however, has been questioned, and the Obama administration is in the process of losing a year in its pursuit. This is because its first proposed budget for this initiative in Fiscal Year (FY) 2010 fell far short of requirements, and Congress did not respond to the White House's request as if securing nuclear materials was an overriding national security priority. The recently submitted FY11 budget is much better, increasing the amounts for this objective by over \$300 million. Now the Congress will have to support this budget and possibly further increase it at a time of record deficits and intense competition for federal dollars. In order to meet the accelerated time frame to secure

"loose nukes" around the globe, the President will need to maintain his leadership of the effort in the international community. Equally, if not more important to the achievement of this goal will be the attainment of significant additional funding from both the United States and multilateral sources. President Obama's April 2010 global Nuclear Summit is an important opportunity to demonstrate progress on these goals.

The Danger

In his April 5, 2009 speech in Prague, President Obama outlined his arms control and nuclear nonproliferation objectives. At the top of the list was his assessment that terrorists are "determined to buy, build, or steal" a nuclear weapon. To prevent this danger of nuclear terrorism the President outlined the following major policy goals:

- ◆ Lead a global effort to secure all nuclear weapons materials at vulnerable sites within four years;
- ◆ Convene a nuclear security summit hosted by the U.S. in April 2010;
- ◆ Set new standards for nuclear material protection;
- ◆ Expand U.S. cooperation with Russia, and pursue new partnerships to lock down sensitive nuclear materials;
- ◆ Turn efforts such as the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) and the Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism (GICNT) into international institutions; and
- ◆ Build on efforts to break up black markets, detect and intercept materials in transit, and use financial tools to disrupt dangerous trade. [1]

The President's concern with nuclear terrorism is consistent with a number of recent statements by current and former government officials and reports of blue ribbon commissions. [2] The 2004 *9/11 Commission Report* stated that, "Preventing the proliferation of these [WMD] weapons warrants a maximum effort." The 2005 *9/11 Public Discourse Project: Final Report on the 9/11 Commission Recommendations* gave a grade of "D" to the implementation of that recommendation. It further stated that the President should "dramatically accelerate the timetable for securing all nuclear