



Like Wedding Rings or Euros?

Nuclear Weapons in Europe

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Summary

NATO is conducting a Deterrence and Defense Posture Review to be completed prior to the May 2012 NATO summit that President Obama will host in Chicago. Among other things, the review will consider what the role of nuclear weapons should be in NATO's overall military policies and posture.

The good news is that NATO does not now face threats against which it would be necessary or credible to use nuclear weapons, except if Russia or a future nuclear-armed Iran were to threaten the existence of an allied state first. The bad news is that NATO's nuclear weapons are not useful against the threats that are most likely to arise, such as cyberattacks, energy-supply blackmail, or political subversion. The underappreciated news is that some states believe nuclear weapons are such a safe and protean asset that they will protect against a wide range of threats. This belief encourages leveraging the nuclear deterrent to cover positions that in fact should be backed by real capital in the form of new nonnuclear capabilities and policies.

Rather than a wedding ring that reassuringly symbolizes commitment, as defenders of the status quo argue, the NATO arsenal of nuclear bombs may be more like the euro. In that case, NATO states should learn from the euro crisis. While security conditions in Europe remain relatively benign, they should recapitalize their security commitments and clarify their crisis decisionmaking procedures.

As the West trembles through the euro crisis, NATO is reviewing its "overall posture in deterring and defending against the full range of threats to the Alliance." Nuclear weapons figure prominently in this review, which is to be completed before the NATO summit President Obama is hosting in Chicago in May 2012.

Approximately 200 U.S. "nonstrategic" nuclear bombs are currently deployed under NATO's aegis in Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy, and Turkey. The United States built and "owns" these weapons, but the decision to use them would be made in consultation with the other 27 members of the alliance. Once a decision is made, the bombs would then be delivered by the host country's crew (except in the case of Turkey, where American planes and crews would most likely fly in to carry out the mission). Multinational teams would perform fueling and other support operations. In this way, the deterrence benefits of these weapons, along

with the moral and physical risks and responsibilities of their potential use, are to be shared by the alliance.

Proponents of maintaining NATO's nuclear arsenal liken it to a wedding ring that symbolizes the alliance's bond. This analogy was created by a veteran U.S. defense official, Elaine Bunn, and is invoked frequently in U.S. and NATO circles. Like rings, NATO's nuclear weapons symbolize the partners' commitments to stay together and defend each other in good times and bad. In addition to reassuring the allies, rings (and nuclear bombs) deter others from thinking that any one partner is fair game for seduction (or attack). While the partners' commitment may be taken for granted over time, when one of them shows up one day without the ring, the other takes notice, as do neighbors and colleagues. Wondering ensues: Is the couple in crisis or splitting up? Is there an opportunity to draw one of the partners away? Because the actions and reactions that may result from removing the symbol of union—a wedding ring or a nuclear arsenal—can be destabilizing, it is better to retain it.

Others might ask whether the NATO bombs are more like euros. This analogy suggests that NATO's nuclear bombs are not the safe assets they once seemed to be because they have been highly leveraged for use against a wider range of potential threats than they can realistically deter. And believing that the safe value of the nuclear assets can cover a wide range of contingencies, NATO has not spent the money it should to improve its nonnuclear capabilities. As long as the possessors of this deterrent and the adversaries who are to be deterred believe in its strength, the system works. But the moment a cash call comes and the necessary reserves are not there, cascading panic can occur: just as countries can't pay back their credit holders, NATO could lack the resources to cover all its obligations. To repair the credibility of the deterrent in a crisis, disastrous nuclear war could be initiated; or a beggar-thy-neighbor debate could occur, as some members of the alliance would prefer accommodation of the adversary over potential self-annihilation. As with the euro, it would become obvious that stronger regulations are needed to prevent such nuclear leveraging and that the absence of a unitary decisionmaking authority in the alliance renders it unsure of its ability to safely manage such powerful forces. To avoid such risks, some argue, it is wiser to remove these weapons and the false reassurance they are supposed to offer.

Safety in Nukes?

Few argue that nuclear deterrence requires the retention of nuclear bombs at NATO air bases in Europe. If nuclear strikes were actually required, U.S. commanders would use invulnerable and more reliable weapons from submarines, not aging fighter-bombers in Europe. The value of the NATO-based bombs is primarily to reassure less secure allies that the alliance has the resolve to protect them. In the words of an American expert speaking at a May 2011 NATO Defense College workshop in Estonia, NATO's nuclear-sharing arrangements "provide assurance to Allies that the commitment to collective defense will be realized

in even the most extreme circumstances—and that the U.S. will remain deeply engaged in Europe.”²¹

Of course, as NATO’s 2010 Strategic Concept put it, “the circumstances in which any use of nuclear weapons might have to be contemplated are extremely remote.” The threats that NATO states face today and in the foreseeable future do not resemble the scenarios of massive Warsaw Pact invasion that fostered NATO’s reliance on nuclear weapons in the first place. The Warsaw Pact dissolved, and its non-Soviet members have joined NATO. Western European states are more secure from military threat than they have been for centuries.

Yet, new NATO states, formerly part of the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact, do not feel as secure as those farther west. What worries them is not massive invasion but rather more ambiguous threats from Russia, “such as cyber attacks, energy cut-offs, and local ethnic unrest to intimidate and even attack its neighbors.”²² As veteran NATO experts Hans Binnendijk and Catherine McArdle Kelleher report, these states are concerned that such threats “would not reach the Article 5 threshold” calling for active collective defense “or that NATO decision making and response would be too slow to be effective.”²³

Whatever comfort NATO’s nuclear weapons may provide, in reality it is not clear how they would or could credibly be invoked to deter or retaliate against the most likely threats, which are those below the threshold of massive attack. Initiating the use of nuclear weapons against a nuclear-armed adversary who can retaliate is credible only if the threat posed by that adversary is of an existential scale. It would be irrational and incredible to invite nuclear retaliation on oneself (or one’s allies) if that retaliation would be more destructive than the initial threat itself. And if the threat facing the alliance was of lesser severity and/or did not come from a nuclear-armed adversary, using nuclear weapons would not be necessary, justifiable, or credible.

Nevertheless, senior leaders of Baltic states, Poland, and the Czech Republic express, usually privately, that retaining these weapons is important to reassure them. Proponents of nuclear weapons in Washington and NATO headquarters eagerly amplify these views to resist calls for reducing, let alone eliminating, the nuclear arsenal. Herein lies a mismatch between capabilities and objectives that amounts to a moral-strategic hazard. Relying on nuclear weapons to bail out NATO from positions it has not adequately covered with nonnuclear forces should not be reassuring.

Learning From the Euro

The euro crisis is instructive. Banks and treasuries in the eurozone financed loans and expenditures in ways that are now recognized to have been profligate. They did so on the assumption that eurozone countries collectively were rich and would continue to grow richer, and that somehow if there were an economic problem in one state, the others would be strong enough to maintain the

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solvency of the system. “Euro-assets” were simply assumed to be safe; holding them was reassuring. Lonely voices that worried about the absence of a unified decisionmaking body that could impose fiscal regulations and/or issue and underwrite zone-wide bonds were dismissed. Requirements to increase capital reserves relative to loans were not made across the eurozone.

When the financial crisis emerged in the United States in 2008 and cascaded through Europe, banks and states acted haphazardly and incrementally. The spread of the turmoil outpaced the reactions of the actors who were disaggregated and not unified. Greece, on the most endangered end of the spectrum, moved inadequately due in part to domestic political compulsions. Germany, on the other end of the capability spectrum, has moved too little too slowly, also for domestic reasons. Germans understandably denounce Greeks and others for not saving enough, for not requiring stronger capitalization requirements for banks, and so on. They ask, “Why should we who have worked so hard and saved so much have to bail out other people who have not had the responsibility to invest in the capabilities we have or the wisdom to act prudently?” The retort, of course, is that German businesses and workers benefitted enormously from the profligate consumption of their exports and loans by Greeks and others. Saving the credibility of the euro is necessary to maintain a strong German economy, whether German voters like it or not.

Nuclear assets may be like euro assets. Europeans (and Americans) assume that the nuclear bombs on NATO air bases underwrite a deterrent that will work against an unspecified range of potential threats. NATO members do not face realistic threats of large-scale invasion of the sort that NATO forces are meant to deter and defeat. When NATO has acted militarily in recent decades—Bosnia, Afghanistan, Libya—it was “out of area” on missions beyond the core purpose of the alliance. But if NATO members did unexpectedly face direct threats, it is assumed that the deterrent would be strong because nuclear assets are there.

Cautionary voices, such as former secretary of defense Robert Gates, warn that NATO states have not invested enough in new military capabilities, and have not coordinated and rationalized procurement policies to make the alliance an efficient unitary actor. NATO members for years have been reducing investments in nonnuclear forces that would be suited to deter or defend against twenty-first-century threats. Even new members of NATO, who express the greatest insecurities, have resisted calls to end redundancies, divide labor, coordinate procurement programs, and organize regional multilateral forces. Like Western European states, they have reduced defense spending and not invested in critical capabilities identified as recently as the 2010 Lisbon Summit.

In euro terms, NATO is too leveraged. There is too little capital in reserve in the form of nonnuclear twenty-first-century capabilities to cover the risks if the credibility of NATO’s deterrent is challenged in a crisis. In 2007, Estonia suffered a temporarily crippling cyberattack emanating from Russia, though not with certainty from the Russian state. Four years later it is not clear that NATO agrees how to deter or counter such threats, or whether it has the capabilities to do so. Nuclear retaliation is not a viable option.

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Estonians might expect that nuclear deterrence would be invoked if Russia moved armored forces to the Estonian border, say, in response to dramatic maltreatment of the Russian minority, and NATO was not able to move sufficient conventional military forces to stop the Russians. Such a challenge to NATO's deterrent may never happen, just as it was possible that investors would have never questioned the safety of Italian bonds. But once doubt arises in the assumed value of the asset, in this case NATO's portfolio of military capabilities, self-fulfilling panic can set in. Nuclear weapons may be like the vaunted "bazooka" that commentators believe could end the euro crisis: the mobilization of the European Central Bank to back all the credit issued by banks and governments. If Germans and others have been unwilling, with some reason, to pull the trigger on the financial bazooka, imagine how much greater the reluctance would be to detonate nuclear weapons.

NATO states' refusal to change procurement and operational practices in order to build twenty-first-century capabilities is akin to banks' and treasuries' failure to increase reserve requirements and impose fiscal discipline *before* the euro crisis hit. To believe or hope, instead, that NATO-based nuclear weapons would continue to do the job is similarly irresponsible. Whatever reassurance may be claimed for such a position is hollow. Real security requires greater capitalization of defenses combined with reductions in the threats to which the alliance is exposed.

Doubts About Unity

The problem of excessive leveraging of nuclear weapons is compounded by the absence of a single, unified decisionmaking actor. NATO's nuclear burden sharing is said to demonstrate the alliance's solidarity, but the reality is that a decision to use the nuclear weapons in Europe must be agreed to at least by the United States and the countries whose bases and crews would be involved in the operation. During the Cold War, doubts about NATO's collective decisionmaking were attenuated by the belief that the threat, if it were enacted, would be an unmistakable and massive Warsaw Pact attack on Germany, Europe's richest and most powerful state. Today's threats are more ambiguous and most likely directed against small states whose fates do not directly implicate the security of the alliance's largest populations, much like Greece's economy alone did not seem to threaten the eurozone. In a crisis, NATO's collective decisionmaking process could just as readily produce bitter disagreements, indecision, half-measures, and delay, much as has occurred in the euro crisis.

The treaty that created the euro included a "no bail-out" clause guaranteeing that no state would be held liable for the debts of others. Yet, as the euro crisis has shown, when excruciating decisions have to be made, politics intervene. Germany is now begrudgingly, haltingly, and perhaps inadequately bailing out Greece, Italy, and maybe others, contrary to the Maastricht Treaty. This offers a measure of confidence that powerful states will act in the common good even if action entails great cost to them—but just a measure. If political exigencies can lead to reluctant positive improvisations on agreements, as in the euro case, why could they not stimulate negative improvisations?

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NATO has Article V, which runs in the opposite direction of the Maastricht Treaty by obligating all states to come to the defense of one who has been attacked. Yet, it is at least plausible that if a state on NATO's periphery were subject to a military threat serious enough to motivate that state or the NATO staff to urge the alliance to signal that nuclear weapons could come into play, some member states would resist. The mere invocation of a nuclear threat could cause a split in the alliance. Politics farthest from the "action" could panic at the prospect of nuclear war. This happened multiple times even during the Cold War. Early in the Korean War, for example, President Truman insinuated during a press conference that the use of atomic weapons was "under active consideration." British prime minister Clement Attlee immediately rushed to Washington to press for restraint, and other European leaders echoed this fearful message. Similar dynamics ensued around the Quemoy and Mazu crisis with China in 1955.

It is said that retaining the bombs in Europe is necessary to demonstrate the "coupling" of the United States and NATO, in both directions. U.S.-controlled bombs in Europe signal the possibility that Washington could respond to an adversary's aggression against NATO by using "local" nuclear forces instead of leaping up the escalation ladder to the use of U.S. strategic forces. The possibility of confining nuclear use to Europe is supposed to add credibility to the United States' willingness to risk nuclear war on behalf of allies. And the willingness of European NATO states to make themselves potential targets of nuclear retaliation by hosting these weapons and participating in their potential delivery is supposed to signal to Americans that the allies share the moral and physical risks and responsibilities of nuclear deterrence and defense.

However, coupling can run in another, less welcome direction, too. Indeed, rather than solidifying NATO, the pre-positioned nuclear forces in Europe could tempt a cynical and somewhat risk-prone adversary to push a crisis just far enough to provoke someone in NATO to ring the nuclear alarm, betting that the ensuing reaction would split the alliance and weaken its resolve. Playing cat-and-mouse this way with nuclear weapons is very risky, but it has been done in the Cold War in Europe and East Asia, and more recently by Pakistan in crises with India.

Moving Forward

NATO leaders, understandably, are reluctant to discuss scenarios that could raise questions about the certainty of robust, timely collective decisions to undertake nuclear war in defense of an ally. But such discussions should not provoke despair. NATO does not face a crisis now, much like the eurozone in 2008 as compared to today. The alliance can and should learn from the euro experience. Indeed, if the euro crisis can be instructive it is irresponsible not to explore whether and how it might be relevant to security planning. The most obvious lesson is to act now to build reserves of capability, to correct the overvaluation of particular assets, and to strengthen the unity and efficiency of decisionmaking.

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If economic problems in Europe and the United States make it more difficult to invest in defense, this possibility should be addressed too. The answer then would not be to further leverage unreliable assets but rather to focus on reducing threats. For all the West's current economic and political hardships, NATO states have the wherewithal to demonstrate that they would be able to inflict grave economic, political, and military harm on any state that would attempt to project military power against them, including Russia and Iran. This can be done with or without the largely symbolic nuclear bombs now positioned in Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy, and Turkey.

More constructively, after the upcoming presidential election in the United States and transition in Russia, NATO and Moscow could act on their shared interests to concentrate resources on economic reconstruction by alleviating each other's military threat perceptions. They could do this through reaffirming mutual commitments not to project military power across the borders of NATO (in both directions), backed by corresponding reductions in NATO and Russian conventional military forces and further reductions in the aggregate totals of U.S. and Russian nuclear forces. The core imperative is to reassure NATO's easternmost members and Russia that their sovereignty will not be undermined. In these trying political and economic times, the populations of Russia and NATO states would welcome leaders who manage to cooperate in reducing threats.

The wedding ring analogy may be instructive here in ways that its admirers have not considered. Spouses do not only remove their rings to enable an affair or signal a breakup. Occasionally a ring is lost, or a spouse gains weight to the point where the ring of his youth no longer fits. Pawn shops are full of wedding rings that have been hawked to gain emergency cash. In any of these situations, the issue is how the ring's absence is explained and how the decision to deal with it is made. Things change and the measure of individuals, couples, and alliances is how they adapt to that change. Whether NATO prefers to exercise and make the nuclear ring fit more comfortably or to find other resources to keep its ring out of hawk, or instead chooses to trade its nuclear weapons for other goods, the imperative is to have adult conversations about what is realistically best for the family. In marriage as in economics, when crises arise, wise partners identify what is vital and work together to save and invest in the bare necessities.

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Notes

- 1 David Yost, "Adapting NATO's Deterrence Posture: The Alliance's New Strategic Concept and Implications for Nuclear Policy, Non-Proliferation, Arms Control, and Disarmament," report on the May 4–6, 2011, workshop of the NATO Defense College, Rome (Tallinn, Estonia, June 2011).
- 2 Hans Binnendijk and Catherine McArdle Kelleher, "NATO Reassurance and Nuclear Reductions," in *Reducing Nuclear Risks in Europe: A Framework for Action*, edited by Steve Andreasen and Isabelle Williams (Washington, D.C.: Nuclear Threat Initiative, 2011), 99.
3. *Ibid.*

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