

# Is NATO's Nuclear Deterrence Policy a Relic of the Cold War?

November 17, 2010

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## Summary

The Cold War left a nuclear landscape whose remnants must still be sensitively managed. As NATO grapples with the future of its deterrence posture, it faces the contentious question of whether reducing or withdrawing forward-based U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe would unacceptably reduce the security of its member states. The weapons were intended to promote nuclear burden sharing through an Alliance-wide decision process. But the European aircraft that would drop them are aging and will need replacement or refitting. Decisions are needed soon on whether this should occur.

The United States favors still greater nuclear restraint, as it declared in its recent Nuclear Posture Review. But it is reluctant to change in Europe without the agreement of all its allies. Some member states, especially on NATO's periphery, seek the continued assurance that they believe these theater weapons offer. Other allies see the decision as an urgent opportunity to advance the goal of the abolition of nuclear weapons. So the upcoming debate in Lisbon will require a rare combination of determination, political sophistication, and analytical clarity—and issues will likely still require resolution long after the summit.

Although significant differences between member states exist, most agree NATO should:

- Remain capable of launching a nuclear response to aggression or blackmail as long as nuclear weapons exist.
- Reassure the most exposed members about the Alliance's capacity and commitment to defend them.
- Avoid a high-profile transatlantic difference of opinion, which would represent the fastest and most far-reaching loss of collective credibility.
- Contribute to the reduction and, when possible, the elimination of nuclear weapons in the world.

To foster lasting consensus on the future shape and basing of nuclear deterrence, NATO's leadership must pay close attention to the internal political pressures within key member states, as well as others' perceptions

of external insecurity. Both result from long-term geographical, historical, and cultural factors. A good decision on nuclear arrangements will safeguard both the Alliance's credibility and its cohesion—and enable NATO to focus on new and emerging threats without distraction.

The Cold War is long over, yet it left a nuclear landscape whose remnants must still be managed. Nuclear guarantees and umbrellas cover 60 percent of the world's population and more than 80 percent of its GDP.<sup>1</sup> While NATO still retains theater nuclear weapons (commonly, but misleadingly, referred to as tactical nuclear weapons) in Europe, their numbers have shrunk from around 8,000 weapons at their peak<sup>2</sup> to about 200 weapons today.

It is consequently necessary to consider whether the old adage, often attributed to Joseph Stalin, that “quantity has a quality all of its own” applies to shrinkage of this scale. While some encouraging research predicts that a world with fewer nuclear weapons is not necessarily less stable than a world with many more,<sup>3</sup> Alliance members will have to decide whether and how current and foreseeable numbers affect overall deterrence and security. In the meantime, the United States has changed its nuclear declaratory posture in the direction of still greater nuclear restraint, as its Nuclear Posture Review carefully signaled in April.<sup>4</sup>

The upcoming debate about NATO's nuclear future will have to look at the background arguments for and against changing the Alliance's nuclear deterrence policy, last fundamentally examined in the 1999 NATO Strategic Concept, and to address both underlying pressures and prudent limits. Doing so requires NATO members not only to consider strict deterrence theory but also to think through the consequences of varying national attitudes to security and the use of force, often referred to as National Strategic Culture.<sup>5</sup> While different countries may take various approaches to deterrence, their ability to reach a true consensus will affect how long that agreement lasts and how effective it can be in maintaining Alliance credibility. This means paying appropriate attention to political, strategic, and cultural changes within member states and the divergences they can produce within the Alliance.<sup>6</sup>

Differences in nuclear position are far from any stereotype that projects the United States as favoring firm nuclear deterrence as against all other NATO members that do not. Significant differences exist within Europe itself. Poland and the Baltic States, for example, have a recent history of occupation and a sense of living on the front lines, exposed to confrontation or intimidation. They are skeptical of the need for radical revisions of the Alliance's nuclear posture in a way that risks reducing their security. Turkey is undergoing far-reaching socio-political changes and uncertainty about its attitude toward the West; it also borders Iran, and religiously inclined elements of the Turkish leadership

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may differ profoundly from secular and military perspectives in assessing the certainty, purpose, and risks of Iranian nuclear intentions.

In a generally more sheltered geopolitical situation, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Norway emphasize the dangers and moral difficulties inherent in relying on nuclear weapons and have stressed the case for taking faster steps toward nuclear disarmament. The United States, France, and the UK remain nuclear-weapon states because they believe the unique deterrent effectiveness of nuclear weapons in maintaining international stability justifies their retention. Each strategic player or group of players within the Alliance believes it has a persuasive moral and intellectual case for determining the future of NATO deterrence, which other members should accept.

Many of these differences appear to have long-term historical, cultural, or even religious origins. Whatever their genesis, though, the intensity of some anti-nuclear attitudes could lead certain Alliance members toward advocating a policy of de facto “WMD pacifism,”<sup>7</sup> which would reject the use or threat of nuclear as well as biological and chemical weapons. The outcome of the Afghan campaign—whatever it is—will further change national strategic cultures in ways that are unlikely to be uniform across the Alliance.

Acknowledging the significance of differences among NATO members about deterrence is not necessarily deterministic or fatalistic. On the contrary, while political leadership within NATO may not want to change, it must pay careful attention to the internal and external situations of countries that affect their cohesiveness and their credibility in making arguments for change. The German word *Schicksalgemeinschaft* provides a convenient reminder that remaining “a shared community of fate” should be a long-term guiding principle for the Alliance.

Nevertheless, while differences exist, there is considerable agreement, at least among those who do not reject nuclear weapons as a legitimate Alliance capability, that NATO should:

- Remain clearly capable of launching a nuclear response to aggression or blackmail, however unlikely they may seem, while nuclear weapons remain in the world.
- Focus on reassuring the most exposed member states about the Alliance’s capacity and determination.
- Avoid a high-profile transatlantic difference of opinion, which would represent the fastest and most far-reaching loss of collective credibility.
- Contribute to the reduction and, when possible, the elimination of nuclear weapons in the world.

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## Current Strategic Realities

As NATO members prepare to discuss whether to alter the Alliance’s deterrence strategy, they must consider several major changes since the end of the Cold War.

First, there is no longer any overriding antagonism between states that could conceivably animate conventional offensives or surprise nuclear attacks, risking national suicide for global ideological or even national power advantage. (While Iran could be an exception to this rule, it is a vastly less capable adversary than the USSR was during the Cold War.)

Second, NATO has expanded significantly since the break-up of the Soviet Union. It now includes 850 million people in 28 nations. Its member states comprise 70 percent of world military spending, with the United States alone accounting for more than half of the global total.

NATO’s technical capabilities also offer new possibilities for deterrence. Future military options include non-nuclear but highly advanced missile systems, such as Prompt Global Strike, capable of the conventional decapitation strikes that Russian analysts fear. The innovativeness, high levels of funding, and productivity of the U.S. military industry means that further technical developments can be expected to emerge, which will in turn additionally increase NATO’s ability to deter attack or blackmail.

Third, the Alliance is likely to invest in missile defense, which should offer limited additional deterrence by denial by intercepting and at least blunting missile attacks.

All these factors make NATO the 800-pound geopolitical gorilla in the room. As long as NATO members remain cohesive, their size, numbers, wealth, democratic systems, technology, and globally attractive culture give them enormous strength and resilience. That combination of strengths makes it extremely unlikely that any aggressor would want to take on even the most exposed Alliance member.

But the Alliance’s scale also raises the relative and complementary importance of internal harmony. NATO’s voluntary formation and cohesiveness was a decisive strength over the Warsaw Pact during the Cold War. Yet, if NATO members aren’t careful, poor management of present differences could lead to infighting and a perception among unfriendly states that solidarity is dissolving.

The nuclear question is one where differences among NATO members may be most obvious. This is partly because nuclear systems are—as Alliance politicians have emphasized for many years—“political weapons” about which they are fated to negotiate with themselves. Wide differences of opinion exist about the weapons’ ability to deter threats. Prolonged internal dispute about the future of

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nuclear weapons would reduce trust among NATO members and prevent the Alliance from addressing other problems, especially emerging threats.

The dramatically improved strategic circumstances NATO enjoys in the twenty-first century mean it could undertake a wider range of diplomatic and disarmament initiatives if it chose to do so, without undermining its fundamental security interests. But first its members must agree on which strategy to pursue.

As NATO decides at its Lisbon summit this month whether to keep or change its current nuclear policy as part of its new Strategic Concept, most of its electorates would not wish the debate to revolve around faith or immutable principle, but rather the careful weighing of political and economic costs against security gains. One early and inescapable question is whether Alliance members will support the retention of dual-capable aircraft—which are outfitted to perform both conventional and theater nuclear missions—and the approximately 150–240 American B61 nuclear gravity bombs now thought to be in Europe<sup>8</sup> or reduce, reorganize, or withdraw them.

## Arguments for NATO's Maintaining Its Current Posture

Several reasons exist for maintaining U.S. theater nuclear weapons and European dual-capable aircraft:

First, the location and visibility of these nuclear assets embodies the transatlantic partnership. It gives a physical footprint in Europe to U.S. extended nuclear deterrence, which has been an undeniably important buttress of world order since the beginning of the Cold War.

Second, this is a collective capability offering a sharing of risk—as well as the uncertainty such capability would create in the mind of an aggressor who might be tempted to exploit (or even to threaten to exploit) local and temporary superiorities of force.

Third, NATO theater nuclear weapons provide a nuclear capability that in the absence of new alternative means of deterrence and defense seems particularly valuable to those members on the exposed periphery of the Alliance because it is geographically close to them.

Fourth, an extremely evolved system of internal consultation and decision making about the use of these weapons, including NATO's Nuclear Planning Group and its advisory High Level Group, would transform shared risk into shared decision-making. However, as NATO's final determination rests on consensus, a collective decision to use nuclear weapons could only be achieved

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through careful deliberation in a complex process that could turn divisive. This could correspondingly reduce the military flexibility of the weapons. But, by the same token, this is also the least plausible form of command-and-control for any form of aggression or pre-emptive attack, and thus should lessen risks of nuclear instability in a crisis.

Fifth, U.S. theater nuclear weapons create some balance with the large but uncertain number of Russian theater nuclear weapons. This admittedly remains at present a specialist consideration appreciated only by strategic and diplomatic experts.

It may possibly not remain so. In the 1980s, Alliance leaders were prepared to risk their governments to maintain a NATO–Warsaw Pact Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) balance in Western Eurasia, even though the global strategic balance was not in danger and many hundreds of Alliance theater nuclear weapons existed. It is impossible to predict the long-term impact of living next to a Russian Federation with thousands of theater nuclear weapons if NATO deploys none in Europe and intermediate-range missiles remain banned by the treaty. This disparity may be completely trivial if the U.S.-Russia relationship “reset” can be achieved and maintained, or it may become a chronic source of anxiety and intimidation if Russia instead chooses confrontation and nuclear saber-rattling.

## **The Case for NATO’s Consolidating, Reducing, or Renouncing Weapons**

There is a corresponding but opposite list of arguments for consolidating, reducing, or renouncing the stationing of Alliance theater nuclear weapons in Europe in peacetime.

First, NATO must consider the operational obsolescence of those manned fighter-bombers. They are less able to survive, less certain to reach their targets, and less accurate than InterContinental Ballistic Missiles, Submarine-Launched Ballistic Missiles, or Stealth bombers, and would probably need significant electronic countermeasures assistance to fulfill a nuclear mission. In simple technical terms, they are no longer an efficient method of producing a nuclear fireball on a designated target.

Second, the cost of replacing the F-16 and Tornado aircraft with F-35s and modified Eurofighters; maintaining the B-61 bombs; and safeguarding the current five airbases in Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Turkey, where they are believed to be stored, is significant. Yet while the money involved seems large in absolute terms, it represents a small percentage of the Alliance’s total expenditure. Germany, for example, would need to spend about 300 million euros to upgrade its Eurofighter aircraft, starting in 2011–2013 so the project is

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complete before its Tornado IDS aircraft are retired.<sup>9</sup> To put this in context, the total German defense budget for 2009 was around 34,557 million euros.<sup>10</sup>

Supporters can argue that money spent on dual-capable aircraft modernization would provide more deterrence—being nuclear, geographically impossible to overlook, and demonstrably shared—than alternative NATO security investments, and that such cost-effectiveness considerations should matter more as defense budgets come under greater pressure. But the necessary modernization programs will be particularly difficult to organize procedurally since they need to be endorsed explicitly by national legislative bodies, which will no doubt hear passionate counterarguments about the costs involved and the case against nuclear weapons.

Third, maintaining NATO's theater nuclear capability in Europe constrains its ability to contribute to worldwide nuclear reductions and thus to assist in the widely popular project of eliminating all nuclear arsenals. Yet a cascading increase in the number of nuclear-capable states, especially if Iran acquires nuclear weapons, is an entirely imaginable future possibility with very different implications. NATO is likely to follow the American policy of working toward the non-nuclear world while retaining a nuclear deterrent. But the choices this dictates will not be easy. It is particularly difficult at present to predict how realistic the prospect of global elimination will prove, how long the process would take, or how NATO members should calculate which of their capabilities were worth offering up at different stages to enhance the chances of success of that huge global aspiration.

This uncertainty about the overall nuclear future necessarily makes the NATO nuclear debate partially subject to intuition or worldview, rather than precise calculation. The same global uncertainty would also undermine predictions of an inevitable or permanent “necessity” for dual-capable aircraft and U.S. nuclear bombs to maintain nuclear deterrence in Europe. Rather than take a long leap of faith, NATO could abolish nuclear weapons incrementally by evaluating the effects of each particular step on security.

Fourth, NATO must consider the alleged inconsistency of dual-capable aircraft with Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) obligations and their unpopularity with the non-nuclear-weapon states (though this objection did not feature strongly in the eighth NPT Review Conference held between May 3–28, 2010). Nonproliferation proponents and activists emphasize that withdrawing the dual-capable aircraft from five NATO European nations would reduce the number of states in the world with nuclear weapons on their soil from fourteen to nine, which they see as an intrinsically desirable contribution to the overall elimination of nuclear weapons.

Even if this occurred, however, the nuclear basis of NATO—often the fundamental objection of non-nuclear-weapon states—would not disappear if

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it were maintained less visibly from submarines, missiles, or bombers far out of sight of Europeans. And if a guarantee to remove nuclear weapons were to lead to less stability—the basic issue in dispute—any additional risks would, for most Alliance citizens, outweigh symbolic gains.

Fifth, divisiveness, and particularly toxic anti-Americanism, among NATO members could result if theater nuclear weapons are retained and modernized. It is this risk—where it is possible to imagine scenarios of endless demonstrations against “unwanted American weapons imposed on sacred national soil”—which is perhaps the most politically powerful argument against retaining theater nuclear weapons and dual-capable aircraft.

This dispute has not yet seriously emerged in the media and it is unclear how much political capital NATO leaders would need to expend to contain such a campaign. But if these tensions broke open, the risk of such divisive internal dispute might argue for consolidation of weapons to perhaps two, down from five, sites or, conceivably, removal of the weapons entirely. But if the Alliance were to decide, either explicitly or by default, to cut or reduce its theater nuclear capabilities, it would be vital to prevent this outcome from being portrayed as a divisive decoupling earthquake that fundamentally undermined the credibility of America’s extended nuclear deterrence.

## Guiding Principles for NATO’s Decision

Whatever NATO members decide, they should keep three additional factors in mind throughout their discussions.

First, whatever concessions might be made over forward-based U.S. nuclear systems and dual-capable aircraft would not end anti-nuclear pressure and dispute within NATO. Anti-nuclear activists would continue to campaign to abolish all nuclear forces and to end the U.S. nuclear guarantee, which some see as immoral and provocative.

While the Alliance maintains its present deterrence strategy, its political leaders must resist such pressures, unless genuine and demonstrable global movement toward denuclearization develops. Arguing the deterrent policy case for avoiding a grinding, bitter conflict among NATO members as they consider security and force issues emphasizes, rather than eliminates, the requirement for responsible leadership in shaping those discussions.

Second, it would of course be desirable for NATO to handle the theater nuclear weapon issue in a way that not only reassures its allies but helps reset relations with Russia. Ideally, NATO should aim to secure greater transparency, accountability, and consolidation of all U.S. and Russian theater weapons. That would indicate to NATO member-state publics that it is genuinely trying to solve

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a problem—transparency and eventual verification of small nuclear warheads—which is absolutely central for any eventual progress toward a world without nuclear weapons.

The key Alliance negotiating consideration today should be transparency rather than the reduction of nuclear weapons, as recent proposals by Sweden Foreign Minister Carl Bildt and Polish Foreign Minister Radek Sikorski have suggested.<sup>11</sup> Given the scale of the disparity between NATO and Russian theater weapons, there is little advantage to reducing Russian numbers by 200 or even multiples of 200. Unfortunately, Russian positions do not indicate a major likelihood of success in either reducing their numbers or gaining transparency—though any successful movement to resuscitate the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) could indicate things are changing.

Third, even if NATO decides to retain its present level of theater nuclear weapons, the most exposed Alliance members will need reassurance that they will be adequately protected. This will require member states to specify, update, and collectively consider their threat perception, a potentially leaky process that has previously been deemed diplomatically undesirable by the Alliance because it would involve the inherently controversial identification of potential aggressors and the elaboration of threat scenarios and militarily convincing responses. But, if theater nuclear weapons are further reduced or eliminated, the requirement for other kinds of reassurance will only increase.

Several experts recently made the case for doing more in this field in *NATO, New Allies and Reassurance*.<sup>12</sup> Their case is consistent with proposals<sup>13</sup> put forward by East European scholars like Lukasz Kulesa in an approach that might be called “Enhanced Soft Forward Presence.” Further reassuring members may not only require a greater investment and more frequent exercises in the territory of the new allies, as well as starting serious military contingency planning for scenarios that most worry them,<sup>14</sup> but also addressing new and unconventional threats such as cyber terrorism or warfare, energy security, and the strategic incitement of ethnic minorities, which was attempted among Estonia’s Russian speakers in parallel with the cyber attacks of 2007.

## Conclusion

With all of these factors to consider, NATO members are likely to engage in an intense, lengthy, and acrimonious internal dispute as they decide on their course of action.

Ultimately, unless the basis of world order changes profoundly, Alliance deterrence must remain grounded in convincing nuclear capabilities. But, for an entity as complex as NATO, that alone will not be enough.

Unless the basis of world order changes profoundly, Alliance deterrence must remain grounded in convincing nuclear capabilities.

Unless its aggregate deterrence is cohesive, total, and capable of addressing new and much more likely contingencies than nuclear confrontation, NATO may begin to fray, setting up destructive currents of resentment among members and allegations of failure to comprehend, sympathize, adequately assist—or conversely to appreciate the collective commitments that key members have made.

There were indications of this concern in the NATO Expert Group report earlier this year, which recommended that “As long as nuclear weapons exist, NATO should continue to maintain secure and reliable nuclear forces, with widely shared responsibility for deployment and operational support, at the minimum level required by the prevailing security environment.”<sup>15</sup> It would have been extraordinary if their conclusions had been very different. But it would have been desirable if more specific recommendations had emerged for incorporation in the new Alliance Strategic Concept, to help move NATO permanently beyond accusations of ossified Cold War thinking.

However, assuming the new Concept emerges, as widely expected, as short and deliberately non-specific on nuclear and other issues, the Alliance will then have to seek internal agreement on the detailed future shape and basing of its nuclear deterrence. A major statement<sup>16</sup> aimed at influencing how it does so was made in September, with the “European Group of 34 senior . . . politicians, military figures and diplomats calling for significant changes to NATO nuclear policy.” These included “[f]urther reduction and consolidation of U.S. non-strategic nuclear weapons stationed in Europe; change to NATO declaratory policy to make it clear that the fundamental purpose of nuclear weapons is to deter nuclear attack,” and “NATO engagement with Russia on the verifiable reduction and consolidation of non-strategic nuclear weapons across the whole of Europe, for the retention and updating of the CFE Treaty and for Russia’s return to this treaty regime, and for efforts to reach agreements on the future of ballistic missile defence.” But it is significant that none of the signatories came from the Baltic states, Poland, or Turkey.<sup>17</sup>

The resulting debate about deterrence will therefore undoubtedly extend beyond NATO’s November summit in Lisbon. The strength of emotions and historical memories—combined with the leverage of committed voting blocs in each nation—may prevent any easy consensus among NATO’s European members about the future of theater nuclear weapons in Europe, although the United States has said such a consensus would be necessary for it to agree on their withdrawal.

Given the different ways certain member states are coming to think and talk about security, deterrence, and the use of force, the looming and unavoidable Alliance nuclear debate will require a recently rare combination of determination, political sophistication, and analytical clarity if it is to reach a cohesive outcome. The underlying seriousness of the issues at stake demands nothing less.

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## Notes

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