Thinking Beyond Theories
Concrete Proposals to Make NATO’s Future Nuclear Policy Work
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With NATO again debating its future nuclear policy—including the role of its tactical nuclear forces—it should focus on concrete measures to maintain a credible nuclear deterrent in the medium term and avoid abstract debates over complete disarmament or the need to keep nuclear weapons indefinitely. Policy makers should seriously consider a fuller range of options to develop a credible nuclear deterrent and to explore Russia’s interest in reducing short-range nuclear forces alongside other categories of weapons. Although quick breakthroughs on a new round of arms control arrangements are highly unlikely, it is worth making a concerted effort to reach an agreement on NATO’s nuclear posture before the next NATO summit in 2012.

Summary

At its most recent summit in Lisbon last November, NATO’s members tasked the North Atlantic Council—the principal decision-making body—with a general review of the Alliance’s “overall defence and deterrence posture.” Rather than focusing specifically on nuclear issues—which many observers had sought—this overall posture review will look at the interconnections of nuclear weapons, missile defense, and conventional capabilities.

As the Council undertakes this review, it must approach its work carefully. Otherwise, thorny nuclear issues could revive the Alliance’s fierce pre-Lisbon dispute—and derail an important opportunity to move toward nuclear disarmament while maintaining credible nuclear deterrence in a nuclear-armed world. Specifically, NATO should avoid theoretical debates about disarmament, the principles of deterrence, or the potential strategic effects of European anti-ballistic missile defense.

Instead, NATO should focus its efforts on developing a concrete nuclear posture. Its nuclear assets are aging. Disarmament by default is not a sound option for a serious and coherent military alliance. NATO must carefully examine whether the present posture is technologically, financially, and politically sustainable and, if not, what changes are necessary to guarantee credible deterrent capabilities.
NATO’s Continuing Nuclear Debate

A review of nuclear policy—one might argue—is not the most pressing issue facing NATO decision makers in Brussels and the capitals of its 28 member states. NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen’s speech at the Munich Security Conference in February made clear his top concern: shrinking defense budgets in times of economic pessimism. The present operation in Libya shows the kind of scenario most likely to require NATO’s involvement in the future. To contemplate the use of nuclear weapons in such operations would be absurd.

Yet nuclear issues remain a priority for NATO’s members. The Alliance’s summit meeting in Lisbon was preceded by an unusually open—and tense—debate on NATO’s future nuclear policy. The debate centered on whether to emphasize disarmament—particularly the withdrawal of the remaining U.S. nuclear bombs from their European storage sites—or to maintain the status quo of U.S. weapons based in Europe, which would be delivered by European capabilities. In trying to bridge the gap between these two positions, the Alliance produced an intelligent but fragile compromise.

Though the Alliance’s new Strategic Concept “commits NATO to the goal of creating the conditions for a world without nuclear weapons,” its next phrase “reconfirms that, as long as there are nuclear weapons in the world, NATO will remain a nuclear Alliance.” While the new concept omitted language deeming nuclear weapons the link that connects NATO’s European and North American members, it still emphasizes their solidarity—including the “broadest possible participation of Allies in collective defense planning on nuclear roles, in peacetime basing of nuclear forces, and in command, control and consultation arrangements.”

Such ambiguity and apparent contradictions are found throughout the concept, reflecting the need to accommodate members’ incongruous perspectives. Despite acknowledging that situations where the use of nuclear weapons would be considered are “extremely remote,” NATO’s arsenal is nonetheless characterized as necessary “to deter and defend against any threat to the safety of our populations and the security of our territory.” The Lisbon documents affirm the famously vague formulation that seeks to maintain the “appropriate mix of nuclear and conventional capabilities.” NATO underlines the enduring relevance of solidarity in nuclear policy as a basis of Euro-Atlantic security, even as it strives for international relationships that would eliminate the need for nuclear weapons anywhere.
NATO’s Overall Defence & Deterrence Posture Review

At its 2010 summit in Lisbon, NATO leaders tasked the North Atlantic Council with reviewing NATO’s “overall posture in deterring and defending against the full range of threats to the Alliance.” This Defence & Deterrence Posture Review (DDPR) is broader than the more tightly focused nuclear posture review some participants sought. It will examine the Alliance’s nuclear capacities in the context of its ballistic missile defense and conventional capabilities.

Though the Lisbon call for a review was not accompanied by a timeline, most observers expect it to be completed before NATO’s next summit in 2012. The DDPR was largely a way for NATO to escape its inability to agree on a future nuclear policy before the Lisbon summit. Still, it signals some openness for NATO to delineate its nuclear posture and allows for the possibility of change—though evidently within the red lines prescribed by the new Strategic Concept (which include calls for the Alliance to remain nuclear and for solidarity among member states, for example).

NATO representatives in Brussels and member state capitals approach the DDPR cautiously. Within the Alliance, there is clearly limited appetite for another pre-Lisbon brawl over the future role of nuclear weapons. No one wants to revive a tired and tiring debate on a sensitive issue. Any abstract dispute about what the “appropriate mix of conventional and nuclear capabilities” might be—or an attempt to clarify the stated purpose of NATO’s nuclear weapons—would be a recipe for deadlock. There was no substantial consensus on those issues before the Lisbon summit, and none is likely before NATO’s meeting next year.

But reviewing and rethinking the nuclear posture need not be a fruitless exercise. A wide-ranging and careful review of NATO’s nuclear options could help it incrementally advance the conditions required for a world free of nuclear weapons—while also bolstering the solidarity and credibility of the Alliance and its nuclear deterrent arsenal.

Why the Review Is Needed

Strained budgets do not free states from the responsibility to maintain credible deterrent capabilities. A number of NATO’s nuclear assets are nearing a critical phase in their life cycles. Provided mainly by a number of European countries, these assets will require modernization or renewal if NATO wants them to remain operable for the length of time needed. This normally small-scale and arcane set of procurement decisions is, however, laced with uncertainty—given...
shrinking defense budgets; skeptical decision makers, parliaments, publics, and taxpayers; debates over investing more money in new or modernized nuclear facilities despite periodic media reports of insufficiently equipped combat troops in Afghanistan; and a fragile consensus on Alliance nuclear posture.

As a result, NATO must come up with possible alternatives in case allies prove unable or unwilling to supply the means NATO needs to uphold its present force posture. If such changes are necessary, the Alliance must guide the process carefully and with good strategic sense. Disarmament by default or by accident would cast NATO as weak—and undermine its “Active Engagement and Modern Defence,” which is both the title and vision of the new Strategic Concept. In addition, intelligent changes to the current posture might make more resources available and remove contentious internal distractions, enabling NATO to better take on new twenty-first century security challenges.

Wide Range of Possible Options

It has previously been suggested that there is a “great variety of elements that could even more credibly exemplify that NATO is determined to hold up nuclear deterrence in solidarity beyond the present nuclear posture. And NATO states surely have the creativity, resources, and political capacity to address the future of U.S.-tactical nuclear weapons without undermining the solidarity and future of an alliance that must be able to adapt to twenty-first-century realities.”

The 2010 Strategic Concept reiterates the formulation of the 1999 Strategic Concept, which stated that “the supreme guarantee of the security of the Allies is provided by the strategic nuclear forces of the Alliance, particularly those of the United States.” While this remains true, the posture review should include a wide range of options to maintain a credible supplementary tactical-level nuclear element in NATO’s overall deterrent. Both the status quo and the complete withdrawal of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons from Europe would naturally be such options. But neither approach should be favored from the outset, and the analysis should be more open-minded than previous debates have been. Among the options raised publicly by thoughtful analysts are, for example, the following:

- Reducing the number of U.S. weapons but retaining all U.S. storage sites in Europe, being transparent about the remaining numbers of U.S. bombs and possibly storage facilities in Europe, updating NATO Dual-Capable Aircraft (DCA) when necessary, or assigning U.S. aircraft to the missions previously fulfilled by European DCA.
• Reducing and consolidating the weapons into fewer sites, updating DCA when necessary, or assigning U.S. aircraft to fulfill European DCA duties.

• Creating a NATO-owned nuclear force—a “Dual Capable Air-Wing” comparable to NATO’s “Airborne Warning and Control System” force (AWACS)—commanded by the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) and manned by personnel from different NATO countries.

• Gradually removing some or all U.S. nuclear weapons from Europe, maintaining the storage sites in Europe for crisis situations, and finding other ways of expressing solidarity among NATO members on the nuclear issue. This could include temporarily reassigning European NATO officers to relevant U.S. tactical nuclear weapons units or U.S. strategic command facilities, and periodic, short-term visits by U.S.-based strategic bombers to European sites.

Some of these alternatives evidently apply to multiple options. It remains to be seen which option might have the best chance of creating consensus among NATO’s 28 member states, based on its varying political, military, and political soundness. But these options are worth a fresh look, as the Lisbon assignment requires NATO’s North Atlantic Council to offer its heads of state and governments viable solutions when they next meet.

The Role of the Nuclear Planning Group and France

As NATO members consider how to move forward, they have good reason to refocus the nuclear debate on the work of the Nuclear Planning Group (NPG). The NPG—which has successfully hosted dialogue and constructed policy on NATO’s nuclear forces for several decades—offers both a useful venue and an existing compendium of debates. NATO does not have to start from scratch.

Of course, NPG findings would have to be endorsed by all NATO member states, including France, which is not a member of the NPG and is reluctant to change, fearing repercussions on the role of its own nuclear forces. However, approaching the issue pragmatically might help France to look at the exercise more enthusiastically than it does now. Because France is not an NPG member, a DDPR process clearly limited to internal NPG matters is more likely to win France’s approval than general debates on statements of purpose or the role of deterrence in the age of missile defense. In Paris, these could be considered as encroaching on French nuclear autonomy.

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Russia, NATO’s 2012 Summit, and the Next Round of Arms Control Arrangements

Those who defend NATO’s present nuclear posture and favor retaining U.S. bombs in Europe rightly argue that one of their functions is to provide a counterbalance to Russia and its tenfold advantage in tactical nuclear weapons in Europe. But this effect will dwindle each day that NATO’s force posture is not backed by the political will to maintain it through reliable financial and technical resources. The alternative would be for Russian negotiators to sit back and watch NATO’s nuclear bargaining card disappear.

NATO and the United States have repeatedly made clear that significant reductions ultimately depend on Russia’s preparedness to reduce its own arsenal. So far, Russia has given a range of reasons and preconditions to explain its unwillingness to participate in isolated talks on tactical nuclear weapons. Unless that changes, even an unlikely decision by NATO to withdraw U.S. weapons from Europe would not change Russian attitudes.

And yet, the 2012 NATO summit—coming about a year after the ratification of New START and within the one-year time period the U.S. Senate gave President Obama to initiate negotiations with Russia on its non-strategic nuclear weapons stockpile—has the potential to help launch the debate about a next round of arms control arrangements, or at least to sort out what Russia would deliver in such an undertaking. Whether this will occur and what exactly this would look like is hard to predict at this point.

At the summit, NATO could propose to start building confidence in tactical nuclear weapons by improving transparency on the numbers and storage sites of weapons. It could suggest that both NATO members and Russia cut their tactical warheads by a certain percentage. And it could introduce an initial version of a multi-track approach for future arms control arrangements to include tactical nuclear weapons, missile defense, non-deployed strategic systems, and conventional forces—not formally tied together but moving in parallel. But whatever happens at its 2012 summit, NATO must be prepared to do its homework on its nuclear posture first.
Notes


3 For the official French point of view, see “The United States and France: A Strategic Partnership for the Twenty-First Century,” then-defense minister Alain Juppé’s lecture at the Carnegie Endowment on February 8, 2011, www.carnegieendowment.org/events/?fa=eventDetail&id=3154.
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