

# Nuclear Weapons Disagreements within NATO

## SOURCES AND IMPLICATIONS

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In the last few years, debates within NATO on the future of the Alliance's nuclear policy have gone through a number of twists and turns. The adoption of the new Strategic Concept in 2010 was not the end of that process: the NATO Defense and Deterrence Posture Review (DDPR) expected in the spring/summer of 2012 might reveal new surprises – and perhaps new fault lines – within the Alliance.

Events started to unfold in 2008 when new German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle rather unexpectedly called for a complete withdrawal of American nuclear weapons from Europe; his proposal was quickly supported by some other European states. Meanwhile, many observers in the United States expected that the Obama administration would initiate a withdrawal as well, although the possible timing and conditions remained unclear. Shortly thereafter, the tide began to turn. First the May 2009 report of the Congressional Strategic Posture Commission cautioned against unilateral withdrawal (that language appeared in the report reportedly after testimonies by representatives from the Baltic states, Poland, and Turkey). Subsequently, debates on the new Strategic Concept revealed deep fault lines within the Alliance; the compromise language effectively kicked the issue down the road, to the DDPR, which could hopefully establish a more coherent and definitive policy. Then, debates in the Senate over the 2010 New START Treaty raised Russian tactical nuclear weapons (TNW) to the top of the arms control agenda, instructing the administration to seek talks on TNW within one year of the entry into force of New START. The mood prevailing in the Senate during the ratification debate clearly suggested that a complete withdrawal of U.S. TNW from Europe as part of an agreement with Russia, let alone unilaterally, was unlikely.

In the meantime, Russia stuck to its traditional position that any dialogue on TNW could only begin after the United States withdrew its TNW from Europe. During ratification of New START, that position even hardened: the package was expanded to

include missile defense, conventional weapons, and some other issues. While the Russian position will be reviewed in detail below, it is sufficient to note here that the deadlock in NATO over the future of U.S. TNW in Europe was probably welcomed in Moscow as a means of avoiding negotiations. Effectively, Russia bet on the Alliance's inability to agree on a withdrawal and, so far, has won.

### **A Rift in NATO**

Two groups emerged in NATO in the run-up to the Strategic Concept, commonly referred to as representing the "old" and the "new" NATO, although these terms do not fully reflect the lineup within the Alliance. One group consisted of Germany, Belgium, Denmark, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and Norway. This group advocated a "fresh look" at the role of U.S. TNW in Europe, including the possible removal of these weapons from the continent. This second group, consisting of the Baltic states, Poland, Hungary, and France, adhered to a more conservative position; such countries as Italy and Turkey were close to this view. It opposed the withdrawal of U.S. TNW and agreed to at most their reduction in the event that Russia would accept an asymmetric reduction of its much larger TNW arsenal. While the common characterization of these groups is not entirely correct, the labels seemed to stick and for a reason, as will be discussed below.

At the heart of the debate are two interrelated issues: whether American non-strategic nuclear weapons – a limited number of B-61 bombs that are still kept in several West European states – have deterrence value and what should or could be done with the much larger Russian TNW stockpile.

The proponents of withdrawal insist that for a variety of reasons the remaining U.S. TNW have no deterrence value, and they are skeptical about the utility of nuclear weapons in general. Furthermore, they claim that they are located far from Russia, which is commonly assumed to be the main (although not the only) target for them. Moreover, a significant portion of the elites and public of basing states question the costs of replacing the aging F-16s, which are the main delivery vehicles.

Opponents tend to point to the existence of threats that they believe short-range nuclear weapons could still help deter – for East and Central European states, Russia, and for Turkey and Italy, states to the southeast and south of NATO. France apparently joined this group for a different reason – it reportedly feared that the withdrawal of U.S. TNW could make its own nuclear arsenal the primary target for nuclear disarmament advocates. While members of this group accept that the value of these weapons is primarily symbolic, they nonetheless see them as essential to their security. A further reduction (complete withdrawal is not really accepted by this group) is only seen as feasible if Russia agrees to deep asymmetric reductions of its own TNW arsenal. East and Central European states have been particularly vocal in their opposition to the withdrawal of U.S. TNW, which is why that group is commonly associated with "new" members.

These debates developed against the backdrop of a quite definitive U.S. military view that TNW in Europe have no mission. This was, for example, the conclusion of the

U.S. European Command (USEUCOM), which said that the U.S. military would be better off if these weapons were withdrawn from Europe.<sup>1</sup> The Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff James Cartwright also expressed this view.<sup>2</sup> A task-force report for then-Secretary of Defense Robert Gates indicated that senior EUCOM officers believed it could cost between \$120 and \$180 million to upgrade the security of the weapons stored in Europe to the required level.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, the consensus language of the 2010 NATO Security Concept is different from both U.S. and British policy guidelines and is essentially hollow. In the hypothetical case of a major conflict, the decision to use or not use nuclear weapons on behalf of NATO (or, if the decision to use nuclear weapons is made, the choice of specific assets) will be determined by the national policies of the United States and Great Britain rather than by NATO documents. The convoluted NATO process has thus resulted in a document that perhaps has helped to smooth over internal differences within the Alliance but is meaningless for practical purposes. This situation is untenable and cannot be allowed to continue, lest NATO's role as a defense alliance be undermined.

The persistent rift in NATO presents several challenges to the future of the Alliance. In the absence of a consensus on the degree of threat Russia presents and on the utility of the remaining small U.S. TNW force, further clashes during the DDP process appear unavoidable. This is not healthy, as the debate increasingly grows emotional and political. Behind closed doors, representatives of the two groups speak about each other with growing disdain. Some "new" members (Poland and the Baltic states in particular) signal their preference for direct U.S. security guarantees instead of those provided through NATO, further undermining the long-term value of the Alliance.

The continuing rift also complicates the Alliance's policy vis-à-vis Russia. On the one hand, Moscow can always hope that the group of NATO members that advocates the withdrawal of U.S. TNW succeeds, thus helping achieve a long-standing Russian goal without any effort or sacrifice on the part of Russia. On the other, they cannot fail to have noticed one consequence of the recent debates: whereas in 2009-2010 some in NATO and the United States proposed to introduce contingency planning to boost the defense of the Baltic states and Poland to compensate for the withdrawal of U.S. TNW, in the end contingency planning was introduced *in parallel* to the retention of TNW. This fed Russia's sense of insecurity and further strengthened domestic support for retention of a large TNW force.

DDP *must* help bridge that rift. Its continuation is untenable and dangerous. Yet the chances that the review process can achieve this goal without extra effort appear

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Air Force, "[Air Force Blue Ribbon Review of Nuclear Weapons Policies and Procedures](#)," February 8, 2008; Hans Kristensen, USAF [Report](#): "Most" Nuclear Weapons Sites in Europe Do Not Meet U.S. Security Requirements, Federation of American Scientists Strategic Security blog, June 19, 2008; Report of the Secretary of Defense Task Force on DOD Nuclear Weapons Management, Phase II: Review of the DOD Nuclear Missions, Washington DC, December 2008

<sup>2</sup> Council on Foreign Relations meeting, "[Nuclear Posture Review](#)," April 8, 2010

<sup>3</sup> Report of the Secretary of Defense Task Force on DOD Nuclear Weapons Management, "Phase II: Review of the DOD Nuclear Missions," Washington DC, December 2008

slim.

### **Russian Position (Or Lack Thereof)**

Russian government and non-governmental experts commonly refer to TNW as a tool for offsetting U.S. and NATO conventional superiority. Since the West is already regarded as superior in conventional forces, continued presence of TNW in Europe is bound to generate suspicion. Beyond these general points, however, almost nothing has been said about specific missions, scenarios, or force posture. As with NATO, Russia's TNW apparently represent a symbolic asset instead of a warfighting tool. The only exception seems to be the navy, whose commanders insist they want to keep the option of deploying non-strategic nuclear weapons on ships and submarines (currently they are stored on shore).

Moreover, the modernization of the Russian armed forces, including theater-range delivery vehicles, appears to emphasize high-precision conventional, rather than nuclear, capability. While reliable data on the Russian TNW stockpile has been absent, almost all Western experts agree that that stockpile is gradually dwindling as Russia dismantles more warheads than it refurbishes.

For Moscow, Russia's own TNW have turned into the same kind of "hot potato" as are U.S. TNW for NATO – a military asset that for political reasons is impossible to drop but at the same time difficult to handle. If one tried to define the Russian attitude toward TNW in a single phrase, it would be: "we do not know what to do with them." This applies both to military posture and to arms control.

Asymmetric reductions similar to the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF Treaty), advocated by the "new members" group and many U.S. legislators, are bound to be rejected by Moscow. The arms control legacy of the late 1980s, and the INF Treaty in particular, is now cast almost exclusively in a negative light. It would be politically almost inconceivable to accept the same approach for non-strategic nuclear weapons.

Including TNW into the next START negotiations, which is the preference of Obama administration officials, might be palatable for Russia. Yet this option would require an unprecedented set of verification and transparency measures that are difficult for the military to swallow. Changing that attitude will require inducements beyond what seems politically possible for the United States and NATO.

Under these circumstances, the old, even ancient, adagio about withdrawal of U.S. TNW from Europe as a precondition for any negotiations has become an ideal escape hatch. Its only risk has always been the possibility of withdrawal – in which case Moscow would be forced to develop a serious position (something it has not done so far) and begin negotiations. In effect, Moscow has placed its bet on NATO's inability to agree on such a withdrawal. So far, that gamble has paid off.

Recently, in response to the New START ratification resolution adopted by the U.S. Senate, Moscow has piled on additional conditions – TNW are now linked to Russia's laundry list of security concerns: conventional strategic weapons, space-based weapons, missile defense, and the imbalance in conventional forces (listed in that order

by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov).<sup>4</sup> This move clearly reflects a desire to more reliably deflect U.S. pressure, which became evident during the ratification of New START, and perhaps hope of exploiting the apparent anxiety of the United States and NATO over TNW. Paradoxically, the decision to up the ante might also have reflected concern that proponents of unilateral withdrawal among NATO members would win, and Russian decision makers decided to shore up their defenses.

### **What Can (and Should) Be Done?**

The period of active debates and fluid positions that could have led to progress on TNW in Europe appears to be over. By the beginning of 2011, the positions of all the relevant parties have been set – maybe not in stone, but close. Proponents of unilateral withdrawal of U.S. TNW from Europe within NATO and the United States have been blocked; proposals that could garner support within the Alliance and in Washington are non-negotiable; Russia continues to comfortably hide behind a set of conditions. Chances for a breakthrough appear slim.

While the lull continues, it might make more sense to address the rift within NATO with regard to the perceived utility of nuclear weapons in general and their non-strategic variety in particular – a rift that has grown since 2009 and that could reach potentially dangerous proportions. In theory, DDPN could serve as both a vehicle and a forum for a new stage of debates within NATO, but national positions appear unyielding.

To achieve progress, the underlying causes of this sorry state of affairs must be addressed, namely the gap between perceptions of the utility of nuclear weapons espoused by the two groups within the Alliance. The attitude of many U.S. legislators seems to be derivative of that gap – they primarily insist that as long as at least some members of NATO believe in the utility of the small number of U.S. TNW, they should be kept where they are.

Many practitioners from the “old” NATO countries, with whom the author has had an opportunity to discuss this issue, tend to attribute this gap to the inadequacy of background knowledge and of prior experience in nuclear disarmament matters among government and non-governmental organizations in East and Central Europe. Whereas “old” NATO members have been closely involved in all nuclear disarmament debates and negotiations for several decades, “new” members joined the process only relatively recently; during the Cold War, they were prevented from serious involvement in nuclear policy by the Soviet Union. As a result, the staff of foreign and defense ministries, as well as other governmental organizations, often lack institutional memory and training in nuclear disarmament affairs, and the non-governmental expert community, which in the United States and “old” NATO member states serves as an important source of analysis and initiatives, is virtually absent.

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<sup>4</sup> "Stenogramma Vystupleniya Ministra Inostrannykh Del Rossii S.V. Lavrova na Plenarnom Zasedanii Gosudarstvennoi Dumy Federalnogo Sobraniya Rossiiskoi Federatsii po Novomy Dogovoru o SNV, Moskva, 14 Yanvarya 2011 goda" [Transcript of a Statement by Foreign Minister of the Russian Federation Sergey Lavrov at a Plenary Meeting of the State Duma of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation on the New START Treaty, January 14, 2011], [Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#), January 14, 2011 (document 20-14-01-2011)

This calls for a serious educational effort. NATO needs a discussion about the fundamentals of nuclear policy rather than a debate about specific practical issues and positions. One example is the question of whether weapons that do not have a defined credible mission (and have insufficient range) can serve as a deterrent. Another question is whether extended deterrence requires short-range nuclear weapons in the theater or can be supported by long-range out-of-area assets (extended deterrence for Japan was entrusted to long-range sea-launched cruise missiles with warheads that were kept on shore in the United States and, under the new Nuclear Posture Review, will now be supported by strategic weapons).

A discussion of fundamentals has an advantage of being less emotional and less restricted by domestic politics. It could also include seminars and even short educational courses designed to bring younger government and non-governmental experts up to speed with regard to past policies and experiences, including nuclear and disarmament policy failures.

Current debates usually center on the question of whether Russia represents a threat. Achieving a consensus within NATO on this question is hardly feasible in the near future. Yet one can try to develop a common understanding of what nuclear weapons can and cannot do, and which posture and negotiating strategy works best. If such an understanding is reached, DDPR could produce a policy that is more sound and forward-looking than the one reflected in the Strategic Concept.