Getting to Zero Starts Here: Tactical Nuclear Weapons

By Catherine M. Kelleher and Scott L. Warren

A critical debate on nuclear weapons is once again in the limelight. President Barack Obama has unequivocally, ambitiously, and repeatedly stated his ultimate vision of a world without nuclear weapons. Under the Obama policy, zero nuclear weapons is, for the first time in U.S. history, an operational, tangible U.S. policy goal and thus a measuring stick against which to judge a host of shorter-range, less ambitious initiatives or actions.\[1\]

Obama has acknowledged that the goal will not be reached during his presidency, and probably not even during his lifetime. Nevertheless, it is a dramatic move, probably the most dramatic foreign policy commitment in a principally domestic presidential agenda.

The question of how to reduce or eliminate tactical nuclear weapons should be (and, Obama experts promise, will be) among the first in this ambitious campaign, once an agreement extending the logic and verification protocols of START is reached. An agreement to extend key provisions of the treaty, at least on an interim basis, will have to be reached by the time the current treaty expires December 5. A formal agreement is expected to follow early next year. Tactical nuclear weapons are an important priority partly because of their seemingly easy solution, but also because the challenges they present are emblematic of those in the larger arms control debate.

Strategically, the weapons have little real value in the post-Cold War climate. They are vulnerable to a rogue or terrorist attack, too small or risky for independent military use, and unpopular with military forces and most political audiences. Lately, maintaining these weapons has provided many more disadvantages than advantages for the countries that possess them in their arsenals—France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States—at least as measured in terms of the costs of safety and security, of the operational burden of dedicating and preserving delivery aircraft, and of ensuring ongoing certification of forces. Even within NATO, for all but a few countries, tactical weapons have come to represent a decreasingly meaningful symbolic commitment rather than a concrete deterrent or escalation tripwire. From a U.S. standpoint, the relatively low numbers of such weapons that still exist, at approximately 1,000 in the U.S. arsenal with only 20-25 percent of that number located outside U.S. borders, would seem to make it easy to secure and verify their ultimate elimination.\[2\]

Yet, these weapons also represent one of the more complex components of reaching complete nuclear disarmament and serve as an effective microcosm of the challenges in securing U.S.-Russian agreement and eventually a global consensus on how and why to get to zero. This issue goes to the heart of what a U.S. nuclear umbrella entails, especially in Europe, in the 21st century. The United States must take the lead by setting the pace and orchestrating the multiple bargains involved.

The principal issues with the elimination of tactical nuclear weapons are political and conceptual, rather than straightforwardly military, with the single but critical exception of the risk of terrorist seizure. The notion of the U.S. nuclear umbrella, with tactical weapons serving as a real or potential down payment on a security commitment, particularly in Europe, still has significant traction within the Obama administration. Key factions in the Pentagon and perhaps in the Department of State argue that the United States must still provide allies substantial security support, especially with Iran and North Korea deeply engaged in nuclear programs. This is the case despite the indifference of many NATO allies toward technical weapons or, in some cases, direct demands for elimination.
European countries, especially elites in the newer central and eastern European member states, attach a high symbolic importance to the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons on European soil as evidence of U.S. security guarantees. Turkey also is thought to be particularly concerned about any withdrawal because it faces a more direct threat from Iranian missiles, although it is now included in the new U.S. plans for a European missile defense system.[3]

Negotiations with Russia will not prove easier. The number of Russian tactical nuclear weapons is significantly higher than that of the active U.S. forces or stockpiles, and the Russians assign them greater strategic importance in offsetting conventional weakness and deterring future threats from their south and east. There are also clear competitive political stakes. Official Russian statements have explicitly tied drawdowns in tactical weapons to a general geopolitical rebalancing, given U.S. conventional superiority and the ongoing Russian opposition to NATO expansion, past and future. The Russians have also stated that they will not consider reducing their tactical nuclear stockpile until all U.S. weapons are removed from European territory. As a principle, they have essentially declared that all tactical weapons should be based on national territories of nuclear-weapon states.[4]

As Obama tries to shift U.S. nuclear policy toward zero against substantial domestic and international odds, he will have to reconcile the traditional Cold War/alliance commitment logic behind tactical nuclear deployments with his own long-term objectives and the present, complicated political context. It is now time to consider and suggest new bargains and methods to deal with the perennial tactical nuclear issues. The question of preserving the essentials of extended deterrence for crucial allies without the physical presence of nuclear weapons should be high on the agenda of those working on the Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) and within the broader national and international communities. Recently suggested plans include significantly reducing the number of tactical nuclear weapons, rethinking the logic of extended deterrence requirements with the Russians and NATO allies, and finding ways to reconcile the tactical nuclear withdrawals from Europe with a broader bargain: the safe, secure centralization of a transparent tactical weapons stockpile. One promising road was outlined at the July U.S. Strategic Command (STRATCOM) conference in Omaha: U.S. withdrawals of and reductions in the numbers of tactical weapons in return for Russian reductions and a centralization of a countable Russian stockpile away from frontline forces.

Resolving these dilemmas and crafting responses that will be acceptable to the Russians and concerned allies requires an understanding of the history of the development and deployment of the weapons, an analysis of the political debate, and a grasp of the possible responses for a way forward.

**Early History**

From their initial development and deployment in the late 1950s and early 1960s, tactical nuclear weapons generally have played a limited role in policy debates centering on reducing the overall nuclear threat. Most of the historic nuclear debate between Russia and the United States has focused on long-range, or strategic, nuclear weapons, rather than tactical, or nonstrategic, weapons. The smaller scope and size of tactical weapons was seen as implying minimal risk to national populations and homeland property, with their primary operational effect being on overseas territories and military operations.

The U.S. military has defined the employment of tactical nuclear weapons as “the use of nuclear weapons by land, sea, or air forces against opposing forces, supporting installations or facilities, in support of operations that contribute to the accomplishment of a military mission of limited scope, or in support of the military commander’s scheme of maneuver, usually limited to the area of military operations.”[5] Tactical weapons were primarily intended to support troops in the battlefield, demonstrate intent to escalate, or constitute a last warning before escalation to all-out nuclear war. Weapons designers and military planners sought credible battlefield roles without much success. Ground and sea use increasingly were judged too expensive, too dangerous to U.S. and allied troops, or too difficult to subject to discriminating centralized control. Effective air use required dispersed deployments, quick-response capability, and dedicated crews and forces, which greatly increased problems and the costs of security and storage. The significance of tactical nuclear weapons therefore became largely political, as Washington sought to implement extended deterrence, the...
policy of signaling willingness to protect NATO and other allies from the Soviet nuclear and conventional threats.

The waning of the Cold War in the late 1980s and early 1990s brought about a drastic reduction in Russian and U.S. nonstrategic weapons levels. The implementation of the bilateral 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty eliminated all nuclear and conventional ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles with intermediate ranges in Russia and the United States. Additionally, the Presidential Nuclear Initiatives, which consisted of the unilateral declarations by Presidents Mikhail Gorbachev and George H.W. Bush on shorter-range nuclear-capable missiles, essentially eliminated launch capability on the ground. Sea-based missiles were also reduced, first by the United States and in slower, more gradual actions by Russia.

In the early 1990s, after the United States reduced active tactical deployments on European territory by more than half, Gorbachev made a unilateral pledge to eliminate all nuclear artillery munitions and warheads intended for tactical missiles while removing tactical weapons from ships and submarines. President Boris Yeltsin amplified Gorbachev’s commitments by pledging to eliminate one-third of Russia’s remaining sea-based tactical weapons and to halve its arsenal of ground-to-air missile warheads and its airborne tactical weapons. Because there were no formal agreements on verification or transparency, it is unclear how many reductions the Russians actually made to their original arsenal, which comprised between 20,000 and 30,000 weapons, according to expert estimates.[6]

Despite U.S. reductions, the administrations of Bill Clinton and George W. Bush asserted that tactical nuclear weapons remained important to the U.S. nuclear posture, with the Clinton NPR stating that tactical weapons were necessary for “maintaining U.S. nuclear commitments with NATO, and retaining the ability to deploy nuclear capabilities to meet various regional contingencies. That ability continues to be an important means for deterring aggression, protecting and promoting U.S. interests, reassuring allies and friends, and preventing proliferation.”[7]

Recent History and Challenges

For the past decade, tactical nuclear weapons have remained in a virtual but somewhat confusing limbo. In March 1997, the United States and Russia agreed to restart negotiations relating to those weapons, but no concrete outcomes materialized. Setting the process back even further, the Bush administration reaffirmed its commitment to nuclear weapons by stating in its NPR that it reserved the right to use the weapons in response to any potential adversary and needed to continue to develop relevant technology. These comments underlined the belief that the administration would hold to the Cold War-era doctrine of tactical first use of nuclear weapons and its affirmation of the traditional political argument on NATO tactical weapons: the weapons in Europe were deployed as part of formal NATO policy and could be removed only with the full consent of all alliance members.

NATO on the whole did not formally address the issue outside the Nuclear Planning Group (NPG). Despite internal conversations, this group of representatives of the “nuclear” factions within the defense and foreign ministries of nuclear-possessing members (the United Kingdom and the United States), hosting NATO members (Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Turkey), and other members in rotation, firmly led by the United States, has shown little willingness to bring this issue forward for wider formal debate. Yet, several countries, including Belgium, Canada, Germany, and Norway, have called for the withdrawal of the tactical weapons within the foreseeable future, if not immediately. Moreover, the Bush administration allowed a quiet withdrawal of about one-half the remaining tactical weapons from Europe, notably from sites in Greece, Italy, and the United Kingdom. The remaining weapons in Europe are thought to number around 200; stockpiled weapons are estimated to be between 900 and 1,000.[8]

Recently, the Russians have been relatively quiet on the issue, citing the need to wait for the conclusion of their general doctrinal reassessment before taking a definitive stance. There continue to be occasional interjections from military hard-liners disparaging Gorbachev’s “capitulation” to the West and asserting the need for tactical nuclear modernization. Experts estimate that Russia still possesses thousands of active tactical nuclear weapons, with deployments largely on the Kola Peninsula and around Vladivostok and most in reserve. As Russia appropriated more money toward
military expenditures, it is possible that significant modernization indeed occurred. Russia has continued to produce weapons for replacement and storage, while meeting its destruction goals for weapons previously deployed with its own troops in the European members states of the Warsaw Pact.

Moscow has attempted to justify its continued dependence on tactical nuclear weapons, asserting that the decline of Russian conventional military power has necessitated its arsenal, given the accepted view of NATO's tactical and strategic superiority in conventional weapons. Informally, Russian experts say the rise of Chinese forces has exacerbated this need; they argue that tactical nuclear weapons are necessary in countering a potential Asian threat. Moreover and troubling for the United States, Moscow has indicated that it is contemplating pulling out of the INF Treaty, paralleling its suspension of the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty, with similar claims of discrimination. The INF Treaty has been long disdained among hard-liners in the Russian military, who assert that the agreement caused an unnecessary sacrifice of a clear Russian technological advantage. Before Obama's recent decision to change the missile defense plans for central Europe, some Russian military and political figures re-emphasized the possibility of pulling out of the accord in response to any final U.S. deployment.

Tactical Weapons Under Obama

In his April 5 Prague speech, Obama changed the terms of the U.S.-Russian debate. He ambitiously called for a world without nuclear weapons, pledging to begin negotiations on a new START with Russia and making a concrete promise to reduce nuclear stockpiles and enhance nuclear security. The speech gave new momentum to what is known as the movement to “nuclear zero” or “global zero,” which had regained prominence with the 2007 op-ed written by Henry Kissinger, Sam Nunn, William Perry, and George Shultz. The spring of 2009 saw a flurry of hearings, statements, and reports, including the congressionally mandated bipartisan study led by Perry and James Schlesinger. The emerging debate, which has taken place largely below the surface in the Obama administration, seems to turn on several alternate conceptions of the requirements of extended deterrence and whether even highly lethal and precise conventional weapons would ever be able to replace nuclear weapons in reassuring allies. Another question is the potential ramifications of the loss of the U.S. “nuclear card” vis-à-vis “new” nuclear states that might be tempted to follow in the footsteps of Iran and North Korea. Another issue is how to overcome the myriad obstacles to a meaningful U.S.-Russian-European agreement in the near term. In the longer term, the prospects for the necessary but difficult task of carving out an international timetable for reductions are very much in question.

The role of tactical nuclear weapons in these discussions has not loomed large in much of the public or private Washington discourse. It has received more informal play in Brussels, where the efforts to craft a new NATO strategic concept quickly ran into private concerns about the ultimate fate of tactical weapons. Several new working papers circulated by opponents of continued tactical nuclear deployment in Europe have garnered quiet support from others. Germany, in particular, stimulated the push for elimination of tactical weapons, as Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, who also was a candidate for chancellor in the September 2009 elections, advocated the elimination position. Turkey, however, has reportedly suggested in internal conversations that a decision by the United States to reduce its tactical nuclear weapons further would mark the end the grand alliance bargain of the 1960s: Turkey, like other hosts, would have the U.S. nuclear shield and would share in the physical control of the weapons in return for Ankara’s promise not to develop its own nuclear weapons.[9]

Technical Debates

The technical specifics of defining, eliminating, and verifying the elimination of tactical nuclear weapons have become difficult terrain. First, defining these weapons requires a new consensus of definitions within and among countries. Do tactical nuclear weapons include all weapons under a specific yield and with a specific range? Do they have to be used with specific types of launchers? For many countries and even NATO allies, there is no significant distinction between tactical nuclear weapons and strategic weapons. How many states, for example, would have to agree on the favored Russian proposal of extending the INF Treaty limit globally for the agreement to be effective and
credible?

Another question focuses on the distinction between sophisticated new conventional weaponry and tactical nuclear weapons. The practice of dedicating specific launchers to specific weapons had served as the prime marker in the identification of strategic nuclear forces, but the Bush administration muddied the distinction by loading high-end conventional weapons onto Trident submarines. Creating a universal definition of the specifics of tactical nuclear weapons will be even more complicated.

Another difficulty for the traditional U.S. arms control approach is the large discrepancy between the size of the U.S. inventory and that imputed to Russia, a discrepancy that seems to require a very asymmetric bargain. This difference extends beyond just the numbers; arms control, from its outset, has been set in the mode of strategic bargains, the trade of assets against like or equally valued assets. If Russia possesses thousands more tactical nuclear weapons, why should the United States reduce its far smaller forces? Should the Obama administration recognize that tactical weapons are much more important strategically for the Russians than for the Americans and accept unequal reductions?

Even proportionate reductions would leave the Russians with a larger arsenal, but such cuts could be an effective component of a larger bargain involving tactical and strategic weapons. Such cuts could mark a crucial icebreaker, demonstrating the overall U.S. commitment to making real progress toward a world without nuclear weapons. Some officials within the Obama administration seem to recognize this point. It will remain challenging to sell this argument to congressional opponents and domestic critics on the right who accuse the Obama administration of being soft on the Russians, weak on defense, and generally having an overall naïve worldview. The military establishment will likely present a less difficult sell, given its fundamental dislike of these weapons and the taxing formal and informal requirements for their deployment.[10]

The Political Debate

The political debate also rages on. The Obama NPR due to Congress in early 2010 is expected to clarify much. Some opponents hope the NPR will become a barrier to any change or at least buy time for further consideration.

Nevertheless, there are hints of change to come. Robert Einhorn, an adviser to Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, floated one idea in a presentation at the July STRATCOM conference. Einhorn, who said he was speaking personally rather than in his official capacity, said the United States might consider removing “some or all of its tactical nuclear weapons from Europe to encourage Russia to consolidate its own arsenal of nonstrategic bombs.”[11] Einhorn argued that tactical nuclear weapons have minimal, if any, military value in Europe and that their previous deterrent value is no longer relevant to the current debate. He emphasized the common U.S.-Russian need to think about current security requirements, particularly the need to secure nuclear weapons and materials against terrorist theft.

Russian rhetoric has sometimes emphasized an opposite theme. In recent months, some Russian security officials have said the role of tactical nuclear weapons might actually increase, with their use being augmented on strategic submarines. Some of the arguments seem to represent stakes in domestic policy battles over service roles and budgetary requirements for the modernization funds now finally available. For example, Vice Adm. Oleg Burtsev, deputy chief of the Russian Federation Navy Main Staff, recently declared that “[t]he future may belong to tactical nuclear weapons. Their range and accuracy are increasing. There is no need to carry a powerful warhead, and we can go over to low-yield nuclear charges that can be installed on existing models of cruise missiles.”[12]

NATO also continues to present a political problem. The process leading up to the new strategic concept is more open and transparent than ever before. There will be national forums; the one in the United States will involve multiple meetings led by former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright. Concerns about tactical nuclear weapons have already been raised on all sides of the argument about NATO’s strategic future. The idea of a nuclear umbrella is still alive and well, despite a number of allies declaring its seeming irrelevance in current times. U.S. officials, in turn, have noted their
continued commitment to extended deterrence throughout Europe. It will be interesting to see how this argument develops, particularly in light of the recent decision to alter the Bush administration’s plans for a missile defense system. Tactical nuclear weapons may experience revitalization if they are seen as a way to re-emphasize the U.S. commitment to the defense of Europe.

Possible Solutions

Although the Americans are striking all the right notes in their efforts to reduce or eliminate tactical nuclear weapons, the solution will be difficult to reach and reflects the complicated debates that must occur on the long, potentially treacherous route to zero.

The best option available to the Obama administration is to plan a route of compromise steps and commitment signals while keeping a firm focus on the ultimate goal of nuclear zero. In attempting to cultivate potential solutions, it is helpful to utilize older, successful arms control strategies as a framework for success.

A crucial first step in addressing the issues raised by tactical nuclear weapons would be to build consensus and agree on total transparency, verification, and the right to monitor changes and movement of the arsenal. This might be accomplished within a restored and renewed CFE Treaty framework, which in time could allow tactical nuclear weapons to be subject to types and rates of inspections similar to those the CFE Treaty establishes for conventional weapons. That treaty provides a precedent for an all-embracing, politically neutral inspection regime over essentially two decades with a notable record of dispute resolution on which to build. This agreement could also become part of a revised and restructured Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe because it too would cover the critical geographic span in Europe.

Several specific functional lessons can be drawn from the arms control experience of the 1980s, including the INF Treaty. In focusing on transparency and verification, it will be useful to establish a baseline for all existing tactical nuclear weapons, in the United States and Russia, in deployment and in storage. Russia and the United States should publicly report the exact numbers of tactical weapons they hold in any form and the launchers with which they could be mated. France and the United Kingdom, despite their programs of virtual operational elimination, should be included in this first step as well. This ambitious effort would entail a specific universal definition of tactical nuclear weapons, including specific classifications and stipulations of the distances that such weapons can travel, in order to distinguish them from strategic nuclear weapons.

Another step would be to take serious moves to meet a recurring Russian proposal: extending the provisions of the INF Treaty multilaterally and expanding the treaty to include formal limits on short- and medium-range missiles. The bilateral INF Treaty is largely informal in nature; a multilateral formal treaty would demonstrate the significance with which the United States views the tactical nuclear issue. It would be especially important to negotiate, or at least set a timetable for negotiating, such a treaty with countries that Russia perceives as a threat, including China and perhaps India. A universal INF Treaty would ensure that fundamental Russian concerns would be addressed, but the price of including these countries in the short run may well be too high. If that is the case, the United States and Russia should conclude a bilateral agreement first and later seek accession by other countries.

Additionally, the United States must expend political capital to change allied perceptions of political realities and cultivate a political-military change in the present NATO framework. The NPG was a very good solution for the problems of the 1960s: secrecy, nonconsultation by Washington, and the political and military needs of extended deterrence. It remains a useful forum, particularly for allies anxious to peer behind Washington’s nuclear curtain. The issues have now changed, however, and the mechanisms needed to provide reassurance and to allow for consultation on nuclear matters should be updated and changed as well. Moreover, a physical down payment of tactical nuclear weapons as the only credible evidence of U.S. commitment seems a concept long since overtaken by the enduring interactions of the transatlantic community. It is also well out of step with current military thinking and practice or even the logical requirements of extended deterrence doctrine.
The possibility exists in the near future for a reduction to a new symbolic level, for example, to 100 tactical weapons on the U.S. side, although the costs for infrastructure and security will remain near present levels. Because it is generally agreed that the present numbers are already purely symbolic, further reductions would be a signal and a commitment to the future, rather than a concrete measure such as elimination. A specific attempt should be made now to identify and eventually destroy any remaining British and French systems now in storage.

Another necessary avenue is the ongoing NPR. The Bush NPR affirmed that the United States must retain a nuclear arsenal as a strategic deterrent;[13] the Obama administration’s formulation is now under debate. The new NPR provides the opportunity for a new road, and it will be extremely helpful if a new strategy toward the goal of tactical nuclear elimination in the near term can be clearly articulated. Specifically, the NPR should state the U.S. desire to work constructively with NATO allies and Russia to lessen and then eliminate the burden of a now-antiquated form of nuclear weaponry.

Time will tell if the United States under Obama and his successors is actually willing or able to take concrete steps to reduce its nuclear arsenal drastically and, through its own example of arsenal concessions, is able to convince other countries to follow suit. The measures on nuclear weapons noted above will have added meaning in the context of the issues that are likely to be the three biggest nuclear policy priorities of the Obama administration’s first term: renewal and reaffirmation of U.S.-Russian reductions and verification arrangements, establishment of a new standard for nuclear tests under the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and fissile materials under a fissile material cutoff treaty, and improved security for nuclear materials. Tactical nuclear weapons will not be the first priority, but they need to become a major contributing factor in cementing and carrying forward the good practices and design of European security and cumulative arms control so that the world can advance toward eventual nuclear disarmament. The way the Obama administration manages the difficult challenges of getting to zero tactical nuclear weapons will provide an important indicator of Obama’s willingness and ability to take concrete steps toward his stated goal of nuclear elimination.

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ENDNOTES

1. Although President Ronald Reagan declared an end goal of zero nuclear weapons, it never became a formal policy position. The Obama administration has stated that all arms control agreements will be based on the premise of getting to zero. For the earlier history of the zero concept, see Randy Rydell, “The Future of Nuclear Arms: A World United and Divided by Zero,” Arms Control Today, April 2009, pp. 21-25.


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