A Nuclear Posture Review for NATO

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NATO leaders seem ready to adopt a new Strategic Concept defining the alliance’s core mission for the next decade when they meet at the Lisbon summit November 19-20. Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen submitted his draft to member states on September 28; a more extensive conversation will take place in the NATO Council among foreign and defense ministers on October 14.[1]

This schedule does not give the 28 member states much time to reach compromise, a point worth emphasizing in light of the serious remaining divisions on a number of key problems. Not least among them is the future role of nuclear weapons in NATO’s defense posture, which Rasmussen, at a September 7 press briefing in Washington, called a “very central question.”[2]

Rasmussen admitted “that there are different positions when it comes to our nuclear posture.” In fact, the divisions among the allies are so serious that NATO defense ministers decided at their June 2010 meeting in Brussels to delete all references to NATO’s nuclear policies from the final communiqué as there was no agreement on the wording.[3] Rasmussen said that his “task will be to find the right balance and platform on which we can trace consensus,” but it is highly unlikely that he will come up with a formula that will satisfy the divergent views on all the political and strategic elements of NATO’s nuclear policy needed to develop military guidance. Thus, allies will probably merely agree to a lowest common denominator around the fundamentals of alliance nuclear policy within the new Strategic Concept, confirming a continued if reduced reliance on nuclear deterrence within a broader suite of capabilities for the immediate future but leaving many key issues ambiguous or open.[4] “We will adopt a new strategic concept which, in broad terms, will give direction,” Rasmussen said at the September 7 briefing. “And then, of course, it is for follow-up negotiations to produce more concrete facts and figures.”

This phased approach presents an opportunity for NATO to commit itself in principle within the Strategic Concept to reducing the salience of nuclear weapons in its deterrence posture. Practical details of that policy, including the future of nuclear sharing arrangements and NATO’s future declaratory policy, should be discussed among all allies in the context of a full review of NATO’s nuclear posture.[5] The alliance could launch that review at the Lisbon summit and conclude it within the following 12 months. Such an initiative would follow a similar effort recently completed by the United States and result in public policy guidelines determining the parameters of NATO’s nuclear policy. In order to bring NATO’s nuclear posture in line with requirements of the 21st century, such a review should:

• reduce NATO’s reliance on nuclear weapons, open the way for transparency and reductions of U.S. and Russian tactical nuclear bombs, and endorse the goal of a world free of nuclear weapons, in line with the policy of its member states to encourage moves toward global nuclear disarmament and nonproliferation;

• comprehensively address all political and military aspects of NATO’s nuclear policy, including declaratory policy, and thus reduce the commitment to ambiguity about the conditions under which the alliance might use nuclear weapons; and

• be conducted in an open and consultative manner by a group of member states’ political
representatives separate from the Nuclear Planning Group, which has had rather limited and more technical ambitions, but with military advice and within a clearly defined time frame.

Without such a thorough, public review, the Strategic Concept itself will likely establish only general principles and be too nebulous to shape operational doctrine. That would leave the real operational decisions to be made behind closed doors in a “business as usual” mode by the nuclear hawks among the military establishment at NATO headquarters and within national military establishments, which have an interest in maintaining the status quo.

**The Need for a New Nuclear Posture**

The alliance can no longer avoid a fundamental reform of its nuclear weapons policy. First, the policy is outdated. Despite a drastic reduction in the number of nuclear weapons deployed in Europe, NATO’s core nuclear policy remains largely unchanged since the 1991 Strategic Concept was adopted soon after the end of the East-West confrontation. Although this policy was responsive to the dramatic transformation taking place at that moment, NATO policy since then appears stuck in a time warp. Despite its overwhelming conventional superiority over any potential foe, NATO remains attached to a position of strategic ambiguity, maintaining the option to use nuclear weapons in response to any kind of attack, be it nuclear or conventional. The alliance confirmed this policy in its current Strategic Concept, adopted in 1999, long after Russia had become a partner, after very little discussion of nuclear policy within the review process. This has weakened the credibility of NATO members’ efforts to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons. Given NATO’s strategic position, there would be no significant sacrifice and a great deal to gain diplomatically and politically if the alliance were prepared to limit its options, much as the U.S. government itself has done in its latest Nuclear Posture Review (NPR).

The alliance retains around 200 free-fall U.S. nuclear bombs, deployed on aging aircraft in Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Turkey, whose pilots could be expected to deliver these weapons in times of war. In the eyes of many, these nuclear sharing arrangements, invented under conditions of the global nuclear standoff to ensure a tight coupling between Western European and U.S. security, look anachronistic in today’s world. These arrangements have been criticized repeatedly by the majority of member states of the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) as being at odds with treaty obligations.[6]

Second, NATO needs to respond to the new nuclear arms control agenda as outlined by U.S. President Barack Obama. NATO has so far been unable collectively to endorse the goal of a world free of nuclear weapons, which the United States and most allies now are pursuing. A number of member states want NATO to play a stronger role in arms control, nonproliferation, and disarmament. From this perspective, the world’s most powerful alliance needs to be seen to engage in efforts to prevent further arms races, specifically nuclear arms races. Otherwise, it might be perceived as an organization pursuing military hegemony.

Third, NATO has to bring its policy in line with the one enunciated in the U.S. NPR Report, which has updated U.S. nuclear weapons policy by reducing Washington’s reliance on nuclear deterrence. For example, the United States has now declared that it will not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear-weapon states that are party to the NPT and in compliance with their nuclear nonproliferation obligations and also declared that it is the goal of the United States eventually to limit the role of nuclear weapons solely to deterring nuclear weapons use.[7] For NATO to have a less restrictive policy than the principal state deploying nuclear weapons on its behalf is, for all practical purposes, strategically meaningless. Maintaining a “first-use” policy also would give the impression of obstinate resistance to the disarmament agenda for no good cause.

There may be several reasons for NATO to consider its own leadership contribution to Obama’s agenda. Such leadership would likely be greatly appreciated by many within the Obama administration at this moment, as they themselves are more directly constrained by hostility within Congress and the need to display a commitment to strong defense. Furthermore, NATO is responding only to the strategic situation in Europe, arguably a great deal more secure than that in many other regions and independent of strategic relationships for which the United States needs to account when considering its global posture.
Fourth, the nuclear status quo in the alliance is politically untenable because the dual-capable aircraft designated to deliver U.S. bombs in Europe are aging, and current host states will likely not have the political and financial capital to drive through investment decisions within the next decade on their replacement.[8] Germany has already indicated that it does not intend to replace these aircraft, although there are proposals to extend the life of the current systems; other host countries will face difficult domestic challenges if they choose to procure new aircraft. A refusal by some NATO member states to accommodate host-nation concerns by blocking alliance-wide change and effectively pressuring them to procure nuclear-capable delivery systems against the expressed will of their parliaments and publics could severely harm alliance cohesion.

Several key western European allies, including three of the five nuclear host nations, have been champions of change. The German government has been most vocal and, with the support of all its significant political parties, has adopted a formal policy that advocates withdrawal of U.S. nuclear weapons from Germany and Europe. Others, most notably host nations Belgium and the Netherlands, but also Norway and Luxembourg, support the German push for a thorough review of NATO’s nuclear posture.[9] Although host countries are obviously motivated in part by the coming issue of investment in dual-capable aircraft, western European countries generally are keen for Europe to play its role in supporting Obama’s vision of a world free of nuclear weapons.

**Resistance to Change**

NATO allies generally recognize that this time “a status quo oriented ‘don’t rock the boat’ approach might not work, as a number of political and military developments require an open discussion.”[10] Yet, there are differences as to how far-reaching the reforms should be. In many people’s minds, certain factors counterbalance the need for a radical reduction of NATO’s reliance on nuclear deterrence and, in particular, a change in nuclear sharing practices.

Some in central and eastern Europe, particularly in the Baltic states, fear that changes in NATO policy and doctrine could signal a weakening of collective defense commitments and a further U.S. decoupling from Europe, a process they perceive started as attention moved away from Europe around a decade ago.[11] Although rarely willing to declare this directly in public, they worry about emboldening a resurgent Russia within their region. Opposition to change comes not so much from an attachment to particular deployments or from specific worries about balancing nuclear forces, but rather from concerns about signaling, local strategic balances, and the long-term credibility of alliance cohesion.[12] Nevertheless, central European caution with regard to changing NATO’s nuclear posture does not mean that these countries oppose a review of nuclear policy. Thus, in a September 9 telephone interview, a source close to the Polish government said, “Poland is ready to work within the framework of follow-on discussions after the Lisbon summit, without precluding any outcome of such discussions.”

Some in Turkey are said to be worried about a possible weakening of U.S. defense commitments and the potential threat from a nuclear-armed Iran. Officially, however, Turkey emphasizes the need for nuclear weapons reductions; one indication of Ankara’s nuanced position is that the Turkish air force has not been providing dual-capable aircraft to participate in nuclear sharing for some time.[13]

Before they agree to a reduction in the role of nuclear weapons in NATO’s posture, these countries are looking to the alliance to put in place stronger non-nuclear instruments of reassurance to fill a “commitment gap” they fear could result from a withdrawal of U.S. nuclear weapons from Europe.[14]

French objections are another hurdle. Even though France does not directly participate in NATO nuclear policy, “Paris sees little need to review NATO’s current nuclear posture,” a French diplomat said in a telephone interview September 7. Others close to French policymaking have privately expressed the view that France is not overly concerned about political pressure being exerted on it to make deeper cuts, but it is concerned that its European allies could move away from supporting the policy of nuclear deterrence, with implications for alliance cohesion.

The other European nuclear power, the United Kingdom, has an ambiguous position with regard to
NATO nuclear policy. The new coalition government has been keen to show continuity in the disarmament diplomacy pursued by its predecessor but is strongly attached to nuclear deterrence. Officials have privately expressed concerns that the desire for progress on disarmament in Europe may lead to hasty decisions.\[15\] The new government appears to have a greater desire to coordinate with the French on these and related matters.

Those that believed that Washington’s leadership was essential to changes in NATO’s nuclear posture were disappointed by the results of the U.S. NPR. The Obama administration appears to be agnostic with regard to the future deployment of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons in Europe or has been unwilling, at least up to now, to express a view publicly. The NPR Report states simply that “[a]ny changes in NATO’s nuclear posture should only be taken after a thorough review within—and decision by—the Alliance.”\[16\] Although Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton argued at the informal April meeting of NATO foreign ministers in Tallinn, Estonia, that NATO should remain “a nuclear alliance,” she did not take an explicit position on the nature of any continued deployment of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons in Europe, rather focusing on the importance of maintaining the principle of burden and responsibility sharing.\[17\]

Ahead of the Tallinn meeting, Rasmussen stated his personal preference for maintaining the current nuclear sharing arrangements and indicated that they might even be useful in deterring unconventional threats, a position that apparently also reflects the opinion of some senior members of the international staff at NATO headquarters. A number of NATO member states, however, have directly criticized Rasmussen for this approach.\[18\] During his September visit to Washington, Rasmussen predicted that NATO “will not give up nuclear capabilities as an essential part of our deterrence policies.”\[19\] Yet, many member states are unhappy with the way Rasmussen is handling the Strategic Concept review, saying that he does not consult adequately with capitals and tends to inject his personal opinions into the debate. Thus, Rasmussen has been described as acting more as a general than a secretary and has been ridiculed as “the 29th member state.” During the first 12 months of deliberations on the new Strategic Concept, which was launched at the April 2009 summit in Germany and France, expectations had been raised that this process was to be the most open and participative of any NATO has conducted. Yet now, during the final stages of deliberations, the doors in Brussels have been slammed shut again, as officials responsible for finding support among key member states seek consensus.

**A Minimalist Strategic Concept**

NATO member states are currently discussing which aspects of NATO’s future nuclear posture need to be determined by the new Strategic Concept and which ones can be left to the follow-on process after the Lisbon summit. NATO would be well advised to take a “minimalist approach,” as one diplomat described it, to the nuclear language in the new Strategic Concept, on the basis of a “first, do no harm” principle, focusing on those aspects of NATO’s nuclear posture that are not under dispute. To a certain extent, this is inevitable because the new Strategic Concept will be much shorter than the 1999 version. Several diplomats predicted that the new concept might contain only two to three paragraphs on NATO’s new nuclear doctrine. One section would outline the alliance’s approach to nuclear deterrence, and another section would “balance” these statements by outlining NATO’s role in disarmament, arms control, and nonproliferation. Thus, in a September 6 speech to Germany’s ambassadors, German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle argued that the joint letter by him and his counterparts from Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and Norway ahead of the meeting of NATO foreign ministers in Tallinn had the purpose of ensuring “that disarmament and arms control will remain a key issue, also within NATO’s new Strategic Concept that is to be adopted at the Lisbon Summit in November.”\[20\]

There is no debate as to whether NATO should remain a nuclear alliance, if only because the three nuclear-weapon states—France, the United Kingdom and the United States—have pledged to use their nuclear assets for the protection of NATO allies. Rasmussen said he expects NATO allies to state that “as long as nuclear weapons exist, the alliance will remain a nuclear alliance, while gradually reducing the role and number of nuclear weapons.”\[21\] Beyond this, a few other principles should guide deliberations on what the Strategic Concept should say on nuclear policy.

First, a new concept should not preclude changes in NATO’s nuclear posture, which would come as
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the result of a formal review with adequate time for consideration. Any attempt to close down debates could damage the longer-term support for NATO’s nuclear posture and for the alliance more generally.

Second, the new concept needs to reflect the widespread support within NATO for the vision of a world free of nuclear weapons, the dominant paradigm on nuclear issues ever since Obama’s April 2009 speech in Prague. At the 2010 NPT Review Conference in May, states-parties endorsed this goal. All NATO members are also NPT parties. During his September 7 briefing, Rasmussen said he expects the Strategic Concept to “endorse the grand vision of a world without nuclear weapons.” The French diplomat, however, cautioned that if nuclear weapons are discussed in NATO, the discussion must take place against the background of the current and future strategic situation. “We do not want ideological debates about Global Zero,” he said, referring to the goal of a world free of nuclear weapons. “This also applies to substrategic weapons. If the Strategic Concept addresses this question, it would also have to speak about Russia’s tactical nuclear weapons as well. These are currently not addressed at all.”

To be sure, a failure by NATO’s new Strategic Concept to endorse Obama’s goal of a world free of nuclear weapons and to explicitly reduce the salience of nuclear weapons would cast serious doubt on the credibility of its members and on the ability of the alliance to act cohesively on all matters surrounding nuclear weapons.

Third, the new Strategic Concept should move beyond the current unequivocal commitment to ongoing deployment of U.S. nuclear forces in Europe, stated in Article 63 of the 1999 concept as follows: “Nuclear forces based in Europe and committed to NATO provide an essential political and military link between the European and the North American members of the Alliance. The Alliance will therefore maintain adequate nuclear forces in Europe.” Retention of such a formula would go against the stated preferences of a number of member states and thus weaken alliance cohesion. The only appropriate approach at this stage would be to leave such a question to a review of nuclear posture in 2011, along with a necessary debate over declaratory policy.

What the Review Should Do

A minimalist Strategic Concept would provide “a framework that is both durable and flexible.”[22] By committing the alliance to reducing its reliance on nuclear weapons and initiating a process to implement such a policy, it would reflect the most important political changes that have taken place since 1999. Such a process, a “NATO NPR,” should not be seen as “reopening” the Strategic Concept. On the contrary, a NATO NPR would consider the posture of the alliance in the light of the general principles contained within the Strategic Concept; it would not revise them. It is therefore not too early to consider what ought to be covered by a NATO NPR and what its principles might be as its framework within the Strategic Concept is hammered out over the next month or so. Previous Strategic Concepts have been implemented through military guidance, an opaque process free from any significant accountability and often ignoring the political implications of NATO’s military posture. The fact that the current MC 400, which translates the political principles in NATO’s Strategic Concept into guidance for military commanders, is almost 20 years old and has been revised only twice underlines the urgency of a thorough review. A true NATO NPR by contrast would be more open-ended, focusing on political and military aspects. Five principles should guide a NATO NPR.

First, a NATO NPR should be comprehensive and address operational and political aspects of NATO’s nuclear sharing policies. All options, including a continuation of current practices, their reform, and their demise should be on the table.[23]

Second, the strategic issues facing NATO are clearly linked to other unresolved issues, such as support for strategic missile defense and the broader alliance relationship with Russia. For example, the Polish source pointed out that, “from a Polish perspective, the question of the commitment of the alliance to the deployment of U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe cannot be seen in isolation. Any change in the nuclear posture would have an impact on other aspects of the Strategic Concept.”

Although a NATO NPR undoubtedly will sit within broader discussions, it would be a mistake to allow the review to be held hostage to unneeded linkages. According to several sources, France has
already conditioned its consent to a NATO endorsement of strategic missile defense (another topic that is up for decision at the Lisbon summit) on a U.S. commitment not to change NATO's nuclear posture drastically. The French diplomat stated that Paris has no fundamental problems with the alliance endorsing strategic missile defense at the Lisbon summit, but warned that “such a system has to be effective and affordable.” He argued that “missile defense is a complement to NATO’s nuclear deterrent, but cannot be a substitute for it. Thus, we think that a possible endorsement by NATO of such a missile defense system should not have any impact on NATO’s nuclear posture.” This stands in contrast to the U.S. desire, as outlined in the NPR Report, “to increase reliance on non-nuclear means,” including missile defenses, to deter regional threats of aggression.[24]

If there was a decision to subsume the NPR into a broader strategic review to address strategic conventional capabilities and missile defense alongside nuclear posture—an option that, according to diplomatic sources, is being considered—there would be a serious risk that agreement would be impossible. The Strategic Concept will recognize the strategic links; it might be advisable to establish parallel tracks on other specific issues, such as NATO’s role in arms control.[25] Such an approach would ensure that NATO nuclear policy is not perceived as the only “unfinished business” by the time alliance heads of state and government meet in Lisbon.

Third, in line with the new Strategic Concept, a NATO NPR would have to outline in greater detail the implications of a reduced reliance on nuclear weapons. There is broad agreement that tactical nuclear weapons no longer serve any conceivable military purpose. The United States in particular would prefer to gradually replace the residual political functions of forward-deployed tactical nuclear weapons with other, non-nuclear means of assurance. This has implications too for NATO’s declaratory policy. NATO still practices a policy of “studied ambiguity,” which resists clarifying the circumstances under which the alliance might use nuclear weapons. It aims to maximize the utility of nuclear deterrence by accentuating uncertainty in the minds of any adversary and complicating his calculations of when the alliance might use nuclear weapons. In particular, NATO implicitly retains the option of using its nuclear forces to respond to a non-nuclear attack. But this policy is now directly at odds with the revised negative security assurances contained in the U.S. NPR Report, which are discussed above. The United Kingdom’s review of its nuclear declaratory policy, likely to conclude in October, is expected to follow a similar formula.

Given that NATO nuclear assets are tightly controlled by the U.S. president and the British prime minister, it would be logical for NATO to have at least as tight a declaratory policy. The Polish source said that “it is an open question whether NATO will take on board the extended negative security assurances the United States has adopted in the U.S. Nuclear Posture Review. It is also not clear whether this issue will be dealt with in the Strategic Concept or in the context of discussions after the summit.”

The group of experts headed by former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright recommended that NATO bring its negative assurances into line with the U.S. policy.[26] Such a course of action, however, would bring its own problems because NATO could be split over assessments of whether a target state is in noncompliance with nonproliferation obligations, how serious a particular breach of international obligations might be, and which institution has the authority to make such judgments. Such debates would remind many of the deep rifts in the alliance before the invasion of Iraq in 2003.[27]

This possibility would seem risky enough that NATO members would be well advised to instead adopt a clear-cut “sole purpose” policy and declare that nuclear weapons would be used only in response to an attack by a nuclear-armed state. It would be reasonable for NATO to have a more restrictive declaratory policy than any of its nuclear members because the NATO policy would apply only to the subset of nuclear assets that are currently assigned to the alliance and applicable to the European theater.[28]

**Guidance for Nuclear Sharing**

Fourth, a NATO NPR will have to give guidance on future operational aspects of nuclear sharing arrangements, including the future deployment of nuclear weapons on member states’ territory. This issue is perhaps the most contentious and has been uppermost in the minds of those discussing the
nuclear aspect of alliance policy for the last year or so. It would seem appropriate to consider the option of a time frame for withdrawing remaining U.S. nuclear weapons, long enough to have a thorough debate about alternative ways to provide assurance and to reinforce Article 5 collective defense commitments but short enough to consider the option of avoiding the replacement of the dual-capable aircraft and thus avoiding a divisive debate. A joint declaration by NATO member states at the next NPT review conference, in 2015, that the alliance will no longer practice nuclear sharing and that nuclear weapons will no longer be deployed on the territory of non-nuclear-weapon states would be an excellent NATO contribution to the global nonproliferation efforts of its member states.

Fifth, a NATO NPR should be conducted in an inclusive, open, and timely fashion, taking full account of the politics of the situation. In the past, NATO nuclear policies have been determined in private by the U.S. Department of Defense and within NATO’s Nuclear Planning Group and High-Level Group of defense ministry representatives. Military considerations have trumped political arguments within NATO’s nuclear discourse, creating a credibility gap between the diplomatic positions of its members and actual alliance policies and deployments. This undermines policy and leads to a skeptical attitude toward alliance members within the wider international community. Thus, South Africa at the NPT review conference pointed out that “[w]hile some argue that steps have been taken since the end of the Cold War to reduce their reliance on nuclear weapons, the continued reliance on such weapons in strategic doctrines, regrettably, would seem to indicate the opposite.”[29] The Polish source argued that “given the fact that foreign ministers were already addressing the alliance nuclear posture in Tallinn, it will be difficult to avoid a political process after the [Lisbon] summit.” The North Atlantic Council would be the natural choice within the alliance to be the principal political facilitator for decisions over a NATO NPR.

This also would ensure that France, which has recently returned to NATO’s integrated military structure but is still not a member of the Nuclear Planning Group, was no longer excluded from formal discussions over nuclear posture, ensuring greater chance of French buy-in and, ultimately, long-term cohesion of the alliance more generally. The Polish source echoed the sentiment of several diplomats and officials interviewed when he said that a NATO NPR “should be inclusive, involving all alliance members.” The French diplomat, however, pointed out that there is currently a debate in Paris about whether France would support a NATO NPR, to be launched at the Lisbon summit. “The French government has not made up its mind whether it wants to be part of such a process, should it be agreed at Lisbon,” he said. “Allies have to be aware that such a process could lead to difficult and long discussions among them,” he cautioned.

The deferral of difficult conversations from the Strategic Concept to a NATO NPR should not be an excuse for an open-ended process that unduly delays or avoids decisions. Thus, the Polish source pointed out that Warsaw preferred “to have a time frame for such discussions, defining milestones, yet avoiding deadlines.” Twelve months should provide a sufficient opportunity to arrive at a new consensus on future NATO nuclear policies. Thus, a NATO NPR could be adopted at NATO’s fall 2011 meetings.

It would be important for the process to be transparent and involve relevant stakeholders. The “public diplomacy” phase of the group of experts process could serve as a model. Thus, NATO could set up a NATO NPR Web site and stimulate debate within the media to enhance the legitimacy of the outcome.[30] Given the acute interest that many parliamentarians have shown in the issue, NATO should be particularly interested in involving national parliaments, their committees, and the NATO Parliamentary Assembly in the process.

A 21st-Century Force Posture

NATO policy up to now has shown all the hallmarks of being dominated by military considerations and far-fetched worst-case scenario planning, with the consequence that its nuclear posture, particularly in recent years, has been a handicap to crucial diplomatic agendas aimed at promoting global security through managed nuclear disarmament and strengthened nonproliferation efforts. A review of NATO’s nuclear posture would be an opportunity to overcome this dynamic and establish NATO as an institution that bolsters the international nonproliferation regime. In addition, although there are clearly elements of fundamental consensus around the need for some form of nuclear deterrence in the near future, there is little or no chance of reaching sufficient agreement on the
operational aspects prior to the Lisbon summit. That meeting has other major considerations to
debate, not least the issues of Afghanistan and the broader nature of the alliance itself.

The starting point for such a nuclear review must be an awareness that NATO members “cannot and
should not avoid a re-examination” of NATO’s current nuclear doctrine and “what it means in
practice,” as the statement of more than 30 senior European political, military, and diplomatic
figures that are members of the European Leadership Network on Multilateral Nuclear Disarmament
and Non-Proliferation recently put it.[31] Most European allies support Obama’s vision of a world free
of nuclear weapons. NATO will have to reflect these changes, by reducing reliance on nuclear
weapons and more actively supporting global disarmament and nonproliferation efforts, if it is to
remain relevant in the 21st century. Nuclear weapons were a central component of NATO capabilities
in the past, but clinging to them now because of nostalgia or an inability to evolve could represent a
major stumbling block for successful transformation.

Decisions will be made by consensus, but this should not be seen as an opportunity to block
evolution. To do so would greatly damage alliance cohesion because in Belgium, Germany, and the
Netherlands, there now exists broad parliamentary and popular support for a withdrawal of U.S.
nuclear weapons from their territories. The most politically viable course of action may turn out to be
a decision to phase out nuclear sharing in the medium term and to develop more credible non-
nuclear instruments that would provide assurance and spur a constructive dialogue with Russia over
European security. A NATO NPR could be just the right vehicle to build consensus behind such an
approach.

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research for this article possible.

ENDNOTES

1. See Oliver Meier, “NATO Struggles to Define New Nuclear Doctrine,” Arms Control Today,
   September 2010.

2. Elaine Grossman, “NATO Chief Anticipates Diminished Reliance on Nuclear Arsenal,” NTI: Global


4. Many of the assessments are based on interviews with diplomats and officials in Brussels and
   NATO capitals, many of whom did not want to be cited because of the sensitivity of discussions.

5. For the most extensive discussion, see Simon Lunn, “Reducing the Role of NATO’s Nuclear
   Weapons: Where Do We Stand after Tallinn?” RUSI Briefing Note, June 2010,


   www.defense.gov/npr/docs/%20nuclear%20posture%20review%20report.pdf (hereinafter NPR
   Report).

8. See Malcolm Chalmers and Simon Lunn, “NATO’s Tactical Nuclear Dilemma,” RUSI Occasional

9. Foreign ministers of Belgium, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Norway to Anders Fogh
   Rasmussen, February 26, 2010,


15. At the time of this writing, the government is undergoing a Strategic Defence and Security Review that will have important implications for the United Kingdom’s contribution to NATO. The strongest public indications of the new government’s position on nuclear diplomacy are from Foreign Secretary William Hague’s speeches, notably his speech of May 26. In that speech, which came during the final week of the NPT review conference, he announced a ceiling on the United Kingdom’s nuclear warheads and committed to a review in declaratory policy. See Hansard, May 26, 2010, cols. 180-181.

16. NPR Report, p. 32.


24. NPR Report, p. 28.


27. The authors thank Otfried Nassauer for this point.

28. These assets are the 200 or so U.S. free-fall bombs deployed in Europe and an unknown number...
of sea-launched ballistic missiles deployed on U.S. and British submarines.


30. The NATO group of experts made its final report and some supporting materials available electronically. See www.nato.int/strategic-concept/.


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