NATO's Incredible Nuclear Strategy: Why U.S. Weapons in Europe Deter No One

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At its November 2010 summit in Lisbon, NATO proclaimed itself a nuclear alliance, declaring that any change in the status of the 200-odd U.S. B61 gravity bombs stored in various sites around Europe would have to be made by consensus among all 28 allies.

Indeed, paragraph 17 of the Strategic Concept approved at the Lisbon summit made clear the intended duration of this policy:

Deterrence, based on an appropriate mix of nuclear and conventional capabilities, remains a core element of our overall strategy. The circumstances in which any use of nuclear weapons might have to be contemplated are extremely remote. As long as nuclear weapons exist, NATO will remain a nuclear alliance.

This reaffirmation of the status quo disappointed many observers whose hopes had been raised by President Barack Obama's Prague speech in April 2009. Several NATO members also were not pleased with the Lisbon declaration. Allies who wanted more thought given to changing NATO's nuclear posture worked out a compromise by which the alliance would determine the right combination of conventional, nuclear, and missile defense forces ahead of the May 2012 NATO summit in Chicago. This Deterrence and Defense Posture Review has now completed an initial consultation phase and has begun the negotiating phase, which presumably will result in an agreed text by the May summit.

NATO, however, has a big problem. The confluence of several serious challenges has placed in doubt the safety, security, and effectiveness of the alliance's nuclear deterrent: The weapons and their means of delivery are old, the weapons systems are vulnerable to sabotage and pre-emption; and these systems lack credibility, both operationally and politically.

This last point is crucial. Nuclear weapons that are not obviously useful in crisis situations are "incredible" in the strictest sense: they lack the credibility necessary to deter potential aggressors. NATO's B61 bombs are not credible in an operational sense because there is no scenario in which NATO could believably load a B61 onto one of its "dual-capable" fighter-bomber aircraft and fly it in harm's way, as that would amount to a suicide mission for NATO pilots. These weapons are "incredible" politically as well because there is no conceivable scenario under which all 28 NATO allies would grant consensus to use such weapons, especially in a time of crisis.

As NATO attempts to find its "appropriate mix" of deterrence and defense forces through the posture-review process, important questions about the alliance's nuclear forces, and especially about the continued presence in Europe of U.S. theater nuclear weapons, can and should be raised by the publics and governments of all 28 member countries, especially those that host the weapons.

Dubious Justification

The justification for continued deployment of U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe rests on four main arguments: deterrence, reassurance, signaling, and burden sharing. A realistic examination of these arguments reveals that each of them is unconvincing at best.
**Deterrence.** According to the common argument, theater nuclear weapons in Europe prevent attacks by potential adversaries by threatening unacceptable damage in return. This is known as “extended deterrence,” a raising of the U.S. nuclear umbrella over Europe.

A fundamental prerequisite for deterrence is credibility: an adversary is deterred when it believes that a retaliatory threat is credible and unacceptably harsh. NATO’s nuclear deterrent, however, is short on credibility.

Operationally, it defies belief that any of the four countries (Belgium, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands) with B61 bombs and fleets of the needed planes would agree to send its pilots on what amounts to a suicide mission, no matter how grave the crisis of the day. (Turkey stores B61s on its territory, but has no dual-capable aircraft.)

Modern air-defense systems in states that could conceivably be the target of a NATO nuclear strike—Russia, Iran, or even Syria—are so formidable that a NATO nuclear mission would have to be preceded by an air defense suppression effort. These, in turn, are massive conventional air operations designed to take out radar sites, command and control nodes, and surface-to-air missile sites ahead of the nuclear strike. In short, a full-blown state of conventional war would have to exist before NATO could reliably employ U.S. theater nuclear weapons.

This fact leads inevitably to political considerations that make NATO’s credibility problem even greater. NATO makes all decisions by consensus, and on contentious issues, this can be problematic even in times of relative peace and quiet. During crises, consensus on such issues can be nearly impossible to reach. An example is the U.S. decision to go to war with Iraq in 2003. The United States formally requested NATO support in undertaking military operations against Saddam Hussein’s regime, but no consensus was forthcoming. In fact, insiders still consider that debate to be the closest NATO ever came to splitting up.

A decision to employ nuclear weapons against any state would surely be an even more difficult sale to allies. Germany, for example, would be extremely reluctant to authorize the release of B61 bombs for potential use against Russia, and it would not be alone in that sentiment. Turkey, among others, would have enormous political problems in being seen as going along with a similar NATO decision regarding Iran or Syria. In short, neither the mechanics nor the politics of nuclear weapons use favor the credibility of NATO’s nuclear deterrent force.

**Reassurance.** Another argument frequently made in support of U.S. theater nuclear weapons in Europe is the alleged reassurance value these weapons hold for allies, especially those located closest to Russia. Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty states:

> The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all and consequently they agree that, if such an armed attack occurs, each of them, in exercise of the right of individual or collective self-defence recognised by Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area.

This guarantee of mutual self-defense is supposedly embodied in the U.S. B61s in Europe, which are believed by some to reassure eastern allies that the United States is committed to Article 5. There is an obvious problem here: if U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe lack the credibility to deter opponents, how can they possibly reassure allies? Beyond that, there is something more than a bit insulting in the supposition that, of all the visible and long-standing U.S. military efforts and elements in Europe, only the nuclear weapons matter.

In fact, eastern allies have repeatedly expressed a preference for the presence of U.S. troops on their soil as the best and most believable Article 5 guarantee. These “boots on the ground” may come in the form of U.S. military aircraft in Poland, land-based Standard Missile-3 interceptors in Romania, or other potential future deployments. The ongoing U.S. commitment to territorial missile
defense in Europe may, in fact, be the best short-term way to replace the U.S. theater weapons’ alleged reassurance factor with a real one.

**Signaling.** Nuclear signaling is an arcane holdover from Cold War days. The theory is that by actively preparing for the use of nuclear weapons, countries can demonstrate intent and resolve to potential adversaries. Extreme forms of the theory even include limited use of nuclear weapons as a signal. Given the very lengthy lead time required to prepare aircraft to receive B61 bombs, it would seem that there is plausibility to this point and that an F-16 mated to a B61 has the potential to warn a potential adversary away from a given course of action in a way that an allied ballistic missile or Tomahawk cruise missile could not.

Here again, however, NATO faces problems. The B61s in Europe are only deliverable by dual-capable aircraft, which have limited ranges unless they are supported by aerial refueling capabilities. Practically speaking, the only potential foe that NATO nuclear-armed fighter-bombers could signal is Russia, which possesses several thousand theater nuclear weapons of its own. If NATO were to signal Russia by increasing the readiness of its nuclear-armed fighter-bombers in Germany, for example, Russia could simply respond by ostentatiously moving nuclear warheads into place to be able to load them quickly onto SS-26 ballistic missiles located near NATO territory.

If the target of nuclear signaling were instead Iran, NATO’s problems would increase exponentially. To send the same kind of signal, NATO would have to transport both dual-capable aircraft and B61 bombs to locations within operational distance of Iran. Such an exposure of extremely inviting targets to Iranian attack would never happen. Alternately, NATO could string together an aerial refueling chain that would allow B61-armed aircraft to fly toward Iranian airspace, but then the whole purpose of signaling would be lost. The signal that matters consists of preparing NATO’s dual-capable aircraft for use, not in actually using them. NATO would no more keep dual-capable fighter jets circling within range of Iranian targets than it would ship B61s to a base within range of Iran’s ballistic missiles.

**Burden sharing.** The final argument usually presented in favor of a continued U.S. nuclear presence in Europe is one most often made by U.S. commentators, that of burden sharing. Allied hosting of B61 bombs and operation of dual-capable fighter squadrons are seen as an acknowledgment by European allies of the large burden, financial and otherwise, undertaken by the United States in extending nuclear deterrence to Europe. Nuclear burden sharing thus supposedly demonstrates “old” Europe’s willingness to pay its own way. Most U.S. observers of NATO, however, would strongly prefer a different kind of burden sharing, financial rather than nuclear. NATO allies are pledged to spend at least 2 percent of their gross domestic product on defense, but at present, only five allies do so. In a time of increasing concern over continuing economic recession, surely it would send a much stronger signal to the U.S. Congress and public if allies were to honor that fundamental obligation first. Allied contributions to territorial missile defense would also be well received, on Capitol Hill as well as on Main Street.

**Conclusion**

What, then, is to be done about the basing of U.S. theater nuclear weapons in Europe? The NATO posture review appears to be deadlocked along the same lines as the 2010 Strategic Concept debates, at least on the nuclear issue. Germany, Norway, Poland, and others would like NATO at least to contemplate meaningful change in its nuclear posture, and they want the alliance to hold substantive discussions with Russia on finding ways to reduce tensions arising from both sides’ continued deployment of theater nuclear weapons in Europe. France, on the other hand, refuses to allow any serious discussion of reducing the salience of nuclear weapons to NATO, fearing a hidden linkage with France’s independent strategic nuclear deterrent force.

With NATO unable to move forward on this issue, the presence of the U.S. weapons in Europe should be widely and publicly debated, with a special focus on credibility and on value for money. Furthermore, although NATO’s nuclear sharing arrangements may not be in technical breach of provisions of the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty—a subject that has been ferociously debated—it certainly violates the spirit of that treaty and lends cheap ammunition to those states that question NATO’s reason to exist in the 21st century.
For that matter, U.S. theater nuclear weapons in Europe provide Russia with the perfect excuse to do nothing about its own massive holdings of such weapons. The status quo suits the Russian government very well, as Moscow can simply invoke its precondition for talks on the removal of the U.S. weapons from Europe.

NATO policymakers should think carefully about why they have rejected this condition out of hand. If, as argued above, these systems have no credibility and thus no deterrent value, what is to be lost through their removal back to the United States? Among other effects, it would force Russia into the much less comfortable position of having to account for the beam in its own eye, rather than being able to point to the mote in NATO’s.

For operational, political, economic, and nonproliferation reasons, NATO needs to agree to the removal of the remaining U.S. tactical nuclear weapons from Europe. Only NATO publics and governments can make that happen. Governments that care about this issue need to lobby fellow NATO members before, during, and after the 2012 Chicago summit, while publics need to demand greater transparency on discussions of nuclear posture and policy, both nationally and throughout NATO.

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