

## **The NATO Summit: Recasting the Debate Over U.S. Nuclear Weapons in Europe**

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**[By Oliver Meier and Paul Ingram](#)**

During their April 18-19 meeting, NATO foreign and defense ministers agreed on the draft text of the Deterrence and Defense Posture Review report. According to diplomatic sources, the draft contains several elements to enable continued discussion toward a new consensus on the role of nuclear weapons within the alliance.

For example, the allies are prepared to offer Russia a substantive dialogue to increase transparency with regard to tactical nuclear weapons. NATO also is likely to revise its nuclear doctrine to make it more consistent with the postures of the United Kingdom and the United States. The report—provided that the heads of state and government at the May 20-21 Chicago summit approve it—could therefore establish important guidance for future debate over NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements and for a stronger role for the alliance in nuclear arms control and disarmament.

Yet, some still maintain that the forward deployment of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons in Europe should not be reconsidered, citing worsening relations with Moscow, the ongoing Iranian nuclear crisis, and the constraints on defense budgets as a result of the global economic and financial crisis. In reality these developments only highlight the need for a long-overdue revision of NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements and for further reductions in the role of nuclear weapons.

In October 2009, the German government triggered an unprecedented debate within the alliance on the value of nuclear sharing arrangements by expressing a desire for withdrawal of U.S. nuclear weapons from Germany. For political, technical, and financial reasons, maintenance of the nuclear status quo is not feasible. Yet, consensus solutions to this problem were elusive at NATO's Lisbon summit in November 2010 when a new Strategic Concept was adopted. The allies therefore agreed to conduct the posture review. The underlying debate continues, clearly exposing the problems and contradictions associated with NATO's current nuclear weapons policy. The report that is to be adopted at the summit covers "the range of NATO's strategic capabilities required, including NATO's nuclear posture, and missile defence and other means of strategic deterrence and defence."<sup>[1]</sup>

As observers have pointed out, the review for some time had been "proceeding with little real political engagement from national capitals and with almost no reference to the wider conditions of economic crisis and reduced defence resources."<sup>[2]</sup> If the review were simply to reconfirm the formulaic compromise agreed at Lisbon, NATO would appear inflexible and stagnant, and the alliance would have fallen short of its self-proclaimed goal of encouraging the "creat[ion of] the conditions for a world without nuclear weapons."<sup>[3]</sup> Certainly, one recent paper argued, NATO could consider options to evolve its nuclear policy in the interests of NATO cohesion and contribution to global disarmament.<sup>[4]</sup> The leaders in Chicago need to demonstrate their leadership by moving in that direction.

NATO would be well advised not to skirt a debate over its nuclear posture. Below are some proposed elements for an agreement in Chicago to frame a meaningful discussion of nuclear issues within the alliance beyond the summit.

**A Good Time to Talk**

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Some observers argue that “[t]he time has now come to reaffirm and for the time being [leave] alone” the conclusions reached in the Strategic Concept.<sup>[5]</sup> Yet, none of the arguments that “[t]his is not the right time to let down the nuclear guard”<sup>[6]</sup> stands up to scrutiny.

Deepening conflicts with Russia. Under NATO’s new Strategic Concept, changes in the alliance’s nuclear policy must be reciprocated by Russia. Reflecting particularly the concerns of central and eastern European countries, the document states that “[a]ny further steps” on NATO tactical nuclear weapons “must take into account the disparity with the greater Russian stockpiles of short-range nuclear weapons.”<sup>[7]</sup>

Since the Lisbon summit, NATO-Russian relations have deteriorated. One year later, in November 2011, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev expressed exasperation at the lack of progress by NATO and Russia in exploring cooperation on missile defense. Seeing NATO’s developing strategic missile defense plans as an emerging threat to Russia’s nuclear strategic deterrent, he said that Russia would have to respond, possibly by deploying “offensive weapons systems” such as the Iskander short-range missile in the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad.<sup>[8]</sup> He again voiced his displeasure just prior to meeting with U.S. President Barack Obama in March 2012.<sup>[9]</sup> Prime Minister Vladimir Putin’s return to the Russian presidency may reinforce this uncooperative approach.

Some believe that, in such an environment, cuts in arsenals would show weakness. From this perspective, nuclear sharing shows forthright unity of purpose and continuing faith in nuclear deterrence, thus reassuring NATO members. Removing U.S. nuclear weapons from Europe therefore would be a “concession” to Russia “that would put U.S. and allied interests in Europe and around the world at risk.”<sup>[10]</sup>

Yet, even without the 180 or so tactical nuclear weapons deployed in Europe, NATO will keep its vast military, political, and economic supremacy vis-à-vis Moscow. The military disparity will widen despite Russian intentions to increase defense spending and the implications of the financial crisis for NATO defense budgets. In 2010 the combined military spending of NATO countries was 20 times higher than Russia’s. Roughly the same ratio exists for procurement of military equipment and military research and development.<sup>[11]</sup> Russia’s declared intention to close the gaps with the West will remain an illusion.

NATO hedging against a resurgent Russia reinforces a confrontational NATO-Russian relationship and is self-fulfilling. At the most basic level, “tactical nuclear arms at military combat bases on both sides create uncertainty and concern about possible intentional use under unforeseen circumstances.”<sup>[12]</sup> This will be intensified by the planned modernization of NATO forces in the coming years. The new B61-12 smart bombs delivered by stealthy F-35 Joint Strike Fighters represent a significant improvement in the alliance’s nuclear war-fighting capabilities that could be seen by the Russians as intentional or used as an excuse to modernize its own tactical nuclear weapons.<sup>[13]</sup>

The presence of Russian nuclear weapons near NATO borders makes it easier for central and eastern European states to veto a more cooperative NATO approach toward Russia. Conversely, the continued presence in Europe of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons on foreign soil—a unique situation today—hands Russia a diplomatic advantage when it demands U.S. nuclear withdrawal as a precondition for including tactical nuclear weapons in talks for a follow-on agreement to the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty. The two sides are trapped in a deterrence relationship characterized by implicit threat.

Dispute over Iran’s nuclear program. Some observers question the wisdom of withdrawing tactical nuclear weapons from Europe when Iran appears to be pursuing a nuclear weapons capability.<sup>[14]</sup> U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe could deter a nuclear-armed Iran, according to this line of thinking. In addition, it is argued that Turkey’s involvement in nuclear sharing reduces the temptation for Ankara to develop its own nuclear weapons capability. Yet, Ankara has already retired its own dual-capable aircraft, indicating a lack of commitment to nuclear sharing. In any case, Turkey “would have enormous political problems in being seen as going along with” a NATO decision to employ nuclear weapons against Iran or Syria.<sup>[15]</sup> Turkish objections at the Lisbon summit in November 2010 even to referencing the Iranian missile threat as a justification for NATO’s missile defense plans suggest a preference for engaging its neighbor Iran rather than dropping into a deterrence posture.

The Turkish elite and public appear to be split on the security value of nuclear sharing arrangements. Turkish analysts and officials themselves argue that unless there is a breakdown in Turkey's security relationship with the United States, "[n]ot even the prospect of a nuclear-armed Iran is likely to push Ankara to develop its own nuclear weapons."<sup>[16]</sup> A recent opinion poll, however, suggests that around half of the Turkish public believes that Turkey should consider developing its own nuclear weapons if Iran does, rather than relying on NATO for protection.<sup>[17]</sup>

Moreover, U.S. nuclear weapons based in Turkey under NATO nuclear-sharing arrangements could become an issue at the international conference to be held in December on a zone free of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in the Middle East. States in the region might be less willing to sign on to legally binding prohibitions of biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons if potential competitors on their borders continue to host U.S. nuclear bombs.

The new Strategic Concept correctly finds that NATO "is affected by, and can affect, political and security developments beyond its borders" and states that the alliance wants to contribute "actively to arms control, nonproliferation and disarmament."<sup>[18]</sup> It is precisely because of this impact beyond the alliance's borders that NATO's continuing commitment to nuclear deterrence undermines its nonproliferation objectives. Justice arguments play strongly in the debate about the legitimacy and effectiveness of the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). Iranians challenge what they see as double standards practiced by the nuclear-weapon states and within NATO, in particular, in seeking the benefits of nuclear deterrence while denying that presumed comfort to others. Even proponents of nuclear deterrence concede that as long as Iran has not developed nuclear weapons, "visibly putting Iran on the NATO agenda might reinforce [Iranian] hard-liners' rhetoric that 'the West is after us.'"<sup>[19]</sup>

Nuclear sharing and the financial crisis. The U.S. military footprint in Europe will shrink, both to rebalance the U.S. "global posture and presence, emphasizing the Pacific and the Middle East,"<sup>[20]</sup> and as a result of budgetary pressures. At the same time, European allies are contemplating their own reductions in defense spending. Worrying about Russia's intentions, central and eastern European leaders are made uneasy by these two factors. Some observers argue that U.S. nuclear weapons deployed in Europe offer good value for money because they are already deployed and "[t]he cost for the U.S. Air Force of the European nuclear mission, and of a nuclear capability for the successors to the fighter-bombers currently in service in European air forces will be limited."<sup>[21]</sup>

Twenty years after the Cold War, these arguments are likely to gain little traction in those parliaments debating the necessary funds, in part because NATO itself has avoided public debate on the wisdom of further investment in nuclear sharing. Development of the F-35, assigned to replace most of the aging nuclear-capable aircraft in Europe, has run into serious delays and cost overruns, also affecting the nuclear version of the aircraft. The total cost estimate for the life extension program (LEP) of the 500 or so remaining B61 bombs has also recently grown from \$4 billion to \$5.2 billion, a considerable portion to be spent on the B61s deployed in Europe. Even the U.S. Congress is conducting a review of whether the scope of the B61 LEP is appropriate.<sup>[22]</sup>

The Obama administration has repeatedly stated its desire to increase reliance on non-nuclear means to accomplish regional deterrence. Consequently, some European governments in NATO also believe that advanced conventional capabilities and missile defenses "imply a reduced salience of nuclear weapons in the overall range of NATO capabilities."<sup>[23]</sup> European NATO allies who share this view would expect their contribution to NATO's emerging strategic missile defenses to be "balanced" by reduced spending on the nuclear elements in NATO's defense posture. A curtailed debate on how spending for conventional weapons, missile defense, and nuclear elements of NATO's defense posture should be balanced is likely to result in unnecessary investments in nuclear sharing arrangements that might be phased out in a few years anyway.

## Implications for the Review

NATO leaders meeting in Chicago will be preoccupied with discussions on how to contain the quickly deteriorating situation in Afghanistan before, during, and after the pullout of NATO forces and with managing NATO-Russian relations against the background of Putin's decision to stay away from

Chicago. Yet, it would be a mistake to sweep the nuclear issues under the carpet. The posture review presents an important opportunity to put NATO's nuclear policies on a sound footing by revising those aspects of NATO's nuclear posture that are particularly divisive and chart the way into the future. Three principles should serve as a yardstick for a continuing review of NATO's nuclear posture beyond Chicago.

**Do no harm.** A reaffirmation of the continued value of nuclear sharing for alliance cohesion and defense is not only unnecessary but also potentially harmful to alliance cohesion and to the current diplomatic round of the NPT. As former German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt and former U.S. Senator Sam Nunn (D-Ga.) recently argued, “[M]aintaining the nuclear status quo in Europe...runs a high cost and unacceptable risk.”<sup>[24]</sup> A repetition of the pledge contained in the Strategic Concept to “ensure the broadest possible participation of Allies in collective defense planning on nuclear roles, in peacetime basing of nuclear forces, and in command, control and consultation arrangements” would ignore the broad opposition to current nuclear practices in a number of NATO states, including the ones in which some of the weapons are deployed, and is bound to provoke future conflicts over the modernization of nuclear hardware. Instead, to defuse such conflicts, NATO leaders at the Chicago summit should declare a moratorium on the modernization of the B61 bombs deployed in Europe and the procurement of new dual-capable aircraft.

**Be coherent.** NATO should declare that it will not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear-weapon states. NATO's current declaratory policy resembles that of France, which does not restrict the possibility of nuclear retaliation against any state. Yet, Paris is the only NATO nuclear-weapon state that does not contribute any nuclear forces to the alliance's integrated nuclear posture. By contrast, the two states that do assign nuclear forces to NATO—the United Kingdom and the United States—announced in 2010 that they would not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear-weapon states that comply with their nonproliferation obligations. “For most member states,” this situation “makes a new NATO declaratory policy necessary, so that the policies of the Alliance reflect those already adopted by these two states.”<sup>[25]</sup>

Because France is increasingly isolating itself within the alliance by opposing any changes to NATO nuclear policy, some in Paris have suggested that only those NATO members that participate in the alliance's Nuclear Planning Group (NPG), that is, the 27 members other than France, should declare “at 27” a more restrictive nuclear posture. This would only highlight French isolation, undermine cohesion, and weaken the nonproliferation benefits of strengthened negative security assurances while failing to satisfy proponents of change, such as Germany. Berlin openly supports “the transfer of the principles contained in the [British and U.S.] negative security assurance to the Alliance context and will continue to do so, including in the context of the current NATO Deterrence and Defence Posture Review” and views the U.S. assurances as “an important step towards strengthening non-proliferation.”<sup>[26]</sup>

**Be forward-looking.** Most importantly, the nuclear posture arising from the review has to be sustainable and has to support NATO's goal of “reinforcing arms control and...promoting disarmament.”<sup>[27]</sup> At a minimum, NATO should give its explicit blessing to U.S. negotiators as they propose reductions or elimination of tactical nuclear weapons deployed in Europe in their talks with Russia, but NATO can do more. The alliance's new arms control body, the WMD Control and Disarmament Committee, has developed a set of potential transparency measures on tactical nuclear weapons, and the Obama administration would like “to use these ideas as the basis for detailed discussions with Russia on concrete steps we can take in this area.”<sup>[28]</sup> As a concrete transparency measure, NATO could unilaterally declare its total arsenal of nuclear weapons deployed in Europe and in which countries they are deployed. Going one step further, releasing information on all weapons assigned to NATO, including British and U.S. strategic warheads on submarines, could help “to convince those NATO members looking for nuclear reassurance that NATO has a credible, flexible and survivable nuclear posture beyond the heavily disputed B-61 arsenal.”<sup>[29]</sup> NATO also should be more ambitious with regard to withdrawal of U.S. nuclear weapons from Europe. Nunn has recently proposed “[t]o proceed with further reductions of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons in Europe, with the announced target of completing the consolidation of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons to the United States within five years, with the final timing and pace to be determined by broad political and security developments between NATO and Russia, including but not limited to their tactical nuclear posture.”<sup>[30]</sup>

Finally, institutional issues matter. As Acting U.S. Undersecretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Rose Gottemoeller recently pointed out, “the process of adapting the Alliance to a changing world will be on-going,”<sup>[31]</sup> and the political review of nuclear policy therefore should not be terminated in Chicago on the basis that agreement is elusive. If the issue is simply sent back to the NPG and its senior advisory body, the High Level Group (HLG), for implementation, officials will let the issue drift. The guardians of the arsenal at NATO headquarters in Brussels certainly cannot be expected to be a force for change. A continual review of NATO nuclear policies beyond Chicago must take place at the political level and include clear milestones for decision-making. The Chicago summit could decide that the North Atlantic Council, meeting at the level of foreign and defense ministers, should annually receive a report based, for example, on contributions from the new WMD committee and the NPG/HLG on possible changes to NATO’s nuclear posture. The meeting could take place in conjunction with a public seminar on NATO nuclear policy to which major stakeholders are invited and where findings of the reports are debated.

The indications are that NATO leaders in Chicago will be agreeing on a text that frames a continued debate on the role and posture of nuclear weapons within the alliance, based on the principles outlined by U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton in Tallinn, Estonia, in 2010, and opens up the opportunity to discuss these issues with the Russians. The leaders would do well to recognize that it is not discussion of nuclear issues that causes rifts and strains but resistance to change and evolution. Even if the posture review does not live up to the hopes many have had for it, it can create the framework for a constructive process that takes into account opinion from across the spectrum and helps the alliance break free from the Cold War legacy holding it back.

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