Arms Control Today

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Strenuous efforts are currently being made to control the spread of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and to reduce existing stockpiles of such weapons. New talks on Iran’s nuclear program have resulted in an interim agreement that could lead to a comprehensive solution of the conflict over how to better control Tehran’s nuclear efforts.

The United States and Russia are cooperating in the destruction of Syrian chemical weapons, despite competing geopolitical interests in the region. Some hope this cooperation could be the long-awaited “game changer” in relations with Russia, opening the way to progress on the broader agenda of nuclear arms control and other issues.

This surge of optimism stands in sharp contrast to the pace of progress on tackling the problem of tactical nuclear weapons in Europe. NATO and Russia have entrapped themselves, with each of them linking progress on nuclear arms control to steps by the other side while lacking the political will to take the process forward. The December 3-4 meeting of NATO foreign ministers and deliberations in the NATO-Russia Council did not even have nuclear arms control in Europe on its agenda, although a few member states raised the issue.

NATO does not confirm numbers, but it is believed that the United States deploys 150 to 200 gravity bombs under nuclear sharing arrangements in Europe. The alliance has declared its intention to engage Russia in a process of confidence building on tactical nuclear weapons in order to pave the way for future reductions. The allies, however, will contemplate changes to the nuclear posture only on the basis of Russian reciprocity.

Russia probably deploys around 2,000 operational tactical nuclear weapons and may have many more in reserve. Moscow insists that a dialogue on tactical nuclear weapons must be part of a broader settlement of differences over NATO’s missile defense plans and the asymmetries in conventional capabilities between Russia and NATO. Recently, Russia reportedly has raised the stakes by moving short-range Iskander missiles, which could carry nuclear warheads, toward NATO member countries. On December 19, however, Russian President Vladimir Putin denied press reports that the missiles have been deployed on the territory of the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad, which is situated between NATO members Lithuania and Poland.[1]

In combination, NATO’s conditionality and Russian intransigence have created an impasse over how to deal with the nuclear weapons deployed in Europe. Almost 25 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the contribution of these weapons to nuclear deterrence and the core function of preventing conventional war in Europe has vanished. Nevertheless, both sides have been unwilling to take meaningful steps toward the elimination of Europe’s nuclear legacy.

In the long run, NATO’s nuclear posture is not sustainable. The hardware supporting nuclear sharing arrangements is aging. U.S. plans to modernize the B61 gravity bombs deployed in host countries Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Turkey could potentially trigger public opposition to NATO’s nuclear sharing arrangements.

The alliance, therefore, must re-evaluate the linkages involved in its nuclear weapons policy toward
Russia, clarify its goals in arms control and force posture, and, more broadly, reassess the usefulness of nuclear forces associated with its deterrence posture.

At the same time, Russia would be well advised to take up NATO’s offer of discussing transparency and confidence-building measures. Russia’s rigid stance has resulted in a more united alliance. Those allies that have argued for a policy of engagement toward Russia find themselves increasingly isolated and with fewer good arguments to support their case for dialogue and cooperation. Thus, Moscow’s tough policy on tactical nuclear weapons is pushing NATO into a confrontational mode that cannot be in Moscow’s interest.

This article focuses on the state of play in NATO’s internal deliberations on the alliance’s future nuclear posture and its current efforts to engage Russia in a process of transparency and confidence-building measures in that area. Ultimately, a reciprocal agreement on reducing the number of tactical nuclear weapons and eventually eliminating them is the best way to deal with the Cold War’s dangerous and expensive legacy. In the meantime, each side can take many steps of intrinsic value to break the current political deadlock.

**NATO’s Internal Debate**

The promise in 2009 by Germany’s previous government to “advocate within the Alliance and with our American allies the removal of the remaining nuclear weapons from Germany”[2] triggered a debate within NATO on the role of nuclear weapons and the related issue of arms control.[3] The adoption in November 2010 of a new Strategic Concept and a subsequent May 2012 Deterrence and Defence Posture Review report managed to reconcile but not resolve the alliance’s deep-seated differences.[4]

As a result, the question of NATO’s tactical nuclear weapons and their relationship to Russia’s own weapons remains unresolved. In the 2012 posture review report, the allies confirm that NATO’s nuclear forces currently meet the criteria for an effective deterrence and defense posture.[5] Yet, the report contains several references to the possibility of further reductions in tactical nuclear weapons. Thus, the allies seek to ensure the broadest possible participation in nuclear sharing arrangements in case NATO were to decide to reduce its reliance on tactical nuclear weapons based in Europe.[6] These references not only leave open the door to further reductions, but also are testimony to the continuing pressure from some allies for such movement. The posture review report also clearly states that the alliance is prepared to reduce “its requirement” for tactical nuclear weapons only “in the context of reciprocal steps by Russia.”[7] As a result of the review, work is now under way in these areas.

Despite three years of discussions in various settings, the allies have not been able to resolve their competing views on reciprocity—what the term means or what consequences reciprocal actions by Russia may have for NATO policy. Some insist that Russia must match NATO moves directly; others say that NATO should take actions that encourage Russian reciprocity. Simply put, the alliance has not established a road map of where it wants to go and how it plans to get there.

Several structural hurdles impede agreement on a unified and practical arms control approach by the alliance and account for the slow progress in completing the tasks that the posture review assigned. NATO has been trying to increase its arms control profile and be more coherent by agreeing in May 2012 to set up the Special Advisory and Consultation Committee on Arms Control, Disarmament and Non-Proliferation (see box). Developing policy with regard to possible reductions and reciprocal action by Russia on tactical nuclear weapons has been the committee’s main task until now.

Yet, arms control, disarmament, and nonproliferation remain the prerogatives of individual members; attitudes within NATO vary considerably, depending on the issue at stake. There is a broad consensus among the 28 alliance members on NATO’s role in constraining WMD proliferation, but views on arms control and disarmament are mixed. Some members are seeking a higher profile for NATO in disarmament policy, while others believe that this is not an appropriate subject for an alliance committed to collective defense. France is generally skeptical of strengthening NATO’s role in arms control. Some central and eastern European nations also are skeptical of the potential
benefits of engaging Russia on arms control.[8]

NATO and member state officials insist that the low level of ambition is the price of sustaining the intra-alliance consensus on NATO’s nuclear posture. It is unlikely that the necessary consensus to change NATO’s nuclear posture will be reached any time soon. Thus, maintaining the status quo is the default option.[9]

Confidence-Building Package

Against this difficult background, NATO began developing a package of transparency and confidence-building measures on tactical nuclear weapons for discussion with Russia, after the mandate of the new arms control committee had been adopted in February 2013.[10] After many delays, it was hoped that NATO foreign ministers at the North Atlantic Council meeting on December 3 would adopt a set of measures for subsequent discussion in the NATO-Russia Council, which met on December 4, also at the level of foreign ministers.

The new NATO committee initially considered more than a dozen specific measures. Many of these were the outcome of deliberations in its predecessor committee, which was charged under the posture review with elaborating NATO’s role in arms control.[11] Member states “scrubbed” these measures to ensure that they took full account of their concerns and interests. According to diplomatic sources, after last summer, the earlier committee’s list had been narrowed to five measures, each of which was developed in further detail in national papers from the United States or the Netherlands.

According to several sources, that short list included topics such as joint seminars, joint declarations on nuclear policy, information exchanges, joint visits at former deployment sites of tactical nuclear weapons, and cooperation to deal with the consequences of nuclear accidents and incidents. This list was far less ambitious than, for example, the nonpaper that Norway, Poland, Germany, and the Netherlands submitted in April 2011 on increasing transparency and confidence with regard to tactical nuclear weapons in Europe. That document, which had also the support of Belgium, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Iceland, Luxembourg, and Slovenia, suggested information exchanges about U.S. and Russian tactical nuclear weapons, including numbers, locations, operational status, command arrangements, and level of warhead storage security. The paper also proposed voluntary notifications of movement of tactical nuclear weapons and exchange visits by military officials.[12]

The focus and purpose of some potential discussion topics on the 2013 list, such as joint seminars and joint declarations on nuclear policy, were vague, and it remained unclear what they would add to discussions on similar topics already taking place. For example, there already have been four meetings with Russia on nuclear doctrines and strategies in the NATO-Russia Council. Most recently, Russian Foreign Ministry officials actively participated in a seminar on such issues held June 26-28 in The Hague.[13] There also have been four rounds of discussion on nuclear policy among the five countries that the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty recognizes as nuclear-weapon states (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States), resulting in joint statements.[14]

NATO’s New Arms Control Committee

During the last four decades, NATO has set up a number of different bodies to discuss arms control matters. The most recent of these is the Special Advisory and Consultation Committee on Arms Control, Disarmament and Non-Proliferation, whose mandate was approved in February 2013. The committee, which has been meeting primarily at the level of first secretaries of NATO missions, has a dual mandate as an advisory body on forming positions regarding NATO-Russian transparency on tactical nuclear weapons and a forum in which the United States can consult with its allies on the full range of U.S.-Russian strategic stability topics. This latter category includes bilateral negotiations with Russia on nuclear strategic forces. This role is similar to that played by the Special Consultative Group in the 1980s during the negotiations on
The new committee is assisted in its work by the High Level Group, the senior NATO body with competence in nuclear affairs, thus assuring at least in theory a link between NATO arms control policies and its force posture. The High Level Group comprises representatives from national capitals, is chaired by the United States, and reports directly to ministers. It was created in 1977 to ensure high-level attention to nuclear issues and was responsible for developing the 1979 “dual track” decision, which approved the deployment of new intermediate-range nuclear weapons by NATO while offering the Soviet Union talks about an agreement on the elimination of such weapons from all of Europe.

The North Atlantic Council also anticipated that the committee meetings would provide allies an opportunity to exchange information and national views on issues related to arms control, disarmament, and nonproliferation. The dual role of the new committee and its relationship to the High Level Group are particularly important in view of the sensitive nature of nuclear policy and the unique role of NATO nuclear-weapon states in nuclear decision-making. France, which operates its nuclear forces independent of NATO, does not participate in any of the alliance bodies concerned with nuclear weapons posture, but is a member of the new arms control committee.

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More-specific proposals, such as information exchanges on nuclear holdings or joint visits to former nuclear sites, proved to be too difficult to implement and controversial among NATO members. As it turned out, in some cases NATO itself is not ready to exercise the kind of transparency on tactical nuclear weapons it is demanding from Moscow. Nuclear declassification rules apparently have not been changed since the Cold War. Thus, everything related to current or past nuclear activities remains classified. Defense ministries in several NATO member states continue to oppose any changes to such policies. Even if an individual NATO member were to decide to be more open about its past or current involvement in nuclear sharing, releasing such information would need the consent of all other members of the Nuclear Planning Group.[15]

Most experts and officials concede that the United States could easily adopt a more relaxed approach to these rules.[16] Nevertheless, partly because of these problems with transparency, the proposals on information exchange and joint visits were dropped from the list of topics to be offered to Russia ahead of the December 3 foreign ministers meeting.

The proposal to offer a tabletop exercise and information exchanges on nuclear safety and security suffered the same fate, which was somewhat surprising. Relatively recently, both sides were involved in practical cooperation on reducing the risks from unintended or unauthorized nuclear
weapons use, and despite the general cooling of NATO-Russian relations, that cooperation is generally viewed as having been mutually beneficial. From 2004 to 2007, all NATO-Russia Council members had been invited to observe four exercises, one in each of the council’s nuclear-weapon states, to practice responses to incidents and accidents involving nuclear weapons. [17]

Offering such openness today appears unacceptable to some NATO members. These critics argue that the alliance should not endlessly pursue cooperation with Moscow, given Russia’s consistent lack of willingness to engage in a dialogue on tactical nuclear weapons. Their case was strengthened when, according to several diplomats, Russia, ahead of the December meeting of the NATO-Russia Council, declared that it was not interested in any discussion of nuclear confidence building. Whether this objection is specific to the issue of transparency on tactical nuclear weapons or reflects a more general objection to discussing such matters with non-nuclear-weapon states remains unclear.

In any case, the 2014 work plan of the council omits all topics related to nuclear weapons policy. Meetings of nuclear experts under the auspices of the council have been put on hold. [18] Discussions could be revived, however, should both sides agree to do so, according to diplomatic sources. [19]

As a result, the arms control committee, during a December 6 meeting, endorsed only two potential transparency and confidence-building measures to be pursued in a possible future dialogue with Moscow on tactical nuclear weapons. These would comprise unilateral and joint statements on nuclear policy and the possibility of a dialogue and reciprocal briefings on U.S. and Russian tactical nuclear weapons in Europe. Once these topics have been adopted by the North Atlantic Council, allies will begin a discussion on the timing and tactics of how to take these issues forward with Russia. More-ambitious proposals remain under discussion among NATO allies. Allies also have yet to agree on what role arms control, disarmament, and nonproliferation might play at NATO’s 65th anniversary summit, which is to take place September 4-5 in Newport in the United Kingdom.

What Lies Ahead?

Over the last few years, efforts to revive the nuclear arms control dialogue between NATO and Russia have ground to a halt. The combination of Russia’s unwillingness to engage in a dialogue on tactical nuclear weapons and the refusal of some NATO members to decouple changes in the alliance’s nuclear posture from Russian actions have resulted in complete deadlock. Vested interests in maintaining the status quo and arcane classification rules on each side further solidify the situation.

At the same time, alliance members that were major arms control proponents have scaled back their ambitions. As always in NATO, everything depends on where the United States stands. President Barack Obama repeatedly has emphasized the importance of reducing tactical nuclear weapons and including these weapons in the next round of nuclear arms control with Russia. Speaking in Berlin last June 19, Obama promised “to seek bold reductions in U.S. and Russian tactical weapons in Europe.” [20] Yet, these words so far have not been translated into action, and U.S. leadership on the issue has been sorely lacking. It is an indication of the degree of political resistance to changes in NATO’s nuclear posture from Russian actions have resulted in complete deadlock. Vested interests in maintaining the status quo and arcane classification rules on each side further solidify the situation.

Germany remains committed to pushing for a stronger NATO role in arms control. Outgoing Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle, speaking to the press on December 4 after the NATO-Russia Council meeting, called arms control and disarmament an element of NATO’s “core business.” Westerwelle said, “We set our hopes on Russia having an interest in transparency and cooperation in the area of substrategic weapons.” [21]

The program of Germany’s new government, which does not include Westerwelle’s Free Democratic Party, encourages negotiations between the United States and Russia on the verifiable elimination of tactical nuclear weapons and promises that Berlin will “forcefully support corresponding steps by both partners.” Yet, in contrast to the previous government, which had no clear position on reciprocity, the new coalition agreement makes successful disarmament talks “the precondition for a withdrawal of the tactical nuclear weapons deployed in Germany and in Europe.” [22].
Meanwhile, the public and parliaments in many of the countries that host nuclear weapons remain wary of the financial and security implications of maintaining and updating NATO’s current nuclear posture. The United States wants to begin deploying the B61-12 in Europe after 2020. Compared to the weapon currently deployed in Europe, this modernized version of the B61 will have not only enhanced safety and security features, but also improved targeting capabilities.

Critics ask how such a program fits with NATO’s declared intention to seek a reduction of tactical nuclear weapons. U.S. officials, however, argue that “even if the NATO Alliance struck an agreement with Russia to mutually reduce tactical nuclear weapons, [the United States] would still need to complete the B61-12 [Life Extension Program] on the current timeline,” meaning that more-precise nuclear weapons would be deployed in Europe.

In addition, if host countries want to stay involved in the operational aspects of nuclear sharing, they would have to replace or modernize dual-capable aircraft, which can deploy either conventional or nuclear weapons, over the next 10 to 15 years, and it is not clear that they are ready to do so. The Dutch parliament on November 6 passed a resolution saying that the Joint Strike Fighter, which the Netherlands is going to purchase from the United States to replace its nuclear-capable F-16, shall not be nuclear capable. In practice, such resolutions are rarely binding, but the measure puts the Dutch government in a predicament and is a clear indication of the fragility of political support among several allies for NATO’s nuclear sharing arrangements.

As long as Russia refuses even to talk about steps that could help to create a better climate for including tactical nuclear weapons in arms control, it is unlikely that NATO will undertake meaningful steps to reduce its reliance on nuclear weapons or change its nuclear posture in Europe. Yet, several things might be useful to help prepare the ground and initiate a dialogue on transparency and confidence-building measures on tactical nuclear weapons.

- If NATO wants to engage Russia seriously in this type of dialogue, the allies need to create among themselves the preconditions. Unless nuclear declassification rules are made consistent with post-Cold War security requirements, calls for increased transparency by Russia will sound hollow.

- Painful as it may be, the allies should continue their own political dialogue on the role of nuclear weapons in the alliance’s deterrence and defense posture. The posture review report fell far short of the comprehensive review for which many had hoped in terms of establishing the requirements for NATO’s future nuclear posture and the linkages among the alliance’s nuclear, conventional, and missile defense capabilities. It continued to paper over internal differences concerning the roles of tactical nuclear weapons and arms control. Consensus was achieved only by including the condition that changes to NATO’s nuclear weapons posture would not take place unless Russia reciprocated, but without any apparent sense of what that means or what its significance is for NATO’s own requirements. As a result, the questions and doubts concerning tactical nuclear weapons that surfaced in 2009 remain to be answered, and the political debate on a sustainable deterrence and defense posture should be restarted. By bringing in additional stakeholders, including from parliaments and nongovernmental organizations, the alliance could increase the legitimacy of the outcome of such deliberations.

- NATO should signal to Russia that it views tactical nuclear weapons as a legacy issue by indicating that these weapons no longer play a role in military planning. Current plans to modernize nuclear weapons and their delivery vehicles undermine the credibility of any offer to include tactical nuclear weapons in future arms control agreements. If the alliance is serious in its goal of reducing the role of these weapons, it should declare its willingness to freeze current modernization plans, namely, the deployment of the B61-12 and certification of new aircraft for nuclear missions, in return for the opening of a dialogue on tactical nuclear weapons. Such conditional reciprocity will be open to the criticism of naivété, but it might induce Russia to open serious discussions. One thing is clear: under current conditions, NATO’s preferred approach of direct reciprocity offers little prospect of success.
The alliance should kick-start a confidence-building process by offering transparency measures in which Russia might be interested. This could include an offer to open up former nuclear storage and deployment sites in new NATO member states to demonstrate that NATO is sticking to its 1997 promise not to deploy nuclear weapons on the territory of such states.[26]

NATO could offer Russia increased cooperation in ensuring the security and safety of tactical nuclear weapons. Such an offer would make clear that these weapons are no longer usable assets, but rather a redundant security legacy. It could provide a framework for regular interaction at the expert level. In any case, working together in averting the danger of nuclear accidents and incidents would be a symbol of NATO-Russian partnership, regardless of overall relations. Not least, both sides could learn from each other how to reduce the risks associated with tactical nuclear weapons.

Arms control cannot resolve political conflicts between NATO and Russia. It can, however, help to establish patterns of cooperation, increase transparency, and reduce mistrust by verifiably eliminating redundant and potentially insecure weapons. It is in the mutual interest of NATO member states and Russia to begin a serious dialogue about these weapons, their control, and their eventual elimination. Transparency measures are small, pragmatic steps toward that goal.

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6. Ibid., para. 12.


15. The Nuclear Planning Group is NATO’s senior body on nuclear matters. It normally meets in the context of the regular meetings of defense ministers. France is not a member of the group and does not discuss its nuclear posture in the alliance, although it does participate in consultations on NATO’s nuclear arms control policies.


19. The NATO-Russia Council has a mixed record of discussions on nuclear issues. Russia has resisted efforts to discuss tactical nuclear weapons, but nuclear weapons experts have been meeting in the context of the Defence Transparency, Strategy and Reform Working Group. Russia apparently has suspended these meetings. On the role of the NATO-Russia Council, see Simon Lunn, “The NATO-Russia Council: Its Role and Prospects,” European Leadership Network Policy Brief, November 2013, www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/medialibrary/2013/11/29/11e0c7b3/The%20NATO%20Russia%20Council%20Its%20Role%20and%20Prospects_Simon%20Lunn_November%202013.pdf.


25. “33 763 Toekomst van de krijgsmacht Nr. 14 [33 763 Future of the armed forces, Nr. 14].” The Hague, November 6, 2013 (resolution tabled by member Jasper van Dijk during debate).


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