Just Leave It: NATO’s Nuclear Weapons Policy at the Warsaw Summit

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The biennial NATO summit in Poland next month comes at a time of deeply strained relations between NATO and Russia. The Russian occupation of Crimea is a direct challenge to internationally agreed principles.

Other indications of Russia’s assertive foreign policy are its incursions into eastern Ukraine, brinkmanship with military aircraft and ships near the borders of NATO member states, aggressive nuclear rhetoric, and military intervention in Syria.

No wonder that fear in many eastern European states, despite being members of NATO, has been on the rise since the beginning of the Ukraine crisis. That is why the NATO summit in Wales in September 2014 tried to reassure eastern European member states with the creation of the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force, the stationing of rotating NATO (including U.S.) troops, and military exercises.

Apparently, eastern European member states are not yet fully satisfied. At the upcoming summit in Warsaw, although there are equally pressing challenges at NATO’s southern flank due to the conflict in Syria, eastern European states are expected to demand a reinforcement of NATO’s reassurance and deterrence policy.
Tellingly, more and more voices are calling for a review of NATO’s nuclear deterrence policy that would strengthen the role of nuclear weapons inside the alliance.¹ That would be a dramatic change as the role of nuclear weapons in NATO doctrine has gradually decreased since the end of the Cold War. The numbers of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons in Europe have come down from about 2,500 in 1993 to about 180 today.² The phrase from the 1999 Strategic Concept that nuclear weapons “will continue to fulfill an essential role” to preserve peace was significantly altered in the most recent version of the document 11 years later.³ Instead the current version states, “Deterrence, based on an appropriate mix of nuclear and convention capabilities, remains a core element of our overall strategy.”⁴ Similarly, the two specific references to the “nuclear forces in Europe” were deleted. The only remaining reference to those forces is the pledge to “ensure the broadest possible participation of Allies in collective defence planning on nuclear roles, in peacetime basing of nuclear forces, and in command, control and consultation arrangements.”⁵ Moreover, the readiness levels of these weapons have been drastically reduced since the end of the Cold War. Contrary to the past, it would take weeks or even months to be able to use the U.S. tactical nuclear weapons stationed in Europe.⁶ Finally, in contrast to the previous version, the 2010 Strategic Concept refers twice to the goal of a world without nuclear weapons.

After 25 years of scaling back its reliance on nuclear weapons, is NATO going to change course on that front? Last October 8, at a meeting of NATO defense ministers, U.S. Secretary of Defense Ash Carter and Adam Thomson, the United Kingdom’s ambassador to NATO, publicly stated that NATO should consider steps to improve the way it integrates conventional and nuclear deterrence.⁷ Two months later, Polish Deputy Defense Minister Tomasz Szatkowski proposed stationing U.S. tactical nuclear weapons in Poland. That would contravene the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act, which stipulated that NATO had “no intention, no plan, and no reason” to station nuclear weapons on the territory of the new members.⁸ The Polish Ministry of National Defence immediately denied that Szatkowski’s statement was a formal proposal.

Nevertheless, NATO quietly is beefing up its nuclear posture. Polish F-16s participated for the first time on the sidelines of a NATO nuclear strike exercise at the end of 2014. As a clear signal to Russian President Vladimir Putin, four B-52 bombers flew a nuclear strike mission over the North Pole and the North Sea in a bomber exercise in April 2015. Although these planes did not have nuclear weapons on board, they were equipped to carry 80 nuclear air-launched cruise missiles.⁹

In the run-up to the Warsaw summit, a high-level NATO working group is trying to come up with concrete proposals to strengthen NATO’s nuclear deterrence policy with respect to force structure, declaratory policy, and operational policy. Although there is no consensus on stationing B61 nuclear bombs in eastern Europe or on upgrading NATO’s nuclear hardware in general, one idea that is gaining strength within the working group is enhancing the readiness of the NATO dual-capable aircraft—those that are able to transport conventional and nuclear weapons—stationed in the five remaining host nations: Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Turkey. The group also is considering ideas for organizing more nuclear exercises and being more transparent about them in the hope of strengthening deterrence, revising NATO’s communications strategy on nuclear deterrence, and strengthening nuclear expertise within NATO.¹⁰

This article will describe and evaluate the arguments of the proponents of changing NATO’s nuclear weapons policy. It will conclude with a discussion of alternative options.

Reasons for a Review

The advocates of change point out that the last revision of NATO’s Strategic Concept was conducted more than five years ago. Another key exercise in this area, the Deterrence and Defence Posture Review, was conducted from 2011 to 2012 and also predates the Ukraine crisis. The strategic environment has changed, and as a result, NATO policy, including nuclear weapons policy, should change, the advocates argue. They also point to a change in Russia’s nuclear doctrine that apparently includes the possibility of early use of limited nuclear strikes in response to a large-scale conventional weapons attack by the West in the hope of de-escalating the crisis at hand.

Their arguments boil down to two objectives: first, strengthening NATO’s nuclear weapons policy in
order to reassure eastern European states and, second, deterring Russia. The two are related as deterrence may strengthen reassurance, although only if the deterrent is perceived as credible.

Eastern European states argue that NATO’s nuclear weapons policy should be updated. Because they are geographically close to Russia and some of them were invaded by the USSR during the Cold War, they want guarantees that Article 5 of the Washington Treaty will be implemented if needed. Article 5 states that an attack against one member state will be regarded as an attack on NATO as a whole and will trigger a common response.

advocates of the update want the rest of NATO to believe that conventional and nuclear weapons can be of help in this regard. Because the role of nuclear weapons has gradually diminished since the end of the Cold War, it is time to reverse this trend, they argue. They believe that NATO’s policy of extended nuclear deterrence helps deter Russia. According to this argument, the nuclear umbrella, partly in the form of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons in western Europe, diminishes the chances that Putin will repeat in the Baltic states what he did in Crimea. For these reasons, they believe not only that the U.S. tactical nuclear weapons in western Europe should stay, but also that NATO should increase the role of nuclear weapons.

A Defensive Russia

The biggest mistake by NATO would be not to respond to the fears in eastern Europe. That said, threat perceptions are subjective by nature and can be heavily influenced by factors related to historical experiences and domestic politics, including the media. There are three reasons why Russia is not likely to invade and occupy any eastern European member state of NATO.

First, Russia is not an expansionist country. The reason that it invaded Crimea can be categorized as defensive. Large nations defend their spheres of influence, and Russia regarded Ukraine as part of its sphere of influence. That geostrategic constellation is also recognized by realists such as Henry Kissinger, John Mearsheimer, and Stephen Walt. They blame the West as well as Putin for having created the Ukraine crisis. Luckily, the West can by definition not repeat in eastern Europe the mistakes it made vis-à-vis Ukraine and Russia because eastern Europe already belongs to the Western sphere of influence, something that has been more or less accepted by Russia. Even if Putin would like to live in a country as big as the former Soviet Union, he is fully aware that that is not going to happen.
Second, there is a world of difference between occupying all or part of a country of which a large majority of the population stands behind the occupier, as in Crimea, and a country in which only a relatively small percentage of the population would support the occupation, as in the Baltic states. By invading and occupying one or more of the Baltic states, Putin would import too many problems. The Russian economy, which may determine the survival of the regime, is in trouble. The international reaction to the occupation of the Crimea, including the economic sanctions by the West, is hurting Russia economically. Putin has every reason to avoid making matters worse.

Third, through NATO, the U.S. and western European spheres of influences have been institutionalized. The Baltic states belong to NATO; Ukraine did not. The Ukrainians might have hoped that the West would help them militarily. The Baltic states may hope for the same thing, but their hope has a much firmer foundation. NATO cannot do otherwise because helping allies militarily is NATO’s core business. Putin knows that very well. Although Putin can make mistakes, his record in foreign and domestic politics shows that he calculates rather well. He rightly estimated that occupying Crimea would not stir a military reaction by the West. With regard to the Baltic states, his calculations will be different.

For all these reasons, it is reasonable to assume that the odds are that Russia is not going to invade and occupy the Baltic states, let alone Poland or Romania.

Providing Reassurance

That said, NATO should do as much as it can to reassure its eastern European states. These reassurances, however, should meet two conditions. They should be credible, and they should not provoke Russia as that could make matters even worse.

With respect to the first condition, the question is whether nuclear weapons are a credible means of reassuring eastern European member states. Tallinn is fully aware that NATO is not going to use nuclear weapons, even in the extremely unlikely event of a Russian occupation of Estonia. Updating NATO’s policy of extended nuclear deterrence should therefore not be on the agenda.

There is an alternative that is much more credible than nuclear weapons, namely the forward deployment of usable weapons. That would mean conventional weapons and troops, even if on a rotational basis. That is exactly what NATO has been doing until now and what Carter recently described. The Warsaw summit should restrict itself to fine-tuning and implementing the decisions made at the Wales summit.

Deter Putin in a Credible Way

It is difficult to see how NATO’s nuclear weapons policy can contribute to reassuring eastern European states unless one believes that these weapons deter Putin. That raises the second argument, deterrence. NATO should enhance deterrence for the very unlikely case that Putin is going to miscalculate. As in the case of reassurances, the deterrent should be credible and should not provoke Russia.

The credibility of a deterrent depends on the capabilities and the intention to use them. That is the reason why conventional deterrence is more credible than nuclear deterrence, especially after 70 years of nonuse of nuclear weapons. Each day that nuclear weapons are not used on the battlefield, the norm against using these weapons is strengthened. Every day, it becomes more difficult for a U.S. president to authorize the use of these catastrophic weapons.

That applies even more to nuclear weapons that are meant to defend other states under the notion of extended nuclear deterrence. In his standard work on deterrence, Patrick Morgan wrote, “If the Soviet Union invaded Western Europe, would it be rational for the United States to attack the Soviet Union with nuclear weapons if it knew that it would thereby provoke massive damage to itself in return? The answer, of course, is ‘no’.” It therefore is not rational for eastern European states to cling to the belief that NATO nuclear weapons, even the strategic ones, help much in deterring Putin.

That reasoning applies even more to the U.S. tactical nuclear weapons stationed in western Europe.
Practically speaking, the use of these tactical nuclear weapons requires the consent of all NATO member states. It is extremely unlikely that all states will agree to use the weapons, even in the unlikely event of the occupation of the Baltic states. That is because the consequences of the radioactive fallout may be felt in the Baltic states and other NATO member states.

Furthermore, the 2010 Strategic Concept moved away from the role of tactical nuclear weapons and emphasized the role of strategic nuclear weapons as the key element of the nuclear umbrella. Note that the Strategic Concept was not written in times when the relationship with Russia was smooth, but after friction with Russia in Kosovo and elsewhere in the Balkans, after two rounds of NATO expansion, after the NATO Bucharest summit in 2008 that stated that Georgia and Ukraine “will” become NATO members, and after the Georgian-Russian war that was partly the result of that declaration. The threat assessment in 2010 was different from the one today, but the difference should be put in perspective. Despite the troubles with Russia at that time, the role of NATO’s nuclear weapons was diminished in the 2010 Strategic Concept and the issue was not discussed at the 2014 Wales summit. It would be inconsistent to reverse this policy now.

Putin knows that NATO is not going to use U.S. tactical nuclear weapons stationed in western Europe to protect the Baltic states. The authors of a recent RAND report based on a tabletop simulation exercise argue convincingly that these tactical weapons do not make any difference. 16 To conclude, enhancing the readiness of the dual-capable aircraft in western Europe will not make the slightest difference in Putin’s calculations. As a result, an update of NATO’s nuclear policy will not strengthen deterrence of Russia and cannot help reassure the eastern Europeans.

Likely Negative Consequences

Emphasizing the role of nuclear weapons in NATO’s nuclear doctrine at the Warsaw summit is likely to have substantial negative consequences. First, it will complicate the relationship with Russia, especially in arms control, an area in which there already is an impasse. Strengthening the role of nuclear weapons on the Western side will only fuel the nuclear arms race, which is definitely not in the interest of NATO. If Putin has increased the role of nuclear weapons in Russia, that does not mean that NATO should follow suit, especially because NATO is powerful enough in the non-nuclear realm. One of the reasons why Russia’s defense depends on nuclear weapons is that it is compensating for its inferior conventional forces, just as NATO did during the Cold War.

Second, strengthening NATO’s nuclear weapons policy will have negative domestic political consequences in the countries that host tactical nuclear weapons. The odds are that these weapons will become more politically exposed if NATO decides to reverse its decades-old practice of lowering the readiness of the dual-capable aircraft. If NATO is going to do that, the pressure in the host nations to remove
these weapons will certainly go up. That is a recipe for further friction within NATO.

The public in the host countries, especially in Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands, already has been asking for more than a decade to remove these weapons from their territories. The Belgian parliament approved resolutions in this regard, most recently in 2015. In the Netherlands, the majority parties agreed to a parliamentary motion in 2013 asking the government not to make the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter nuclear capable. The 2009 German government declaration included a paragraph asking for the removal of the U.S. tactical nuclear weapons. The answer from NATO was always that its nuclear weapons policy could not be changed except in the framework of the next Strategic Concept. If that is indeed the logic, NATO cannot change the policy in Warsaw because there will not be a new Strategic Concept produced there.

Third, there is also a world beyond NATO and Russia that is increasingly impatient with the pace of nuclear disarmament. Partly as a result of this frustration, the humanitarian initiative arose. If NATO, the most powerful alliance in history, even without nuclear weapons, decides at the upcoming summit to reverse its decades-old policy of delegitimizing nuclear weapons and to rely on them even more, the odds are that such a decision will cause even more friction with many non-nuclear-weapon states outside NATO. In all likelihood, it will further diminish the chances that nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty review conferences will succeed in the future, and it will decrease the prospects for additional nonproliferation measures. One can also predict that the push for a nuclear weapons ban will draw even more support, which in turn will provoke societal debates within NATO member states about the role of nuclear weapons. Increasing even slightly and in whatever way the role of nuclear weapons in NATO at the Warsaw summit would go against the tide of history. The numbers of nuclear weapons worldwide are going down. When the current tensions have subsided, NATO should remove the tactical nuclear weapons from Europe.

Relations With Russia

If a majority of NATO member states had believed that upgrading NATO’s extended nuclear weapons policy was the best thing to do to reassure eastern Europeans and deter Russia, they would have already done so at the NATO summit two years ago. That did not happen, and nothing in the post-Wales period suggests a different approach. That means that if eastern European member states, backed by France, which wants to delay the discussion about French nuclear weapons as long as possible, at the next summit insist on updating NATO’s nuclear weapons policy, countries that are opposed—the European countries discussed above and probably also the United States—will have to bargain as hard as the advocates of change in order to reach an end result that maintains the status quo.

Russia has to be deterred with credible means, namely conventional weapons. Only a credible deterrent can reassure eastern European member states. Even better, NATO should start thinking about ways to restore a political relationship with Russia. That would be in the spirit of the Harmel doctrine, which regarded NATO as a political as well as a military organization. It is in the interest of all NATO member states not to make matters worse with Russia. Territory seized by the Islamic State group can be recaptured, but Russia will remain a neighbor of NATO in the future. NATO and Russia need each other to work together on issues such as containing the threat of international terrorism; stabilizing Syria, the rest of the Middle East, and Afghanistan; and preventing nuclear proliferation.

NATO and Russia are doomed to cooperate. Halting the suspension of the NATO-Russia Council is a first step. The fact that the council reconvened in the second half of April after two years of inaction may be an indication that the height of the crisis has passed. To consolidate the cooperation, NATO and Russia can take other confidence- and security-building measures, including announcing and attending each other’s military exercises, discussing military doctrines with each other, and starting up new arms control negotiations, including with respect to tactical nuclear weapons. These arms control measures could include unilateral steps that the other side would be encouraged to reciprocate.

In order to prevent a development like the Ukraine crisis in the future, Russia and the West should fundamentally rethink the existing Euro-Atlantic security architecture. At its core, NATO is a collective defense organization that was established to prevent attacks from outside NATO territory.
Russia’s behavior in Ukraine was therefore a gift to NATO because it could be cited as a justification for NATO’s existence. Similar mechanisms are at play in Russia. Putin exploited NATO expansion for domestic political purposes.

The Kremlin and NATO, along with their respective militaries and defense industries, need this kind of tension and antagonism toward each other. As long as that is the case, conflicts between Russia and the West, such as the one in Ukraine, may occur again. The only way to halt the negative spiral is to include Russia in the Euro-Atlantic security architecture in a way that is acceptable to all actors involved. Russia and the West have missed that opportunity in the past.

ENDNOTES


5. Ibid., p. 16.


10. Durkalec, “NATO Must Adapt to Address Russia’s Nuclear Brinkmanship.”

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.


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