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NATO'S NUCLEAR FORCES IN A CHANGING WORLD

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A deep crisis between East and West... Warsaw Pact armies amass, NATO reinforces, hostilities break out on multiple fronts... NATO forces, though numerically inferior, fight well... but Warsaw Pact second-echelon forces are ready to attack and NATO's forward defences seem unlikely to hold....

Until a few years ago, scenarios such as this dominated NATO's nuclear force policy and planning. The readily apparent and potentially immediate threat dramatized by these scenarios helped to define the important role of nuclear weapons within NATO's strategy of deterrence. This threat provided the Alliance with a common starting point for establishing requirements, developing political guidance, and exercising forces and procedures.

NATO no longer has the convenience of such a distinct and accepted foundation for planning. The Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union have been dissolved, and the enemies of the old Cold War scenarios have become our partners in cooperation. The risks that remain are multifaceted and multi-directional, and thus hard to predict and assess. In this new context, the role of the Alliance itself has shifted from straightforward deterrence of a full-scale attack to the more complex task of projecting stability in a new and uncertain world.

The Alliance has rapidly adapted its nuclear posture - both strategic and sub-strategic (1) - to the new security environment. Two years after the Berlin Wall fell, NATO Heads of State and Government approved a new Strategic Concept (2) in November 1991 to replace NATO's old strategy of Flexible Response. Nuclear forces had played a pivotal role in the old strategy, reflecting in part NATO's conventional inferiority relative to the Warsaw Pact. While

nuclear weapons still play an essential role in the new Strategic Concept, reliance on them has been reduced. This reduced reliance is manifest in NATO's force structure as well as its policy and planning.

At the October 1991 meeting of NATO's Nuclear Planning Group (NPG) in Taormina, Italy, Defence Ministers agreed to a dramatically reduced sub-strategic nuclear force (3). NATO Heads of State and Government had already agreed in July 1990 that the Alliance could reduce its reliance on nuclear weapons of the shortest ranges. At Taormina, Defence Ministers went even further, determining that nuclear weapons for ground-launched short-range ballistic missiles and artillery could be eliminated entirely. They also agreed to reduce by more than half the number of air-delivered weapons for NATO's dual-capable aircraft, the only weapons that will now remain in NATO's nuclear stockpile in Europe.

On the basis of these decisions, NPG Ministers welcomed the earlier initiative by President Bush, and the reciprocal response by President Gorbachev, to withdraw and destroy their nuclear warheads for ground-launched systems worldwide. They also welcomed the decisions of the two Presidents to withdraw all tactical nuclear weapons from their surface vessels, attack submarines and land-based naval aircraft, and to destroy many of these weapons.

The cumulative effect of the decisions taken at Taormina is to reduce by roughly 80 per cent the size of the NATO stockpile of sub-strategic nuclear weapons in Europe, relative to its size at the time of the Taormina meeting. This is a reduction of well over 90 per cent compared to the peak level of the stockpile in the early 1970s (see Table I). At the same time, the composition of the stockpile is changing: the past's large array of weapon types, varying in range and function, is being replaced by just one - air-delivered weapons.

Since the Taormina meeting, the reduction and restructuring of NATO's sub-strategic nuclear forces in Europe has progressed well. The precise level and distribution of the stockpile were approved by NPG Ministers at their Spring 1992 meeting at NATO Headquarters, based on the recommendations of the Supreme Allied Commander, Europe (SACEUR) (4). All of NATO's ground-launched and

naval tactical nuclear weapons were removed by July 1992, much earlier than originally envisaged. Reductions in the number of air-delivered nuclear weapons are well underway.

These reductions have been accompanied by a relaxation of the overall readiness of the systems that remain. With the disappearance of an immediate, overwhelming threat, NATO no longer needs sub-strategic forces planned and postured to react at a moment's notice.

Changes of comparable magnitude are planned in the strategic nuclear forces of NATO, which are predominantly those of the United States. Table II illustrates the effect on US force levels of the January 1993 START II Treaty, compared to the force levels in September 1990 and those planned under the July 1991 START Treaty. START II reductions are to be accomplished in two phases by the year 2003 or, if the United States assists Russia, by the year 2000. As with NATO's sub-strategic forces, the overall readiness of these forces has also been reduced.

NATO has adapted its policy and planning as quickly as it has transformed its force structure. At their NPG meeting in Gleneagles, Scotland, last October (5), Defence Ministers agreed to new political principles for nuclear planning and consultation, reflecting the reduced reliance on nuclear forces in the Strategic Concept, while ensuring continued political control over these forces in all circumstances. These principles replaced the detailed guidance that was developed during the Cold War. The new principles are much more general, since the risks facing the Alliance are less predictable than in the past and since more time should be available in a crisis to develop additional guidance for NATO's Military Authorities.

The role of remaining forces

What is the role of those nuclear forces that remain? How are they justified now that the threat scenarios of the Cold War are gone?

Today, NATO's nuclear forces are neither oriented against any particular enemy nor planned for any specific scenario. Their role is much broader.

The Alliance's Strategic Concept states that the fundamental role of NATO's nuclear forces is political: to preserve peace and prevent coercion. NATO does not retain nuclear weapons to fight wars but rather to assist in preventing them. NATO's nuclear forces support war prevention by helping to ensure uncertainty in the mind of any leadership contemplating an attack on the Alliance and by demonstrating that such an attack is not a rational option. Nuclear forces make the risks of aggression against NATO incalculable and unacceptable in a way that conventional forces alone cannot.

The supreme guarantee of the security of the Allies continues to be provided by the strategic nuclear forces of the Alliance, particularly those of the United States. The independent nuclear forces of the United Kingdom and France play an important role of their own. Yet for nuclear forces to fulfil their role in war prevention, NATO cannot rely solely on the strategic forces of the United States, United Kingdom, and France. Rather, NATO requires nuclear forces deployed in Europe and committed to the Alliance's defence, with delivery systems provided by both nuclear and non-nuclear allies. Such forces provide an essential political and military link between the European and the North American members of the Alliance, demonstrating that an attack on the European members of NATO could ultimately engage the strategic forces of the United States. They also allow the risks and burdens of NATO's nuclear posture to be shared through wider participation. Widespread participation is manifest not only in the basing of nuclear forces, but also through participation in common funding of infrastructure and in collective planning through institutions such as the Nuclear Planning Group.

European basing and widespread participation are essential elements of NATO's nuclear posture. A posture without these characteristics could fail, either by causing an adversary to misinterpret NATO's solidarity and resolve or by providing inadequate reassurance to Alliance members who might feel singularly exposed to future threats. Any notion that NATO could in peacetime store all or most of its nuclear weapons outside Europe and redeploy them to the Continent in crisis or war is politically and militarily unsound. NATO's nuclear posture must seek to dissuade a potential aggressor in peacetime, instead of only after a crisis has begun. Moreover,

redeployment in times of crisis might only serve to exacerbate the situation.

The role of NATO's nuclear weapons as described so far may seem academic, at best, particularly in the absence of a specific military threat. Today, the circumstances in which any use of nuclear weapons might have to be contemplated are remote. And for most of the crises likely to confront the Alliance - such as the fighting in the former Yugoslavia - nuclear weapons will play no role. To understand their role more concretely, one must consider a spectrum of future risks that could affect NATO's security and involve a nuclear dimension. None of these has the immediacy or clarity of the Cold War scenarios, but all must be given serious consideration.

One set of risks involves the re-emergence of a major threat on the European landmass, particularly one stemming from a nation that is well armed with nuclear weapons. NATO's conventional forces are anticipated to remain sufficient to cope with the non-nuclear elements of such a threat, particularly given the expectation that NATO will have more time to augment its defences than during the Cold War. Nevertheless, NATO could fail to act promptly or the adversary could see its nuclear weapons as a way to coerce the Alliance before or even without building up a large conventional capability.

In the face of these risks, NATO's nuclear forces are a source of stability and reassurance. They underwrite the reductions in conventional forces now underway in Europe by demonstrating that any future attempt to gain superiority by unilateral rearmament would not guarantee political or military advantage. In addition, NATO's nuclear forces help to protect against any attempt to intimidate or coerce any allied nation through the threat of nuclear force.

A second set of risks involves the proliferation of nuclear weapons and their means of delivery, resulting in the emergence of newly nuclear-armed countries on the Alliance's periphery. These countries are unlikely to have the conventional capability to challenge NATO, or even the nuclear forces to threaten the territory of all Alliance members. Yet they may see even a limited nuclear capability as an equalizer, allowing them to intimidate the Alliance and

challenge its resolve. The leaders involved may be motivated by intense hatred or ideology, and not behave as rationally as those that NATO sought to deter in the past.

For this set of risks, NATO's nuclear posture should serve to discourage such leaders from thinking they can profitably threaten allied countries with nuclear weapons. There has been much speculation about the efficacy of nuclear deterrence upon leaders who are irrational by our standards; however, such leaders may be more effectively deterred than we think, particularly those who consider nuclear weapons so influential that they have sought to attain them for themselves.

Clearly, NATO's nuclear forces must have the flexibility to play their war prevention roles for a broad range of eventualities. But in all cases, they would be weapons of last resort, not because NATO would sacrifice their deterrent value by planning to fight a protracted conventional war, but last resort in that NATO would have a panoply of other instruments in its arsenal to deal with future crises. These start with preventative diplomacy, non-proliferation measures and crisis management, and extend to rapid reinforcement and, if necessary, reconstitution of a stronger defence posture. Good intelligence, effective conventional capabilities, and anti-missile defences would also play important roles.

Required capabilities

For NATO's nuclear forces to play their role in war prevention, the Alliance must ensure that its forces, while maintained at a minimum level, are effective, flexible, survivable and secure.

The effectiveness of NATO's nuclear forces is fundamentally dependent on the qualification and training of the people responsible for operating them. It is also dependent upon ensuring the capability of the delivery systems - dual-capable aircraft (DCA) - and the weapons themselves. NATO's DCA force continues to be updated and today includes some of the Allies' most capable aircraft, such as the Tornado, the F-16, and the F-15E. But we must guard against inattention which would allow these systems or their weapons to become obsolescent.

Flexibility is an inherent characteristic of NATO's DCA force. DCA can be used for conventional or nuclear missions, and they can be assigned as reaction, main defence, or augmentation forces under the new Strategic Concept. DCA and their mission planning can be rapidly reoriented to counter emerging threats. Their ability to reinforce any region of the Alliance at risk and to participate in multinational operations can provide a clear demonstration of Alliance resolve and solidarity.

With the considerable reduction underway in the Alliance's nuclear posture, NATO Defence Ministers have placed a premium on the survivability and security of those systems that remain. The NATO Infrastructure Programme continues to enhance the protection of NATO's sub-strategic forces, including the weapons themselves.

In addition to being effective, flexible, survivable and secure, NATO's nuclear forces must be supported by an adaptive planning system that can respond to unpredictable threats by adequate command, control and communications and by regular exercises. These exercises must test not only military units but also the mechanisms enabling political control.

In sum, NATO requires a nuclear posture that is credible in the eyes of a potential aggressor, so that it cannot be easily dismissed. Only thus can it contribute to the prevention of war.

Conclusion

The series of historic arms control treaties associated with the end of the Cold War - the 1987 INF Treaty, the 1991 START Treaty, and the 1993 START II Treaty - promise to reduce dramatically the number of nuclear weapons stockpiled on our planet. Nevertheless, our world will continue to be a nuclear one, and even more countries are likely to obtain nuclear arsenals in the future. Not all may view their nuclear weapons as instruments of war prevention; some may rely on them as instruments of intimidation or even war.

As we have seen, with Cold War nuclear scenarios now consigned to history, NATO has been able to reduce its own

reliance on nuclear weapons and transform radically its nuclear posture. The most dramatic change associated with sub-strategic nuclear forces is the 80 per cent reduction in nuclear weapons in Europe, including the complete elimination of those for ground-launched missiles and artillery. The speed of this transformation is evidence of the Alliance's ability to adapt.

While the Cold War is over, risks remain which justify the retention of a small - but credible - nuclear deterrent. Unlike in the past, when one narrow set of scenarios dominated NATO's planning, the role of NATO's nuclear forces must now be viewed against a wide range of eventualities, from strategic instabilities within Europe to proliferation of nuclear weapons outside Europe. In all cases, the role of NATO's new nuclear posture is fundamentally political, reflecting the defensive nature of NATO's Strategic Concept and supporting its key objectives of promoting stability and preventing war.

Table I : NATO'S Nuclear Stockpile in Europe

Table II : U.S. Strategic Nuclear Forces

(*) Table I & II can be received on request, by FAX or E-mail.

(1) "Strategic" nuclear forces include intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), sea-launched ballisitc missiles (SLBMs), and bombers with intercontinental range. NATO nuclear forces with less range are termed "sub-strategic".

(2) See "The making of NATO's New Strategy", Michael Legge, NATO REVIEW No. 6, December 1991, pp. 9-14; and see pp. 25-32 for text of new strategic concept.

(3) For text of communiqué, see NATO REVIEW, No. 6, December 1991, p. 33.

(4) For communiqué, see NATO REVIEW, No. 3, June 1992, pp. 34-35.

(5) For communiqué, see NATO REVIEW, No. 5, October 1992, p. 35.


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