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NATO's Nuclear Deterrence Posture and Baltic Security

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**Personal report based upon a roundtable held on March 15, 2011
at the International Centre for Defence Studies, Tallinn, Estonia¹**

Summary

BASIC and ICDS convened a roundtable on 15th March in Tallinn, Estonia to discuss the dimensions involved in NATO's deterrence and defence posture review. The current reality is that the risk of nuclear war has evaporated and Russia is a partner; yet there remain strong suspicions amongst some allies of Russia's intentions, the commitment to nuclear deterrence remains universal amongst NATO's members, and the Strategic Concept implies continued commitment to the deployment of US theatre nuclear weapons (TNWs) in Europe, though it is not explicit. What lies behind this commitment, and what is the role for these nuclear weapons? The roundtable surfaced a number of diverging perspectives on some of the inescapable contradictions involved in NATO's deterrent posture.

- Theatre nuclear weapons deployed within Europe are generally assumed to strengthen Alliance security by deterring external threat. However, the confusion over scenarios and secrecy surrounding their deployment (few are aware they remain and their location and numbers are classified) must reduce that deterrence and the strength of public support for deployment at a time of budget pressure.
- Although NATO staff and militaries plan for the deployment of nuclear weapons in regular joint exercises, there are no genuinely credible scenarios in which the politics could support the

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deployment of NATO's theatre nuclear weapons in a crisis, further weakening the credibility of their deterrent value.

- The deployment of nuclear weapons in Europe is seen widely as a glue to strengthen Alliance cohesion and burden sharing, but increasing domestic pressures in some states may mean these deployments only highlight radically different attitudes to nuclear weapons and drive the allies apart. This negative impact could come to a head if certain allies block the evolution of Alliance policy and host Parliaments block investment in modernized systems.

In simple terms, it is clear that member states and their populations remain keen on membership of an Alliance that can provide security, and that nuclear weapons are often assumed to play an important role in providing the ultimate guarantee for the Alliance. The debates within the Alliance have not been on whether it should retain a nuclear deterrence posture, but rather how much and how quickly that posture and force structure can evolve in a diplomatic environment where there are significant calls to move away from any dependence on nuclear weapons.

Digging below the surface we found a level of complexity and disagreement that was hard to overcome. But they are inescapable. The current compromise that attempts to use NATO's theatre nuclear weapons as a bargaining chip simply weakens the Alliance in its negotiations with Russia in the immediate term, and threatens cohesion in the longer term.

Introduction

The roundtable involved participants from Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia, as well as Poland, the United States, Britain, Italy, Finland and Sweden. We met in the context of an expanded debate on the nature of NATO's nuclear deterrent in the run up to the November 2010 summit, and the establishment of a deterrence and defense review. This report seeks to reflect the conversation, the variety of views expressed, and finishes with a personal conclusion. The event's stated goals were:

1. to consider the state of Alliance discussions on deterrence, reassurance and the nuclear elements of the new Strategic Concept and engagement on the current review of deterrence and defence;
2. to analyze the positions in the NATO debate and how impassioned these views are, and what can resolve them in the interests of the Alliance;
3. to evaluate the need for deterrence and reassurance, the role of nuclear weapons in the region, scenarios in which nuclear deterrence can play a unique role;
4. to consider views on the nuclear posture of the Russian military;
5. to discuss nuclear arms control options in the light of the entry into force of the new START treaty, particularly related to theater nuclear weapons;
6. to evaluate options to reduce reliance on nuclear deployments;
7. to consider the unique role and special concerns that the Baltic states and CEE can play in Alliance posture.

The Baltic states are not only on the geographical edge of the Alliance – some might call the ‘front-line’ – but also the position of the Balts played an important role in the debates around the Strategic Concept, at least indirectly as it was extensively cited (without attribution) by those looking to limit changes to nuclear posture. The continued commitment to the deployment of theatre nuclear weapons in Europe appears of most relevance to those on the periphery of the Alliance. This roundtable was called to unpack those positions and deepen understanding of the complexity of those positions. The perception that Baltic states had been largely quiet in the Strategic Concept review was challenged at the roundtable. Officials said that generally they had been content with the direction of the review, so why would they need to speak out? Whilst sharing the long term goal of world free from nuclear weapons they were also pleased to see a commitment to nuclear weapons as long as they exist. The reasons for their commitment were further explored at the roundtable.

Provision of Security

NATO is seen as central to security in the Baltics, and the United States as the fundamental guarantor. There has been some recent suggestion that in the longer term Europe could not depend upon the United States to provide security because of:

- US financial pressures;
- a judgment that Europe is wealthy and peaceful and ought increasingly to provide its own security;
- attention focused elsewhere especially the Middle East and Asia; and
- the shift in global power.

Rationalization and European defense integration could speed up with defense cuts. However, the suggestion that Europe might in the near future fill the gap was seen with some skepticism by Baltic participants at the workshop. The United States had been actively supportive of Baltic independence and NATO membership when European states had been more appeasing of Russia. Europe instead is perceived as unreliable, bureaucratic and inefficient, and further integration is not seen as a sufficient security enhancer. One participant put it this way: “As long as we see Russia as a problem we will depend upon the United States.” This was important given the emphasis implied in the deployment of US TNWs in Europe as a means to couple its commitment. Attachment to these deployments demonstrates a lack of confidence in Europeans’ capacity to guarantee their own security.

Russia

Disagreement was perhaps most acute in relationship to Russia. Whilst all wanted to see the reset of relations continue, and none had a naïve approach to Russia’s intent and capability, the level of trust was related to a mix of historical experience, location and relative size. Whilst all participants acknowledged that there was little threat of a Russian military attack on the Baltic States, it is still perceived by many in the region as a hostile force, involved in intimidation and malign psychological influence. Participants referred to recent military exercises that involved a nuclear attack on Poland. Whilst such exercises must

surely be expected (deploying nuclear forces means engaging in exercises with them and contemplating scenarios for use, just as NATO does annually), there was clearly a strong need for Russian reassurance of smaller states to their west. Many participants lamented the ambiguity and aggressiveness of Russian spokespeople when referring to Baltic States or addressing Baltic States officials.

Russia has several thousand tactical nuclear weapons (we were given a vague estimate of around 2000), including what were seen as unusable nuclear air defense systems, warheads stored centrally for air delivery, and naval nuclear-tipped cruise missiles. In addition, Iskander missiles have a nuclear capability, and their numbers are set to increase. There were contradictory signals of intent arising out of recent Russian military and policy statements, as well as their modernization plans. Russians views are extremely diverse and difficult to decipher. Their plans appear to be extensive, involving the investment of many billions of dollars in new systems (many of them nuclear). They identify NATO as a danger, with the possibility that it could in future turn into a threat unless actively restrained by Russia, apparently in contradiction to the reset and warming of relations. Russia remains absolutely committed to nuclear weapons and the modernization of its triad, while the Russian national security concept underlines that parity will be maintained with the United States in offensive strategic nuclear weapons.

However, once you accounted for the retiring of old systems and double-counting, Russia's modernization program started to look a little less ambitious than first meets the eye, and numbers of warheads and delivery vehicles will sharply reduce in future, guaranteed. One must also not forget that many parts of the Russian military have had to cope with severe degrading of their capabilities, and 'swallow some bitter pills'. Russia's military was cut to the bone in many areas after the end of the Cold War, as their inability to deal easily with the fires last year might demonstrate. There had been considerable conflict between the military and civilian leaderships, the latter attempting to control budgets and corruption. Many Russian decisions could better be interpreted as internal competition and bureaucratic politics than active intention to threaten others externally. Nevertheless, even in such a frame, threats to neighbors could at times be useful tools in such internal competition.

This having been said, Russia has published ambitious plans for the revitalization and modernization of its armed forces. While it is true that such plans have been published before and never realized, the extent of the implementation of recent decisions should be closely monitored.

The nuclear dimension of Russia's new military doctrine appears to be an improvement on the previous, limiting Russian nuclear use to situations in response to the use of WMD against Russia, or where the existence of Russia itself is under threat. However, Russia continues to produce a classified version of its thinking about nuclear doctrine—which inevitably feeds uncertainties about whether Russian plans have been properly understood. While all participants agreed that there was a crucial need for Russia to be more transparent with respect to actual and planned deployments, one referred to Russia's fear of exposing its weakness that has obstructed such cooperation and is an argument for sensitivity in our demands.

Whilst participants acknowledged that Russia may not be an active strategic threat to the Alliance, if you are small and share borders, the problem does not have to be strategic to be serious. There was no agreement as to whether NATO's TNWs played any role in addressing this sense of insecurity. But it was clear that Russia's TNW certainly were certainly seen as relevant to the security of east and central European states. In the words of one Baltic participant:

'We like the reset, we like START, however one can argue that our (Baltic) security situation has not improved... actually it worsened with the deployment of the Iskander missiles... I feel we are in some ways in a worse situation [in terms of military balance] than at the end of the Cold War.'

Negotiations

Negotiations between the US and Russia on the next round have already started, and must include those weapons currently classed as theater nuclear weapons, both because this was mandated by the US Congress when it ratified new START in December 2010, but also because the distinction is dissolving (see longer term pressures section below). A revitalization of CFE was also generally considered important, and its connection with TNWs clearly recognized, if only because of explicit reference by Russians of the need to retain their TNWs because of conventional imbalances.

Russia has made clear its conditions for negotiations involving their nuclear weapons, conditions that suggest they are in no hurry. They include: the withdrawal of US nuclear weapons from Europe and the dismantling of infrastructure; full implementation of new START; inclusion of other capabilities, namely missile defense and novel conventional capabilities; and multilateralisation of the process. These are high bars, but we need not be discouraged. It is the nature of a hard-nosed negotiator that they start with tough demands.

For its part NATO has made clear that it will be seeking reciprocity from the Russians before it further reduces its warheads in Europe. But what specifically is NATO seeking in reciprocity? Clarity is absolutely critical prior to negotiations. NATO sees its security as affected more directly by the deployment of Russian TNWs than Russian security is affected by NATO deployments – thus NATO has a direct interest in seeking agreement. So far the emphasis has been on transparency of Russian deployments and their relocation away from the borders of NATO, but it could also include discussion on posture and role. Of course the sequencing of this agreement presents many challenges, but should not be beyond the wit of negotiators. NATO clearly sees its TNWs as bargaining chips to achieve increased security. Unfortunately for NATO, its negotiating position is weakened by a number of factors, not least its own divisions over the issue. This could easily be used by the Russians as a negotiating asset and as a means to deepen divisions within NATO. Why then would they want to sit down and negotiate away their own assets in exchange for solving NATO's problems? Far from TNWs being a negotiating asset to be traded with the Russians, NATO might come to see them as a liability. It is important therefore for NATO to consider what trade-offs it is willing to make in this exercise. Is the US also willing to include BMD and CFE limits in the grand bargain? And what are the consequences of failure to negotiate? Can we maintain a status quo, delay decisions?

On the other hand, one important NATO negotiating asset lies in its technical superiority. One participant referred to Russia's desire to acquire US hit-to-kill capability, this being the main driver in Russia's new-found cooperation over missile defense. Whatever the Europeans think, the Russians appear to think BMD works, and they want in.

Whilst all agreed that negotiations are important, there was a strong view expressed that unilateral offers made by the Alliance would simply be pocketed by Russia and that NATO would be left in a weaker negotiating position. It may even damage Russian incentives to offer a great deal in new CFE negotiations. TNW reductions may also send damaging signals to Russia on NATO's resolve to use nuclear weapons in a crisis. This view centered on how to join the negotiating table with good leverage and a strong hand.

It was pointed out that there were complex interplays between the need to retain hard-nosed leverage over the Russians, and the desire not to annoy or frustrate them, or back them into a corner. Were these necessarily opposite sides of the same coin? It was assumed by some that reset and reassurance were in contradiction too, but others saw both as essential. Indeed, measures to strengthen reassurance could be used to seek reciprocity in negotiations with Russia.

In the end, much of our approach comes down to how we see the Russians, and the purpose of negotiations. We need to be aware of the traps involved in seeing the Russians as arms control negotiating partners that cannot be trusted, not least that both redundant systems on NATO's side and plans for the future deployment of offensive Russian systems then acquire an additional value that could prevent disarmament or speed up rearmament.

The value of TNWs

In response to one participant's claim that TNWs retained important military functions within the broader Alliance strategy, particularly as part of the crisis response toolbox, another stated clearly his belief that there are no genuinely credible scenarios in which the politics could support the deployment of European theater nuclear weapons in a crisis, further weakening the credibility of their deterrent value. This 'irreducible paradox' needed to be addressed as a matter of urgency in the review. Without clarity of purpose, other values attached by implication to the deployment of TNWs start to look very shaky.

Nevertheless, it was equally clear that in the minds of many that NATO's theatre nuclear weapons are recognized to have a crucial political value in that they signal American commitment to European defense and NATO's resolve to respond in a crisis, represent Alliance cohesion and provide burden sharing. Nuclear coupling is seen as central. NATO's Nuclear Planning Group, in which nuclear policy and deployment is discussed, was described by one participant as the 'spinal cord of the Alliance'. But it was asked whether this depended upon the deployment of TNWs in Europe. Another asked, is a nuclear weapon free Europe a US-free Europe? The question remains, though, can all this be built upon an edifice that ultimately rests on a system that could not (politically) be used in any credible scenario? It

would require open Alliance-wide conversations about bombing St Petersburg. And how much flexibility is there in achieving desired signals by changing posture, readiness and deployments without undermining that claimed cohesion?

Longer term pressures on the status quo

In many parts of Europe the resolve to actually contemplate the use of nuclear weapons had essentially evaporated since the end of the Cold War, leaving the credibility of deterrence very weak. Reference was made to the very high probability that some host states, particularly Germany, and therefore Netherlands and Belgium, would at some point cease to host US nuclear bombs because parliaments would block any necessary investment in modernization of the aircraft assigned to deliver them. This was referred to by one participant as a ‘time-bomb’, and demonstrates that a commitment to cohesion and the future of the Alliance did not necessarily imply defense of the status quo. Pandora’s box had already irrevocably been opened by the Germans in 2009 – arguably even then the seeds of the disagreement had already been in play as the collective mind of the German people and its parliamentarians were fixed. Another expressed confidence that NATO would find a way through this problem, ‘don’t ever underestimate the drafting abilities of NATO officials’! But at present it seems extremely difficult to see how the obstacles might be overcome.

In any case, the next round of bilateral START negotiations would have to include all B61 warheads. This is unavoidable because the new B61Mod12 would be a common, shared (identical) design whether deployed on (strategic) B2 bombers or on (‘sub-strategic’) nuclear-capable F35s, and the next round of negotiations would have to count and verify warheads. All B61s would therefore be counted as strategic, which is one additional reason the Americans are so keen also to tie in the Russians tactical nuclear warheads. Another uncertainty lies in the shaky future of the nuclear-capable version of the F35, dependent upon a decision by the USAF whether to acquire any, a decision far from certain at present.

One member of the roundtable pointed to the impossible task facing the United States over policy today – balancing and appeasing an extraordinary diversity of views – from French phobias, to European disarmers, to those strongly attached to the status quo – keeping allies as happy as possible (or at least minimizing their unhappiness); ensuring the Russians are not alarmed; and then handling Congress.

Proliferation and disarmament

Another pressure on NATO member states arises from their disarmament commitments under the non-proliferation treaty (NPT). All participants recognized that mutual disarmament had value for its own sake, and that Europe would be safer with lower numbers of nuclear weapons and with more restricted postures. There was clearly an opportunity for NATO to tighten up its own nuclear declaratory policy now that the United States (and UK) had recently (in the nuclear posture review) been able to give security guarantees to non-nuclear weapon states in good standing with the IAEA. However, important challenges face us along the disarmament road. As we get closer to zero there will undoubtedly be turbulence and uncertainty.

The roundtable discussed at several points the connection between proliferation and disarmament, and there was some significant disagreement. The so-called 'Prague agenda', as well as official government policies as articulated in Security Council resolutions, EU statements and the NATO Strategic Concept imply a link. Several thought, though, that it had been overstated, and that the principal strategic factors that encouraged leaders in proliferating states to seek nuclear weapons were more regional and wholly independent of NATO's possession of nuclear weapons. There was skepticism in particular about the impact of unilateral NATO reductions on strengthening the non-proliferation norm. Since the end of the Cold War there had been significant disarmament in terms of numbers of warheads, yet an increase in proliferation. Other participants saw this relationship as far too simplistic an approach to a complex situation, and highlighted the general signaling that results from NATO's continued dependency upon nuclear deterrence, as well as the impact on international norms and the apparent status nuclear possession still appears to convey. Immediate strategic calculations of potential proliferators are only part of the proliferation equation. Opinion on the streets of Tehran, which matters to the regime, is most certainly affected by an interpretation of hypocrisy on the part of states with nuclear weapons or those dependent upon a nuclear umbrella.

Substitutes for TNW

NATO collective missile defence is often cited as a new opportunity to create solidarity and burden sharing among Allies. However, there was some disagreement around the table whether BMD could play this role adequately, even if it were technically credible, skeptics saying that the nature of the difference and the political symbolism of nuclear deployments in Europe was too strong. This is perhaps the deepest division in the current debate around the review.

Several participants pointed to the need for conventional reassurance, independent of decisions on TNWs. However, without strengthened reassurance (such as exercises, defense contingency planning, expansion of infrastructure, and the development of a NATO response force), there would continue to be opposition to any evolution in nuclear policy. NATO has already warmed up initiatives along these lines... one such major exercise involving defense of the Baltics was imminent.

Public debate

As with previous roundtables, the prevailing view was that public discussion could be dangerous, as the issues were too complex, and public opinion overly influenced by simplistic judgments on both sides of the debate (anti-nuclear or xenophobic). One said, 'Maybe we shouldn't [open this to public debate] ... it's scary, it alters political dynamics, is bad for relations with Russia, and for intelligence relations'. He felt that the limited public debate already over-emphasized the influence of disarmament opinion, a situation that could only 'get worse' with greater public debate as publics increasingly become anti-nuclear. He believed part of the problem was that Europeans were comfortable existing under a distant strategic nuclear umbrella. Others believed that the impact of public opinion on these matters is all too easily overstated, and that the silent majority will remain quite ignorant of the issue or are quite content for the status quo to continue, supportive of the general implied guarantee from nuclear deployments.

However, after some discussion, one Baltic participant appeared to acknowledge that an open debate may be useful as a way of ‘ventilating’ pressure that builds up, and certainly that there could be much greater declassification of NATO information. The alternative may mean public support for Alliance nuclear policy ebbing away in the face of shrinking budgets and stronger demands for justification of public spend.

Conclusions

The deterrence and defense review currently under way in NATO circles faces a number of tricky differences between allies that some may be tempted to sweep under the carpet. Leaving it as is and referring to the need for Russian reciprocity when Russia has already set the bar high on negotiations might counter-intuitively weaken the Alliance negotiating position. The Obama Administration has clearly made a particularly big effort to take full account of the diverse opinions of its allies before making a decision to proceed, a hall mark of this Presidency and a clear departure from the previous. In the words of one participant, “they need to minimize the degree to which everyone is dissatisfied”. But a failure to make a decision could be even more dangerous. Leadership is most definitely in their hands. It is the Americans who sit in negotiation with the Russians, and they who own and deploy theatre nuclear weapons in Europe. It is they who offer the security guarantees so sought after by many Europeans, and they who can offer alternatives. Obviously these involve Alliance-wide consultations, but they require leadership from the Americans beyond defining principles. The Deterrence and Defense Posture Review offers a vehicle to further develop this leadership.

All the while the time-bomb clock is ticking. Whether it needs it or not, Europe is sheltered under the strategic nuclear umbrella of the United States, with or without the deployment of theater nuclear weapons in situ. Only a small fraction of Europeans, influenced by planners in NATO, believe there is any credible scenario in which TNWs could be used, a situation that undermines the political value they have.

So what choices do the Baltic states have in this regard? Alongside states in central Europe they have started to win valuable non-nuclear guarantees for their security, perhaps in part as a result of their steadfast position on issues such as the TNWs. These have value in their own right, independent of the future of TNWs. It is time all allies realized that their continued deployment is a liability – to European security, to NATO cohesion, and to achieving a negotiated reduction in the threat arising from Russia’s own nuclear forces.