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NATO's new Strategic Concept and the future of tactical nuclear weapons

NATO can and should reduce its reliance on nuclear weapons. First, President Obama with his April 2009 Prague speech has changed the way in which nuclear deterrence is discussed in many NATO member states. The goal of Global Zero has become the yardstick against which any action on nuclear weapons is measured. That is one reason why most of the five nations that currently still host U.S. tactical nuclear weapons on their territory are no longer comfortable with the nuclear status quo.² There is broad support in parliaments and among the public of many European countries to withdraw the remaining 200 or so U.S. tactical nuclear weapons. While opposition to involvement in nuclear sharing has not reached the level where it is forcing governments to take immediate action, it will prevent new investments to maintain current nuclear sharing arrangements. Thus, it would be extremely costly politically and put substantial strain on alliance cohesion, if host nations were asked by NATO allies to invest in new nuclear-capable delivery aircraft simply because allies are unable to reach a consensual decision to phase out nuclear sharing.

Second, the remaining U.S. nuclear weapons deployed in Europe do not have a military value. This is a view unanimously shared among allies. The new Strategic Concept is likely to recognize this fact by emphasizing that the circumstances in which any use of nuclear weapons might be contemplated are extremely remote. The

reservations of some central European states and particularly the Baltic states with regard to changes of NATO's nuclear posture are not related to the military value of nuclear sharing but to the credibility of security assurances by the United States and the alliance more generally.³ The same argument can be made for Turkey.⁴

Third, from a nonproliferation point of view it is important that the new Strategic Concept backs up efforts to prevent the spread of weapons. The alliance is conventionally superior to any potential opponent,⁵ it also has a unique and prominent position in the global nuclear landscape. Three of the five NPT nuclear weapon states are NATO members. Of the fourteen states that have nuclear weapons on their territory, eight are members of NATO. NATO remains the only alliance which practices nuclear sharing. The United States is the only nuclear weapon state that still deploys nuclear weapons on the territories of non-nuclear weapon states. Against this background, it is evident that the outcome of discussions on the nuclear aspects of NATO's new Strategic Concept will make a real difference. What NATO does on nuclear policy sends an important signal about how serious the alliance and the West more generally are about nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation. Does the alliance support President Obama's agenda to take steps towards a world without nuclear weapons or will it continue to see its nuclear weapons as valuable instruments of national defense?

There is a real danger that NATO's new Strategic Concept will not provide the active support for efforts to reduce the salience of nuclear weapons that many are hoping for. On three key issues the Strategic Concept could prevent any meaningful change of NATO's nuclear posture in the foreseeable future.⁶

Declaratory policy

There is little doubt that NATO's current declaratory policy is outdated. It was developed under conditions of the nuclear standoff in Europe, when short-range nuclear weapons were supposed to defeat conventionally superior Soviet forces and to provide an escalatory capability.⁷ Both functions obviously no longer apply today.

It is a reflection of this diminished value of nuclear weapons that the April 2010 Nuclear Posture Review has restricted the circumstances under which the United States is prepared to use nuclear weapons.⁸

It would be problematic and counter-productive if NATO in the new Strategic Concept were to emphasize that it remains a nuclear alliance to deter *any* attack or coercion against it. Keeping the core of NATO's first-use posture intact would signal that the alliance does not reduce the value of its nuclear weapons and is unable to bring its declaratory policy in line with today's requirements.

Another problem is the lack of coherence between NATO's and U.S. declaratory policies. It would undermine the Obama administration's efforts to reduce the salience of nuclear weapons if NATO's nuclear posture would continue to be broader than U.S. declaratory policy. France particularly has been opposing any changes to NATO's nuclear policy and it would be ironic if the only NATO member that does not participate in the Nuclear Planning Group were able to veto meaningful changes of the alliance's nuclear policy.

Nuclear posture and the future of nuclear sharing

Not surprisingly, in the new Strategic Concept NATO is likely to recommit itself to being a nuclear alliance, along the lines of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's remarks at the April 22-23 meeting of NATO foreign ministers in Tallinn. Given the fact that three nuclear weapons states are members of the alliance, this is a fairly obvious statement to make.

Assessing the need for the continued basing of U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe is a more complex question. Clinton in Tallinn referred to this indirectly by emphasizing the fundamental value of "sharing nuclear risks and responsibilities."⁹ Burden sharing is a key principle for a military alliance but many NATO members currently are more interested in having the value of burden sharing demonstrated on the battlefields in Afghanistan rather than at nuclear weapon storage sites in Central Europe.

If NATO heads of state and government in Lisbon were to commit themselves again to ensure the broadest possible participation of allies in planning of nuclear roles or the peacetime basing of nuclear forces, command, control and consultation arrangements, this would unnecessarily restrict options to change NATO's nuclear posture in the future. Such a statement would also run counter to the expressed will of Germany to have U.S. nuclear weapons withdrawn from Europe.

Arms control and linkages with Russia's nuclear posture

German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle wants to make disarmament and arms control a "trademark" of the alliance. The new Strategic Concept could contain several elements towards that end. Thus, the new concept is likely to endorse the concept of a world free of nuclear weapons, though linked to the usual French reservations that *Global Zero* must be pursued in a manner that promotes international stability and is based on the principle of undiminished security for all. NATO is also likely to strengthen its internal dialogue on arms control – nuclear and conventional – by creating a new mechanism along the lines of the recommendations of the NATO Group of Experts.¹⁰

It is more controversial whether changes in NATO's nuclear posture – including further reductions of the U.S. nuclear weapons deployed in Europe or even their complete withdrawal – should be linked to reciprocal measures by Russia. On this issue, the new Strategic Concept is also likely to be conservative by stating that it should be NATO's aim to seek Russian agreement to increase transparency of its nuclear weapons stockpile and to encourage Russia to relocate weapons away from the borders with NATO states. It seems as if NATO places any further steps that the alliance itself might take in the context of the disparity between Russia's stockpile of tactical nuclear weapons and NATO holdings.

Such a strong linkage between changes of NATO's future nuclear posture and Russia's nuclear policy is unneeded and counter-

productive. In fact, there no longer exists a direct strategic connection between the tactical nuclear weapons postures of NATO and Russia. On both sides, the reasons for maintaining these weapons are primarily internal. It therefore makes little sense to argue that NATO and Russia should negotiate their future force postures in a “give and take” arms control context.

To be sure, tactical nuclear weapons need to be included in future arms control talks. All NATO members have recognized this principle in the Final Declaration of the 2010 NPR Review Conference.¹¹ But such talks are likely to take many years to complete, regardless of whether tactical weapons would be included in follow-on talks to New START or whether they will be addressed in separate negotiations on non-strategic weapons.¹² Postponing a decision to withdraw U.S. nuclear weapons deployed in Europe until an agreement with Russia is reached would also be problematic because of the lack of support for maintaining NATO’s current nuclear sharing arrangements in many NATO countries. By linking its nuclear force posture to Russian reciprocal measures, NATO would be putting itself at the mercy of Moscow. Given the lack of willingness of Russia to engage on tactical nuclear weapons, such a linkage would give Moscow unnecessary leverage over NATO deliberations on the alliance’s future nuclear posture.

A NATO Nuclear Posture Review

In the short term, it is important that the new Strategic Concept does not prevent any meaningful change of NATO’s nuclear policies after the Lisbon summit. Thus, the concept should focus on areas where there

is consensus among NATO allies, i.e. that NATO

- will continue to rely on a mix of conventional and nuclear forces for deterrence,
- supports the goal of a nuclear weapons free world,
- needs to do more to support arms control and disarmament.

Such a minimalistic Strategic Concept would provide a framework for discussions among NATO members on controversial issues after the Lisbon summit, as part of a NATO Nuclear Posture Review (NATO NPR).¹³ This process should be based on four considerations:

- A NATO NPR should be comprehensive. In order to be meaningful, such a review needs to address all political and military issues related to the future of nuclear sharing. All options should be on the table.
- At the same time, a NATO NPR should focus on a revision of NATO’s nuclear weapons policy. Obviously, NATO’s nuclear posture is linked to other security issues (such as missile defense and conventional security). The temptation for some within NATO might be great to discuss all unfinished business under the heading of a broader strategic review. However, under such a broad review there would be a real danger that progress on nuclear issues would be held hostage by unjustified linkages.
- A NATO NPR should aim to give guidance on the operational aspects of NATO’s nuclear policies, including the future of nuclear sharing arrangements.

Thus, the development of a new military strategy could wait until a NATO NPR is completed. Given the advanced stage of deliberations on nuclear issues, a NATO NPR could be finished within a year and deliver its report to the 2011 fall ministerials in November.

- Post-Lisbon discussions on NATO's nuclear posture should be open, inclusive and transparent. In the run-up to the Lisbon summit it has become clear that NATO's nuclear posture can no longer be discussed from a military perspective only. The fact that foreign ministers at Tallinn have had NATO nuclear policy on their agenda has set a precedent that NATO will have to follow from now on. Against this background, the North Atlantic Council, maybe in a reinforced format, would be an appropriate forum to address NATO's future nuclear posture.¹⁴ The current process illustrates the dangers of closed-door discussions on nuclear policies. On key issues, the draft Strategic Concept appears to have become more

conservative after the public discussions were terminated by the Secretary-General, following the release of the Albright report in May this year.

Any decision on NATO's nuclear posture will have to be made by consensus. But this principle should not be seen as an opportunity to block evolution. To do so would greatly damage alliance cohesion because in Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands, there now exists broad parliamentary and popular support for a withdrawal of U.S. nuclear weapons from their territories. The most politically viable course of action may turn out to be a decision to phase out nuclear sharing in the medium term and to develop more credible non-nuclear instruments that would provide assurance and spur a constructive dialogue with Russia over European security. A NATO NPR could be just the right vehicle to build consensus behind such an approach – but for that to happen the new Strategic Concept must not foreclose any options for a post-Lisbon discussion on nuclear issues.

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² Under NATO nuclear sharing arrangements, the United States is believed to deploy nuclear weapons in Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Turkey. In a February 26, 2010 letter the foreign ministers of Belgium, Germany, Luxemburg, Norway and the Netherlands called for a “comprehensive review” of NATO’s nuclear policies.

³ See Lukasz Kulesa: “Polish and Central European Priorities on NATO’s Future Nuclear Policy”, Arms Control Association/British American Security Information Council/Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg, Nuclear Policy Paper No. 2, Washington, D.C./London/Hamburg, Nov. 2010, http://www.ifsh.de/IFAR_english/pdf/Nuclear_Policy_Paper_No2.pdf.

⁴ See Mustafa Kibaroglu: “Reassessing the Role of U.S. Nuclear Weapons in Turkey”, in: Arms Control Today, June 2010, pp. 8–13. www.armscontrol.org/act/2010_06/Kibaroglu.

⁵ NATO members account for about 61% of global defense spending, 71% of global military procurement expenditure and 80% of global research and development spending. See Michael Brzoska, Testimony to the Foreign Affairs Committee hearing on “NATO’s new Strategic Concept”, German Bundestag, Berlin, October 6, 2010.

⁶ This assessment is based on background interviews and private meetings following the distribution of the first draft of the new Concept on October 14 to the North Atlantic Council and the second and third drafts to capitals in the week around October 26 and November 5 respectively. The drafts remain classified.

⁷ The relevant language was essentially carried over in the current Strategic Concept which states that “... the Alliance’s conventional forces alone cannot ensure credible deterrence. Nuclear weapons make a unique contribution in rendering the risks of aggression against the Alliance incalculable and unacceptable. Thus, they remain essential to preserve peace.” NATO (1999): The Alliance’s Strategic Concept. Approved by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Washington D.C. NATO, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_27433.htm, paragraph 46.

⁸ In the April 2010 Nuclear Posture Review Report, the United States has declared that it is “now prepared to strengthen its long-standing ‘negative security assurance’ by declaring that the United States will not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapons states that are party to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and in compliance with their nuclear non-proliferation obligations.” U.S. Department of Defense, “Nuclear Posture Review Report”, Washington, D.C., April 2010, p. 15.

⁹ U.S. Department of State: “Excerpts from Remarks by U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton at NATO Working Dinner on Nuclear Issues and Missile Defense,” Tallinn, April 28, 2010.

¹⁰ The Group of Experts, chaired by Madeleine Albright, recommended that NATO should “invite an ongoing dialogue with Russia on nuclear perceptions, concepts, doctrines, and transparency, and should convene a Special Consultative Group in order to inform and coordinate its internal dialogue about nuclear-related issues.” “NATO 2020: Assured Security; Dynamic Engagement. Analysis and Recommendations of the Group of Experts on a New Strategic Concept for NATO.” NATO Public Affairs Division. Brussels, May 2010, <http://www.nato.int/strategic-concept/expertsreport.pdf>, p. 44.

¹¹ NPT states-parties at the 2010 review conference called upon the nuclear weapon states to “[a]ddress the question of all nuclear weapons regardless of their type or their location as an integral part of the general nuclear disarmament process.” “Final Document of the 2010 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons,” New York, May 2010, Action 5 (b).

¹² On this issue in particular see Miles Pomper/ William Potter/ Nikolai Sokov: “Reducing Tactical Nuclear Weapons in Europe”, in: Survival, February/March 2010, pp. 75–96.

¹³ For an elaboration of this section see Oliver Meier/ Ingram, Paul: “A Nuclear Posture Review for NATO”, in: Arms Control Today, October 2010, pp. 8–15, http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2010_10/Meier-Ingram.

¹⁴ See Detlef Waechter: “Why NATO Is on the Right Track”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Policy Outlook, Washington, D.C., 2010, http://carnegieendowment.org/files/nato_right_track.pdf.