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Options for arms control to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in NATO

Ever since the Harmel report,² NATO has been committed to a broad approach to security, including arms control, disarmament and other co-operative security tools as necessary complement to military capabilities. The declaration on Alliance security adopted by the 2009 Strasbourg summit reflects this twofold approach by restating that deterrence, including through nuclear capabilities, will remain a core element of NATO strategy, while at the same time NATO will continue to play its part in reinforcing arms control and promoting nuclear and conventional disarmament and non-proliferation.

We expect that these two principles will be reaffirmed in NATO's new Strategic Concept. But that will not be enough: While reaffirming them, NATO also has to re-define them in the light of today's security environment. This is a task for which the new NATO strategy can only be the starting point. Both principles are interlinked: On the one hand, NATO's military doctrine has to be consistent with the arms control obligations and objectives of its members. As a nuclear alliance, NATO carries a special responsibility for the pursuit of the nuclear disarmament

obligation under Article VI of the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). On the other hand, a working arms control and non-proliferation architecture as well as progress in disarmament can positively alter the security considerations underlying NATO's deterrence posture.

That is the reason why, at the informal foreign ministers meeting in Tallinn in April this year, the foreign ministers of Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg and Norway launched a

comprehensive discussion on deterrence as well as arms control and disarmament.

After a period of neglect, disarmament has gained new momentum in recent months. President Obama's vision of a nuclear weapon free world has been translated into a U.S. Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) with a remarkable reassessment of the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. strategy. In particular, the NPR came to the conclusion: "Since the end of the cold war the strategic situation has changed in fundamental ways. With the advent of U.S. conventional military preeminence and continued improvement in U.S. missile defenses and capabilities to counter and mitigate the effects of CBW, the role of U.S. nuclear weapons in deterring non-nuclear attacks—conventional, biological, or chemical—has declined significantly."³ The NPR draws from this the following conclusion: "The United States will continue to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in deterring non-nuclear attacks."⁴

Now it is NATO's turn to adapt its strategy.

Already NATO's 1999 Strategy recognized the fundamental changes after the end of the Cold War and stressed that NATO's nuclear forces will be kept at the minimum level consistent with the prevailing security environment. Further changes have since taken place. Traditional threats have receded. New threats such as terrorism, including nuclear terrorism, and ever more threatening proliferation concerns have emerged. To counter those challenges, classic nuclear deterrence is poorly suited, or even completely useless. At the same time – as highlighted in the NPR – the so-called "revolution in military affairs" has

transformed conventional capabilities, and new capabilities such as missile defenses have become operational.

All these developments imply a reduced salience of nuclear weapons. It is time to draw the appropriate conclusions.

Not only are technological changes relevant, but our ability to create a better security environment can also be a determining factor. Progress in arms control – that is agreed measures to build confidence by transparency measures and by imposing limitations on range, location or operational status of certain weapon systems – can contribute to further reduce the reliance on nuclear weapons.

Taken together, these are more than just incremental changes. It is time to acknowledge that any continued role for nuclear weapons has to be seen in a new light. In his April 2009 speech in Prague, President Obama drew the same conclusion that Henry Kissinger and his associates have drawn that "nuclear weapons are becoming less an asset and more a liability" in official U.S. policy. Obama adopted "the pursuit of a world without nuclear weapons" as a necessary and realistic, albeit very long-term objective. The inherent dangers of nuclear weapons, the specter of proliferation and nuclear terrorism all contribute to the conclusion that a world without nuclear weapons is the safer option, in particular if conventional weapons and a more stable political environment – including through effective arms control – give us the confidence that this will not impair but enhance our security.

There is a broad range of areas where arms control can create or improve security, leading to further reductions in the salience of nuclear weapons, including for NATO. Once the Alliance has redefined the general guiding principles of its strategy, NATO members should examine them in the further follow-up and review process of NATO's nuclear posture.

The 2010 NPT Review Conference endorsed the long-term goal of a nuclear weapon-free world and reaffirmed the unequivocal commitment of the nuclear weapon states to the total elimination of their nuclear arsenals. This defines the grand direction in which all NPT states, including NATO's members, have committed themselves to go.

A realistic intermediate goal would be a declaratory policy that defines as sole purpose of NATO's nuclear weapons deterrence of nuclear attacks on its territory. The U.S. Nuclear Posture Review announced that the United States "will work to establish conditions under which such a policy could be safely adopted."⁵ This should also be an issue to be examined by NATO.

A dialogue on nuclear doctrines among the nuclear weapon states could be a major step towards more transparency and confidence-building. Russia, which continues to rely heavily on nuclear deterrence, should be particularly engaged in such a dialogue. The NATO-Russia Council could be an appropriate forum to discuss this between the Alliance and Moscow.

Assurances to non-nuclear weapon states that they will not be the target of a nuclear

attack, so called negative security assurances (NSA) are a legitimate request of states in particular when they do not profit from extended nuclear deterrence. The United States in its NPR has acknowledged this, albeit with the significant qualification that states to benefit from extended negative security guarantees have to be in good standing with their non-proliferation obligations. This too could be a path that NATO should examine.

Declaratory policies have to be followed by practical implementation. For instance, further decreasing the operational readiness of nuclear weapons ("de-alerting") can reduce the risk of human error and increase mutual confidence. While the NPR maintained the current alert posture of U.S. strategic nuclear forces, it opened a window by initiating studies into possibilities for future reductions.

By stating its intention to work towards withdrawal of the remaining nuclear weapons from Germany, the German government induced a debate about the future of NATO's remaining non-strategic nuclear weapons in Europe. This debate concerns NATO as a whole, and we should work toward a NATO consensus on this important question. In this debate we also have to take the large Russian arsenal of non-strategic nuclear weapons into account. We welcome the commitment by the NPT Review Conference to reduce and ultimately eliminate all types of nuclear weapons. We appreciate that the United States' NPR proposed that non-strategic nuclear weapons "be included in any future reduction arrangements between the United States and Russia."⁶ Following ratification of the New Strategic Arms

Reduction Treaty – which we hope will occur soon – there is a window of opportunity. The Polish-Norwegian proposal to speak with Russia about confidence building measures, e. g. in the framework of the NATO-Russia Council, could facilitate future negotiations between the United States and Russia on these matters.⁷

Arms control can also make a positive difference regarding the interrelationship between nuclear weapons policy and conventional forces. After a long time of deadlock, we are now finally engaged in a joint NATO initiative to overcome the crisis of the CFE regime, which is the cornerstone of the European security architecture. Progress in this field would increase confidence and counter the argument that is advanced by Russia that it

needs to maintain its heavy reliance on nuclear weapons because of a conventional inferiority and a perceived conventional threat from NATO.

In conclusion, arm control remains an integral part of our security policy. By including arms control into the NATO “toolbox”, the alliance can positively affect the security environment in which it operates. Reducing the role of nuclear weapons in NATO strategy has to be seen as a dynamic process, and should accompany us through the period covered by NATO’s new Strategic Concept and beyond.

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ENDNOTES

¹ The author is Federal Commissioner for Disarmament and Arms Control at the German Federal Foreign Office. This paper was delivered at the roundtable on “NATO’s deterrence posture & Turkish security”, hosted by the International Strategic Research Organization, ACA, BASIC and IFSH, Ankara, 4 October 2010.

² In December 1967, NATO approved the Harmel Report on the Future Tasks of the Alliance, which combined the notions of deterrence and dialogue in Alliance relations vis-à-vis the Soviet Union.

³ U.S. Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review Report*, Washington, D.C., April 2010 <http://www.defense.gov/npr/docs/2010%20nuclear%20posture%20review%20report.pdf>, p. viii.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid, p. viii.

⁶ Ibid, p. 28.

⁷ “Non-paper on including tactical nuclear weapons in Europe in a broader nuclear disarmament and arms control process”, http://www.regjeringen.no/upload/UD/Vedlegg/Sikkerhetspol/nonpaper_nuclear.pdf.