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The United States, NATO's Strategic Concept, and Nuclear Issues

By all appearances, Washington was very satisfied with the November 2010 Lisbon summit outcome and new Strategic Concept regarding nuclear weapons and arms control. Although allies held diverse views, NATO limited a damaging internal fight and adopted a position that essentially reflects both President Obama's Prague agenda and the five principles articulated by Secretary Clinton at the informal NATO ministerial in Tallinn in April 2010.

Two processes are now proceeding in parallel: the NATO Deterrence and Defense Posture Review (DDPR) and development of a U.S. approach to nonstrategic nuclear weapons for a possible future negotiation with Russia. U.S. officials can envisage a range of outcomes for the nuclear portion of the DDPR and U.S. negotiating approach. A number of suggestions have been mooted within the U.S. government for approaching the question of nonstrategic nuclear weapons, but—other than agreeing on transparency as a useful first step—the interagency process has only just begun. Although many in Washington see a possibility to reduce U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe, in considering a U.S. position, Washington will want to reassure Central European allies and be mindful that nuclear policy in Europe has global implications.

The DDPR and U.S. interagency processes will be interrelated. Any U.S. proposal for negotiations on nonstrategic nuclear weapons with Russia will be vetted with allies. Synchronizing these processes could pose a challenge, though a manageable one, barring a Russian decision to engage quickly on further nuclear cuts. That is the larger question: How soon will the Russians be ready for further negotiations? The current signals coming out of Moscow suggest they are in no hurry.

Lisbon and the Strategic Concept

U.S. officials are very satisfied with the Lisbon summit and the new Strategic Concept approved by alliance leaders.[2] From Washington's perspective, the outcome on nuclear weapons and arms control came out well. It reflects both President Obama's Prague agenda—reducing the number and role of nuclear weapons—and the five principles put forward by Secretary Clinton at the April 2010 informal ministerial meeting in Tallinn:

- "As long as nuclear weapons exist, NATO will remain a nuclear alliance;
- "As a nuclear alliance, widely sharing nuclear risks and responsibilities is fundamental;
- "The broader goal of the alliance must be to reduce the number and role of nuclear weapons and recognize that NATO has already dramatically reduced its reliance on nuclear weapons;
- "The alliance must broaden deterrence against 21st century threats, including missile defense, strengthen Article V training and exercises, and draft additional contingency plans to counter new threats; and
- "In any future reductions NATO's aim 'should be to seek Russian agreement to increase transparency on non-strategic nuclear weapons in Europe, relocate these weapons away from the territory of NATO members, and include non-strategic nuclear weapons in the next round of U.S.-Russian arms control discussions alongside strategic and non-deployed nuclear weapons.'"[3]

These principles established a spectrum—a broad spectrum, to be sure—of possible outcomes. In the run-up to Lisbon, the question became where, within that spectrum, the NATO debate regarding the Strategic Concept would come down. For its part, Washington was ready to accept almost any consensus that allies might find, assuming it would be somewhere on the spectrum defined by Tallinn.

Given the diverse views within NATO on the nuclear question, avoiding a major intra-alliance row was also a principal U.S. objective. Washington saw the Tallinn principles as useful in reassuring the Central European NATO members, who feared a precipitous change in alliance nuclear policy. U.S. officials worked actively to steer the French and Germans to a resolution of their differences, again looking for an answer consistent with the Tallinn principles. The Strategic Concept provided that.

NATO Nuclear Posture and the DDPR

The United States currently deploys some 200 B61 nuclear bombs in Europe for delivery by U.S. and allied dual-capable aircraft.[4] U.S. political and military officials see virtually no military utility to those weapons. When Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Cartwright was asked in April 2010 whether there was "a military mission performed by these aircraft-delivered weapons that cannot be performed by either U.S. strategic forces or U.S. conventional forces," he replied "no."[5] That said, Washington understands that the weapons can play—as they have in the past—an important political role as a symbol of U.S. commitment to the security of its European allies.

While Washington does not regard Russia as a threat and does not see a need for the DDPR to strengthen deterrence against Russia, U.S. officials are mindful of the concerns of Central European and Baltic allies, for whom the U.S. nuclear umbrella now seems to play a more important role than for other allies. One question for the DDPR is how to define "the appropriate mix of conventional, nuclear and missile defense forces" for the alliance and whether that might allow some adjustment of NATO's nuclear posture.

As the 2010 U.S. Nuclear Posture Review stated, the United States would like to reduce the role of nuclear weapons. The fact that the rationale for the nuclear weapons deployed forward in Europe is entirely, or almost entirely, political would appear to allow room for reductions. U.S. officials believe the Tallinn principles could even accommodate an outcome in which all U.S. nuclear weapons were removed from Europe, though this would be very condition-dependent. (In such a case, allies might share risks and responsibilities by basing U.S. dual-capable aircraft on their territories or hosting such aircraft for periodic exercises. U.S. officials also recognize that some allies read the Tallinn principles as meaning that nuclear weapons will stay in Europe.)

Given the U.S. Phased Adaptive Approach and the Lisbon summit decisions, missile defense of NATO territory will presumably assume a greater proportion of the deterrence and defense burden-share. Declining defense budgets, on the other hand, mean that NATO will likely be shedding rather than adding conventional capabilities, making it difficult for conventional forces to assume a greater share of the load in the mix with nuclear and missile defense forces.

While reductions are seen as possible, consolidating nuclear weapons at a smaller number of sites in Europe is seen as a far more complicated question. Many in Washington believe that NATO could not reduce the number of countries in which nuclear weapons are stationed from five to four. The assumption is that, were Germany to no longer host nuclear weapons, the Netherlands and Belgium would follow suit, so that consolidation would go from five to two countries, and possibly to one or zero. This is related to concern about the ripple effect of Germany replacing its dual-capable Tornados with non-nuclear-capable Eurofighters on Dutch and Belgian decisions regarding nuclear wiring for replacement aircraft for their F-16s. An attempt at consolidation into fewer countries thus could strain the principle of alliance-wide burden sharing.

As for declaratory policy, U.S. officials do not want NATO declaratory policy to be inconsistent with U.S. declaratory policy. Some would like to see NATO move to adopt the U.S. position from the Nuclear Posture Review of seeking to create conditions in which the "sole purpose" of nuclear weapons would be to deter nuclear attack on the United States, its allies and partners. One question, in such a case, is whether some NATO allies might then argue that the conditions for "sole purpose" already exist *in Europe* and advocate jumping NATO policy "ahead" of U.S. policy. Moreover, U.S. officials widely recognize that France, which seeks to maintain maximum ambiguity about the

circumstances in which it might resort to use of nuclear weapons, would oppose NATO moving toward adopting the U.S. declaratory policy. Washington is not eager for a fight with Paris on this question.

A related issue is whether NATO might adopt a negative security assurance similar to that articulated in the Nuclear Posture Review, i.e. that nuclear weapons would not be used or threatened against any non-nuclear weapons state party to the NPT and in compliance with its NPT obligations. U.S. officials hold different views; some see this as a desirable outcome for the DDPR, while others question whether NATO should offer negative security assurances. Washington understands that this also would be a difficult issue with the French.

One other consideration for Washington is that the position it takes regarding NATO nuclear policy will have global implications—in particular in East Asia and the Middle East, where the United States seeks to reassure allies and friends in the face of the North Korean and Iranian nuclear programs as well as China's growing power. For example, U.S. nuclear weapons were withdrawn from South Korea and nuclear cruise missiles removed from U.S. naval ships after the 1991 presidential nuclear initiatives. Since then, the U.S. nuclear umbrella for allies in East Asia has been provided by U.S.-based strategic nuclear forces and nonstrategic weapons that are forward-deployable. The deterrence credibility of *forward-deployable* U.S. nuclear weapons for allies in East Asia, however, is enhanced by the fact that such weapons are *forward-deployed* in Europe. Deployments in Europe demonstrate U.S. readiness to forward-deploy nuclear weapons; were they to be withdrawn from Europe, how would that affect the deterrence credibility of forward-deployable nonstrategic nuclear weapons?

Looking Forward on Arms Control

When President Obama signed the New START Treaty, he stated that there should be follow-on negotiations that would also address reductions in nonstrategic and non-deployed strategic nuclear warheads. The Tallinn principles advocate including non-strategic nuclear arms "alongside" strategic and nondeployed nuclear weapons in the next round of U.S.-Russian negotiations. The Senate's resolution of ratification for New START, moreover, calls on the president to "seek to initiate, following consultation with NATO allies," within one year of New START's entry into force, negotiations with Moscow "to address the disparity" in Russian and U.S. nonstrategic nuclear stockpiles.

The U.S. internal process of preparing for a next round of negotiations with Russia began only in February. (Although New START was completed in April 2010, securing its ratification was the consuming focus for the official U.S. arms control community through the Senate vote on December 22.) An interagency working group to develop options for treating nonstrategic nuclear weapons has been established; it brings together U.S. experts on nuclear arms control and NATO (who may bring very different perspectives to the discussion of these issues).

A number of ideas have been mooted, even though the interagency process is just beginning its formal review. As the process

proceeds, it will almost certainly focus on measures regarding nonstrategic nuclear *warheads* rather than *delivery systems*. The delivery systems—which, on the U.S. side, consist only of nuclear-capable tactical aircraft—have primarily conventional roles and missions. Neither the U.S. nor Russian militaries will want to constrain such systems as the result of a nuclear arms agreement.

One negotiating option would seek a discrete limit on U.S. and Russian non-strategic nuclear warheads. Achieving such an outcome could prove difficult given the disparity between U.S. and Russian numbers. Following retirement of the nuclear warheads for sea-launched cruise missiles, the U.S. nonstrategic nuclear arsenal will comprise some 500 B61 gravity bombs, with about 200 deployed forward in Europe.[6] For its part, Russia is estimated to have 3700-5400 nonstrategic nuclear war-heads of all types, with a deliverable capacity of about 2000.[7] Any equal limit—and it is difficult to see how the United States could negotiate any arms control treaty with Russia that did not provide for *de jure* equal limits—would require large and asymmetric Russian reductions, and perhaps *only* Russian reductions. U.S. officials understand that persuading the Russians to accept this kind of outcome would be difficult.

Harkening back to the 1980s' negotiations on intermediate-range nuclear forces, one variant of this option would be a zero/zero outcome, eliminating nonstrategic nuclear warheads from both the U.S. and Russian arsenals. The likelihood of achieving this, however, would be extremely low and is recognized as such within the U.S. government.

An alternative negotiating option would seek to include nonstrategic nuclear war-heads with other nuclear warheads under a single limit covering all nuclear warheads on each side.[8] (Under this approach, the sides would likely also negotiate limits on deployed strategic delivery vehicles and strategic launchers, as in New START, but they would not negotiate limits on delivery systems for nonstrategic nuclear warheads.) The option of a single limit, perhaps combined with a sublimit on deployed strategic warheads, is receiving favorable attention within the official U.S. arms control community.

One reason why many U.S. officials lean in this direction is that a single limit covering all nuclear warheads could create bargaining leverage. Russian interest in capping the number of U.S. nondeployed strategic war-heads—an area of U.S. advantage—may create an incentive for the Russians to consider reductions in their nonstrategic nuclear weapons.[9] A single limit on all nuclear weapons would open the possibility that Russia might make asymmetric reductions in—but still retain more—nonstrategic nuclear weapons, while the United States made asymmetric reductions in—but still retained more—nondeployed strategic warheads.

A negotiating approach will have to consider whether limits should be applied on a regional basis, constraining nuclear weapons in Europe only, or on a global basis. While U.S. officials do not totally discount a Europe-only approach, the trans-portability of nuclear warheads could

undermine any regional limitation. Washington will also be mindful of the Asian dimension. U.S. allies in Asia (as well as China) would object to any agreement that had the effect of moving Russian nuclear weapons out of Europe to sites east of the Urals, and Japanese diplomats have already made that point to their American counterparts. As the 1980s' experience with the negotiations on intermediate-range nuclear missiles demonstrated, Japan may go further and ask that an agreement reduce Russian nuclear weapons in Asia as well as Europe.

The interagency process will examine other options, including those specified in the Strategic Concept: greater transparency regarding Russian nonstrategic nuclear forces in Europe and relocation of those forces away from NATO borders. In prepared remarks for the Carnegie International Nuclear Policy Conference on March 29, National Security Advisor Tom Donilon said that increasing transparency on "the numbers, locations and types of non-strategic forces in Europe" could be a first step in advance of a new treaty.

Some officials have suggested looking at the concept of the 1991 presidential nuclear initiatives, which produced major reductions in U.S. and Russian nonstrategic nuclear forces (Donilon's remarks appear to allow for this). Reductions in the U.S. non-strategic nuclear arsenal over the past 20 years, however, leave the United States with relatively limited scope for new unilateral steps. While it might reduce numbers in Europe or overall, for example, Washington could not make unilateral reductions on the scale of 1991 and could not, as it did then, eliminate an entire class of nonstrategic nuclear weapons, as the U.S. nonstrategic inventory now comprises 500 B61 gravity bombs.

One idea that has been floated—as a measure in the run-up to conclusion of a treaty or in place of one—is parallel unilateral reductions in nonstrategic nuclear warheads, such as equal percentage reductions. (It would be difficult to put this into a treaty, as the result would be unequal.) Defining the percentage could pose a challenge.

Some within the U.S. government argue that the United States should not become too tied to a negotiated outcome. Believing that an agreement on further reductions with Russia—or even agreement on new negotiations—may be difficult to reach, they do not want the United States locked into a position in which it could not unilaterally reduce nuclear weapons if it determined that U.S. security interests permitted doing so. There is also a risk that requiring negotiation and treaty-based solutions will give greater value to systems on both sides that are largely redundant and provide a disincentive to reduce their numbers sooner.

Verification will present a major issue in any negotiation covering nonstrategic nuclear weapons, particularly because the focus will be on warheads rather than delivery systems. This will raise new monitoring challenges—for example, whether to allow inspectors access to weapons in storage areas. The U.S. interagency process has established a monitoring and verification working group to examine such questions.

**Managing Parallel Processes—
A Chicken-and-Egg Question?**

The timeline for NATO's DDPR aims to produce a concept by September and a more definitive position by the time of the 2012 NATO summit. The Senate resolution of ratification requires that the president "seek to initiate" negotiations with Russia by February 2012.

U.S. officials agree on the importance of consulting with NATO allies as they develop their thinking on nonstrategic nuclear weapons. Washington regards the consultations with allies during the Nuclear Posture Review as a generally positive experience. Should a negotiation with Russia begin to develop, however, they hope that the DDPR and the need for NATO to find a consensus view will not hold things up.

That said, it is not clear how soon the U.S. interagency process will come to conclusions on what to do about non-strategic nuclear weapons. Some U.S. officials would like to move quickly, building on the momentum of New START's ratification and entry into force. A big question is whether the president will want to push forward rapidly on next steps. And, with everything else going on, would there be time and bandwidth to make this question a priority?

Other U.S. officials see less urgency, in part for two reasons. First, there is no consensus view among European allies on NATO's nuclear posture and arms control, and it is unclear how quickly one might emerge (allies may be awaiting signals from Washington as to its preferences). Second, the Russians have shown little interest in an early return to nuclear arms negotiations, asserting that other issues—such as missile defense, long-range conventional precision strike and conventional forces in Europe—must be resolved first. The Russians have said that nonstrategic nuclear weapons should be removed to national territory before any negotiation. It is very unlikely that Washington will accept that as a precondition for negotiations, though it could be a part of an eventual agreement, depending on the agreement's other terms.

Russian interest in an early start to new negotiations would generate pressure on Washington and NATO to identify elements of a negotiating position on nonstrategic nuclear weapons sooner rather than later—and perhaps force the alliance to confront questions which may be difficult and which NATO can for now sidestep. But given the lack of Russian interest in early negotiations and absent the development of a consensus among European allies on nonstrategic nuclear weapons, there appears to be little external pressure on the interagency process, National Security Council principals or the president to take a decision.

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ENDNOTES

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[2] Much of the discussion that follows is based on the author's conversations with officials at the White House, State Department, and Defense Department in March 2011.

[3] "NATO Clings to Its Cold War Relics," Arms Control Association, Issue Brief – Vol. 1, No. 1, April 27, 2010, http://www.armscontrol.org/issuebriefs/NATORelic.

[4] Hans M. Kristensen and Robert S. Norris, "Nuclear Notebook: U.S. Nuclear Forces, 2011," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists,* March/April 2011, pp. 66-76, http://bos.sagepub.com/content/67/1/64.full.pdf+html.

[5] Council on Foreign Relations meeting, "Nuclear Posture Review," April 8, 2010, http://www.defense.gov/npr/docs/Council_on_Foreign_Relation.pdf.

[6] "Nuclear Notebook: U.S. Nuclear Forces, 2011."

[7] Hans M. Kristensen and Robert S. Norris, "Nuclear Notebook: Russian Nuclear Forces, 2011," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists,"* May/June 2011 (forthcoming).

[8] Nuclear weapons that have been retired and are in the queue for dismantlement would probably not be included under this limit.

[9] The United States will implement much of its New START reductions by downloading warheads from missiles, e.g., all Minuteman III ICBMs, which can carry up to three warheads, will be downloaded to carry only one warhead. The United States will thus have the possibility to upload nondeployed warheads back onto strategic ballistic missiles. The Russians appear to intend to eliminate missiles with little or no downloading, so their missiles will have no slots for additional warheads. Constraining nondeployed strategic warheads would be a way for Russia to limit the U.S. upload capacity.