



Arms Control Association (ACA)

British American Security Information Council (BASIC)

Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg (IFSH)

Nuclear Policy Paper No. 10

May 2012

Edmond E. Seay III

Nuclear Dilemmas Remaining after Chicago

Introduction

NATO's 20-21 May Summit in Chicago will provide the Alliance with its third high profile opportunity this decade to re-think the presence of U.S. theatre nuclear weapons in Europe. The 2010 Lisbon Summit and simultaneous release of NATO's most recent Strategic Concept both ducked that challenge for a simple reason: no consensus existed among the 28 allies to change the status quo. Unfortunately for Alliance stability and possibly even longevity, however, no consensus exists to *maintain* NATO's nuclear status quo, either. In addition, the option of doing nothing to change NATO's nuclear posture is fraught with dangers of its own that the 28 Alliance capitals have not fully considered, and that carry the potential to rupture relations with the Russian Federation if allowed to proceed unchallenged. This briefing will examine NATO's deterrence and defense posture and policy options following the Chicago Summit.

NATO's DDPR

The Lisbon Summit's failure to address discontent in key NATO capitals with the present nuclear sharing arrangement between the United States and five allies which currently host American B61 nuclear gravity bombs led via compromise to a most NATO-like solution. The allies created a new review process (the Deterrence and Defense Posture Review, or DDPR) and a new committee to staff the DDPR's work (the WMD Control and Disarmament Committee, or WCDC). The Chicago Summit is expected to deliver the final report of the DDPR, which will focus on the "appropriate mix of conventional, nuclear, and missile defence forces" to maximize Alliance security in an era of both strategic uncertainty and shrinking defence budgets.

The enormity of this challenge should not be underestimated. NATO's political divides are

The author is a senior consultant to BASIC. He is a recently-retired career U.S. diplomat, and in his final posting, he was an arms control adviser to Ambassador Ivo Daalder in the U.S. NATO mission.

several and deep, and arguably stem from the inability of 28 sovereign nations to agree on the reason for NATO's existence in the 21st century: is it, as older members generally seem to agree, to operationalize allied security concerns in places such as Afghanistan and Libya? Or is it to provide the mutual-defence security guarantees enshrined in Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, as newer and more easterly allies prefer to see it? Attempts to bridge both positions by positing "protection of the North Atlantic security space" as NATO's *raison d'être* are arguably doomed to wander aimlessly in the fog they create.

The dividing line is, of course, Russia. Allies generally either view Moscow as a partner and potential friend, or as NATO's once-and-future nuclear-armed foe. Countries such as the Baltic republics demand and receive various assurances from NATO that Russia will not be allowed to dominate them through political and military pressure; for them, missile defence is a necessary but insufficient condition for their continued agreement with alliance policymaking at ministerial and summit meetings. Others such as Germany have a very hard time publicly imputing ill intentions to Moscow, both for historical reasons and, some believe, because Russia's state-owned monopoly Gazprom provides over 40% of German natural gas.

While there are other fault lines visible within the Alliance (Turkey, for example, will not allow Iran to be named in Alliance documents as a ballistic missile or potential nuclear threat to NATO, even while insisting on 100% coverage of its territory by NATO's missile defence system against regional ballistic missile threats), the Good Russia/Bad Russia divide largely defines NATO's inability to agree a new nuclear posture. The exception to this rule is France, which prefers to deal with Russia much as Germany does, as an economic and political partner, but

which fears attempts to alter NATO's nuclear posture as stalking horses for general nuclear disarmament. Even though France's independent strategic nuclear force is in no way connected to NATO's nuclear-sharing arrangements with the United States, the French refuse to allow meaningful debate within the Alliance of alterations to the nuclear-sharing status quo.

Untenable nuclear status quo

So how does all this relate to the DDP and to the Chicago Summit? Simply put, how can a political-military alliance that cannot formulate a single reason to exist gain consensus on the "appropriate mix" quoted above from the Lisbon Summit declaration? If it has not been possible, for domestic political reasons, for NATO allies to agree that WMD and/or ballistic missile proliferation in the world can be described as a 'threat', how can they achieve clarity on NATO's deterrence and defence posture for the 21st century?

This inability comes at a crucial time for the Alliance. Economic contraction has already spelled the end of post-September 11 free spending on defence for most allies, and will only worsen over the next few years. The size of defence cuts forthcoming in the U.S. budget process will surprise many, and will mean an even tighter spending and planning regime for NATO over the next decade. Combined with economic tightening, the prospect of upgrading, replacing and/or performing life extensions on NATO's nuclear weapons and delivery systems over the next 10-15 years means the nuclear-sharing status quo is highly unlikely to be maintained.

Yet there are further reasons to avoid complacency: the five allied nations which currently supply bases for U.S. B61 bombs all lack public support for this arrangement. The

ultimate driver of change, however, may lie elsewhere. The United States is already preparing to overhaul its B61 inventory, which currently exists in five variants that deliver the explosive equivalent of between 300 and 360,000 tons of TNT. Four of these are scheduled to be replaced by a newly precision-guided version, the B61-12. With a classified level of accuracy that must surely compare with conventional precision-guided (JDAM) bombs, the B61-12 will in itself represent a significant increase in the nuclear capabilities of the Alliance. The prospect of highly accurate bombs which could take out hardened targets at lower blast levels (and thus with less collateral damage) might prove enticing to military planners. If combined with the troubled F-35 stealth fighter-bomber, currently the only aircraft scheduled to replace NATO's aging fleet of 'dual-capable' nuclear delivery aircraft (DCA), the B61-12 would initiate a highly accurate and battlespace-survivable aspect to NATO's nuclear sharing program which potential adversaries, notably the Russian Federation, could only look upon with deep suspicion.

There are therefore political, economic and military reasons why the nuclear status quo cannot continue much longer at NATO without threatening to divide the Alliance. Without agreement to change, however, NATO's consensus rule prohibits any alteration in that status quo – and thus the scene is set for Chicago and beyond.

NATO after Chicago

It must be appreciated that arms control and disarmament do not take place in NATO committees which include those terms in their names. The only real contribution NATO can make to arms control and disarmament will come in the form of a substantial change to the Alliance's deterrence and defence posture – in

short, it is the operational side of the house that has something to contribute.

NATO faces two possible dangers in its approach to handling US non-strategic nuclear weapons in Europe. On the one hand, there is a danger of individual European countries being unable or unwilling to continue their nuclear-sharing roles and of a disorderly NATO process of nuclear disarmament by default. This would be a significant and potentially damaging development, because if the DCA are retired in disorderly fashion without replacement, NATO is not only out of the NSNW business, period, but its political cohesion is also likely to have suffered in the process.

On the other hand, there is a danger that NATO, in the guise of maintaining the status quo, will actually improve its tactical nuclear forces stationed in Europe and render them more credibly usable in war-fighting scenarios. This could alienate Russia in particular and worsen the prospects for further negotiations on NSNW reductions in Europe as a whole. This escalation by default should be avoided, not least because non-strategic nuclear weapons in Russia, as well as in NATO, are a security and safety risk and a matter of concern to all members of the Alliance, even if to varying degrees.

The combination of new precision-guided nuclear munitions and a stealthy delivery vehicle would quite rightly gain the attention of any potential targets, and will no doubt draw vivid reactions from them. Nor would it help NATO's profile at the next NPT Review Conference to be seen to have not only maintained the current approach to nuclear sharing in the face of strong and widespread intra-NATO and international opposition, but in fact to have upgraded NATO's nuclear capabilities in the process. At a time when nuclear proliferation risks are so much in the news, it behoves the North Atlantic Alliance

to consider carefully before sending out such signals to the rest of the world.

There is another way, of course. The issue of nuclear sharing can be settled well in advance of the F-35's eventual entry into active service and the appearance in the U.S. nuclear arsenal of the B61-12. NATO can and should instead agree to remove all remaining U.S. nuclear weapons from Europe, and urge the United States to eliminate that category of weapons once and for all. This would have several positive effects:

- It would make NATO a much more 'NPT-friendly' organisation
- It would force Russia onto the back foot by taking away its built-in excuse for inaction on its own formidable NSNW arsenal in and near Europe
- It would preclude NATO nuclear planners from getting any ideas about building credible tactical nuclear missions into NATO's future plans.

This last point is crucial. As NATO's tactical nuclear deterrent on European soil now stands, it lacks the credibility to deter any potential foes, and is thus incapable of providing meaningful reassurance to allies who are concerned about potential future conflicts with unfriendly neighbours. This is arguably a good thing, as it provides all needed incentives for NATO to agree to remove NSNW from its arsenal sooner rather than later.

Nevertheless both the current state of affairs and the suggested change being called for here are a cause for concern in some European capitals. In this context, it also has to be kept in mind that there are a number of alternative, less costly, and less dangerous approaches to nuclear sharing in the Alliance that have the potential to fill what some would see as a politically and symbolically important gap. These alternatives

include: consolidation of B61s and DCA down to fewer sites (with or without partial withdrawal of B61s from Europe); creation of a NATO nuclear air wing; full withdrawal of B61s from Europe with a U.S. commitment to return them to Europe if and as required; and withdrawal of all B61s from Europe, replacing them as a deterrent force with other means – ICBMs, SLBMs and/or strategic bombers owned by the U.S. but crewed by NATO personnel.

In the view of the author, a straight-forward decision to withdraw U.S. tactical nuclear weapons from Europe would be preferable to both these alternatives and to inaction, which would itself leave open the door for a very enticing, and extremely dangerous, vision of high-technology tactical nuclear deterrence and in fact, compellence, to take root in NATO planning circles. With a strong public preference across the Alliance for eliminating nuclear weapons in Europe, it is incumbent on policymakers and concerned citizens to push for change in the right direction, and soon. Given wide agreement among NATO observers that the B61/DCA theatre nuclear force has no military application and adds nothing to the deterrence of potential foes, it will be necessary at some point in the near future for the United States to inject some common sense into the discussions at NATO and propose the return of the roughly 180 B61s to the continental United States.

This paper is published under the joint ACA/BASIC/IFSH project on "Reducing the role of tactical nuclear weapons in Europe" funded by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. More information on the project can be found at <http://tacticalnuclearweapons.ifsh.de/>.