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NUCLEAR IMPLICATIONS OF THE RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN CONFLICT

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Russia's aggression against Ukraine is not only a threat to the European post-Cold-War order, but also once again puts the issue of nuclear deterrence on the Euro-Atlantic agenda. What should we make of Moscow's threatening nuclear gestures? What are the potential consequences for US nuclear weapons stationed in Europe? What are the implications for NATO's nuclear strategy?

It is becoming increasingly clear that the Ukraine crisis is not just a bad weather period but a long-term climate change fundamentally affecting Euro-Atlantic security. The issue of nuclear deterrence, which had been on the sidelines for the past two decades, is now being pushed to the fore once more. The year 2008, in which Russia's military revealed major deficiencies in the Georgia war, marked the beginning not only of a modernisation of its conventional armed forces. Russia's arsenal of nuclear weapons has also been steadily increased and improved since then. New ballistic missile systems have been introduced and equipped with greater numbers of warheads. Modern submarines have replaced older models that dated from the Cold War. Long-range cruise missiles have been tested, which in the eyes of the United States constitutes a grave breach of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) of 1987.²

Greater cause for concern, however, is the fact that for the last few years Moscow has been including its nuclear weapons in military scenarios. In 2008 Anatoliy Nogovitsyn, the Deputy Chief of General Staff of the Russian armed forces, announced that Warsaw would be the target of Russian nuclear weapons if – as was the plan at the time – parts of the US missile defence system were to be stationed in Poland.³ A year later, in the course of the exercise “Zapad-99”, nuclear attacks against Poland were simulated. Since the Ukraine crisis began, Russia has been carrying out

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² Paul N. Schwartz, Russian INF Treaty Violations: Assessment and Response, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Washington DC, 16 October 2014, <http://csis.org/publication/russian-inf-treaty-violations-assessment-and-response>

³ Moscow warns it could strike Poland over US missile shield, The Guardian, 15 August 2008, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/aug/15/russia.poland.nuclear.missiles.threat>

military exercises involving nuclear-capable weapons systems on an almost monthly basis.

The Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), already dented by Iran's nuclear activities, has also been damaged further. Ukraine had joined the NPT as a non-nuclear-weapon state in 1994, after returning all Soviet nuclear weapons that had been stationed there back to Russia. In return, the United States, Russia and the United Kingdom signed the Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances on 5 December 1994, agreeing to respect Ukrainian territorial integrity.⁴ In annexing Crimea, Russia has breached this agreement – an act that has so far remained without consequence. As a result, no other nuclear state that is not yet a part of the NPT (Pakistan, India, Israel, North Korea) will likely ever agree to a similar treaty.

In December 2014 Russia terminated the Nunn-Lugar Act, a pillar of US-Russian nuclear cooperation. In 1991, US Senators Sam Nunn and Richard Lugar had cosponsored an initiative to secure and dismantle the large nuclear arsenal of the former Soviet Union. Since then, the United States has invested more than twenty billion dollars to assist Russia in dismantling decommissioned nuclear weapons and nuclear submarines, and to pay the salaries of Russian nuclear scientists in order to keep them from migrating to crisis regions in other parts of the world.⁵

With regard to nuclear dangers, the deep conflict with Russia is thus doubly explosive. Firstly, Moscow is feared to have lowered its inhibitions about using nuclear threats against neighbouring states and NATO. Nuclear weapons could thus regain some of the political relevance they last had during the Cold War. Secondly, concern about a possible use of these weapons is growing, justifiably or not, especially among the Eastern European members of NATO. Both these developments raise the question of whether – and how – NATO should adapt its nuclear strategy and its potential for nuclear deterrence.

Russian Nuclear Thinking

Open, or veiled, nuclear threats have been part of the repertoire of Russian political practice for many years. Whether it was about the Baltic States' membership in NATO or the establishment of a US missile defence system, Russian political and military officials would time and again threaten to move nuclear weapons to NATO borders or even use them. This is not only politically imprudent, but an indicator of a fundamental difference in thinking about nuclear weapons. To the Western nuclear powers, i.e. the United States, UK, and France, nuclear weapons have lost a great deal of value as a "power currency" in international politics since the end of the Cold War. As far as they are concerned, nuclear weapons are of little help in dealing with today's security challenges and the status of being a nuclear weapons state barely translates into political clout. The strategic importance of nuclear weapons has thus greatly decreased. What is more, the Western nuclear powers distinguish between – broadly speaking – "usable" conventional weapons and essentially "unusable" nuclear weapons that serve the political purpose of deterrence. Nuclear escalation is possible but not actually given any real consideration, as the damage would be unimaginable.⁶

4 The text of the memorandum has been published by the Council on Foreign Relations, <http://www.cfr.org/nonproliferation-arms-control-and-disarmament/budapest-memorandums-security-assurances-1994/p32484>

5 The US budget for this program was about \$1B per year for more than 20 years. In addition, the G-7 states also provided significant funds for the security of Russian weapons of mass destruction.

6 Some argue that even a "nuclear taboo" of almost seven decades of nuclear non-use after Hiroshima and Nagasaki exists. The longer this

This thinking, however, is not entirely coherent, as nuclear weapons must be operational and the possibility of their use must be credible in order to act as a deterrent. If there were absolutely no possibility of their ever being used, nuclear weapons would no longer serve any purpose at all. This paradox of nuclear weapons, i.e. that they must be usable so that they will never be used, is hard to accept and one of the main reasons for the public criticism of the very idea of nuclear deterrence.

Russia, on the other hand, sees nuclear weapons as an integral part of its military power and, especially, as a way to make up for its relative lack of conventional forces compared to NATO. The importance of nuclear weapons has thus steadily grown in the eyes of Moscow, especially since several former parties to the Warsaw Pact have joined the Alliance.

Since its Military Doctrine of 2000, Russia's official position on nuclear weapons has been that they are a possible means of de-escalation.⁷ This logic, which from a Western perspective seems bizarre, is rooted in the perception of NATO as a conventionally superior alliance. In the event of a large-scale NATO attack, which is evidently perceived as a real danger, limited and targeted use of nuclear weapons would inflict "tailored damage" on the enemy and end the destructive attack – hence "de-escalation".

Furthermore, Moscow still sees nuclear weaponry as an essential factor of state power, presumably because it is one of the last elements to remain of the former Soviet claim to superpower status. In recent months, President Putin has repeatedly reminded the West of Russia's status as a nuclear power.

Both the highlighting of this status and the demonstration of potential nuclear weapons, for example in flying nuclear-capable Bear bombers over the English Channel, are deliberate signals to NATO and to Russia's neighbours. To NATO, this sophisticated way of "nuclear messaging" is meant to indicate that Russia is well aware of the military power of the Alliance and is willing to counter it with nuclear weapons. To Russia's neighbour states – be they NATO members or not – Moscow presents a scenario of intimidation in which the threat of nuclear weapons should be regarded as real.

The Nuclear Debate in NATO

As far as NATO is concerned, these different nuclear philosophies have long been irrelevant. NATO doubtlessly is a nuclear Alliance, in which nuclear weapons states have given nuclear commitments to their non-nuclear allies; after the end of the Cold War, however, nuclear deterrence was no longer directed at any particular enemy. Therefore, Russia's Soviet-style understanding of nuclear weapons as a militarily usable instrument of state power did not raise too many concerns.

This is arguably one of the reasons why the small number of US nuclear weapons stationed on the territory of a few European NATO member states rarely played a role in public perception. The last time these weapons⁸ made headlines was in 2009, when the newly appointed German

taboo is kept up, the argument goes, the less likely it is that these weapons will ever be employed. See Nina Tannenwald, "The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Normative Basis of Nuclear Non-Use," *International Organization*, No. 3/1999, pp. 433 – 468.

7 Nikolai N. Sokov, Why Russia Calls a Limited Nuclear Strike 'De-Escalation', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 13 March 2014. <http://thebulletin.org/why-russia-calls-limited-nuclear-strike-de-escalation>

8 They are often falsely described as "NATO nuclear weapons." although they are under the complete control of the United States. NATO

Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle, in an initiative that had not been agreed with NATO, called for the removal of US nuclear weapons from Germany. Westerwelle rightly pointed out that the B61 nuclear bombs were relics from the Cold War that had once been destined for targets in the territory of what are now NATO member states in Eastern Europe. Given the challenges of the 21st century, with nuclear threats looming mostly in Eastern Asia and the Middle East (Russia was still seen as a partner at the time), nuclear weapons that had to be transported to their targets by fighter-aircraft seemed rather illogical.

What Westerwelle had failed to take into account, however, was the political relevance of these weapons as symbols of the credibility of the US nuclear defence shield in Europe. That is why his initiative was not well received with NATO nuclear powers and especially with the Eastern European allies that, for historic reasons, had always had their reservations regarding Moscow. NATO solved the dilemma in a two-step approach. First, in 2012 all 28 member states agreed to a Deterrence and Defence Posture Review (DDPR) – a new policy document which declared nuclear weapons to be a “core element” of NATO’s overall capabilities for deterrence. They also clearly decided that American nuclear weapons stationed in Europe continued to meet the criteria for deterrence. With that, the debate about the purpose of these weapons was off the table for the time being. Second, NATO decided to establish a new arms control committee to engage in dialogue with Russia on tactical nuclear weapons stationed in Western and Eastern Europe, i.e. US nuclear weapons and their Russian equivalents. This committee, having been able to begin its work after some delay, can nevertheless have only a sort of advisory role, as the United States and Russia only engage in bilateral negotiations on nuclear weapons.⁹

Moscow’s aggression against Ukraine occurred at the time of the committee’s initial sessions, and fundamentally changed the international security landscape as well as the nuclear debate.

The Renaissance of Nuclear Deterrence

With Russia’s aggression against its neighbours, the classic role of NATO as an instrument of self-defence in accordance with Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty is once again gaining increasing relevance. This also brings deterrence as a means of preventing war back to the fore. Deterrence influences the cost-benefit analysis of a potential aggressor. It ensures that the cost of an attack will exceed any potential benefit an aggressor might hope for. Such a potential aggressor, if rational, would thus not take up arms against another state.

Given the developments in Ukraine and the fears of other Eastern European NATO members, it is understandable that NATO’s first step was to increase its conventional forces in order to send such a signal of deterrence. Core measures of the Readiness Action Plan will be in place by the next NATO Summit in Warsaw, in 2016. But the question remains how nuclear deterrence will be credibly ensured in future. When, in the DDPR, NATO unanimously declared the discussion on nuclear weapons to be over, Russia was still seen as a partner. The Alliance was also primarily concerned with crisis management in Afghanistan, the establishment of a missile defence system

nations just provide the aircraft for the delivery.

⁹ The Committee, initially called “Weapons of Mass Destruction Control and Disarmament Committee,” was burdened with disagreement over its mandate and its lifespan (permanent or limited) right from its inauguration. Its portfolio is subject to different interpretations within the Alliance.

and the effects of the financial crisis. Faced with today's Russia, which still has more than 5,000 nuclear warheads at its disposal, which positions itself as anti-Western, and which defines NATO as a concrete threat, nuclear strategy must be discussed and substantiated once again.

US Nuclear Weapons in Europe

The US B61 bombs stationed in Europe are currently undergoing a technical refurbishment and some of their components are being upgraded to meet current technological safety and security standards. It has been debated whether this modernisation is a mere overhaul, or whether the weapons will be equipped with entirely new capabilities – which Russia might interpret as a sign of aggression. There was also speculation that, in light of ubiquitous budget cuts, the United States might not be willing to bear the substantial cost of this modernisation and would eventually withdraw its nuclear weapons from Europe.¹⁰ In view of recent developments, neither of these aspects is likely to play much of a role any more. If anything, the symbolic value of these weapons has grown in light of fears in Eastern Europe, pushing into the background questions of whether they are conceptually useful. What is more, the potential for deterring Russia does not stem from these American bombs alone but from the entire nuclear arsenal plus (within limits) the nuclear weapons of France and the United Kingdom.

In the long term, the question must be answered as to how NATO should respond to a deepening of the antagonism with Russia, for example if America's accusations of a breach of the INF Treaty prove to be true. The US administration has confirmed that possible countermeasures – including military – are currently under review. The stationing of additional US nuclear weapons in Europe is, however, unlikely in the near future. It would be impossible to enforce politically or justify from a military perspective, as the United States already has a sufficiently broad spectrum of nuclear weapons. There is also not yet a nuclear strategic framework for the new security situation post-2014 which would justify additional weapons. This is why suggestions of announcing a new “Dual Track Decision” to Russia, i.e. to threaten the deployment of new intermediate range nuclear forces if Moscow further breaches the INF treaty, are not very realistic.¹¹ This, however, means that NATO must once again focus on nuclear questions in order to reconcile deterrence needs with strategy and weapons systems.

Delivery Systems

In the past, critics of American nuclear weapons in Europe had speculated that these weapons would stop serving a purpose, in part because the aircraft used for their delivery to the target (Tornado, F-15, F-16) would reach the end of their service lives. The follow-on to the Tornado, the Eurofighter, is not certified for nuclear missions, and the nuclear-capable F-35 aircraft was regarded by some countries like Germany as being too expensive to be procured (and they already had the Eurofighter). Without delivery aircraft, the bombs would be worthless and would have to

10 Adam Mount, The Fiscal Threat to Nuclear Strategy, Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, 3 May 2015, <http://thebulletin.org/fiscal-threat-nuclear-strategy8080>

11 Even if senior representatives of the US administration currently air this option, it is unimaginable that any of the West European allies want to go through another painful public debate on new nuclear weapons in Europe, as in the early 1980s.

be withdrawn.

The matter of delivery aircraft, however, was always more technical than political. Technically, an aircraft does not have to retire from service after a certain time – but the costs of maintaining it increase immensely. The US long-range B-52 nuclear bomber was fielded more than 60 years ago and is still in service today. The Tornado can also continue to be used for nuclear missions if supported by political will and industry, which would have to produce service parts beyond the intended “lifespan” of the aircraft. High-ranking US military officials also pointed out some time ago that US jets could deliver these weapons in Europe, should Alliance partners be unwilling to provide their own aircraft.¹²

In practice, this is not an issue that is likely to arise. The cohesion of NATO (and the EU) in response to the Russian crisis has shown that the Allies fully understand the seriousness of the situation. Even when faced with increased costs of maintenance, the countries that host US nuclear weapons are unlikely to reject their responsibilities within the Alliance and cease to maintain attack aircraft.

Nuclear Arms Control

The United States had always offered to reduce the number of nuclear weapons in Europe in conjunction with Russian steps towards disarmament. Such parallel approaches to arms control, however, always failed when, as a prerequisite to bilateral disarmament, Moscow demanded that Washington first withdraw its own nuclear weapons to US territory, since Russia’s nuclear weapons were all stationed on Russian territory.

Given the current confrontational conditions, a joint reduction of nuclear weapons in Europe is even harder to imagine. Russia is gradually withdrawing from US-Russian discussions and fora. In November 2014, Russia announced that it would no longer participate in the annual US-Russian nuclear security summit. What is more, Moscow apparently fears not only a US-led initiative to overthrow the Putin government (as bizarre as this may sound) but also, in the long term, military aggression from NATO against Russia.¹³ Among other things, Moscow banks on strong nuclear forces to protect Russia from both.

Eastern European NATO members, on the other hand, are now less likely than ever to support a reduction in the number of US nuclear weapons in Europe. Presumably, Poland or the Baltic states could also agree to station nuclear weapons on their territory, but this option was ruled out in the NATO-Russia Founding Act in 1997.¹⁴ Nevertheless, a greater number of non-nuclear NATO member states would participate in support of any planned nuclear operations. It is also unlikely that at this time any of the NATO member states that host US nuclear weapons will call for their

12 The statements even insinuate that other nuclear stationing countries could pick up the delivery missions from those who were lacking the aircraft. See Oswald, Rachel, “U.S. Tactical Nuclear Arms Mission Could Shift Among NATO Jets”. Global Security Newswire, 26 March 2014. <http://www.nti.org/gsn/article/aircraft-could-be-given-nato-tactical-nuclear-arms-mission/>

13 Ahmari, Sohrab, “The View From NATO’s Russian Front,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 6 February 2015. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/weekend-interview-gen-frederick-hodges-on-natos-russian-front-1423266333>

14 In this document, NATO stated that it has “no intention, no plan and no reason to deploy nuclear weapons on the territory of new members”. Some NATO members point out that this self-commitment was made under the conditions prevailing at that time and could be subject to change in light of today’s Russian aggressiveness. However, even if the wording “in the current and foreseeable security environment” is in the treaty, this qualification appears to be linked to the permanent stationing of conventional forces rather than to deployment of nuclear weapons. https://www.armscontrol.org/act/1997_05/found

withdrawal.

With this, nuclear arms control is not ruled out – it remains a core element of Western security policy. But it is definitely secondary to the objectives of preventive security. The primary purpose of nuclear arms is not to be disarmed. The purpose of a nuclear weapon – just like any other weapon – is to contribute to security and defence. If it is incapable of that or no longer required, it may be retired. But before that can happen, security must be ensured without this weapon. This idea must also play a role in future debates, if there is to be a nuclear strategy that is acceptable to all 28 NATO member states.

Conclusion

After the fierce debates on the future of US nuclear weapons in Europe in 2009, NATO was remarkably quick to take the issue off the agenda. The DDPR proved to be a compromise all sides could live with, even if it did not answer key questions with regard to the strategic logic of B61 bombs deployed in several European countries. The “nuclear dog” that had been briefly awoken was put back to sleep.

Russia’s expansionist policies in Eastern Europe have not only profoundly changed the international security landscape, but are also likely to wake up the nuclear dog again. Hence, NATO will have to restart the debate in order to reassess the role of nuclear weapons in its deterrence posture. However, these deliberations cannot be limited to the pros and cons of US nuclear weapons on European soil. Instead, a comprehensive consensus needs to be forged which includes nuclear forces (in Europe and in the United States), NATO’s conventional capabilities, its missile defence capacities and a coherent nuclear strategy. Even if this seems a strenuous effort, kicking the can down the road will not be an option.



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