

Working Paper

Research Division
European and Atlantic Security
Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
German Institute for
International and Security Affairs

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Germany and Nuclear Weapons

FG03-WP No. 7
December 2010
Berlin

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Germany and Nuclear Weapons*

After the September 2009 elections the German coalition government promised, as part of the development of NATO's new Strategic Concept, to work within the Alliance to ensure that nuclear weapons in Germany are withdrawn.¹ This reflects both the anti-nuclear sentiments in Germany and the popular disarmament positions of the current and former governments.

But to the surprise of German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle he got some harsh reactions when he announced in Washington that he wants to support President Obama's initiative for a world free of nuclear weapons not only by words but by acting as well. Some weeks later Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared that one could certainly use Germany's help in preventing nuclear materials around the world from falling into the wrong hands. But concerning a reduction of the nuclear arsenal, she said: "We want to have NATO carefully study all the different aspects of the nuclear posture I think we want to demonstrate good faith, but we also have to be careful and thoughtful about how we proceed. And that's something we'll be discussing not only with Germany, but with other of our partners in NATO."² And in February 2010 she said that "this dangerous world still requires deterrence and we know there's a debate going on in Europe and even among some of our leading member nations about, well, what does that mean. And we would hope that there is no precipitous move made that would undermine the deterrence capability. In fact, we want to build up our deterrence through missile defense."³

So eventually there was some misunderstanding between Berlin and Washington concerning Obama's

vision of a world free of nuclear weapons. Former NATO secretary general George Robertson made it undoubtedly clear when he wrote a briefing note with the title "Germany Opens Pandora's Box".⁴

Germany Opens Pandora's Box

Pandora's box is an artifact in Greek mythology. The "box" was actually a large jar given to her, which contained all the evils of the world. When Pandora opened the jar, the entire contents of the jar were released, but for one – hope.

According to Lord Robertson, Germany opened Pandora's box. But what did he mean by that? Actually he accused Berlin of being a free rider in the name of Obama's vision by writing: "For Germany to want to remain under the nuclear umbrella while exporting to others the obligation of maintaining it, is irresponsible. Moreover, the pressure created by Germany's unilateral announcement will be unhelpful to other countries, especially Turkey and the new member-states. Denied the protection of NATO's nuclear weapons in Europe, Turkey would have additional reasons to worry about Iran's nuclear programme – and perhaps to develop nuclear weapons of its own. Newer NATO members in Central Europe, who see in the nuclear weapons a symbol of US commitment to defend them, would be left feeling vulnerable. They are likely to respond by demanding that NATO move its forces and bases, now heavily concentrated in Germany, closer to Russian borders." However, the authors of the briefing note said, "that the proposal could be turned to advantage if NATO collectively negotiated with Moscow asymmetric but multilateral reductions to Russian and allied tactical nuclear arsenals. Such an approach would reaffirm NATO solidarity and the value of nuclear deterrence in preventing aggression, and thus advance the allies' security." And it would also set a positive example of western commitment to disarmament in the context of the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Actually the harsh reaction was less for substance but for the unilateral initiative – although it was later supported by other nations like Norway, too. US nuclear weapons in Europe were and are clearly an *Alliance* issue. The reduction of battlefield nuclear weapons is a good idea, but it was both too early and badly introduced to the alliance.

⁴ Franklin Miller/George Robertson/Kori Schake, Germany Opens Pandora's Box, London: CER, February 2010, S. 1
<http://www.cer.org.uk/pdf/bn_pandora_final_8feb10.pdf>.

How to Close Pandora's Box

Now the reset in US-Russia relations offers new opportunities. The New START Treaty represents an important, although quite modest step towards the vision of a world free of nuclear weapons. There was a lot of talk about change in the last two years. But actually there was no fundamental change – neither in the US nuclear posture nor, as expected, in the Russian military doctrine, and even less in reducing strategic nuclear weapons. Right now we don't know when or even whether New START will be ratified. But there is still hope in the jar.

The Cold War is long over, but today there are still about 200 U.S. tactical nuclear bombs on NATO military bases in Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Turkey. Russia, which has an even larger stockpile of substrategic nuclear weapons, refuses to enter into talks to limit them, citing the U.S. deployments in Europe. And, by the way, a former commander of the Russian strategic missile forces recently mentioned to me also the British and French nuclear weapons which should be also taken into account – a pretty old-fashioned position which would mark the end of the debate, at least concerning the French ones.

There is no doubt that, at least in the current security environment, tactical nuclear weapons serve no meaningful military role for the defense of NATO in Europe. The devastating power and inescapable collateral effects of such weapons make them inappropriate tools against non-nuclear targets, whereas the possible loss or theft of these weapons poses an unacceptable risk of nuclear terrorism. Nevertheless Russia does not fully share this conviction and perceives tactical nuclear weapons as a means to balance its conventional inferiority towards NATO, not to mention China's growing military capabilities and Iran's nuclear ambitions.

In the last decades several U.S. administrations have sought to initiate talks with Russia on substrategic nuclear weapons, but Russia's increasing reliance on nuclear weapons and NATO's own nuclear policy inertia have prevented progress. In early 2009 the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States concluded that despite its concerns about Russia's non-strategic nuclear forces, the next step in bilateral arms control should be to ensure that there is a successor to the START treaty. It cautioned against over-reaching for innovative approaches in the negotiations on that successor treaty, and instead envisioned discussing non-strategic nuclear forces in a

follow-on to START-replacement negotiations.⁵ In March 2010, the United States and Russia concluded the negotiations. On April 8, Presidents Obama and Medvedev met in Prague and signed the New START Treaty. The treaty was submitted to the U.S. Senate on May 13, 2010, along with an article-by-article analysis of the treaty, protocol, and annexes. Following ratification of New START, President Obama has pledged to pursue further reductions in all types of U.S. and Russian nuclear weapons - deployed and nondeployed, strategic and non-strategic.

A reduction or even a withdrawal of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons is not mentioned in the alliance's new Strategic Concept. But it will be a topic of a wide-ranging discussion afterwards, in a so-called "comprehensive deterrence review" and a new NATO committee on disarmament issues. So what are the topics for that discussion?

Transparency

The first goal clearly should be to increase transparency on non-strategic nuclear weapons in Europe regarding the size, location, deployment status, and security of these forces. Russia's lack of transparency contributes to widely varying estimates of the number of non-strategic weapons that it deploys or has stockpiled. One open source estimate concludes that Russia deploys about 2,000 non-strategic weapons.⁶ The Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States cited unnamed "senior Russian experts" who have estimated that Russia possesses some 3,800 non-strategic operational warheads.⁷ An even larger disparity in numbers of sub-strategic nuclear weapons was revealed by WikiLeaks cables: these estimates put "Russian totals at 3,000-5,000 plus", although it doesn't differentiate between deployed and non-deployed systems.⁸

⁵ William J. Perry/James R. Schlesinger, America's Strategic Posture. The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States, Washington: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2009, p. 21.

⁶ Robert S. Norris/Hans M. Kristensen, „Nuclear Notebook: Russian Nuclear Forces, 2010“, in: Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, January/February 2010, p. 76, <<http://thebulletin.metapress.com/content/4337066824700113/fulltext.pdf>>.

⁷ Perry/ Schlesinger, America's Strategic Posture, p. 13.

⁸ "US embassy cables: US targets terrorists with conventional warheads fitted to nuclear weapons", in: The Guardian, 6. December 2010, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/223843>>.

Nevertheless getting Russia closer to NATO means that it also has to put its nuclear weapons systems on a greater distance to the borders of new NATO members – both as a confidence-building measure and as a first step towards an arms control solution.

Reduction of substrategic nuclear weapons

NATO will remain a nuclear alliance, while on the long term the broader goal of the alliance must be to reduce the number and role of nuclear weapons. Parity in the number of substrategic nuclear weapons on both sides won't be achievable, so both sides' forces could be reduced by a common percentage and centralized at one or two sites; deep cuts along these lines could be acceptable as long as European allies retain some credible force on their soil – so Germany at least until 2020.⁹ The Alliance's ultimate goal could be "a nuclear-weapon-free zone from the Atlantic to the Urals"¹⁰.

Whatever changes are agreed to, they will need to be implemented in a manner that takes into account the security concerns of all NATO members. In the absence of a consensus for change, the status quo will remain in place. At last solidarity among NATO countries rests on the principle that allies share the burden of NATO's commitments, and that means the nuclear burden, too.

Salvaging the conventional armed forces in Europe (CFE) treaty regime will be necessary to facilitate a reduction of tactical nuclear weapons because of the low levels and readiness of Russian conventional forces: "If CFE unravels completely, the Russian military will be able to argue even more convincingly, within Russia, for continued reliance on tactical nuclear weapons to defend itself in Europe."¹¹

Missile Defense

Missile defense will be crucial for future relations between Russia and the West. Germany is a strong advocate of involving Russia as far as possible. As the

German Minister of State Werner Hoyer recently said: "We believe NATO-based missile defence can only further European security if Russia is on board."¹²

NATO and Russia could use the opportunity for co-operation for a long-term and truly strategic improvement in NATO-Russia relations. The first step has been taken by drawing up a common threat assessment regarding joint missile defence in the NATO-Russia Council. But there is more potential, from passing of technical information via the joint development of components, to the interconnection of surveillance and defence systems in various areas. The ultimate goal might be a fully integrated system, but in the meantime separate, although coordinated systems seem to be much more achievable.

A New Start for NATO-Russia Relations

Finally, it will take some time to build trust in NATO-Russia relations. There is still a New START waiting for ratification by the US Senate. Making the re-set of NATO-Russian relations successful, NATO should also start a dialogue with Russia on security perceptions, doctrines, and transparency. But one should keep in mind that this was already a task that SWP began with a seminar on military doctrines in Ebenhausen in the early 1990s and personal experience of 15 years of our armed forces dialogue with Russian generals shows that there is still a lot to discuss. But by deepening the dialogue there is hope for change.

And hopefully the American "tea party" will not succeed with its slogan "We keep the weapons, you keep the change". That slogan was addressed to U.S. President Obama, but could easily be misunderstood by Russia.

9 From 2013 the Eurofighter will replace the Tornado fighter jets. After the switch over to the Eurofighter the German Defense Ministry plans to keep several Tornados in reserve at least until 2020.

10 Detlef Waechter, „Why NATO Is on the Right Track”, in: Carnegie Policy Outlook, 28 October 2010, <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/nato_right_track.pdf>.

11 Anne Witkowsky/Sherman Garnett/Jeff McCausland, Salvaging the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty Regime: Options for Washington, Washington, D.C.: Brookings, March 2010 (Arms Control Series Paper 2), p. 10.

12 Werner Hoyer, Euro-Atlantic Security – Perceptions and Realities, Speech given at the German-Polish-Russian Seminar at NATO: Enhanced Cooperation and Security For All – Renewed Commitment, Brussels, 22 October 2010, <<http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/diplo/de/Infoservice/Presse/Reden/2010/101022-Hoyer-dt-pol-russ-Seminar-Bruessel.html>>.