

NATO's Deterrence and Defense Posture Review

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In its new strategic concept of November 2010, allies agreed that “as long as nuclear weapons exist, NATO will remain a nuclear alliance.” As clear as this statement appears at first glance, NATO allies continue to debate the role of nuclear weapons. By the same token, NATO agreed at the 2010 Lisbon summit to “develop the capability to defend our populations and territories against ballistic missile attack as a core element of our collective defense,” but allies still differ in their views about the significance and future role of missile defenses. The Lisbon summit declaration adopted a procedural compromise and tasked the NATO Council “to continue to review NATO’s overall posture in deterring and defending against the full range of threats to the Alliance.” This procedure became known as the Defense and Deterrence Posture Review (DDPR). Alliance members will use the time until the next NATO summit – scheduled to take place on May 20 and 21, 2012, in Chicago – to consider the appropriate mix of nuclear, conventional and missile defense forces for NATO.

Inside NATO, one can identify four different groups with regard to DDPR: one, led by France, which underscores the continued importance of nuclear deterrence; a second, mainly represented by the United States, with a special focus on missile defenses; a third, in which Germany plays a prominent role, concentrating on arms control and disarmament; finally, a group mainly consisting of new allies, arguing that NATO should give priority to the strengthening of its conventional capabilities so that the Alliance can effectively fulfill its principal Article 5 mission.

Outside NATO, in academia, two schools of thought have emerged regarding the interpretation of NATO’s new strategic concept:

Traditionalists: They argue that the Alliance has adopted a “business as usual” approach by stating that its deterrence will be based on an appropriate mix of nuclear and conventional capabilities. This group assumes that US nuclear forces based in Europe and nuclear sharing, that is, European air forces contributing delivery systems for these nuclear bombs, will remain in place as an important transatlantic link,

as will an element of risk and burden sharing within NATO.

Modernists: This school of thought argues that NATO's new strategic concept paves the way for a new Alliance in which the focus will shift from nuclear sharing to missile defense sharing, that is, from deterrence by punishment to deterrence by denial. These pundits hint at § 18 of the new strategic concept: It refers to US strategic as well as UK and French nuclear forces as the supreme guarantee of the security of the Alliance, but it makes no mention of US nuclear forces based in Europe. At the same time, the importance of missile defenses is emphasized.

There are mainly four topics that need to be taken into consideration in the course of the DDPR: the security environment; a possible change of NATO's declaratory policy; the future mix of strategic capabilities, such as nuclear weapons and missile defenses; and the role of arms control.

The security environment

When analyzing strategic challenges, one important issue concerns the NATO-Russia relationship. Since the end of the Cold War, though, NATO-Russia relations have improved significantly. However, some NATO members remain more concerned about Russia than others. A series of events fueled doubts, particularly in East European NATO countries, about Moscow's intentions; chiefly among them are: the cyber attack of 2007 directed against Estonia, apparently originating in Russia; the Russia-Georgia war of 2008; and the 2009 Zapad military exercise, which appeared aimed at intimidating the Baltic states and Poland and which reportedly concluded with simulated nuclear strikes.

Another strategic challenge is Tehran's nuclear program. An Iranian nuclear capability would definitely change NATO's security environment. Many expect a nuclear Iran to become more assertive. NATO partners at its southern flank would not be the

only ones to feel less secure. If Iran develops nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles that could reach Berlin or Brussels, Central European NATO countries would also need to be reassured and protected. Although it is not a case for the defense of NATO territory proper, the Alliance could hardly turn a blind eye if Israel or one of the Arab countries that participate in NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue or the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative came under Iranian military pressure. In sum, as a consequence of a possible nuclear Iran, the Middle East would gain significance for NATO's deterrence posture.

Finally, there are new threats, such as cyber war and terrorism. The assault that happened in Norway in July 2011 is a reminder that, for NATO members, there are terrorist threats other than Islamic terrorism.

Declaratory policy

When US President Barack Obama developed the vision of a world without nuclear weapons in his Prague speech in April 2009, analysts speculated that the Obama administration would use its Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) to launch a new nuclear doctrine. But Washington stopped short of declaring a no-first-use policy, and that it would use nuclear weapons only to deter the use of nuclear weapons by others. Rather, the NPR, published in April 2010, states that the United States would not use nuclear weapons against those non-nuclear members of the NPT that are in full compliance with their obligations. Regarding countries that possess nuclear weapons or are in non-compliance with the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), the United States keeps its option open to use nuclear weapons in deterring not only nuclear, but also conventional, chemical or biological attacks. Still, Washington would use nuclear weapons only under extreme circumstances to defend vital national interests. At the same time, the Obama administration wants to work to establish conditions under

which a no-first-use policy could be safely adopted.

Such a perspective runs counter to the interests of France, and in a less articulated way also the United Kingdom. Paris argues that ambiguity as to the circumstances under which nuclear weapons would be used is the basis for any effective deterrence. Hence, NATO's language in the new Strategic Concept is less far-reaching than Washington's NPR. It only states: "The circumstances in which any use of nuclear weapons might have to be contemplated are extremely remote." However, some NATO partners would like to steer the DDPR to approve language similar to the NPR statement.

Nuclear weapons and missile defenses

Some of those countries in which US nuclear forces are deployed (Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, Italy and Turkey) have expressed their wish for these weapons to be withdrawn in the near future. Others in NATO heavily oppose such a view. While disarmament advocates argue that non-strategic nuclear weapons are militarily redundant, new NATO members, in particular, are afraid that a removal of US nuclear forces could result in the beginning of the end of US military engagement in Europe. Against the background of shrinking national defense budgets within NATO and consequently reduced conventional capabilities, they find this prospect dangerous. Others insist that the practice of nuclear sharing still is indispensable in order to ensure the impact of non-nuclear European NATO partners on the Alliance's nuclear policymaking. Still others believe that forward-based US nuclear weapons could play a role in future contingencies, such as a nuclear Iran.

Those who favor US nuclear removal do not deny the continued political and symbolic value of these weapons. They represent an important transatlantic link. Therefore, proponents of nuclear disarma-

ment argue, these political functions could be overtaken by NATO's new missile defenses. This system can keep the United States committed to European security. Visible missile defense contributions could give allies new opportunities to actively participate in NATO force planning through arrangements similar to the Nuclear Planning Group. However, many allies are reluctant to move from "deterrence by punishment" to "deterrence by denial." They doubt that missile defenses could have a similar deterrent effect as nuclear weapons. Moreover, they are unsure whether NATO's missile defense project will materialize as planned.

Arms control

NATO remains committed to arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation. The New START agreement, limiting US and Russian strategic nuclear forces, is currently being implemented. With a view to the huge numerical advantage Russia enjoys in the category of non-strategic nuclear weapons, the alliance is aiming at future arrangements in this field as well. However, there are several obstacles to overcome. For one, the existing US nuclear weapons deployed on European territory could hardly be used as bargaining chips. Rather, the situation can be described as "a reverse NATO double-Track Decision reverse." Whereas NATO in the beginning of the 1980s negotiated new Pershing and cruise missiles, now it would come to the negotiation table with relatively old nuclear bombs and the aircraft used for their delivery that are scheduled to be phased out in a few years. In addition, Russia does not perceive its own non-strategic nuclear forces in relation to those that NATO has deployed, but as a deterrent vis-à-vis what Moscow believes is an overwhelming conventional superiority of the Alliance. As a matter of principle, Russia would want the United States to remove all remaining US nuclear weapons from the territories of European NATO countries before negotia-

tions could begin. This is a proposition that obviously runs counter to NATO's nuclear sharing policy. Next, verification would be extremely challenging because, for the first time, inspectors would need to count nuclear warheads as opposed to delivery systems, which practically are all are dual-capable. Furthermore, non-strategic nuclear weapons are easily transportable, meaning regional limitations would not make much sense. Finally, any treaty would need to include equal limits, because otherwise it would not have a chance of ratification by the US Senate.

As a first measure, NATO could aim at confidence- and transparency building. Data exchanges and visits at storage sites could, inter alia, contribute to such an approach. Another line of action could include unilateral reductions, coupled with transparency measures and an invitation to Russia to reciprocate. A third approach could be to negotiate strategic and non-strategic nuclear weapons in a single format so that overall limits and sub-limits for strategic and non-strategic forces could be agreed upon.

The Chicago summit and beyond

The DDPR can hardly be expected to result in a revolution of NATO's nuclear and missile defense affairs. Indeed, there is no need for such an outcome. But if Alliance members in principle agree that the Middle East will gain more prominence for NATO's deterrence posture, missile defenses will slowly but steadily become ever more important. Mutually Assured Destruction was good enough to deter the former Soviet Union. In a possible contingency in which NATO is confronted with a nuclear Iran, the Alliance as a whole – and its European members in particular – would be well advised to have damage limitation options available, such as missile defenses. To make sure that NATO missile defenses are not primarily based on US systems, Europeans should consider pooling and sharing options as part of their missile defense pro-

urement policy. Without a larger missile defense footprint, the already existing gap between US and European military capabilities would widen, and the European impact on Alliance affairs would further decrease.

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