

NATO's Posture Review and Non-Strategic Nuclear Weapons

Prepared Remarks for Brookings Panel on NATO Nuclear Policy

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First let me thank Steve Pifer and Brookings for inviting me to participate in today's panel discussion on the future of NATO's nuclear posture and the prospects for addressing non-strategic nuclear weapons through arms control.

This is both a timely and important issue that Steve's new report captures in a comprehensive and nuanced way that I think will be of great assistance to the public debate about NATO's Defense and Deterrence Posture Review (DDPR).

A key conclusion that he reaches in his paper is that NATO is on a path to disarmament by default. That certainly appears to be true as several of the delivery systems in Europe are approaching retirement in the near future and some NATO countries that favor a withdrawal of nuclear weapons from Europe may be reluctant to renew them.

But we also see attempts to slow or even halt that process. Looming on the horizon is an upgrade of the nuclear posture in Europe: in 2018, an improved nuclear bomb with greater accuracy than the one deployed there today will begin arriving in Europe along with the stealthy Joint Strike Fighter. This will bring improved nuclear capabilities to Europe and provide ammunition to hardliners in Moscow who are not interested in addressing non-strategic nuclear weapons.

Both the Lisbon declaration and NATO's new Strategic Concept endorse additional reductions in non-strategic nuclear weapons in Europe. The issue is not whether the nuclear posture in Europe should be reduced but how and under what conditions.

Twenty years ago Washington was buzzing with excitement over sweeping Presidential Unilateral Initiatives (PNIs) following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The PNIs are still some of most efficient nuclear initiatives to have reshaped NATO's posture and reduced Russian non-strategic nuclear weapons. Today we're waiting to see if President Obama's revitalization of the nuclear arms control agenda will motivate NATO to recapture some of the spirit of the early 1990s, or if the burden of bureaucratic inertia and consensus decisions end up producing a DDPR that is behind the curb.

Even after the PNIs were completed in 1993, NATO has continued to unilaterally reduce the number of U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe, reduce the locations of the weapons, and reduce the countries hosting weapons or participating in the nuclear

strike mission. This has been done regardless of Russia's much larger inventory of non-strategic nuclear weapons; in fact, NATO has insisted for much of the past two decades that the weapons in Europe were not directed against Russia – or anyone.

Over the past couple of years we have started seeing officials re-linking the posture in Europe to Russia by arguing that further reductions – certainly withdrawal – should take into consideration the “disparity” with Russia's non-strategic nuclear weapons. The Strategic Concept explicitly makes this point, as did the U.S. Senate in its approval of the New START treaty.

The United States and NATO should certainly work to increase transparency and verification of non-strategic nuclear forces – Russia's as well as its own – but it should avoid the trap of making further cuts conditioned upon Russian reductions. There are several reasons for this:

- First, the Russian non-strategic nuclear arsenal is not tied to or sized by the U.S. bombs in Europe. Instead it appears to be linked to NATO's conventional superiority and Russia's long border with China. So it is unclear why Russia would agree to cut its non-strategic nuclear weapons in return for cuts in NATO's non-strategic nuclear weapons.
- Second, making further cuts continued upon Russian reductions means handing over the initiative to Moscow. It implies that nothing will happen unless Russia agrees to cuts. Why would NATO want to tie its hands like that?
- Third, the United States is moving toward a posture where it will no longer have non-strategic nuclear weapons in its stockpile. The Nuclear Posture Review retired the last naval non-strategic nuclear weapon (TLAM/N), and the B61 Life-Extension Program will eliminate the last designated non-strategic nuclear bombs from the stockpile. Instead, the carrier – not the weapon – will determine whether a weapon is considered non-strategic. So why construct an arms control process focused on non-strategic weapons? Shouldn't it be tied to limitations on nuclear weapons in general?

Some officials in Eastern NATO countries argue that the deployment in Europe is needed as a symbol of U.S. commitments to defend NATO. But if a left-over of non-strategic nuclear weapons from the Cold War is the basis for Article V, then I think NATO is greater trouble than people realize. This is the least likely of military capabilities that NATO would use to come to their aid. And once you talk to officials who make this argument, it soon becomes clear that it is not the non-strategic nuclear weapons per se that they want to preserve but some tangible proof in Europe of U.S. security commitments.

The DDPR must ensure that that assurance is based in real-world scenarios and credible capabilities and not on some leftover of non-strategic nuclear weapons that are not relevant to any of the threats that face NATO today.

Linking NATO's nuclear posture to Russia's non-strategic nuclear weapons is not credible. If one imagined that Russia scrapped all its non-strategic nuclear weapons tomorrow, would those officials say anything different about their security concerns that they do today? I doubt it because I think their security concerns are much more basic and about border security, conventional forces, crime and being close to a former superpower that used to occupy them. Basing security assurances on a non-strategic nuclear posture that NATO would be most unlikely ever to use does not help the security concerns of those countries. And they're fooling themselves if they think so.

Fortunately, the Strategic Concept is explicit that it is the *strategic* weapons – not the non-strategic weapons in Europe – that provide the supreme guarantee of the security of the allies. One should not confuse this mission with the non-strategic weapons.

Instead the non-strategic weapons in Europe seem more to be retained for internal psychological and cultural issues. Countries and officials that used to be involved in this mission have a hard time thinking about security without it.

A particular problematic example of this is the nuclear sharing mission, a Cold War arrangement where a handful of non-nuclear countries are equipped and trained in peacetime to deliver U.S. nuclear weapons in wartime. The continuation of this arrangement boggles the mind in an era when the non-proliferation standards that the United States and NATO are promoting are precisely about the opposite: not to equip non-nuclear countries to do nuclear things.

Instead, the DDPR should reshape NATO's posture to increase reliance on non-nuclear elements, including conventional forces and missile defense, to reassure allied countries. The nuclear consultation process should be reorganized so that it does not require deployment of U.S. non-strategic nuclear weapons in Europe or active involvement in the strike mission; indeed, retaining status quo risks that the review of NATO's consultation process does not receive the attention it demands.

On the 20th anniversary of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the DDPR should declare the nuclear mission in Europe accomplished and move on. In addition to the need for greater transparency of non-strategic nuclear weapons, the lesson learned is that unilateral initiatives used to simulate a Russian response have been the most efficient in reducing the number of non-strategic nuclear weapons.

Military and political issues aside, the harsh reality of declining military budgets in NATO means that it would be irresponsible for the Alliance to continue to waste precious resources on maintaining a forward deployment of non-strategic nuclear weapons for a mission that is no longer essential to the security of the alliance.

Rather than continuing the "death of a thousand cuts" with incremental reductions toward "disarmament by default," the DDPR must take the bold and visionary

decision to complete the withdrawal of non-strategic nuclear weapons from Europe and create a security architecture that has to do with today's threats rather than those of yesterday.