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Reducing and Regulating Tactical (Non-strategic) Nuclear Weapons in Europe: Moving Forward?

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Prepared for
Unit for Policy Planning and Research
Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs

Monterey Institute
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An affiliate of Middlebury College



The James Martin Center for
Nonproliferation Studies

THE JAMES MARTIN CENTER FOR NONPROLIFERATION STUDIES

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Foreword

At the request of the Unit for Policy Planning and Research of the Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, a team of specialists from the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies (CNS) published an analysis in December 2009 on the prospects for reducing and regulating non-strategic nuclear weapons.

With continued support from the Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, CNS has undertaken the following report to account for developments since the release of the publication, *Reducing and Regulating Tactical (Non-strategic) Nuclear Weapons in Europe*, in December 2010. This report takes account of key developments up through late April 2010, including the informal NATO Foreign Ministerial meeting April 22-23, 2010.

Reducing and Regulating Tactical (Non-strategic) Nuclear Weapons in Europe: Moving Forward?

During the first few months of 2010, the fate of non-strategic nuclear (NSNW) weapons in Europe received far more attention from political elites, professional observers, and publics than it has for many years. In particular, Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands went on record saying they would welcome the withdrawal of these weapons from their territory (the weapons are believed to remain in those countries as well as Italy and Turkey¹). Still NATO's European allies remained far from united in their views on the merits of withdrawing the weapons or the conditions under which they would be willing to support such a move. Furthermore, the Obama administration's Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) did not articulate a clear U.S. policy on the issue, following a long-standing tradition of deferring to NATO as a whole out of fear of undermining alliance solidarity.

An informal meeting of NATO foreign ministers on April 22-23, 2010 broached the issue as part of initial discussions on the new Strategic Concept the alliance plans to produce within the next year. While the meeting was not expected to and did not reach any agreement on an approach to the issue, one course of action appears to have been rejected out of hand—a rapid or unilateral withdrawal of the weapons from any of the NATO countries. At the meeting, top leaders appeared to condition any action on a consensus approach and some reciprocal steps from Russia, which has far larger holdings of NSNW. In doing so, they seemed to follow an approach first outlined by Poland and two Scandinavian countries—Norway and Sweden.

In particular, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton outlined five principles that she said should guide deliberations over NATO's nuclear weapons policy as it considers the new Strategic Concept. Of particular importance, she said that in looking to any future reductions carried out by the alliance, "our aim should be to seek Russian agreement to increase transparency on non-strategic nuclear weapons in Europe, relocate these weapons away from the territory of NATO members, and include non-strategic nuclear weapons in the next round of U.S.-Russian arms control discussions alongside strategic and non-deployed nuclear weapons."² Clinton did not elaborate on the possible sequence of these elements nor the trade-offs between transparency, relocation, and ultimate elimination. However, one thing seemed clear: Russia was expected to make concessions of its own in response to any changes in the U.S. NSNW posture. New nuclear weapons talks are widely anticipated to begin shortly after Senate consideration of the New START agreement with Russia or perhaps even sooner, if necessary to win Republican support for that pact.

Whether the U.S. approach will gain any traction in Russia is far from certain and will clearly depend, in part, on the details of substance and timing that administration officials have so far omitted. So far, Russia continues to reject Western proposals that foresee reduction of Russian NSNW and conditions any action on these weapons on the withdrawal of the remaining U.S. NSNW force from Europe. A close look at (very rare) Russian statements leads one to believe that Moscow does not have a plan in place for a position once (and if) this demand is heeded. For the moment, it appears to be content with the status quo that does not force it to introduce any changes into its existing position or nuclear posture.

The Tallinn meeting certainly did not close the issue. More debates will take place in the coming months leading to the adoption of the new Strategic Concept, and the positions cautiously staked at the recent meeting do not guarantee the outcome of that debate. It is also

important to note that the other alliance goals Clinton laid out include reducing the role and number of nuclear weapons and broadening deterrence to include other measures such as forging an alliance missile defense mission, strengthening military training and exercises to carry out self-defense responsibilities, and drafting contingency plans to counter new threats.³ Significant progress on NSNW, it appears, will require a careful balancing act among the United States, NATO, and Russia not only to address the fate of the weapons themselves, but also on such issues as nuclear nonproliferation, strategic arms, missile defense, advanced conventional arms, and NATO enlargement.

U.S. Views

In the NPR, the Obama administration made clear that it sees a reduced role for nuclear weapons in reassuring U.S. allies of Washington's commitment to their defense and deterring potential adversaries.

To wit, the NPR states that:

Although nuclear weapons have proved to be a key component of U.S. assurances to allies and partners, the United States has relied increasingly on non-nuclear elements to strengthen regional security architectures, including a forward U.S. conventional presence and effective theater ballistic missile defenses. As the role of nuclear weapons is reduced in U.S. national security strategy, these non-nuclear elements will take on a greater share of the deterrence burden. Moreover, an indispensable element of effective regional deterrence is not only non-nuclear but also non-military—strong, trusting political relationships between the United States and its allies and partners.⁴

While this language can be interpreted as an indication that the authors of the NPR do not see much military value in U.S. nuclear weapons deployed in Europe (Indeed, James Cartwright, Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff said recently there is no military mission the weapons perform that could not be carried out by conventional or strategic weapons⁵), the document makes clear that “any changes in NATO's nuclear posture should only be taken after a thorough review within—and decision by—the Alliance.”⁶

It also indicates that the Obama administration sees the weapons as providing some political reassurance, if not military utility, and that Washington continues to approach the issue gingerly. According to the NPR:

Although the risk of nuclear attack against NATO members is at an historic low, the presence of U.S. nuclear weapons—combined with NATO's unique nuclear sharing arrangements under which non-nuclear members participate in nuclear planning and possess specially configured aircraft capable of delivering nuclear weapons—contribute to Alliance cohesion and provide reassurance to allies and partners who feel exposed to regional threats.⁷

As one indication of this cautious approach, the NPR calls for retaining the ability to forward-deploy U.S. nuclear weapons on tactical fighter-bombers and heavy bombers, including proceeding with a full life extension program for the B-61 bomb, the non-strategic variety of which the United States deploys in Europe.⁸ To enhance the B-61's safety, security, and use control, the president in his fiscal 2011 budget request has called for increasing spending on its life extension program from about \$100 million now to about \$300 million in the next fiscal year.

The Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) similarly called for a new approach to regional defense that emphasize missile defense and other conventional alternatives at the expense of NSNW:

To reinforce U.S. commitments to our allies and partners, we will consult closely with them on new, tailored, regional deterrence architectures that combine our forward presence, relevant conventional capabilities (including missile defenses), and continued commitment to extend our nuclear deterrent. *These regional architectures and new capabilities*, as detailed in the Ballistic Missile Defense Review and the forthcoming Nuclear Posture Review, *make possible a reduced role for nuclear weapons in our national security strategy*. [emphasis added].⁹

The NPR and QDR language clearly point to an alternative to the permanent deployment of nuclear weapons in Europe (and is consistent with one of our recommendations in the previous paper), but, characteristically, the NPR stopped short of proposing such a change in U.S. nuclear posture in that region. Interestingly, however, this new thinking led to a decision to retire the nuclear-equipped sea-launched cruise missile, (TLAM-N) the non-strategic weapon Washington had devoted to the East Asian theater, after the new Japanese government indicated a change of heart on retaining it.

A possible reason for a reserved attitude toward non-strategic nuclear weapons relates to broader arms control and disarmament policy considerations. Specifically, one “key recommendation” of the NPR is to “address non-strategic weapons, together with the non-deployed nuclear weapons of both sides, in any post-START negotiations with Russia.”¹⁰ In addition, it calls for a dialogue on “strategic stability” with Russia, in which Moscow could “discuss steps it could take to allay concerns in the West about its non-strategic nuclear arsenal, such as further consolidating its non-strategic systems in a small number of secure facilities deep within Russia.”¹¹ One can clearly detect the desire to solve the issue of U.S. NSNW in Europe within a wider context and use apparent Russian interest in reducing non-deployed U.S. weapons ultimately to gain leverage to eliminate Russia’s NSNW arsenal.

Ellen Tauscher, Undersecretary of State for Arms Control and International Security, responding to a reporter’s question on the possibility of reaching an agreement with Russia on tactical nuclear weapons, said on March 29 that “it certainly is an ambition of the President and Secretary Clinton to begin to have those conversations.”¹²

Since the end of the Cold War, the dwindling number of U.S. NSNW in Europe has been a “hot potato” – impossible to drop, but too difficult to handle. The Obama administration policy, after a period of internal arguments, appears to have chosen to follow the 20-year old tradition of deferrals, postponements, and temporizing. The reason for that choice, it seems, lies primarily in domestic and intra-alliance politics rather than in strategy as the administration has offered no clear path to attain its arms control goals.

At the informal meeting of NATO foreign ministers in Tallinn, Secretary of State Clinton reaffirmed the long-standing tradition of the United States to defer decisions on U.S. nuclear assets in Europe for fear of damaging alliance cohesion. A high level U.S. official said that having a united position on the subject matter was of utmost importance because “we don’t want to divide the alliance on this issue.”¹³ To be sure, unlike NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen, who claimed that the weapons continued to provide a deterrent value for the alliance, Clinton primarily emphasized the need to “widely share responsibilities and risks within the alliance”—a task which conceivably could be met through other means than NSNW, such as continued operation of the Nuclear Planning Group.¹⁴ She also

reaffirmed that the nuclear arsenal of the United States would continue to guarantee the security of its allies, and that “as long as nuclear weapons exist NATO would remain a nuclear alliance”¹⁵ but did not define whether NSNW need play a role in this extended deterrence.

U.S. inaction does not merely reflect deference to its allies. The administration’s top arms control priority this year will be winning Senate support for ratification of the New START treaty with Russia. Such approval, while likely, is far from certain and is not apt to be granted before the end of the regular Congressional session in late summer and perhaps not until a “lame duck” session in late fall 2010 or even early 2011.¹⁶ The White House has already come under fire from Republicans for not tackling the issue of Russian NSNW within the agreement and can be expected to be careful not to unveil any specific plans in this regard prematurely.

European Views

Germany

The debate to remove U.S. NSNW from Europe was re-energized last fall after the German elections. Germany’s new Foreign Minister, Guido Westerwelle conditioned his support for a new coalition government, headed by Chancellor Angela Merkel, on steps being taken to remove U.S. NSNW from Germany, which hosts about 10 to 20 U.S. NSNW.¹⁷

At the Munich Security Conference in mid-February this year, Westerwelle sought to broaden his rhetoric on the subject matter to include language on the strategic value of the warheads (or lack thereof), Germany’s joint work with other countries for removal, and the desire to work with Russia on reducing its own NSNW arsenal, especially along that country’s western border. “The last remaining nuclear weapons in Germany are a relic of the Cold War,” Westerwelle said.

They no longer serve a military purpose. That is why, through talks with our partners and allies, we, the German Government, are working to create the conditions for their removal. As part of this process, we also want to discuss confidence-building measures with Russia as well as a reduction of its weapons.¹⁸

These developments were welcomed by many in the arms control, nonproliferation and disarmament community worldwide, though others suggested that the German initiative was reckless. For example, in a report released in early February 2010, Franklin Miller, a former senior career policy official in the Pentagon and the White House, George Robertson, a former NATO secretary-general and former UK defense secretary and Kori Schake, a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, wrote that “For Germany to want to remain under the nuclear umbrella while exporting to others the obligation of maintaining it is irresponsible.”¹⁹ The authors suggested that removing U.S. NSNW from Germany would “be unhelpful” to Turkey, providing “additional reasons to worry about Iran’s nuclear program” and perhaps “feel compelled to develop or buy nuclear weapons of its own.”²⁰ The report also stated that some European countries that have recently joined the military alliance and perceive U.S. NSNW in Europe as a “symbol of U.S. commitment to defend them” against Russian aggression, may feel vulnerable if U.S. warheads in Germany were removed. The authors of the report contended in particular that Poland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania “are likely to argue with merit that a withdrawal of nuclear weapons from Europe would constitute a material change to those commitments, and to NATO’s mutual defense guarantee,” inscribed in NATO’s Article 5.²¹

This report by Miller *et al* triggered a rebuttal by other European actors, including Wolfgang Ischinger, former deputy foreign minister of Germany and chairman of the Munich Security Conference and Ulrich Weisser, former director of the German defense ministry's policy planning staff. Ischinger and Weisser called Miller, Robertson and Schake's perception "wrong and misleading" saying the report was based on "outdated perceptions."²² They criticized Miller, Robertson and Schake for continuing to see Russia from an adversarial Cold War perspective and not as a partner with which the West has mutual interests. The German response also noted that former U.S. Defense Secretary William Perry, while in office 15 years ago, declared that the U.S. nuclear umbrella would extend over NATO allies whether or not they there were NSNW on European soil. In addition, Ischinger and Weisser called for negotiations with Russia based on three principles: a reaffirmation of the U.S. nuclear umbrella; a declaration that reciprocity would guide U.S. NSNW withdrawals from Europe; and a Russian commitment to move its arsenal deeper within its territory. They concluded that, "As the United States and Russia commit themselves to nonproliferation, a proposal by European NATO members to reduce and withdraw NSNW would be an important contribution to broadening this bilateral effort to reduce the number of nuclear weapons in the world."²³

At the NATO Foreign Ministers meeting in April, Westerwelle stated that Berlin would not take unilateral action to remove the NSNW from Germany, but would coordinate potential efforts with NATO alliance partners.²⁴ However, he also noted that "[t]he Americans included in their concept that tactical nuclear weapons might be reduced. This is big progress compared to the situation a few months ago."²⁵

Belgium

The German government's new stance on the NSNW issue re-energized the debate in other countries. In February, the Belgian Foreign Ministry, headed by Yves Leterme, released a statement saying that Belgium, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Norway would call "in the coming weeks" for the removal of U.S. NSNW in Europe.²⁶ Foreign Minister Leterme, whose country is believed to have 10 to 20 U.S. NSNW on its soil, said that the initiative from the five European nations targets NATO's Strategic Concept discussions, as well as the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference in May 2010.²⁷ A letter by the five foreign ministers subsequently followed, urging Rasmussen to put on the agenda, *inter alia*, NSNW "in subsequent steps towards nuclear disarmament."²⁸ Rasmussen agreed to the request in early March.

Other Belgian political players endorsed the government's point of view and threw their support behind President Obama's disarmament agenda. In an article that appeared in several Belgian newspapers, Willy Claes, former NATO Secretary-General and former Belgian Foreign Minister, together with other key Belgian political figures, wrote that Brussels should join Germany immediately by calling on NATO to remove U.S. NSNW from European soil.²⁹ "The Cold War is over," the article read. Claes wrote that, "It's time to adapt our nuclear policy to the new circumstances," and furthermore, that, "U.S. NSNW in Europe have lost all military importance."³⁰

At the NATO Foreign Minister meeting in April, a spokesperson for the Belgian Foreign Ministry said that "[w]e think it is important to maintain the credibility of nuclear deterrence," but noted that the transatlantic alliance has a role to play on nuclear arms reductions and that NSNW is part of that role.³¹

The Netherlands

The Dutch government also aligned behind the German initiative, seeking to remove the estimated 10 to 20 bombs stationed in the Netherlands.³² Perhaps most notable were the statements in the newspaper *NRC Handelsblad* by a group of Dutch politicians. On December 2, 2009, former Prime Minister Ruud Lubbers, co-authored a piece that stated, “As a member of NATO the Netherlands should make itself heard in the upcoming revision of its Strategic Concept... Given the clear indications the United States takes nuclear disarmament very seriously and that the original objective of deterrence has lost its validity, we need to ensure that neither the United States nor the other NATO allies wait for each other. The Netherlands should play an active role, so that the revision of the Strategic Concept will lead to the withdrawal of American nuclear weapons from the territories of non-nuclear weapon states.”³³ The article was especially significant because Lubbers was a major supporter of deploying U.S. NSNW in the Netherlands in the 1980s.³⁴

The article also appeared less than two months after the Dutch government rejected a resolution in the parliament calling for NSNW withdrawal from the Volkel airbase in the southeastern part of the country.³⁵

Italy

Italy, which reportedly has up to 90 U.S. NSNW on its territory, has not publicly joined the recent German, Belgian and Dutch calls for their removal from Europe.³⁶ In a March interview, an Italian diplomat said that his government has been angered by the public approach of the German government, saying that if NATO policy on the issue were to be changed, it should be done quietly, and only with the consensus of all other NATO members and the clear support of the United States.³⁷

Turkey

It is difficult to know the official view of the Turkish government as it pertains to the reported 50 U.S. nuclear weapons on that country’s soil, because Turkish officials have offered conflicting views to Western interlocutors, with these differences perhaps reflecting splits between the Defense and Foreign ministries. But Turkey’s approach to this issue may well be influenced by the responses of NATO and neighboring states to developments in Iran’s nuclear program.

Some commentators have argued that the removal of U.S. NSNW from Turkey, coupled with the potential realization of a nuclear weapons-armed Iran, may alter Ankara’s security environment to the degree that the country may seek its own nuclear weapons.³⁸ Henri J. Barkey, a renowned Turkey expert, writes:

The advent of an Iranian nuclear device would not automatically change Turkey’s approach to nuclear weapons. However, it would certainly unleash a brand new debate in the country because, to date, the discussion in Turkey has remained conjectural and, with few real specialists on the subject, has had a somewhat unreal quality to it. Two factors will determine the future course of action: first, regional development pursuant to Iran’s nuclearization and, second, which of Turkey’s domestic political parties is in power at the time.³⁹

To be sure, the prospects of Turkey developing nuclear weapons and thus undermining its NATO ties is remote,⁴⁰ and, as Jessica Varnum points out, “[i]t is Turkish faith in the credibility of U.S. security commitments—not the presence of militarily insignificant tactical nuclear weapons on Turkish territory—that helps to constrain Ankara from pursuing nuclear

weapons.”⁴¹ Nevertheless, at a time of growing tensions with Iran, the United States and other NATO allies are wary of taking risks. In addition to any possibility of a Turkish nuclear weapons program, other NATO members fear that removing the weapons could further drive Turkey’s Justice and Development Party, which has sought to improve relations with Iran, into accommodating the Islamic Republic at Western expense. By the same token, the fundamental reason why Turkish officials want to maintain a U.S. nuclear presence on Turkish territory lies in a perception among the Turkish governing circles that the stationing of U.S. NSNW in the country strengthens the U.S.-Turkey relationship.⁴²

Still, another Turkish scholar Mustafa Kibaroglu notes that Turkey “would prefer that some other allies also continue to host U.S. nuclear weapons on their soil, if only in symbolic numbers. Then Turkey would not stand out as the only country in NATO that retains U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe.”⁴³ One senior Turkish official recently emphasized to a Western interlocutor that Ankara would like to keep US warheads in Europe in sufficient numbers “not for ourselves per se but for the alliance.”⁴⁴

Turkey has a similar view about supporting the administration’s plan for European missile defenses. While such a system might provide Ankara with the reassurance it seeks from Washington and the alliance, Turkey does not want to host a radar base for the system unless other NATO members increase their support for the system; Ankara does not want to sign up for a strictly bilateral pact against Tehran.⁴⁵

Additional European viewpoints

Central and Eastern European countries, as well as the Baltic States, have historically been reluctant to support the removal of U.S. NSNW. These states generally perceive these weapons as a means of providing a highly visible deterrent to Russia and see their location and visibility as essential to assuring them of the U.S. defense commitment to Europe and of the value of NATO. To this end, Bruno Tertrais, a prominent European scholar, has stated that “a U.S. nuclear withdrawal could be *perceived* as a lessening of transatlantic security ties by countries which are particularly keen to shelter behind U.S. protection, such as Poland, the Baltic States and Turkey.”⁴⁶ Malcolm Chalmers and Simon Lunn writing in March 2010 cite an unidentified ambassador from a new NATO member:

Nuclear deterrence by the US and through NATO and with the American presence of American warheads in Europe is the ultimate test of NATO’s credibility. If that fails, you will see a different NATO – more will follow the Poles in seeking bilateral guarantees. It is the essence of NATO membership.⁴⁷

Absent the nuclear link, experts fret that the new members will see little benefit from NATO as they will perceive a lack of concern for their security from Germany and other Western European NATO members. George Perkovich of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace recently called for Germany to reassure “NATO’s easternmost members that their security interests will be robustly protected.”⁴⁸ Discounting the possibility of a Russian attack worthy of a nuclear response, Perkovich calls on Germany to “seek collective policies to obviate the range of conventional and non-military threats such as cyber warfare and energy coercion that can lead to escalatory crises.”⁴⁹

At the NATO Foreign Ministers meeting in April, Estonian officials stated that they were in favor of keeping the NSNW in Europe as protection against Russia.⁵⁰ “Nuclear deterrence

based in Europe must remain, as it preserves close trans-Atlantic ties and allows for greater flexibility in deterrence,” stated Estonian Foreign Minister Urmas Paet.⁵¹

NATO is currently examining what measures might provide greater reassurance to its new members in Central and Eastern Europe, such as more extensive contingency planning and military exercises.

Given these concerns, some little-noticed diplomacy conducted by Poland’s Foreign Minister, Radek Sikorski with Scandinavian countries is particularly significant. In February 2010, he wrote a piece with Sweden’s foreign minister Carl Bildt, in the *International Herald Tribune*, Sikorski, calling for European NSNW to be “greatly reduced” and ultimately eliminated.⁵² They also stated that decreases in the presence of U.S. NATO NSNW in Europe should occur in tandem with Russian reductions, either by unilateral initiatives or through negotiations. The authors, however, put a special emphasis on Russia to move forward with reducing its stockpile of weapons believed deployed close to European Union member states in the Kola Peninsula and Kaliningrad.

In connection to the NATO Foreign Minister meeting Sikorski said that a reciprocal agreement with Russia is necessary in order to remove the “too many tactical nuclear weapons in Europe.”⁵³

Sikorski has also raised the issue together with his Norwegian counterpart Jonas Gahr Stoere. In a joint statement the day after the new START was signed the two foreign ministers called for talks between the U.S. and Russia on limiting NSNW. “We suggest a step-by-step approach, including transparency and confidence-building measures as well as balanced and mutual arms reductions,” Stoere and Sikorski said in a joint statement.⁵⁴

Sikorski also succeeded in getting Stoere, a champion of nuclear disarmament, who has often worked with Berlin on arms control initiatives to send a shot across the bow to Germany and other like-minded countries by pushing back against their public calls for withdrawal:

We are convinced that the Alliance will not benefit from unilateral actions in the field of sub-strategic nuclear weapons. Reciprocity and mutually agreed measures are called for. NATO’s deterrence policy and military posture have always been, and should continue to be, the subject of thorough consultations between all Allies.

It is quiet clear that there are different views in Europe with regard to the NSNW. Some countries favor keeping the weapons on European soil, while others believe that it is time to remove them. All countries, however, seem to agree that any decisions to remove them should be consensus based, which in turn may lead to a continuation of the status quo.

The Russian take

Despite increased momentum and continued discussions on U.S. NSNW in Europe, Russia has remained largely silent on the subject. NSNW have been mentioned only a few times and even these did not add much new to the debate. On February 6, 2010 Sergey Ivanov, the First Deputy Prime Minister in charge of the defense industry, repeated a standard Russian line that “Russia has reduced by three quarters its tactical nuclear arsenals and concentrated them in central storage bases exclusively within its national territory.”⁵⁵ On the same day, speaking at

a press conference, he said that Russia would continue to seek the withdrawal of all nuclear weapons to the national territories of nuclear-weapon states and intended to ask the United States for an explanation for why U.S. nuclear weapons are still deployed in Europe.⁵⁶ Simultaneously, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov reaffirmed that Moscow was ready to engage in a dialogue about the withdrawal of tactical nuclear weapons “from the territories of third countries;”⁵⁷ he repeated exactly the same position on the day the United States and Russia announced completion of talks on New START.⁵⁸ Speaking shortly after the signing of New START, the Chief of the Russian General Staff Nikolai Makarov said tactical nuclear weapons would be on the agenda of his upcoming trip to Washington, but this statement sounded more like an acknowledgment of American interest than a promise to engage in a discussion of possible compromises.⁵⁹

In the runup to the informal NATO foreign ministers’ meeting in Tallinn – and following a meeting of the NATO-Russia Council at the level of ambassadors, which probably previewed relevant NATO decisions, – the Russian representative to NATO Dmitri Rogozin declared once again that “the future of tactical nuclear weapons could be decided only after it is returned to national territories,”⁶⁰ leaving little or no room for possible compromises. Foreign Minister Lavrov did not even accept the invitation to come to the Estonian capital. Rogozin’s statement served as a sort of advance response to NATO ministers’ decisions and, curiously, no Russian official reacted to discussion of NSNW in Tallinn *after* the meeting.

This list of official statements is remarkable not only because it is so short, but also because it keeps repeating positions that have been in place for many years. One is bound to conclude that while Europe and, to a lesser extent, the United States engage in an increasingly acrimonious debate on the subject, Russia purposefully stays on the margins, apparently counting that NATO will, in the end, unilaterally withdraw U.S. NSNW from Europe, or that NATO unwillingness to do so would help Moscow avoid action on the issue altogether. In fact, the restrained, but nevertheless unquestionably negative reaction to the Bildt-Sikorski article certainly suggests that Moscow does not see any need to engage and make new proposals or to entertain reductions of its own NSNW force. An unnamed representative of the Ministry of Defense told *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* that the “unequal treatment” of U.S. and Russian NSNW in that article was “surprising, to say the least:” whereas Bildt and Sikorski proposed to “reduce” American TNW in Europe, they suggested that Russia should withdraw them from its European part completely.⁶¹ In the above-mentioned statement, Lavrov said he was surprised that the topic was raised in an op-ed, since, he claimed, neither Bildt, nor Sikorski had discussed their proposals when they had met with him.⁶²

The first-order analysis, while on the surface compelling, misses important elements that cast doubt on this explanation.

The absence of Russian reaction to proposals about unilateral withdrawal of U.S. NSNW is conspicuous. One would at least expect support for proposals that go Russia’s way, but none has been forthcoming.

It is even more conspicuous that NSNW appear to have no role in Russian military planning. While the 2000 Military doctrine did not assign any tangible missions to these weapons,⁶³ the new doctrine, which was released in the spring of 2010, tightened conditions for nuclear use even further. Whereas the 2000 Doctrine foresaw resort to nuclear weapons “in situations critical for [the] national security” of Russia, the 2010 version allows for their use in situations when “the very existence of [Russia] is under threat.”⁶⁴ Also, the new doctrine

pertaining to nuclear weapons emphasizes *strategic* deterrence capability, further suggesting that NSNW are not assigned a visible role.

Most importantly, Russia apparently does not have a plan as to what it might do if the United States, indeed, withdraws its NSNW from Europe. One can find a range of rather contradictory opinions on how Russian NSNW could be leveraged, but these opinions come from any quarter except from high-level officials.

For example, Chairman of the International Affairs Committee of the State Duma Konstantin Kosachev opined, in 2009, that NSNW should be tackled in the context of new START talks with the United States.⁶⁵ An unpublished study by scholars at the Institute of World Economy and International Relations of the Russian Academy of Sciences (IMEMO) that also dates back to 2009, proposed linking NSNW to the issue of updating the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty; the Russian Ambassador to the United States Sergey Kislyak has also sometimes indicated that such an exchange is not unthinkable.⁶⁶

Chief of the 12th Main Directorate (GUMO), General Vladimir Verkhovtsev, has been on record for several years with his insistence that NSNW be discussed in multilateral talks of all nuclear powers.⁶⁷ On the other hand, Igor Korotchenko the editor-in-chief of *Voenna-Promyshlennyyi Kurier*, a Russian weekly closely associated with the Ministry of Defense and the defense-industrial complex, recently proposed to use the issue of NSNW as a lever to be exchanged for U.S. plans to deploy missile defense assets in Europe. Russia could deploy NSNW close to the borders of countries that agreed to host such assets, he said, and implied that it could also agree to discuss NSNW if missile defense systems are not deployed.⁶⁸ A similar view was expressed by the head of the analytical section of the Asia-Pacific Department of the Foreign Ministry Vladimir Kozin.⁶⁹

In the end, the rather strange Russian stance on NSNW at the time when that issue is once again back at the center of international attention suggests that, contrary to common wisdom, Russia actually tries to stay away from the issue altogether. Paradoxically, even the withdrawal of U.S. NSNW from Europe might be regarded in Moscow as less than a fully positive development because it would force Russia to do *something*, while the preference is clearly for doing nothing. This seems to be very uncomfortable position and, it seems, Moscow would be satisfied if the current international debate on NSNW comes to naught, as have previous discussions of the topic. One is forced to question the very existence of any Russian interest in the issue of U.S. NSNW in Europe that could be leveraged by the United States and NATO.

Looking Forward

Two important events this year could play a role in determining the future of U.S. NSNW in Europe: the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference that will be held in New York City in May and the review of the NATO Strategic Concept due to be adopted before year's end.

2010 Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty Review Conference

The issue of NSNW has long been a subject of discussion in the NPT review process, and Finland, historically, has been among those countries most engaged on the subject in the NPT

context.⁷⁰ Thanks in large part to the initiative of the New Agenda Coalition (NAC), the 2000 NPT Review Conference (Rev Con) final document includes language on non-strategic nuclear weapons as part of the 13 Practical Steps on Disarmament. Although there was strong support at that Rev Con for text calling for verifiable and legally binding reductions in NSNW, Russia ultimately prevailed in diluting the final language to a call for “the further reduction of non-strategic nuclear weapons, based on unilateral initiatives and as an integral part of the nuclear arms reduction and disarmament process.” The issue continued to receive significant attention at the 2002 NPT Preparatory Committee (Prep Com), but then diminished in subsequent years due to disinterest in the subject—and legally binding verifiable arms control more generally--by the George W. Bush administration and as a result of Russian resistance to any initiative that might curtail the one dimension of nuclear weapons in which Moscow enjoyed a significant numerical advantage.

The pause in active discussion of NSNW in the NPT context also was a consequence of the diminished influence and activity of NAC (and internal disagreements about the importance to attribute to any single category of nuclear weapons), as well as the muted voice assumed by those Scandinavian countries who traditionally had been most outspoken in seeking reductions in NSNW. As such, Norway, Sweden, and Finland all appeared to be in a “listening mode” at the 2009 NPT Prep Com and chose not to focus specifically on the risks posed by NSNW or to articulate new approaches to deal with those risks. Ironically, this pause coincided with a much greater receptivity in the United States to a discussion of further reductions in NSNW.

It is difficult to anticipate how much attention will be given to NSNW at the 2010 NPT Review Conference. On the one hand, one should expect a number of countries such as Germany and possibly also Belgium, Finland,⁷¹ Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and Sweden to highlight the issue in their opening remarks in general debate and in more detailed interventions in Main Committee One (and also in Subsidiary Body One if Subsidiary Bodies are created). The EU also can be expected to include reference to the subject in its statement in general debate and in Main Committee One, although possibly linking strategic and non-strategic nuclear weapons in a call for further reductions in the next round of U.S.-Russian negotiations.

The issue of further reductions in NSNW also may be discussed in the context of the forward-looking component of the Review Conference. In the lead up to the 2010 Rev Con, a number of states have expressed support for the idea that the Conference should attempt to adopt a number of new disarmament and nonproliferation objectives to supplement the Principles and Objectives adopted in 1995. It therefore would be desirable for proponents of further reductions in NSNW to have language in hand that not only calls for full implementation of the Presidential Nuclear Initiatives and additional negotiated and legally binding reductions in NSNW, but also provides appropriate benchmarks when such targets should be achieved.

Enthusiasm for renewed attention to NSNW, however, may be tempered by the disinclination of some NATO countries to focus on a topic that is currently under scrutiny as part of the development of a new NATO Strategic Concept. A natural inclination on the part of many NPT states to defer to other negotiating fora may impede efforts to have sustained debate over the topic at the Rev Con. One also can anticipate that this very conservative orientation will be exploited by Russia, which will probably argue that the issue of NSNW is better left to the United States and Russia to pursue by themselves when they return to the negotiating tables (even if Russia has no desire to pursue negotiations anywhere on the subject).

NATO Strategic Concept

In April 2009, NATO leaders charged the organization's Secretary-General with developing a new Strategic Concept, a document that outlines NATO's roles, missions and strategies to confront security challenges relevant to the organization. This new initiative arises from the changing nature of international security threats since 1999, the year the last document was adopted, coupled with the addition of nine additional members since then. A group of 12 experts, appointed by the Secretary General, and chaired by former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, will lay the groundwork for the new Strategic Concept with the active participation of the North Atlantic Council with a report expected in early May. A three-step process will revise the document, expected to be concluded near the time of a late 2010 NATO summit in Lisbon.⁷² All NATO member states need to approve the new Strategic Concept before it becomes official NATO doctrine.

NATO Secretary-General Rasmussen has encouraged debate on the nuclear sharing issue in the ongoing Strategic Concept Review. At the first meeting of the Group of Experts in October 16, 2009 he identified it as an area needing review.⁷³ Additionally, in December 2009, Foreign Minister Westerwelle raised the issue in the North Atlantic Council, NATO's highest decision-making body.⁷⁴

Paragraphs 46 and 62 to 64 currently guide NATO's nuclear sharing policy (see textbox for key language from these paragraphs).

NATO Strategic Concept from 1999

- Paragraph 42 – "...the Alliance's conventional forces alone cannot ensure credible deterrence. Nuclear weapons make a unique contribution in rendering the risks of aggression against the Alliance incalculable and unacceptable. Thus, they remain essential to preserve peace."
- Paragraph 62 – "The fundamental purpose of the nuclear forces of the Allies is political: to preserve peace and prevent coercion and any kind of war. They will continue to fulfil an essential role by ensuring uncertainty in the mind of any aggressor about the nature of the Allies' response to military aggression. They demonstrate that aggression of any kind is not a rational option."
- Paragraph 63 – "A credible Alliance nuclear posture and the demonstration of Alliance solidarity and common commitment to war prevention continue to require widespread participation by European Allies involved in collective defence planning in nuclear roles, in peacetime basing of nuclear forces on their territory and in command, control and consultation arrangements. Nuclear forces based in Europe and committed to NATO provide an essential political and military link between the European and the North American members of the Alliance. The Alliance will therefore maintain adequate nuclear forces in Europe."
- Paragraph 64 – "Since 1991, therefore, the Allies have taken a series of steps which reflect the post-Cold War security environment. These include a dramatic reduction of the types and numbers of NATO's sub-strategic forces including the elimination of all nuclear artillery and ground-launched short-range nuclear missiles; a significant relaxation of the readiness criteria for nuclear-rolled forces; and the termination of standing peacetime nuclear contingency plans. NATO's nuclear forces no longer target any country."

Nonetheless, in addition to the hesitations of countries such as Turkey and the Baltic states, there are NATO officials who prefer the status quo. Last year, Michael Rühle, Head of the Policy Planning office of NATO, warned against what he called “abolitionist delusions” and stated that it may only be a “matter of time until Europe finds itself in a much less comfortable situation,” citing developments in the Middle East and Russia.⁷⁵ In times of uncertainty, U.S. NSNW are “supposed to spare Europe the nervousness that is so palpable in the Middle East and Asia.”⁷⁶ Rühle’s views seem to have been endorsed by a series of confidential reports produced by the NATO High-Level Group over the past three years, which called the presence of sub-strategic systems in Europe essential, and argued that dual-capable aircraft remain the most appropriate option for delivering them. It is not clear whether a new report from the High Level Group for a June 2010 ministerial meeting will draw different conclusions or how it will jibe with the experts’ report which should be ready for presentation to Rasmussen by May 1.⁷⁷ Early press reports indicate that the experts group will suggest that U.S. NSNW in Europe not be withdrawn unilaterally, but only as part of a new treaty with Russia.⁷⁸

In this context and that of the Tallinn decision, NATO governments conceivably could support a range of options, from a continuation of the status quo, to a consolidation of NSNW in a couple of regional locations (i.e. Turkey and Italy), to a complete withdrawal and/or involving European officers in U.S.-based missions. But they will be making decisions at a time when there is considerable dissension from smaller states that complain they are not having enough input into the Strategic Concept drafting process.⁷⁹

Moreover, the fate of NSNW, and more broadly NATO’s nuclear deterrent, is only one of many issues that are likely to be discussed in the context of the Strategic Concept. Indeed, other issues are likely to receive far more attention, such as out-of-area operations in Afghanistan and elsewhere, the U.S. desire for other members to upgrade conventional capabilities, and the Obama administration plans for a European missile defense system in which NATO plays a significant role. Even Germany, the champion of a new approach to NSNW, is said to be far more interested in winning alliance support for reviving the moribund conventional arms control regime in Europe than for withdrawing U.S. nuclear forces from the continent.

One can clearly discern the propensity to put the issue of NSNW into a broader context. Such a move can help alleviate possible intra-NATO conflict over these weapons and at the same time conceivably help resolve other issues of contention both inside the alliance and between the alliance and Russia. On the other hand, efforts to reduce and regulate NSNW in a broader context could require the NATO allies, particularly the Obama administration, to tread carefully to make difficult tradeoffs. Widespread deployment of missile defense systems, for example, might encourage states like Turkey to part with their NSNW;⁸⁰ yet such deployments could also limit prospects for striking further strategic arms agreements with Russia. The role of missile defense will be defined, to a large extent, by technical issues – the capabilities of weapons systems, the regions where they are deployed, etc. Moving forward with new conventional arms approaches with Russia might make the Kremlin more amenable to compromises on NSNW but would be bitterly opposed by Turkey, which wants to preserve current flank agreements—an issue that has gained in importance after Russia established military bases in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.⁸¹ Efforts to ameliorate the concerns of Baltic States about withdrawal of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons, such as enhancing military exercises in those states, could stoke tensions with Russia, and, indeed, the first response to

NATO contingency planning with respect to these states has already received a negative response from Moscow. Upgrading strategic conventional capabilities could provide a non-nuclear means of strengthening deterrence,⁸² but might affect prospects for a new conventional arms regime.

Subjecting further action on NSNW to reciprocal actions from Russia clearly has political appeal for many members of the alliance. However, it should be remembered that there are undeniable benefits to be reaped if NATO were to take the first step and offer to withdraw U.S. NSNW from Europe. If accompanied with an invitation to Russia to take action on its own NSNW stockpile, this could deny Moscow the convenience of avoiding that issue by references to the presence of a limited number of U.S. bombs in Europe. It could start an earnest debate in Moscow on the role and future of its own NSNW force—a debate that, given that support for these weapons is “mile wide but foot deep,” could make Moscow move away from its almost 20 year old position. Furthermore, discussion about the security needs of Turkey vis-à-vis Iran could potentially lead to a further adjustment of the Russian position on Teheran’s nuclear ambitions.

The Tallinn Summit and other recent developments make clear that NATO’s preference is for cautious steps before NSNW will be withdrawn from Europe. But the truly hard decisions on substance and timing are still to be made in Washington, Moscow, and Brussels.

Notes

¹ Data compiled by Ian Anthony and Johnny Janssen indicate that of the 14 European sites with nuclear storage vaults, only eight have Munitions Support Squadrons assigned to them—such squadrons are responsible for the security and maintenance of nuclear bombs stored at national air bases of Allied countries and upon U.S. command can realize them to the designated allied partner in wartime. Of these, only six (two in Italy) have had a Nuclear Surety Inspection within 18 months, a requirement if they are to be certified to handle and store nuclear weapons. See Ian Anthony and Johnny Janssen, *The Future of Nuclear Weapons in NATO*, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, April 1, 2010.

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