



STRATEGIC FILE

No. 28, January 2013 © PISM

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Arms Control During Obama's Second Term: What May the U.S. Want and How Can Europeans Contribute?

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During his second term in office, U.S. President Barack Obama is likely to continue the implementation of his ambitious arms control agenda. In the European context, this will require further work on the redefinition of the extended deterrence relationship with the European NATO allies, which currently involves U.S. nuclear weapons stationed in Europe. However, the programme of work cannot be limited to the nuclear file, as at present in Europe both missile defence and conventional arms remain important subjects, both in need of innovative arms control approaches. The role of Europeans does not have to be limited to merely supporting U.S. actions. They can provide their ideas and also take a leadership role in some areas. The lack of a unified position of Europeans can, however, block or obstruct U.S. initiatives.

First-term Achievements and Unfinished Businesses in Europe

Nuclear arms control became one of the major tools for implementing the long-term vision of a nuclear weapons-free world outlined by U.S. President Barack Obama in Prague on 5 April 2009. The main achievement of the Obama Administration in this area was the entry into force of the bilateral U.S.–Russia New START Treaty, which facilitated verifiable reductions of the two largest stockpiles of operationally deployed strategic warheads and their delivery vehicles.

A profound consequence of the U.S. push towards reducing reliance on nuclear weapons and strengthening nuclear arms control was the revival of the **nuclear debate within NATO**. After the end of the Cold War there was no deep reflection within the Alliance about the role of nuclear weapons, especially U.S. non-strategic weapons based in Europe.

Arguably it was Obama's Prague speech that ignited open and frank discussion within NATO on nuclear matters. Obama's position empowered European states that did not feel comfortable with hosting U.S. non-strategic nuclear weapons to push for some in-depth nuclear talks during work on the new Strategic Concept.¹ In the new situation, all NATO members were forced to answer the challenging question of how the U.S. can maintain effective extended deterrence that provides reassurance to all NATO allies while at the same time reducing reliance on the U.S. nuclear arsenal.

¹ See: a letter from 26 February 2010 by the foreign ministers of Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, and Norway to NATO's secretary general, www.regjeringen.no/upload/UD/Vedlegg/Sikkerhetspol/Nato/Letter%20to%20Secretary%20General%20NATO.pdf.

Intra-Alliance discussions clearly confirmed that there was no single European view on this issue. The five principles presented by U.S. Secretary Hillary Clinton in Tallinn in April 2010 laid the groundwork for a basis for compromise amongst NATO members to commit to the goal of creating the conditions for a world without nuclear weapons, while reconfirming that as long as there are nuclear weapons in the world NATO will remain a nuclear Alliance.² Also, the U.S. input contributed to finding the compromise that increasing transparency and confidence-building measures between NATO and Russia is a common goal of all NATO members.

The U.S. input was reflected in NATO's 2010 Strategic Concept and 2012 Deterrence and Defence Posture Review (DDPR). Both documents did not resolve all controversies within the Alliance. Nonetheless, they provided a direction for NATO's further work and space to incrementally extend the area of consensus in the future.

While the DDPR created prospects for a new nuclear consensus within NATO, during Obama's first term the U.S. failed to make substantial progress in reaching agreement with Russia on European **missile defence**. The European Phased Adaptive Approach, unveiled by the Obama administration in 2009, was initially hailed as both better suited to the European threat environment (by concentrating on short- and mid-range ballistic missiles) and offering better chances of compromise with Russia than the Bush approach. The 2010 NATO Lisbon Summit created considerable optimism for a breakthrough in this area. However, by the end of 2012, the approaches to MD by the U.S.–NATO and Russia proved to be impossible to reconcile. In parallel, the deployment of elements of the MD system and command-and-control architecture in Europe by the U.S. and NATO has been moving forward.

Apart from pursuing its nuclear and missile defence agenda, the Obama administration took a leading role in revitalising the European **conventional arms control** regime. During 2010 and 2011, efforts by Victoria Nuland, the U.S. special envoy for Conventional Armed Forces in Europe, brought promises of a breakthrough in overcoming the crisis caused by Russia's unilateral suspension of its CFE Treaty obligations in December 2007 but were ultimately unsuccessful. As a consequence, in November 2011 the U.S. together with the NATO members plus Georgia and Moldova ceased implementation of certain obligations of the treaty with regard to Russia.

The U.S., however, did not cease to be interested in this area. In 2012, the State Department probed the European allies on how to break the current impasse. This new process of "homework"—a re-examination of possible future European conventional arms control architecture—was intended to prepare ground for diplomatic initiatives after the U.S. elections.

Second Term Tasks for Arms Control in Europe

It is unlikely that the beginning of President Obama's second term in office will be marked by a powerful public address on nuclear disarmament similar to the 2009 Hradčany Square speech. The priorities set up in Prague to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in the U.S. security strategy, strengthen the international non-proliferation regime while dealing with the Iranian and North Korean crises, and also to safeguard dangerous nuclear material worldwide, remain far from being met. Developments in Syria, Iran and North Korea may stop or even reverse some of the achievements of the first term.

At the same time, the dedication shown by President Obama on nuclear issues would suggest that the administration will aim at achieving visible progress during the next four years. The U.S. would, however, need to resolve some of the "unfinished business" in Europe in order to move forward.

Starting the Non-strategic Nuclear Weapons Arms Control Process with Russia

Non-strategic nuclear weapons are neither covered by existing arms control regimes nor by any sets of confidence-building measures. Crucially, as the numbers of strategic weapons would be brought down in line with President Obama's vision, the importance of including this category of weapons in the arms control process would become more pressing. While originally meant for tactical battlefield use, some

² For a complete list of the five principles, see: www.armscontrol.org/act/2010_05/NATO.

categories of NSNWs and their modern delivery systems can have the capacity to strike strategically important targets in both Russia and the European NATO member states.

The inclusion of NSNWs in the arms control process is complicated by the lack of information about their numbers and deployment status. Most experts agree that a disparity exists in the numbers of the U.S. and Russian arsenals, but its extent (and thus its importance) is open to debate. The U.S. NSNW stockpile is estimated to be 760 warheads (including about 200 B-61 gravity bombs deployed to Europe), while assessments of the Russian stockpile vary from as many as 4,000 to as few as about 1,000 “operationally assigned” warheads for ground, air, naval forces and air defence.³ Further complicating the issue, most of the delivery vehicles for NSNWs are dual-capable, and thus more difficult to put under arms control measures.

During the second term, the United States will be interested primarily in opening the discussion with Russia on transparency and confidence-building measures regarding NSNWs, potentially preparing negotiations on reciprocal reductions of this category of nuclear weapons. For Russia, the withdrawal of the U.S. weapons deployed in Europe remains a pre-condition for becoming engaged in the talks. It might be tempting for the United States to consider such a unilateral move as a way to “unlock” wider arms control negotiations with Russia. It is, however, unlikely that the U.S. would so radically reverse current policy. One, however, cannot preclude introducing changes in the way U.S. nuclear weapons are deployed in Europe, for example by consolidating them in fewer bases and changing or terminating nuclear-sharing arrangements with some European allies.

Maintaining NATO’s Cohesion in Further Steps Related to the Reduction of NSNW

The U.S., as the owner of NSNW based in Europe, will have a decisive voice on how to deal with this category of armament. Nonetheless, Europeans will also have a degree of influence over this process. The difficult task in front of the U.S. will be to maintain **European NATO members’ cohesion**. Although, a basic consensus was achieved during the DDPR process, sources of potential tensions have not entirely disappeared.

The commitment to seeking Russian transparency and reductions might be interpreted in different ways. NATO members may differ about the most desirable forms of transparency measures and whether any unilateral NATO measures vis-à-vis Russia could be beneficial. Also, they may have divergent perspectives on what kind of reciprocity, if any, should be expected from Russia in order to facilitate significant reductions or a withdrawal of U.S. NSNW from Europe.

Additionally, a political dynamic within the European states that host U.S. weapons may force some changes in NATO’s current nuclear posture. New governments with a more anti-nuclear agenda may block the process of deployment in their countries of B-61 bombs that have undergone the life extension programme (LEP) or may ask for the withdrawal of NSNW to the U.S.⁴ This may create a degree of anxiety for other NATO members, for example the Central Europeans for whom the matter of a NATO position on Russian reciprocal steps would be weakened.

To strengthen NATO’s cohesion, during Obama’s second term the U.S. can provide NATO allies with a more clear cut view on how the process of increasing transparency and reductions of NSNW should look like. The U.S. can provide its assessment of whether the planned B-61 LEP or the introduction of the F-35 as a dual-capable aircraft might reduce the required numbers of U.S. NSNW based in Europe. The U.S. may also find it useful to provide an assessment of whether quantitative reductions of B-61 bombs could provide any significant economic savings in times of economic austerity and whether such reductions would not

³ See: H.M. Kristensen, R.S. Norris, “Nonstrategic Nuclear Weapons,” *Nuclear Notebook, Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, vol. 68, no. 5, 2012, pp. 96–104, <http://bos.sagepub.com/content/68/5/96>; I. Sutyagin, “Atomic Accounting: A New Estimate of Russia’s Non-Strategic Nuclear Forces,” *RUSI Occasional Paper*, November, 2012, www.rusi.org/downloads/assets/1211_OP_Atomic_Accounting_Web_updated.pdf.

⁴ For example, the German opposition Social Democratic Party (SPD) advocates for a withdrawal of U.S. nuclear weapons from Germany and Europe, has vetoed modernisation plans for B-61 gravity bombs, and supports cutting funding for maintaining Germany’s nuclear-capable aircraft.

negatively impact the prospects of Russia's steps related to its own arsenal.⁵ Last but not least, to maintain cohesion of the European allies, the Obama administration will need to persuade European governments that the B-61 LEP reduces not increase nuclear risks in Europe. Although, the modernisation of the B-61 weapons is planned to begin after the end of Obama's second term—in 2019 at the earliest—the current administration can have a profound influence on building wide consensus in Europe regarding this issue.

Missile Defence

It is likely that the arms control agenda for the second Obama term will also include the issue of possible limitations or confidence-building measures on **European missile defence**. The United States will want to neutralise the negative impact of this issue on its bilateral agenda with Russia. At the March 2012 Seoul Nuclear Summit, President Obama was hinting at “more flexibility” on missile defence after the U.S. elections, in an informal conversation with then-President Dmitri Medvedev. Still, it seems that the freedom to manoeuvre by the U.S. president is limited by internal factors (with the Republican Party evidently hostile to putting any formal confines on missile defence development). Additionally, the U.S. position will be further constrained by a commitment given to NATO allies to implement all phases of the EPAA as currently planned.

When all these factors are taken into account, any new U.S. “offer” to Russia on missile defence probably would be rather limited. It may involve the option of more information-sharing on the development and deployment of the system as well as its technical characteristics. The U.S. can also repeat proposals regarding the fusion of data, exercises and coordination centres. The issue of phases III and IV of EPAA cannot be avoided, as the initial work on the SM-3 site in Poland would need to be conducted during the second term of the Obama administration. The U.S. will most probably try to adhere to the general timeline of the activation of the site in Poland (2018), while simultaneously trying to push away decisions regarding the actual deployment of these types of interceptors, which according to Russia may infringe on its intercontinental nuclear strike capabilities.

Conventional Arms Control

During the second Obama term, the U.S. has an opportunity to continue its efforts toward the revival and modernisation of **conventional arms control in Europe**. Successes in this area not only will contribute to rebuilding trust and predictability related to conventional armaments between NATO and Russia but may also create momentum for overcoming the deadlock in the nuclear field, and even could provide some new solutions to the dispute on missile defence in Europe. It is hard to imagine, for example, that without reaching some common ground on conventional weapons, NATO and Russia could make some progress with regards to reductions in non-strategic nuclear weapons in Europe.

Taking into account the results of consultations conducted throughout 2012, the U.S. should formulate and present early on during Obama's second term its vision of the future conventional arms control regime so as to constitute a basis for further work. It may not be confined by the CFE/Adapted CFE framework, but can also include proposals on including new weapons categories (such as drones, short-range missiles, missile defence systems), complex military capabilities (including C2ISR—Command and Control, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance), and issues such as mobility or the deployability of weapon systems.

Europe's Role

The Europeans can constitute an important source of backing for President Obama's policy, adding international legitimacy to the U.S. arms control proposals. They may provide support for the United States in the framework of multinational regimes such as the United Nations or the 2015 NPT Review Conference. Furthermore, they may strengthen the Obama administration's position on internal struggles related to arms control initiatives.

⁵ The costs of the B-61 LEP are estimated at \$10 billion.

The United States' resolve will remain a crucial ingredient in finding solutions related to nuclear and conventional arms control and missile defence in Europe. However, the role of the European states should not be underestimated. On the one hand, they may become significant contributors in finding solutions to the tasks outlined above. Their role does not have to be limited to merely supporting the U.S. initiatives. They can provide innovative solutions and also take a leadership role in certain areas. On the other hand, if particular preferences and sensibilities of different European states are not adequately factored into the U.S. thinking, they might block or obstruct most of the plans of the administration.

On non-strategic nuclear weapons, all European states can back U.S. efforts to establish a dialogue with Russia on information-sharing and transparency measures, as well as ways to include non-strategic nuclear weapons into the arms control process. European NATO states can signal their willingness to participate in the confidence-building initiatives, e.g., agreement on measures related to inactive or active nuclear weapons storage sites on their territories.

A lack of European agreement on the meaning of Russian reciprocity with regards to NSNW might preclude universal support for any U.S. unilateral initiatives with regards to a reduction of U.S. NSNW in Europe. The European states interested in a withdrawal of U.S. nuclear weapons from the continent would eagerly support such U.S. actions. However, other NATO members, including Central Europeans, may be concerned that any unilateral actions would most probably not bring about any progress with Russia, but instead would weaken the position and credibility of the Alliance. The direction of work within NATO related to implementation of the DDPR will play an important role in encouraging or discouraging the U.S. from such moves.

U.S. initiatives related to the future of NSNW in Europe would also depend significantly on the attitudes of the European states hosting U.S. weapons. For example, any plans to consolidate U.S. weapons to fewer storage sites would depend on agreement of the states concerned. Also, hosting states might have some impact on the plans to replace existing B-61 bombs with their modernised versions.

In the second term, if the United States moves to implement more ambitious steps towards a world free of nuclear weapons, it might more directly affect the French and United Kingdom's nuclear deterrence policies. For example, these countries can be asked by the U.S. to consider their role in any future coordinated reductions of warhead numbers with the participation of all P5 states. Also, the discussion about non-strategic nuclear weapons in Europe would most probably touch upon the issue of the French air-delivered nuclear weapons (the ASMP cruise missiles), which Paris classifies as strategic but which could be considered as non-strategic systems, impacting the nuclear balance in Europe.

The European allies of the United States may also influence the future of the European segment of the **missile defence system**. Some of the crucial elements of a potential agreement with Russia, for example, Russia's access to MD installations or any changes to the EPAA deployment schedule, would require either the agreement of and prior consultations with the allies. The Europeans are, however, not confined to waiting passively for U.S.–Russian agreement. They can actively engage in the discussions about the possible scope of the Russian monitoring of MD sites situated on the soil of NATO members and about the possible limits on the development of the system in order to allay Russian concerns. Simultaneously, the European states can take the lead in pushing forward the issue of joint theatre and territorial missile defence training with Russia and an exchange of experiences within the framework of the NATO-Russia Council.

Finally, **the conventional arms control file** may provide an opportunity to chart the most effective European-American division of labour in the arms control processes during the next years. The United States can take the lead in efforts to resuscitate the Europe-wide arms control framework, but its global responsibilities and diminishing military footprint in Europe make it less prepared to stay permanently focused on the issue of the European military balance and the possibility of introducing new CSBMs or limitations on conventional weapons. It is the European states, especially those situated in Central and Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus and the Balkans, that should bring their own experiences and proposals to the table, concentrating on the most threatening or destabilising developments in their neighbourhoods. Such initiatives would most probably not result in the development of a pan-European or Euro-Atlantic conventional arms limitations or transparency regime, but they could lead to regional and sub-regional arrangements that reduce the levels of tensions and probability of an armed conflict in Europe. European activism in this area might complement the U.S. actions, which could then be concentrated on the nuclear weapons and missile defence dimensions.