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Careful What You Wish For: Nuclear Reductions and Conventional Deterrence in Europe after Crimea

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As NATO contemplates changes in its deterrence posture amid Russia's aggression against Ukraine, questions regarding the relationship between the Alliance's nuclear and conventional dimensions have gained importance. Some experts propose that the Allies should spend their scarce funds on conventional instruments of deterrence rather than on the U.S. nuclear weapons based in Europe. Still, the suggested shift of emphasis from nuclear to conventional would not be that easy to implement. Even with U.S. nuclear weapons removed from Europe, strengthening conventional deterrence in parallel could result in Russia increasing its reliance on its own nuclear weapons and bringing them closer to Alliance territory, further destabilising European security. Therefore, NATO should avoid making radical changes in its nuclear posture and concentrate on a calibrated beef-up of its non-nuclear presence along the eastern flank.

According to a number of experts, the Ukraine crisis has proven the uselessness of NATO's non-strategic nuclear weapons (NSNW) for deterrence and reassurance purposes, thus strengthening the case for their elimination.¹ The opposing argument states that the forward-deployed weapons are still serving as a reminder of U.S. involvement in European security and can balance the threat of nuclear escalation by Russia during a possible NATO–Russia crisis. The substantial price tag of the prolongation of the current NATO nuclear posture (especially, the Life Extension Programme for B61 nuclear bombs) adds additional weight to the debate.

Nuclear and Conventional Deterrence in the Ukraine crisis

Nuclear weapons were “used” in the Ukraine crisis in a number of ways, albeit (based on publicly available information) no direct threats or preparation of the use of such weapons were made by Russia, the United States or NATO.²

¹ See, for example: B. Blechman, R. Rumbaugh, “Bombs Away,” *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2014; T. Sauer, “Ukraine shows uselessness of NATO nukes in Europe,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, www.thebulletin.org.

² This section was prepared for a seminar devoted to the consequences of the Ukraine crisis on nuclear deterrence and non-proliferation and was organized on 2 July 2014 by Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique (FRS) in Paris. The author would like to thank Bruno Tertrais and the other participants for their input during the seminar, which helped to improve the content of this paper.

Still, the background presence of nuclear weapons has played a role in defining the framework in which the crisis has played out. The status of Russia as a nuclear power limited Western responses to Moscow's land-grab of Crimea and other destabilising actions in Ukraine. It was clear that military intervention in support of Ukraine—even if it remained a remote possibility anyway—could bring the Alliance into direct confrontation with Russian troops and the prospect of further escalation. Conversely, it may be argued that NATO's defence potential (including nuclear) made it unlikely for Russia to threaten it militarily, even in response to the strengthening of the Alliance's presence along its eastern flank. Both the U.S. and Russia seemed to signal to each other by publicizing pre-planned exercises involving their strategic forces that a further escalation of the crisis could have severe consequences.³

More direct signalling of its nuclear capability was conducted by the U.S. in subsequent stages of the crisis, though it probably had more to do with reassuring allies in Europe than with deterring any specific Russian action.⁴ The deployment of three B-52H and two B-2 strategic bombers to Europe in June 2014 was presented as a training mission that, according to U.S. Strategic Command, was to “demonstrate to our nation's leaders and our allies that we have the right mix of aircraft and expertise to respond to a variety of potential threats and situations.”⁵ The use of the strategic bombers to demonstrate U.S. capability to reinforce regional deterrence was similar to missions conducted in Asia in 2013: a show of force by a B-2 and B-52, which flew over South Korea during the March 2013 crisis with North Korea and a November flight of B-52s through China's newly proclaimed air defence identification zone. As for Russia, one can refer to the participation of nuclear-capable Tu-22M3 bombers in the June 2014 exercises conducted in the Kaliningrad region and Baltic Sea,⁶ as well as “routine” exercises with high-precision strikes conducted by joint forces including missile troops from the Western Military District (armed with Iskander SS-26 SRBMs) and Long-Range Strategic Command.⁷ The exercises may have served as a reminder to external observers that the Russian doctrine envisions the use of non-strategic nuclear weapons in certain scenarios of a conflict with NATO forces.⁸

During the crisis, Ukraine failed to deter the Russian armed forces from overtaking Crimea and fomenting unrest in other parts of the country. However, Ukraine does not “count” as a failure of NATO deterrence. On the contrary, to the extent that extended deterrence was involved in the crisis, the U.S. and other NATO Allies took significant steps to signal to Russia the seriousness of their extended deterrence obligations stemming from Article 5 of the Washington Treaty towards Poland, the Baltic States, Romania and Bulgaria.

Importantly, the Ukraine crisis has demonstrated the value of non-nuclear components in bolstering deterrence and reassurance. While nuclear weapons were employed in the background, the forefront was occupied by conventional forces. Fighter aircraft were deployed by NATO countries to Romania, Poland, Lithuania and Estonia, reconnaissance flights were conducted over Poland and Romania, and additional naval assets were put in the Baltic and Black seas. The participation of units from NATO countries in land exercises in the region increased significantly.⁹ The eastern Allies, which called for more reassurance from NATO, also focused their attention on a surge of conventional forces, avoiding (at least in public) any mention of the need for a more visible nuclear deterrence.¹⁰

³ Z. Keck, “Russia, US Conduct Nuclear Weapon Drills,” *The Diplomat*, 14 May 2014, www.thediplomat.com.

⁴ T. Collina, “U.S. Sends Nuclear Bombers to Europe,” *Arms Control Today*, July/August 2014, www.armscontrol.org.

⁵ “Strategic bombers deploy to Europe to train, exercise capabilities,” *U.S. Strategic Command Public Affairs*, 3 June 2014, www.afgsc.af.mil.

⁶ “Ministry of Defence conducts large-scale exercises in Kaliningrad,” *Itar Tass agency*, 12 June 2014, www.itar-tass.com.

⁷ “Russian Missile Troops Test Fire Iskander Systems during Military Drills,” *RIA Novosti*, 2 June 2014, www.en.ria.ru.

⁸ See, N. N. Sokov, “Why Russia calls a limited nuclear strike ‘de-escalation,’” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 13 March 2013, www.thebulletin.org.

⁹ “NATO Reassurance Measures in Response to Crisis in Ukraine,” *Allied Joint Force Command Brunssum*, 27 May 2014, www.jfcs.nato.int.

¹⁰ A. Kacprzyk, “Deterring Russia after Ukraine: CEE Divided on the Future of NATO Policy,” *PISM Policy Paper*, No 13 (96), July 2014, pp. 3–4.

During the crisis, the Alliance has also refrained from making any references to its air defence and missile defence (MD) potential, and specifically to the development of NATO territorial missile defence as a deterrence factor. The United States government explicitly rejected calls from members of Congress to speed up the construction of the U.S. SM-3 Aegis Ashore installation in Poland (planned for 2018), stating that this move “likely would not change Russia’s security calculation in Europe.”¹¹ Reluctance to mention missile defence as a deterrence factor can be explained by the history of the European territorial MD project, which was presented by both the U.S. and NATO as something to be developed and configured solely in response to possible threats from the Middle East region, not from Russia.

Are Non-strategic Nuclear Weapons “Useless”?

For supporters of the withdrawal of U.S. non-strategic nuclear weapons from Europe or from the U.S. arsenal as such, the Ukraine crisis provided an opportunity to re-open a debate that had largely subsided after the publication of the 2012 NATO Deterrence and Defence Posture Review (DDPR).¹² The DDPR concluded that the NATO nuclear force posture (including forward-deployed U.S. weapons and nuclear-sharing arrangements) “meets the criteria” of effectiveness.¹³ The debate was reignited by two main lessons so far from the Ukraine crisis. First, it is claimed that European-based NSNW have proved useless during the current crisis, as their presence did not have an impact on Russia and did not present reassurance to Central Europeans, who called for more robust conventional reaction. It is argued that NSNW would be equally impractical in future crises facing the Alliance, as NATO would be faced with ambiguous “little green men” situations or localized hostilities rather than full-scale armed aggression. Second, it is underlined that the continuation of the forward-deployment of these types of U.S. weapons in Europe requires spending tangible sums (exceeding \$10 billion over the next decade), which could instead be used to reinforce U.S. and NATO conventional forces as they are better suited to deal with Ukraine-like scenarios.¹⁴

The central argument, though, that the Ukraine crisis decisively proves the “uselessness” of NSNW misses the point. The threat to the NATO Allies has not reached a level that might justify the activation of nuclear forces assigned to NATO. The events in Ukraine do not offer a definite answer about the “usability” of NSNW, as an actual existential threat to NATO territory never surfaced. They do support the notion that the threat to use nuclear weapons can be contemplated only in extremely rare situations, when the core interests of the relevant countries are at stake.

The financial argument, however, may prove to carry much more weight in making decisions about the future of U.S. NSNW, especially if the Ukraine crisis is seen as proof that strategic bombers (B-52, B-2) can replace Dual Capable Aircraft (F-15, F-16, Tornado) in regional contingencies.¹⁵ If the problem is presented as the U.S. modernizing the B-61 warhead and making the upcoming F-35 multipurpose fighter nuclear-capable only as a favour or “defence subsidy” to Europe,¹⁶ then indeed the price may be seen as exorbitant when compared to the strategic rationale and existing alternatives.

Taken into account their budget priorities (and also the questionable legality of such an option under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty), even the European Allies interested in keeping the

¹¹ “Statement of Administration Policy on H.R. 4435—Howard P. “Buck” McKeon National Defense Authorization Act for FY 2015,” the White House, 19 May 2014, www.whitehouse.gov.

¹² See, for example: H. Chalmers, M. Chalmers, A. Berger (eds.), “A Problem Deferred? NATO’s Non-Strategic Nuclear Weapons after Chicago,” *RUSI Whitehall Report*, 4-12, October 2012.

¹³ “Deterrence and Defence Posture Review,” NATO Press Release (2012) 063, 20 May 2012, par. 8, www.nato.int.

¹⁴ S. Andreasen, “Short-sheeting European security,” *The Star Tribune*, 19 June 2014, www.startribune.com.

¹⁵ Still, when compared to DCAs, the use of strategic bombers for extended deterrence/reassurance signalling vis-à-vis Russia during a crisis may entail more difficult decisions for U.S. leaders. They may fear that the activation of an element of the strategic nuclear triad may be interpreted as preparation for a wider strike.

¹⁶ B. Blechman, R. Rumbaugh, “Bombs Away,” *op. cit.*

current arrangements in place are unlikely to cover part of the bill for B6I modernization. New financial burden-sharing schemes for supporting the host countries' infrastructure and their nuclear role can be prepared,¹⁷ but these will not change the current imbalance in which the U.S. covers the lion's share of the costs. Hence, the fundamental issue for Washington is the wider strategic justification for the retention of the NSNW forward-deployment option, which does not end with the NATO "defence subsidy" dimension. Besides political symbolism, American DCAs and nuclear weapons based in Europe offer the U.S. an in-theatre presence and thus more flexibility during any future crises, whether with Russia or the Middle East. More generally, the U.S. capabilities to forward-deploy fighters and nuclear weapons can also be helpful at some point in northeast Asia to counter threats posed by North Korea (or even China or Russia) and to reassure U.S. Allies in the region.¹⁸

Does Less Nuclear Plus More Conventional Equal More Security in Europe?

Despite the reservations noted above, the supporters of continued forward-deployment of U.S. NSNW to Europe should not dismiss the new proposals on elimination out of hand. If their main concern is the possibility of Russian conventional intimidation or sub-aggression actions, the focus should be on boosting the Alliance's conventional means of response. Consequently, if the withdrawal of U.S. NSNW from Europe and restructuring of the B6I LEP could considerably strengthen conventional deterrence and the reassurance posture with money and other resources "freed" from the nuclear role, it might emerge as a reasonable *quid pro quo*.

To make such proposals more attractive, there would need to be credible assurances that conventional deterrence would indeed be strengthened, adding substantial elements to what has already been put on the table by the U.S. and other Allies in terms of post-Ukraine temporary reassurance.¹⁹ It is impossible to list specifically which modifications of NATO posture would compensate for the deterrence value of pulling NSNW from the NATO "mix." However, any discussion of a replacement package would need to address the following questions:

- **Political symbolism of U.S. engagement in European security.** The withdrawal of NSNW would need to be accompanied by a tangible (and not only political) re-confirmation of the U.S. commitment to European security, e.g., strengthening of U.S. conventional forces in Europe.
- **Signalling to Russia.** A clear message would need to be sent to Russia that, by modifying its nuclear policy, NATO is not relaxing its deterrence posture, but rather tailoring it to the specific challenge posed by Russian conventional forces and Moscow's hybrid tactics.
- **Credibility of the conventional deterrence posture** for the eastern NATO flank. New assets must not only be announced but also deployed in a sustainable manner in the countries concerned or in their vicinity. That would require multi-year budget allocations.

Availability of strategic nuclear forces. Since any future conventional crises would be played out under Russia's "nuclear shadow," questions about the role of strategic forces in responding to the threat or use of Russian non-strategic nuclear weapons would need to be addressed. Other Allies would need to be informed and consulted on the U.S. strategic forces posture, planning and nuclear decision-making, with the UK and French nuclear establishments also engaged in discussing their roles in such contingencies.

¹⁷ "Quigley Calls for Nuclear Weapon Cost Sharing Among NATO Allies," U.S. Representative Mike Quigley Office Press Release, 10 June, 2014.

¹⁸ The 2010 Nuclear Posture Review Report states that retaining the possibility to forward-deploy DCA fighters and nuclear weapons is intended both to "keep the [NATO] Alliance's options open" and to "provide capabilities to support other U.S. commitments."

¹⁹ For an overview of the U.S. actions and pledges, see www.defense.gov.

When faced with strengthening of conventional deterrence, Moscow could argue that the NATO decisions would make the use of sophisticated conventional weapons against Russia more likely. In response, Russia may choose to emphasize the role of its own NSNW in repelling aggression.²⁰ Moscow can thus increase the “visibility” of this category of weapons on its Western flank by the relocation of dual-capable systems (e.g., Iskander missiles, TU-22M3, Su-24 and Su-34 aircraft) closer to NATO borders, including to Kaliningrad and Crimea, as well as to Belarus. Russia may also openly introduce NSNW to Kaliningrad and re-build nuclear storage sites in Crimea, either announcing the relocation of the warheads themselves or leaving ambiguous the issue of their deployment, as in Kaliningrad now.

Paradoxically, by removing U.S. NSNW from Europe and strengthening substantially conventional deterrence, NATO would thus most likely increase the salience of nuclear weapons in the Russian security policy. That may, in turn, lead to calls to reverse the NATO course and re-introduce the NSNW to the NATO deterrence mix.

More Nuclear NATO, More Security?

On the other side of the spectrum, the U.S. is encouraged to re-structure its nuclear posture in Europe by transferring some nuclear weapons eastward and/or bringing new allies into nuclear-sharing schemes.²¹ The perspective of new deployments of nuclear weapons is presented as a way to both make it clear to Russia that it risks nuclear conflict in case of aggressive actions towards any NATO territory and to reassure Eastern Europeans about the sincerity of U.S. security guarantees. If the change should involve the transfer of weapons from some of their current locations in Germany, Netherlands, Italy and Belgium (and relieving these countries’ air forces from the nuclear role), it would also remove a major inter-Alliance irritant. Instead of dealing with the anti-nuclear public critical of these countries’ nuclear role, the U.S. weapons could reportedly count on a much warmer reception in the nuclear-weapon-friendly eastern NATO states.²²

Yet, from a political and practical viewpoint, even raising the possibility of transfer of the weapons to the east would be clearly harmful to the cohesion of NATO and to the prospects of stabilising the situation in Ukraine. The vast majority of NATO Allies, the U.S. included, would strongly object to the suggestion that the deterioration of the European security environment is so grave that it requires making such changes to NATO’s nuclear posture, including the revocation of the nuclear “Three No’s” pledges made in 1997.²³ Preparing such a proposal could be seen (rightly) as an escalation of tensions, and would almost certainly cause a response in terms of a change in Russian deployments of NSNW and relevant delivery vehicles. It would also serve as a convenient propaganda theme and a justification to increase the tempo and range of Russian nuclear modernization. It could also be used as an excuse to withdraw from the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty, further eroding the nuclear arms-control regime. Finally, instead of focusing NATO’s attention on Russia’s actions against Ukraine and on the credibility of

²⁰ This reaction can also be caused by NATO taking less-significant reassurance measures than described above. According to renowned Russian security expert Lt. Gen. (retired) Yevgeny Buzhinsky, “Russia is a nuclear power. [...] If NATO becomes more active, we will deploy a division of Iskander missiles in Kaliningrad region,” quoted in: “OPINION: Russia Could Station Missiles in Europe in Response to NATO moves,” RIA Novosti, 7 May 2014. Russia’s “nuclear” response to more far-reaching measures may be proportionally more severe.

²¹ See: T. Szatkowski, “After Ukraine: Developing Central European Defense Capabilities,” *CEPA Issue Brief*, 10 June 2014, www.cepa.org/content/after-ukraine-developing-central-european-defense-capabilities; former Czech Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Jiri Schneider, cited in E. Braw, “After Ukraine, Countries That Border Russia Start Thinking About Nuclear Deterrents,” *Newsweek*, www.newsweek.com.

²² In 2009, German Defence Minister Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg stated, referring to the Central European NATO member states and NSNW, that “we could have partners in mind who probably would be glad to offer their grounds and their soil for any weapons,” quoted in O. Meier, “German Nuclear Stance Stirs Debate,” *Arms Control Today*, December 2009.

²³ The Alliance declared that it had “no intention, no plan and no reason to deploy nuclear weapons on the territory of new members, nor any need to change any aspect of NATO’s nuclear posture or nuclear policy” and it had “no intention, no plan and no reason” for establishing nuclear weapons storage sites on their territory. Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation, Paris, France, 27 May 1997, www.nato.int.

conventional deterrence, it would lead to a major internal conflict within the Alliance with little chance of agreement.

Even if somehow these obstacles are overcome, the benefits of eastern deployment seem far from obvious for the credibility of deterrence. Locating the weapons further eastwards or expanding the list of DCA countries would not make NSNW more “usable.” Executing the nuclear option would still require the consent of NATO members and the authorization of a strike by the U.S. It remains doubtful whether the presence of NSNW would help in deterring or affecting Russian actions other than direct aggression. It may discourage Russia from making nuclear threats against NATO members, but that would most probably not be the preferable Russian tactics anyway when pursuing limited objectives.

Conclusion

As a consequence of the current crisis in the relationship between the United States and Russia, there seems to be little chance for the resumption of bilateral talks on the next round of nuclear force reductions during the next couple of years. Taken into account the fact that NATO has decided to suspend all practical cooperation with Russia below the ambassadorial level of the NATO–Russia Council, any hopes of the Alliance reaching out to Russia to discuss transparency and confidence-building measures (let alone reductions) for NSNW arsenals any time soon are also unrealistic. That can explain the interest in exploring unilateral U.S. or NATO moves.

The question of whether the current NATO deterrence posture is adequate to the challenge of a more assertive Russia deserves an in-depth debate. Intuitively, the idea to remove U.S. NSNW from Europe and invest in better-suited conventional capabilities makes perfect sense. However, as discussed in the paper, its implementation in the current circumstances would cause serious complications because the supporters of forward-deployment would expect in return the tangible strengthening of conventional deterrence, to which Russia would most likely respond by increasing the role of its own nuclear deterrent. These factors should be taken into account when discussing NATO’s future course of action.

It is unlikely that the U.S. or NATO would make far-reaching decisions to change the nuclear posture in Europe as long as the relationship with Russia remains shaky and Russia maintains its bellicose rhetoric. For the foreseeable future, then, both the Alliance and the U.S. would probably choose to continue their nuclear policies and not yield to the temptation to use the crisis as an opportunity for a re-evaluation. The focus of the September 2014 NATO summit in Newport should be rather on the importance of conventional deterrence and assurance measures, calibrated to the new threat assessment and lessons learned from Ukraine.