

# ISSUE BRIEF

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INTERNATIONAL SECURITY PROGRAM

## It's Time to Put the Nuclear Issue Behind Us: The Chicago Summit Has More Urgent Priorities than Nuclear Theology

### Summary

Slightly over two years ago, NATO was embroiled in an internal controversy of its own creation which bore within it the seeds of a deep crisis within the Alliance. Several governments, impelled by a heady mix of domestic politics and a newly fashionable interest in nuclear disarmament among certain elites, actively sought the removal of US nuclear weapons from the European portion of the Alliance. In doing so, they raised serious questions about their adherence to the central core of the Alliance: the Article 5 guarantee.

Their policy proposal equally threatened to undermine the concept of risk sharing and burden sharing which has helped to bind together history's most successful military alliance. As a result, we felt compelled to publish a highly critical article<sup>1</sup> in which we "called a spade a bloody shovel" and argued that Alliance unity and security demanded a return to NATO's founding principles in which the security concerns of all members, new and old, were protected. In that article, we also were among the first, if not the first, to call for the inauguration of arms reduction and transparency discussions with the Russian Federation on the subject of short-range nuclear weapons. The evolution of Alliance policy since our article's publication has been, for the most part, laudatory.

As a result, NATO heads of government, when they gather in Chicago next month, have an opportunity to put the nuclear policy issue behind them. We urge them to do so. NATO has

### About the International Security Program

For decades, the Atlantic Council's International Security Program had shaped and influenced the debate on international security by facilitating dialogue through critical analysis and policy-relevant programming concerning the greatest security challenges facing the United States and the transatlantic community. On the occasion of the Council's 50th anniversary, the International Security Program will officially be renamed the Brent Scowcroft Center on International Security and will expand the breadth and depth of its programming and expertise to address the new array of security challenges and opportunities facing the transatlantic community. For more information about the International Security Program or the Scowcroft Center, contact the Center's Director-designate Barry Pavel ([bpavel@acus.org](mailto:bpavel@acus.org)) or Deputy Director Jeff Lightfoot ([jlightfoot@acus.org](mailto:jlightfoot@acus.org)).

important work to do, and it does not involve nuclear theology. It is time to halt the internecine warfare which distracts Western national security experts, and has no obvious result other than creating strains and rifts within NATO.

<sup>1</sup> Franklin C. Miller, George Robertson and Kori Schake, "Germany Opens Pandora's Box," Briefing Note; Centre for European Reform; London; February 2010.

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## The Winter of Our Discontent

The agreement that brought Germany's ruling parties into coalition in November 2009 committed Chancellor Angela Merkel's government to "the withdrawal of all US nuclear weapons from Germany." That position, brought to the coalition by Free Democrat (FDP) leader (and now foreign minister) Guido Westerwelle, was not an act of statecraft; rather, it was a cynical (and temporarily successful) attempt to attract traditionally anti-nuclear voters to the FDP. Indeed, tellingly, Westerwelle did not and has not renounced nuclear deterrence or even the Alliance's nuclear umbrella over his own country. He stated simply that the United States should carry that burden solely with strategic weapons operating from US soil.

Once in office as foreign minister, Westerwelle sought to bolster his position by encouraging like-minded colleagues in the Netherlands and Belgium to call for the removal of US nuclear weapons from Europe. Additional support and encouragement was lent by a wholly predictable assortment of transatlantic arms control enthusiasts, many of whom have sought the unconditional removal of US nuclear weapons for many years. As this game played out over the winter of 2009-2010, many of NATO's new members, as we predicted, reacted quite negatively, perceiving that unilateral decisions were being contemplated which would adversely affect their security by casting doubt both on the credibility of NATO's nuclear deterrent and on some allies' commitment to the new members' territorial integrity.

## February 2010 Turns Into Spring

The new members' negative reaction found a receptive audience at the "informal" meeting of NATO foreign ministers in Tallinn in April 2010. On the first day of the meeting, Secretary General Rasmussen, speaking personally, said at a press conference, "I do believe that the presence of American nuclear weapons in Europe is an essential part of a credible deterrent." And, during the Ministerial dinner, US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton outlined "five principles" to guide NATO's approach to nuclear weapons:

- "as long as nuclear weapons exist, NATO will remain a nuclear alliance;
- as a nuclear Alliance, sharing nuclear risks and responsibilities widely is fundamental;

- a broad aim is to continue to reduce the role and number of nuclear weapons while recognizing that in the years since the Cold War ended, NATO has already dramatically reduced its reliance on nuclear weapons;
- allies must broaden deterrence against the range of 21st century threats, including by pursuing territorial missile defense; and
- [i]n any future reductions, 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 US-Russian arms control discussions alongside strategic and non-deployed nuclear weapons."

A month later, the distinguished members of Rasmussen's "Group of Experts" delivered their report on "NATO 2020," which included the following recommendation:

*"As long as nuclear weapons exist, NATO should continue to maintain secure and reliable nuclear forces, with widely shared responsibility for deployment and operational support, at the minimum level required by the prevailing security environment. Any change in this policy, including in the geographic distribution of NATO nuclear deployments in Europe, should be made, as with other major decisions, by the Alliance as a whole."* (emphasis added)

## The 2010 Strategic Concept

In November 2010, meeting in Lisbon, NATO heads of government approved a new Strategic Concept. Following from the Tallinn principles and the Experts report, this important consensus document, in addition to listing collective defense as the first of the Alliance's three "core tasks" and reaffirming the Article 5 commitment, contains the following statements of Alliance policy:

- "Deterrence, based on an appropriate mix of nuclear and conventional capabilities, remains a core element of our overall strategy...As long as nuclear weapons exist, NATO will remain a nuclear Alliance.
- We will ensure NATO has the full range of capabilities necessary to deter and defend against any threat to the safety and security of our populations. Therefore we will:
  - Maintain an appropriate mix of conventional and nuclear forces;

- Ensure the broadest possible participation of allies in collective defense planning on nuclear forces, in peacetime basing of nuclear forces, and in command, control and consultation arrangements;
- ...we will seek to create the conditions for further [nuclear weapons] reductions in the future;
- in any future reductions our aim should be to seek Russian agreement to increase transparency on its nuclear weapons in Europe and to relocate these weapons away from the territory of NATO members. Any further steps must take into account the disparity with the greater Russian stockpiles of short range nuclear weapons.”

These developments should have brought the nuclear debate within NATO to a reaffirming close.

## The Deterrence and Defense Posture Review

Herr Westerwelle’s price for agreeing to the high-level strategy in the Strategic Concept, however, was that NATO continue to examine the details of basing nuclear weapons in Europe. As a result, at the 2010 Lisbon summit the Alliance also agreed to conduct a “Deterrence and Defense posture Review (DDPR) whose mandate was:

“... to continue to review NATO’s overall posture in deterring and defending against the full range of threats to the Alliance, taking into account changes in the evolving international security environment. This comprehensive review should be undertaken by all allies on the basis of deterrence and defense posture principles agreed in the Strategic Concept, taking into account WMD and ballistic missile proliferation. Essential elements of the review would include the range of NATO’s strategic capabilities required, including NATO’s nuclear posture, and missile defense and other means of strategic deterrence and defense.”

The Alliance has been carrying out this review since Lisbon. The review’s recommendations were briefed to NATO’s foreign and defense ministers at their “jumbo ministerial” in April 2012, and those recommendations will be forwarded for approval in Chicago to heads of government. As we

understand it, the question of basing nuclear weapons in Europe has produced a recommendation that the current posture be maintained, although with an eye to being able to make reductions in weapons numbers if an arms agreement with Russia can be reached.

Two other nuclear-policy issues of a much more theoretical nature were also raised in the course of the DDPR. Some nations urged that the Alliance adopt its own “Negative Security Assurance” (NSA), a pledge whereby a nuclear weapons state makes clear that it will not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against a non-nuclear weapons state. Since NSAs are properly the province of the nuclear weapons states, and since each of NATO’s three nuclear powers have somewhat unique NSAs of their own, a Solomonic recommendation has been made whereby the Alliance recognizes (or “endorses” or “looks favorably upon”) these three national statements rather than trying to create a “NATO NSA.”

A more difficult question was raised when the United States sought to have NATO state that “the fundamental purpose of nuclear weapons is to deter the use of nuclear weapons against NATO.” For those new members whose governments still harbor fears of potential conventional attacks, this seemed to de-link the nuclear deterrent from the Strategic Concept’s pledge to “deter and defend against any threat of aggression, and against emerging security challenges where they threaten the fundamental security of individual allies or the Alliance as a whole.” This concern, harkening back to the issue raised during the winter of 2010 and seemingly put to rest in the Strategic Concept, caused a backlash against the proposal and we understand it has been dropped.

We want to make clear that we believe those conclusions serve the Alliance well and we believe that NATO is ultimately stronger for having gone through the process of reviewing and reaffirming the fundamental principles of its nuclear policy. Every decade or so NATO needs to do this, especially as it gauges how geopolitics have changed. What we objected to in 2010, and continue to object to today, was the way the debate began and the fact that it became politically necessary to prolong it after November 2010. All of this said, we applaud its ultimate conclusion.

## To Chicago and Beyond

We urge NATO's leaders to endorse the recommendations on nuclear policy that the "jumbo ministerial" agreed upon. In so doing, we earnestly hope they will close the book for now on the issue of Alliance nuclear policy. There will be strong external pressures on them not to do so. Already those same arms reductions experts who failed to convince new member governments that they did not need the presence of forward-based nuclear weapons to provide reassurance and linkage are calling for a new round of NATO work on alternative basing schemes.

While such a new round would provide great entertainment (and employment) for the nuclear arms control lobby, we believe that the Alliance should regard the subject—which as we have demonstrated above has been amply studied, reviewed, analyzed, and debated for the past two years—as closed.<sup>2</sup> A new round of studies will simply continue to convince new members that the nuclear umbrella they sought shelter under by joining NATO can't be counted on. Worse yet, it will distract time and attention from those issues which NATO really needs to address: the growing gap in capabilities between the United States and its NATO allies, managing draconian cuts in defense spending that are facing all NATO allies, setting out a post-2014 path for Afghanistan, determining an end-game for Kosovo, evaluating progress toward membership by several aspiring countries, and sharing perspectives on Putin's Russia.

That leaves open the topic of arms reduction negotiations with Russia. We believe NATO should continue to make clear that it is open to such discussions. We believe NATO should

begin by seeking a means by which transparency can be introduced into the world of short-range nuclear weapons. We believe that NATO should seek an agreement which would both allow for a small but meaningful residual stockpile of NATO nuclear weapons on the ground in Europe and for a reduction—consistent with Russia's security needs but also consistent with the realities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century—in Russia's bloated and overly large tactical nuclear force. As we indicated several years ago, there are multiple paths through which such mutually acceptable reductions could be achieved.

Russia's responses to date have not been encouraging, alternating between a simple refusal to consider reductions in their short-range nuclear forces and a demand that NATO remove all of its weapons from Europe as a precondition to beginning negotiations. We should not regard these positions as final and immutable; at the same time, given the history of Russia's failure to carry out fully its commitments under the 1991-1992 "Presidential Nuclear Initiatives" and its perverse response of placing nuclear weapons at the heart of its national security policy when NATO was decreasing its reliance on nuclear weapons, we should understand that "leading by example" has not worked in this area and that no new reductions should be undertaken as an incentive to bring Russia to the table.

*MAY 2012*

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<sup>2</sup> There is in fact one subject which could use an additional look. Without considering this as an excuse to undercut the forward stationing of US nuclear weapons in Europe, the Alliance might usefully review how non-weapons-basing states can strengthen their role in nuclear risk-sharing and burden-sharing and thereby extend participation in NATO's nuclear missions to more countries and in ways that convey an alliance-wide willingness to share the critical responsibility of nuclear deterrence. This can apply to all of the new members of the Alliance as well as to those old members which are not weapons-basing states. Innovative ideas in this area could benefit the Alliance.

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