



ISSUE BRIEF BY MATTHEW KROENIG AND WALTER B. SLOCOMBE

Why Nuclear Deterrence Still Matters to NATO

AUGUST 2014

NATO's Strategic Concept (SC), adopted at the Lisbon Summit in November 2010, includes a number of propositions that define NATO's nuclear policy. Most fundamentally, NATO's most important strategy document declares that "[d]eterrence, based on an appropriate mix of nuclear and conventional capabilities, remains a core element of" the Alliance's "overall strategy."¹

Although the SC reaffirms NATO's continued reliance on nuclear deterrence, it and the May 2012 Deterrence and Defense Posture Review (DDPR) Statement at the NATO Summit in Chicago still leave a great deal unresolved about the role nuclear weapons should play in NATO's deterrence and collective defense policy.²

In this issue brief, the authors argue that nuclear deterrence will remain a crucial part of NATO defense policy for the foreseeable future to deter the real (but remote) nuclear threats that the Alliance faces. They also examine the Russian, Iranian, and other threats that NATO nuclear weapons are intended to deter.

NATO in the Second Nuclear Age

Nuclear weapons are tools of great power political competition, and they remain the ultimate instrument of military force. As such, they featured prominently in the bipolar geopolitical competition between NATO and the Warsaw Pact. As recent events in Ukraine and the South China Sea indicate, it is possible that tensions among the great powers will resurface and that nuclear weapons will again feature prominently in these confrontations, certainly as part of the overall strategic context, and possibly even as a factor in the event of direct major power military conflict. Indeed, in recent years, NATO members have found themselves in

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disputes against both fledgling nuclear-armed states such as North Korea and established ones such as Russia and China.

During the Cold War, nuclear deterrence was a central element of NATO's defense policy and strategy. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, nuclear weapons receded to the background for the Alliance. For the first time in its history, NATO possessed the capability to deal with any plausible nonnuclear contingency with conventional forces without using nuclear weapons. In the two decades following the end of the Cold War, tensions between Europe and Russia were reduced and this led to a corresponding diminution in the importance of nuclear forces in political and military affairs. Since 1991, nuclear weapons have not been central to NATO defense

1 NATO, Strategic Concept, Lisbon, November 19-20, 2010, http://www.nato.int/strategic-concept/pdf/Strat_Concept_web_en.pdf.

2 NATO, Deterrence and Defense Posture Review, Chicago, May 20, 2012, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_87597.htm?mode=pressrelease.

planning, largely because NATO's primary foes, including Serbia, the Afghan Taliban, Saddam Hussein's Iraq, and Libya did not have these weapons and the possibility of military conflict with Russia appeared remote. Moreover, NATO's conventional capabilities were sufficient to handle any conventional threats these adversaries could pose, and there was no plausible use of nuclear weapons against the nontraditional threats (terrorism, insurgency, human rights abuses) of which these countries were sources, so there was no need to rely on nuclear deterrence in the former case and no utility in doing so in the latter.

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Over the past two decades, therefore, nuclear weapons have been deemphasized in NATO planning. This trend was codified in the 2010 SC, which declared for the first time that reducing the role of nuclear weapons was itself an explicit goal of NATO nuclear strategy. The SC notes that NATO has “dramatically reduced the number of nuclear weapons stationed in Europe and our reliance on nuclear weapons in NATO strategy” and that the Alliance will “seek to create the conditions for further reductions in the future.”³ The document goes still further to state that the Alliance pledges “to create the conditions for a world without nuclear weapons....”⁴

The SC is equally clear, however, that “as long as nuclear weapons exist, NATO will remain a nuclear alliance.”⁵ The articulated aspirations for reduction and even elimination are not, therefore, intended to mean that the Alliance has abandoned the core principle that a

nuclear attack will meet a nuclear response, or that NATO will not retain the necessary means to deliver such a response.

Recent events confirm the wisdom of this approach. Russian actions against Ukraine have reminded the Alliance that confrontation, even conflict, with a major nuclear power is not impossible. Moreover, even as NATO has proclaimed its plans for reduction in both reliance on, and numbers of, nuclear forces, key non-NATO nuclear powers are placing an increased, not decreased, emphasis on nuclear weapons. Russia, China, India, Pakistan, and North Korea are all expanding and/or modernizing their nuclear arsenals. In the past, NATO explicitly tied its nuclear force posture to developments in other countries. The 1999 SC, for example, declared that “the existence of powerful nuclear forces outside the Alliance... constitutes a significant factor which the Alliance has to take into account.”⁶ There was no such provision in the 2010 SC. Whether that omission was deliberate or merely a consequence of a determination to shorten the document, it is necessary to explicitly reintroduce such considerations into NATO planning documents.

That potential adversaries put greater reliance on nuclear weapons than in the past is hardly surprising. In some sense, the central potential of nuclear weapons as a military instrument is that they level the odds, and give states a way to offset real or perceived conventional disadvantages. Potential adversaries can plausibly see NATO and US conventional capability as a problem—whether threat or obstacle. That they should claim (and perhaps even believe) that by threatening to use nuclear weapons they can deter NATO from exploiting its conventional superiority is reminiscent of Cold War NATO policy. During the confrontation with the USSR, NATO feared it could not confidently expect to defeat a Soviet conventional attack by conventional means alone. Today, Russia has explicitly adopted a doctrine of possible use of nuclear weapons to “de-escalate” a conflict and would-be proliferators emphasize the potential of nuclear weapons to make US or allied resistance to their regional ambitions too costly.

The scope and significance of Russian and other doctrinal reliance on nuclear weapons are unclear, but NATO needs to take them seriously. At the very least, NATO should be abundantly clear about its resolve and capability to respond with terrible effect to any nuclear attack. Moreover, while the primary function of NATO's nuclear forces is deterrence of nuclear attacks, the Alliance would gain nothing by claiming to absolutely

3 NATO, Strategic Concept, Lisbon.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 NATO, Strategic Concept, Washington, DC, April 24, 1999.

renounce the option of responding with nuclear weapons to certain types of nonnuclear aggression.

Basic Doctrine: Who Is to Be Deterred? From Doing What?

NATO's basic nuclear doctrine lacks clarity about both the actors NATO is meant to deter and the actions from which it is meant to deter them. For example, the DDPR asserts that "nuclear weapons will not be used or threatened to be used against Non-Nuclear Weapon States that are party to the Non-Proliferation Treaty and in compliance with their nuclear non-proliferation obligations."⁷ However important these negative security assurances (NSAs) are for NATO's nonproliferation efforts, they include in their coverage very few, if any, of the nations that could affect the security of NATO members. The fact is that all the potential objects of NATO nuclear deterrence fall outside of these NSA-protected categories. These include the acknowledged current nuclear weapon states Russia and China and also states like Iran and North Korea (and, potentially others) that appear to be bent on taking the steps needed to acquire at least a minimal nuclear weapons capability and that are clearly not in compliance with their nonproliferation obligations.

Russia

During the Cold War, the Soviet Union was not just the primary object of NATO deterrence; it was for all practical purposes the only one. By 2010, the situation seemed to have changed enough that the SC could describe the possibility of military confrontation with Russia, much less one in which use of nuclear weapons would be seriously considered, as "extremely remote." The recent—and very worrying—developments in Russian foreign policy, notably the invasion and annexation of Crimea and other threats to the territorial integrity of Ukraine, inevitably make that comfortable assessment less confident, though probably still accurate. Nuclear deterrence is, by definition, about highly unlikely but possible and terribly dangerous contingencies. The potential Russian nuclear threat was never something to be completely dismissed, and it is still less so today.

The fact is that Russia, in the post-Cold War period, has increased the declared role of nuclear weapons in its military thinking. It has also resumed a robust program of modernizing all legs of its strategic nuclear forces. And it has made doctrinal shifts, e.g., abandoning any pretense of a "no first use" policy and referring to nuclear strikes as a possible way to

"de-escalate" a conventional conflict. Moreover, well before the recent Ukrainian crisis, Russia periodically issued barely veiled threats of launching a nuclear attack in circumstances far short of a response to a nuclear attack on Russia. In 2012, for example, Russia threatened to attack NATO bases in Poland and Romania that host NATO missile defense assets.⁸ And Russia's leaders appear to see a real possibility of nuclear strikes arising in the context of a conventional war.

WELL BEFORE THE RECENT UKRAINIAN CRISIS, RUSSIA PERIODICALLY ISSUED BARELY VEILED THREATS OF LAUNCHING A NUCLEAR ATTACK IN CIRCUMSTANCES FAR SHORT OF A RESPONSE TO A NUCLEAR ATTACK ON RUSSIA.

So long as nuclear weapons retain such a prominent place in Russian force structure, procurement priorities, doctrine, and political rhetoric, it remains an important deterrence mission for NATO to retain a policy of, and a serious capability for, nuclear deterrence as a potential instrument for dealing with the remote but calamitous contingency of a military confrontation with Russia.

Therefore, at a minimum, NATO's nuclear deterrence doctrine needs to be clear and firm that any use of nuclear weapons against an ally would result in a nuclear counterstrike. That leaves the question of whether NATO nuclear doctrine and declaratory policy should explicitly exclude a nuclear response to any

⁷ NATO, Deterrence and Defense Posture Review.

⁸ Bruno Waterfield, "Russia Threatens NATO with Military Strikes Over Missile Defence System," *Telegraph*, May 3, 2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/9243954/Russia-threatens-Nato-with-military-strikes-over-missile-defence-system.html>.

other sort of provocation. NATO's position—admittedly implicit rather than explicit—is that it does not.

Russia's conventional forces, fundamentally weakened after the implosion of the Soviet Union, are being rebuilt, and Moscow undoubtedly has the capability to overwhelm the strictly national defenses of small neighbors. Russia demonstrated this in Georgia in 2008 and in Crimea in 2014. It has also threatened to repeat and escalate its use of conventional force against Ukraine. Assuming continuing, if slowed economic recovery and further rise of nationalist and even revanchist ambitions, both Russia's capacity and its inclination to use force on the periphery of NATO may increase.

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Nonetheless, in all probability, NATO could deal with a Russian conventional attack by conventional, or at any rate nonnuclear means. Should NATO, therefore, contemplate renouncing absolutely the option of nuclear strikes in response to conventional aggression? During the Cold War, there was no question that the task of nuclear weapons was not simply to deter nuclear attack on NATO allies but to dissuade the Soviet leadership from a massive conventional attack as well. At present, however, NATO's relative conventional capability is vastly greater than during the Cold War. Accordingly, it can reasonably be argued that if successful conventional defense against any plausible attack is possible, then there is little need to rely on the risk of nuclear escalation to meet conventional aggression.

There is, however, an important qualification to this argument that the conventional balance has so shifted that nuclear deterrence is wholly irrelevant to the

conventional defense problem. An ultimately successful conventional defense is likely to entail huge costs, especially to the immediate target of the aggression, and take a long time. The likely immediate victims, which could conceivably include the Baltic states or Poland, might therefore prefer that Russia be deterred not only by the prospect of conventional defeat resulting in their potentially delayed and destructive "liberation," but also by the possibility that a Russian attack would be met by early nuclear strikes by the United States or other allies.

Given this context, even if it is thought unlikely that NATO would resort to nuclear weapons in such a contingency, it would be foolish to go through the motions of abjuring in peacetime any possibility of a nuclear response to a Russian conventional assault that is on the verge of overwhelming an ally's strictly conventional defenses. The argument for not foregoing this option is, of course, less that an early nuclear response would in fact be necessary, much less that it would be the more or less automatic consequence of attack, but rather that there is no reason to attempt to assure potential aggressors that this would not happen.

Moreover, the issue of NATO policy on nuclear response to nonnuclear attack has a critical political dimension that may be more important for intra-Alliance politics and relationships than for deterrence as such. Russia, which, having dismissed the unconvincing "no first use" pledge it inherited from the USSR, would (correctly) be unlikely to give such a pledge by NATO much weight. However, a "no first use" promise would in all likelihood undermine the confidence of some allies in NATO's general effectiveness. It would have profound negative effects on Alliance cohesion, without producing much if anything in terms of Russian restraint.⁹ Nor indeed would such a pre-conflict promise in itself necessarily weigh all that much if NATO ever had actually to face a situation in which it confronted the possibility of imminent catastrophic conventional defeat.

The mission of deterring Russian nuclear use against NATO members and perhaps even reserving (or at least not purporting to give up) the option of nuclear first use is probably the nuclear mission on which there is the greatest consensus within the Alliance.

But it is not the only valid NATO nuclear mission.

⁹ For similar reasons, any change in the present arrangements whereby a small number of US nuclear weapons are based in Europe, along with US and allied aircraft to deliver them, must be made with full allied consultation and consensus, for these weapons' political symbolism is at least as important as their military significance.

Iran

The November 2013 “interim deal” between the P5+1¹⁰ and Iran, and its extension in July 2014, was meant to temporarily freeze Iran’s nuclear program and cap its stockpile of nuclear material and thereby to provide time and space to negotiate a more comprehensive accord. At the time of writing, the prospect for successful diplomacy between Iran and the international community remains uncertain. But even if the interim deal is followed up by a comprehensive agreement that places strict and verified limits on Iran’s nuclear stockpile and facilities, Iran will continue to pose a potential nuclear threat to NATO because Tehran will always have the option of renouncing those agreements, either openly or clandestinely, and reconstituting its program.

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In addition, Tehran is also making steady progress on its means of delivery. It currently has ballistic missiles capable of reaching the territory of NATO members in southern Europe. Estimates of when Iran could have a ballistic missile capable of reaching all of Europe and the United States are debated, but there seems little reason to doubt that, if the leadership in Tehran wants such a capability, Iran has the technological and

financial resources to achieve it eventually.¹¹ If in the future, Iran develops the capacity to deliver nuclear weapons to NATO members, the ability to deter and, in extremis, to respond in kind to an Iranian nuclear attack will become an urgent priority for the Alliance.

And, unfortunately, Iran is not the only country in NATO’s neighborhood that might develop nuclear weapons and ambitions inconsistent with NATO members’ security.¹² Maintaining a capability to deal with the emergence of such a threat should remain a NATO priority even if the Iran problem is somehow resolved.

Nuclear Terrorism. NATO should make it a matter of policy that a state that sponsors or facilitates a nuclear attack by a terrorist group would be held fully accountable. Such a policy would be consistent with the 2010 US Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) statement that the greatest nuclear threat facing the United States does not come from other states, but from the possibility of nonstate nuclear terrorism.¹³ Since it would be difficult to deter terrorist groups already in possession of nuclear weapons from using them, the key to preventing nuclear terrorism is stopping terrorists from acquiring nuclear weapons or weapons-grade fissile material in the first place.¹⁴ A commitment to, as expressed in the 2010 NPR, “hold fully accountable any state, terrorist group, or other non-state actor that supports or enables terrorist efforts to obtain or use weapons of mass destruction, whether by facilitating, financing, or providing expertise or safe haven for such effort” would be a useful element in NATO doctrine.¹⁵ Although this and related statements do not explicitly threaten a nuclear response to nuclear terrorism, they do not explicitly rule it out either. In any event, since the intent of the policy is to deter nuclear terrorism, maintaining the option in principle is consistent with a basic doctrine, as articulated in the 2010 NPR, which assigns nuclear weapons the “fundamental role” of deterring nuclear attacks.¹⁶

¹⁰ P5+1 refers to the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States) plus Germany.

¹¹ “Pentagon Report: Iran Could Test an Intercontinental Ballistic Missile by 2015,” *Defense Update*, April 23, 2013, http://defense-update.com/20130425_iran_nuclear_icbm.html.

¹² In addition there is a potential for military conflict with China or North Korea at least as great as with Russia or Iran. In such a conflict, nuclear deterrence in all its dimensions would be a major issue. If such a conflict resulted in an attack on US or Canadian territory, Article V could be invoked.

¹³ US Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review Report*, April 2010, <http://www.defense.gov/npr/docs/2010%20nuclear%20posture%20review%20report.pdf>.

¹⁴ On deterring terrorism, see Matthew Kroenig and Barry Pavel, “How to Deter Terrorism,” *Washington Quarterly*, spring 2012, pp. 21-36.

¹⁵ US Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review Report*.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

Extremely Grave Nonnuclear Threats

In addition to nuclear threats, there is a possibility of threats to NATO nations and interests from large-scale nonnuclear (though hardly “conventional”) instruments that could, at least in theory, be equivalent in their effects to those of an actual nuclear attack. Threats in this category might include devastating biological weapons attacks and large-scale cyberattacks that could, in principle, produce effects equivalent to nuclear attacks. North Korea and Iran are widely believed to possess biological weapons and, although Russia and China have declared adherence to the Biological Weapons Convention, the United States has in the past expressed reservations about both countries’ compliance with this accord. China and Russia are both known to have robust and sophisticated offensive cyber capabilities and to have conducted—or at any rate tolerated—attacks and cyber espionage against NATO members.¹⁷ In addition, Iran has a less capable, but active, offensive cyber program.

Should NATO threaten to use nuclear weapons to deter these attacks? So far, the United States has not regarded it as prudent to absolutely rule out the use of nuclear weapons in response to these types of attack. For the same reasons that have persuaded the United States to adopt its position, NATO should continue not to rule it out either. As with a large-scale conventional attack, the purpose of ambiguity in doctrine toward these threats would not be to commit NATO to a nuclear response, but to deter an adversary by increasing its perception of the potential high and unknown costs of choosing these courses of action.

This issue is, however, distinct from that of NATO retaining a traditional “first use” option in the face of conventional defeat; it considers the possibility of an attack that, although technically not use of nuclear weapons, has effects tantamount to such an attack. It is therefore consistent in principle with a policy of relying on nuclear weapons for the fundamental role of deterring nuclear attack because the threat would be reserved for attacks that are equivalent in their effects to the use of nuclear weapons.

Nuclear Deterrence of Nuclear Coercion? Always implicit in any discussion of the political utility of nuclear weapons is another element: nuclear coercion. Any alliance depends for its credibility—and ultimately for its effectiveness—on the willingness of those allies that are not immediately threatened to come to the aid of

those that are. So strong is attachment to the NATO creed that an attack on one ally is to be treated as an attack on all, that it is easy to overlook how difficult it might be to fulfill that obligation in an actual crisis. In particular, once the Soviet Union had a capacity to inflict immense destruction on the American continent, regardless of any US attempt at preemptive damage limitation, the credibility of the American commitment to NATO came to depend crucially on whether the Soviet nuclear threat could deter US involvement. Nor, in fact, was the problem limited to the United States. There was always an element—which the Soviets routinely exploited and President Vladimir Putin’s Russia periodically revives—of using nuclear threats aimed at more distant European allies to discourage them from aiding the allies immediately at risk. American nuclear weapons played a critical role in offsetting this “divide and conquer” potential, for it meant that any Soviet nuclear attack on the United States or an ally would result in an unimaginably powerful counterattack.

This aspect of the nuclear context is very relevant today. It is by no means implausible that a nuclear-armed adversary would try to use nuclear weapons to coerce NATO members. Therefore, NATO’s nuclear doctrine—and indeed its planning generally—must recognize that the prospect of such nuclear coercion may be the most significant nuclear-related security challenge facing NATO and a principal task for deterrence.

NATO nuclear deterrence has the potential to offset potential nuclear blackmail if the adversary believes that an attack on a NATO ally could have catastrophic consequences. Using nuclear weapons to offset potential nuclear blackmail, therefore, is a special case of extended nuclear deterrence. Negating such coercion is a primary reason for US and NATO commitment—now affirmed in the new SC and by separate action at the Lisbon Summit—to build an effective defense against missiles that could be used to carry nuclear weapons to targets in NATO territory. But the blackmail threat will be most effectively countered if effective defenses are backstopped by traditional deterrence and the prospect of powerful retaliation. Providing that backup may become a central rationale for NATO nuclear forces in the future. Nuclear weapons—and the threat of their use—are likely to remain a central, enduring, and often controversial, element of NATO policy.

¹⁷ David E. Sanger, “US Blames China’s Military Directly for Cyberattacks,” *New York Times*, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/07/world/asia/us-accuses-chinas-military-in-cyberattacks.html?_r=0.

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