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Threaten Decisive Nuclear Retaliation

by David Gompert and Hans Binnendijk

NATO should thwart Russian use of nuclear weapons by threatening certain retaliation.

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The danger of nuclear war in Europe is greater than it has been since the Cold War—and growing. A sputtering economy dragged down by low energy prices impedes Russia from competing with the West in advanced technology and conventional military capabilities. Yet, under Vladimir Putin, Russia is menacing its neighbors, including NATO's Baltic members, diverting attention from its domestic woes. As a result, Russia is increasing its reliance on nuclear weapons and the threat to use them *first,* and it is pursuing an advantage in nuclear forces in Europe. In the face of this challenge, NATO's stated nuclear strategy is too stale, vague, and timid to ensure deterrence. This essay offers an alternative strategy to reduce the danger of nuclear war in Europe.

Russia's growing emphasis on nuclear weapons is not confined to Europe. Russia is also fearful that the United States' missile defense, its unmatched global sensors, non-nuclear precision-strike weaponry, and cyberwar capabilities could weaken the credibility of Moscow's second-strike deterrent. At the same time, it appears to the Kremlin that the United States is walking away from arms control, including the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM), Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF), and Open Skies treaties. Taken together, Russia's adventurous foreign policy, conventional military disadvantages, and fear of US strategic nuclear intentions are causing it to develop and field new intercontinental and theater nuclear delivery systems, including hypersonic systems, which have grave implications for NATO.[1]

In this context, Russia's declared threat to use nuclear weapons first in the event of war should be of acute concern, as much to US allies as to the United States. Such a policy gives Russia an escalatory option if hostilities were to occur and persist until NATO could bring to bear its conventional military superiority. While the policy is meant to warn against conventional strikes on Russian territory, in practice the policy could provide a potential sanctuary from which Russia could conduct military operations against the Baltic States, for instance. It also supports Russia's nuclear intimidation of its neighbors, including NATO members.

Russia has undoubtedly taken note of the decline of support in Europe for NATO's nuclear deterrent. While ultimately the Alliance's deterrence rests on US, British, and French national systems, US B-61 nuclear gravity bombs delivered by allied dual-capable aircraft (DCA) from sites in Europe are the first-line Alliance deterrent. But that deterrent is under political threat. In Germany, the head of the Social Democratic Party's parliamentary group has called for the withdrawal of US weapons and troops from Germany.[2] There is also resistance in Germany to purchasing new DCA. In the Netherlands and Belgium, parliamentary opposition to nuclear deployments there periodically result in close votes on the issue. And instability in Turkey raises questions about the safety and security of any weapons that might be deployed there. While NATO does not need to match Russia missile for missile in Europe to ensure adequate deterrence, it does need some credible capability.

NATO lacks a credible nuclear doctrine to contend with this worrying and worsening situation. The current official formulation, first set out in the 2010 Strategic

1 At the strategic level, these systems include: the Avangard hypersonic glide vehicle, the Kinzhal hypersonic missile launched by the MiG-31, the RS-28 Sarmat heavy intercontinental ballistic missile, the 9M730 Burevestnik nuclear-powered cruise missile, the Poseidon underwater drone, and the Peresvet high-energy laser weapon. See Tony Wesolowsky, "Here Is What We Know: Russia's New Generation of Nuclear-Capable Weapons," *Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty,* February 19, 2019, https://www.rferl.org/a/here-s-what-we-know-russia-s-new-generation-of-nuclear-capable-weapons/29778663.html. Russia is also testing anti-satellite (ASAT) weapons. At the theater level, Russia has developed, tested, and deployed the SSC-8 (9M729) ground-launched cruise missile. It has also deployed nuclear-capable missiles in Kaliningrad.

2 Peter Rough and Frank A. Rose, "Why Germany's Nuclear Mission Matters," *Order from Chaos* (Brookings Institution), June 9, 2020, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/06/09/why-germanys-nuclear-mission-matters/.

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A nuclear capable B-2 stealth bomber taxis down a runway (Source: The National Interest)

Concept and adopted before the new Russian threat emerged, is that NATO needs an "appropriate mix of nuclear and conventional weapons" to deter aggression. This policy contemplates nuclear use only in "extremely remote" circumstances.[3] In 2012, NATO's Deterrence and Defense Posture Review reiterated this basic policy, adding a reference to negative security assurances for adherents of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) and noting the complementary role of missile defense as part of the "appropriate mix."[4] More recently, at its 2016 Warsaw Summit, NATO warned that Russia's use of nuclear weapons would "fundamentally alter the nature of a conflict," and stated that NATO has the "capabilities and resolve" to impose unacceptably high costs in response to threats to the "fundamental security" of a member nation.[5] Such wooly formulations imply that NATO is hesitant to say it would retaliate with nuclear weapons and, indeed, could be indecisive about nuclear retaliation—a stance that is hardly conducive to deterrence. It is high time that NATO fixed this problem.

NATO can reduce the dangers inherent in growing Russian reliance on nuclear weapons by warning unequivocally of symmetrical nuclear retaliation for Russian first use. We call this "Decisive Response."[6] Provided it is clear about its response if Russia were to resort to the use of nuclear weapons, NATO need not state categorically that it would refrain from using nuclear weapons for any *other* reason, thus finessing the contentious no-first-use issue. A statement by NATO that it needs nuclear weapons to deter Russian first use would be understandable and politically defensible. We use the term Decisive Response in that it conveys resolve and dispels any doubts the Russians

3 NATO, *Active Engagement, Modern Defense*, Strategic Concept for the Defence and Security of the Members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, November 19-20, 2010, para. 17, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_publications/20120214_strategic-concept-2010-eng.pdf.

4 NATO, Deterrence and Defense Posture Review, May 20, 2012.

5 NATO, "Warsaw Summit Communiqué," July 9, 2016, para. 54, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_133169.htm.

6 See Hans Binnendijk and David Gompert, "Decisive Response: A New Nuclear Strategy for NATO," *Survival*, October-November 2019, 61(5): 113-128, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00396338.2019.1662119?journalCode=tsur20. This essay develops several ideas first discussed in that article—how Decisive Response relates to NATO's overall defense strategy, strategic nuclear deterrence, NATO's nuclear capabilities, and arms control—and on occasion quotes directly from it. A few sentences in this essay are taken verbatim from pages 118 and 119.

might harbor about NATO's willingness to use nuclear weapons in retaliation. Though NATO's current policy does not exclude this possibility, present conditions make it necessary to eliminate any lingering ambiguity. We recognize that several nations may resist clarity on this issue, but that resistance reduces the effectiveness of nuclear deterrence.

By strengthening deterrence of Russian nuclear escalation of a conflict, Decisive Response would inhibit Russia from *any* aggression against *any* NATO member. It would help disabuse Moscow of the belief that NATO would hesitate to respond forcefully to Russian threats or acts of aggression, such as a quick "grab" of Baltic territory or an attempt to expand its control in the Arctic or Black Sea. And it would negate Russia's strategy of making itself a sanctuary from which it could project force against NATO. Indeed, even irregular aggression toward NATO members, such as the insertion of paramilitary forces and cyberattacks, could be deterred more effectively insofar as the Russian threat to escalate to nuclear war would be spiked. Thus, Decisive Response could strengthen deterrence of *all* aggression.

To support a cogent nuclear deterrent policy, NATO nations who have a nuclear mission should reiterate their willingness to continue with their missions for the foreseeable future, whether stationing or delivering the weapons. Whereas previous nuclear strategies for NATO, such as "flexible response," required nuclear weapons capabilities on every rung of the escalatory ladder, Decisive Response would not. It is only important that NATO have capabilities in theater to respond in kind to what might be a limited Russian first strike. The key to Decisive Response lies not in outsized arsenals of theater nuclear-delivery systems, but in unhesitating decision-making and action. The few hundred B-61 nuclear gravity bombs available in Europe[7] to be delivered by allied DCA provide an important deterrent capability provided they are linked with decisive decision-making. Of course, these systems need to be kept secure and modernized as needed.

Given continuing improvement of Russian air defenses and the need for a robust US role in retaliation, NATO DCA might, if needed, be augmented by US sea-based low-yield nuclear-tipped cruise missiles.[8] The United States may require new theater-range land-based missiles to deal with other threats, for example, China, but it does not require them to make Decisive Response credible in Europe.

At the same time, Decisive Response's credibility depends on having an agreed policy on how NATO would retaliate if deterrence failed. The concept of *symmetrical* response balances the need to avoid further escalation with the need to convince Russia that it will always have far more to lose than to gain by initiating nuclear hostilities. Generally speaking, symmetry implies comparable levels and targeting priorities. To illustrate, if Russia opts to demonstrate its preparedness to use nuclear weapons by detonating a single weapon far from NATO territory or forces, NATO should do likewise. If the Russians use nuclear weapons against NATO forces, NATO should respond accordingly. In the latter case, NATO would endeavor to avoid Russian targets that Moscow might interpret as a precursor to a strategic first strike.

In parallel, the Alliance should work with the United States to initiate efforts with Russia to renegotiate a modified version of the INF Treaty. If Russia is unwilling to scrap its SSC-8 missiles, there are other options to provide greater security for Europe. One option would be to limit all permitted INF missiles globally that carry nuclear warheads, something China might also be able to accept. Adding an arms control component would be consistent with NATO's long-standing tradition of having a dual-track approach to Russia.

With or without a NATO arms control initiative, the Russians will claim that Decisive Response is provocative and will gaslight the concept in Western political circles, hoping to stimulate opposition. Yet, such a strategy is irrefutably meant to *reduce* the danger of nuclear war. As such a concept is debated among and within NATO states, a harsh Russian reaction would

7 For a recent estimate of the number of B-61s in Europe, see NTI, "Nuclear Disarmament NATO," June 28, 2019, https://www.nti.org/analysis/articles/nato-nuclear-disarmament/.

8 US Department of Defense, Nuclear Posture Review, 2018, https://dod.defense.gov/News/SpecialReports/2018NuclearPostureReview.aspx.

suggest that Moscow takes such a declaratory policy seriously, which is exactly the aim. It would be unfortunate for NATO to water down its declaratory policy and thus imply indecisiveness.

Nuclear weapons were a central focus of discussions on deterrence in NATO during the Cold War. Today, similar discussions are taboo. But given the growing Russian nuclear challenge to Europe, continued silence on this topic is no longer viable. There is a path that can reverse the current unstable state of affairs. We urge NATO to follow that path.

David Gompert is a distinguished visiting professor at the US Naval Academy. He previously served as the acting director of national intelligence, special assistant to the US president, deputy undersecretary of state, and vice president of the RAND Corporation.

Hans Binnendijk is a distinguished fellow at the Atlantic Council. He previously served as senior director for defense policy at the US National Security Council, acting director of the State Department's Policy Planning Staff, and director of the US Institute for National Strategic Studies.