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Rethinking NATO's Tactical Nuclear Weapons

Steve Andreasen

The aftermath of President Donald Trump's first visit to NATO headquarters in May 2017 and the G20 Summit in July might seem an inopportune time to debate the future of US tactical nuclear weapons in Europe. Anxiety in NATO capitals has risen since last November, driven by continuing concerns over Trump's election and the threatening direction of Russian security policy. Against this backdrop, the easy – some would say obvious – conclusion is for NATO to stay on nuclear-policy autopilot. But anxiety should not preclude strategic thinking about NATO's nuclear future. Rather than cling to a preset course, programmed in a different era, NATO should confront three questions:

- Does it make sense for the United States and NATO to store tactical nuclear weapons in locations with increasing vulnerability to an evolving and more deadly terrorist threat, or to domestic unrest?
- Does it make sense for the United States and NATO to invest billions of dollars in maintaining NATO's current nuclear posture if a safer, more secure and more credible nuclear deterrent is available at a far lower cost?
- Given the uncertainty in many NATO capitals of securing political and public support for the costly modernisation of their dual-capable aircraft and continued storage of US nuclear weapons on their soil, shouldn't NATO get out ahead of that debate?

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The answers should compel NATO to conclude that sustaining its current nuclear posture is an expense beyond what is needed to maintain a credible deterrent; moreover, it will undercut efforts to sustain credible conventional and counter-terror capabilities across NATO. Most urgently, the security risk of basing US nuclear bombs in Europe, highlighted by recent terrorist attacks there and developments in Turkey, underscores the need for NATO to move to a safer, more secure and more credible nuclear deterrent – including withdrawing, and not replacing, US tactical nuclear weapons in Europe.

Sources of anxiety

After NATO summits in 2010 and 2012 pried open the door to a more rational nuclear posture, Russian aggression in Ukraine in 2014 put anxiety – with a distinctly nuclear component – back in the driver’s seat. Even before then, Moscow retained tactical nuclear weapons greatly in excess of those stored by the United States in Europe. Russian nuclear capability was alarmingly married, years ago, with the concept of nuclear ‘de-escalation’ – the deliberate escalation of a conflict through limited nuclear use designed to create a pause in the conflict and open a pathway for a negotiated settlement on Moscow’s terms. The reported Russian deployment of nuclear-capable *Iskander* missiles to Kaliningrad, and a new nuclear-capable intermediate-range cruise missile – in violation of the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty – has further aggravated the issue.

The result has been a distinctly one-dimensional, almost schoolyard-like, mentality in many NATO capitals. Whatever Russia does, in particular in the nuclear sphere, NATO must do also (witness calls by US Senator Tom Cotton and Congressman Mike Rogers to develop a US intermediate-range missile for Europe as a counter to Russian capabilities).¹ In that context, some view any change to NATO’s current nuclear posture, in particular the consolidation of US tactical nuclear weapons back to the United States, as a display of NATO’s weakness that might embolden Russian President Vladimir Putin.

And then there is Donald Trump. Since election day in the United States, ‘uncertain’ is perhaps the best single-word summary of the Trump presidency. It applies broadly, and has continued for a period of months, beyond the norm of any new administration.

Despite recent efforts by President Trump and senior administration officials to reassure NATO regarding the continuing US commitment to the transatlantic alliance, the uncertainty and anxiety run deep through NATO, as expressed in German Chancellor Angela Merkel's declaration that Europe 'really must take our fate into our own hands'.²

The direction of US policy towards Russia compounds the uncertainty. On the one hand, President Trump's professed willingness to improve relations with Moscow is one of the few constants that ran through his campaign, the transition and the early months of his presidency. Then, in March, reports began circulating that Trump might shelve his plan to pursue closer ties, due to Russian 'provocations' – including Russia's reported INF violation.³ The first Trump–Putin meeting in Hamburg, however, seemed to tilt US policy again towards closer ties between Washington and Moscow. Now, congressional sanctions – and Russian retaliation – have pushed the pendulum the other way. This shift will likely be reinforced by congressional and Justice Department investigations into Russian efforts to influence the US election, the outcome of which will – at a minimum – re-emphasise Russian meddling and perhaps uncover Russian ties to members of the Trump campaign.

A costly status quo

Maintaining NATO's nuclear status quo will come at an increasingly high financial and political cost, and high security risk. Most alarming is that the United States will continue to store tactical nuclear weapons in locations with an increasing risk of vulnerability to an evolving and more deadly terrorist threat, as well as domestic unrest. Nowhere is this more evident than in Turkey.

In March 2016, the Pentagon reportedly ordered military families out of southern Turkey, primarily from Incirlik Air Base, due to ISIS-related security concerns. This came shortly after the Brussels terrorist attacks and what appears to have been a credible threat to Belgian nuclear-power plants.⁴ In July 2016, the Turkish commanding officer at Incirlik was arrested for his alleged role in the Turkish coup plot. If Incirlik is, as reported, a major NATO installation hosting one of the largest stockpiles of nuclear weapons

in Europe, this shows just how quickly assumptions about the safety and security of US nuclear weapons stored abroad can change.⁵

Events in Turkey should then have triggered a withdrawal of any US nuclear weapons stored at Incirlik; nothing that has happened over the past year should yield a different conclusion. Simply stated, Turkey does not provide a safe foundation for basing nuclear weapons. But the anxiety-driven status quo, compounded by concerns that removing nuclear weapons from Turkey would signal a lack of confidence in its stability, have precluded decisive action. Indeed, somewhat unbelievably given the security risks, the US now plans to bring the B61 bombs stored in Turkey back to the United States, replacing them with a modernised version.⁶

The financial and political costs of sustaining NATO's current nuclear posture have the potential to be similarly consequential to the security of the Alliance. The B61 life-extension programme now under way could result in the most expensive nuclear weapon ever built, with the cost now estimated to be \$10 billion or more for only 400–480 weapons. Procuring a next generation of dual-capable aircraft (DCA) – both in the United States and in those NATO countries participating in the mission – will significantly add to these costs.⁷

Yet the argument that tactical nuclear weapons play a deterrent role that cannot be filled by strategic or conventional weapons has been refuted by numerous military experts.⁸ For any weapon to be credible as a deterrent, its use must be plausible; otherwise, it has no political utility. But it is hard to envision the circumstances under which a US president would initiate nuclear use for the first time in more than 70 years with a NATO DCA flown by non-US pilots delivering a US B61 bomb. It is equally hard to envision host-country governments authorising their aircraft to deliver the weapon, under what would be a sure threat of nuclear retaliation against them. And according to at least one NATO commander, it is hard to envision any such mission succeeding if ordered.⁹

In short, tactical nuclear weapons are a psychological Maginot Line. Like the French defences of that era, tactical nuclear weapons today come with a high price tag, one that will inevitably draw scarce defence resources away from counter-terrorism and NATO's conventional reassurance initiatives

designed to deter Russia. In that sense, Russian political leaders and military planners may welcome NATO's commitment to invest in the nuclear status quo for the next decade.

Politically, the issue of tactical nuclear weapons continues to be treated as the Lord Voldemort – 'he who must not be named' – of NATO security policy out of fear that any public mention will bring the issue back to life. The nuclear mission is not popular in many participating countries. Hence, a loud reaffirmation of the status quo may ignite a backlash that threatens its continuation, let alone the planned upgrades of the B61 and DCA. At the same time, a one-dimensional argument for consolidating US nuclear weapons back to the US – in the absence of a vigorous case for why this will lead to a safer, more secure and more credible NATO deterrent – risks exacerbating persistent concerns about Trump's commitment to the defence of NATO allies. Nevertheless, the idea that NATO can silently continue modernisation, effectively ignoring the scepticism of basing countries and their publics, is simply wishful thinking.

A rational choice

Changing policy will be challenging. In particular, political leadership and administrative competence will be required in Washington, at a time when both seem in low supply within the Trump administration.¹⁰ Moreover, congressional hawks are set on further boxing in the president on Russia, including by requiring the Pentagon to begin developing a missile that would violate the INF Treaty in response to Russia's own violation. That said, a US Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) is happening now, which will set a course on these issues that the Alliance may have to live with for seven years. Time and tide wait for no man.

The first step is to prevent the cement of NATO bureaucracy from hardening around Washington's legs, before the Trump administration can conclude its NPR later this year and take the initiative. The good news is that nothing of this sort apparently came out of the 25 May NATO summit.

Secondly, the administration should prepare a comprehensive, as opposed to incremental, initiative. The president and his national-security team must convincingly underscore America's enduring commitment to the

Alliance, and lay out a vision and rationale for moving towards a safer, more secure and more credible nuclear deterrent – explaining why this will improve the security of all NATO members. This should include a commitment to maintain a NATO nuclear deterrent for as long as one is needed, and to sustain conventional reassurance initiatives. Both of these crucial objectives can be better achieved without the expense, opportunity cost and risk of basing US tactical nuclear weapons in Europe. The administration should also commit to working closely with NATO on the restructuring of its nuclear deterrent in line with clear goals. These should include maintaining the strategic nuclear forces of the Alliance – along with a more visible demonstration of their security guarantee to European allies (such as visits of US long-range nuclear-capable bombers to European air bases) – and enhancing information sharing, consultations and planning.

Thirdly, in order to reduce NATO's anxiety, it will be important for the United States to work collaboratively with key allies. This has so far seemed a tall order for this White House, but a collaborative and focused initiative should not be beyond the capabilities of the president's national-security team. A group of NATO states – ideally including a mixture of basing countries, and old and new NATO allies – will need to support the development of this initiative for managed withdrawal of tactical nuclear weapons and advocate for it within the Alliance.

Fourthly, the NATO process should then be used not to review, but rather to implement, this initiative. NATO should be given a clear mandate to develop and recommend to ministers and leaders how existing nuclear sharing, consultations and planning can be enhanced across NATO, and how NATO can visibly and more credibly demonstrate that it remains a nuclear alliance without US nuclear weapons stored on European soil. Congress, too, has a crucial role to play, including by providing continued, predictable funding of conventional reassurance and counter-terror initiatives.

Finally, proponents of changing the nuclear status quo will need to confidently and convincingly make the case that it is important to stop acting on the dangerous idea that mirroring Russian actions, in particular in the case of nuclear weapons, equates to sound security policy. Russia has retained and is now modernising its inventory of tactical nuclear weapons in Europe.

But with the United States, Britain and France, NATO has a robust nuclear deterrent – with around 1,000 warheads on day-to-day alert, a flexible capability well beyond what is needed to deter nuclear use or destroy any potential nuclear adversary – and does not need to invest in tactical nuclear weapons. NATO has a range of other defence priorities – including terrorism, cyber security and migration – that will demand greater attention and effort in the years ahead. That is a message that all NATO countries need to hear – the sooner the better.

Notes

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- 3 'Trump Wary of Russian Deal; New Advisers Urge Tougher Stand', Associated Press, 4 March 2017.
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- 9 Karl Heinz-Kamp and Robertus C.N. Remkes, 'Options for NATO Nuclear Sharing Arrangements', in Steve Andreasen and Isabelle Williams (eds), *Reducing Nuclear Risks in Europe* (Washington DC: Nuclear Threat Initiative, November 2011).
- 10 The following section is adapted from Steve Andreasen and Isabelle Williams, 'Bring Home U.S. Tactical Nuclear Weapons from Europe', in Tom Z. Collina and Geoff Wilson (eds), '10 Big Nuclear Ideas for the Next President', Ploughshares, November 2016, <http://www.ploughshares.org/sites/default/files/resources/10-big-nuclear-ideas.pdf>.