

A photograph of the USS Arkansas at night, with a missile being launched from its deck. The scene is illuminated by the bright light of the missile's engines, creating a dramatic contrast against the dark sky and the ship's silhouette. The ship's superstructure and various antennas are visible in the background.

USS Arkansas.

The Looming Alliance Debate over Nuclear Weapons

U.S. Navy (David Blencoe)

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In talks with Russia on the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and in Alliance debates on restructuring, members have endeavored to keep the question of nuclear weapons off the table. Thus far they have done that by devising a “three no’s” policy, stipulating that NATO has no intention, no plan, and no reason to deploy such weapons on the territory of any new member either now or in the future.¹ Based on an American initiative, the Allies adopted this policy for a number

of fairly sensible but largely tactical motives. For one, the United States and some of its European NATO allies did not want the politically volatile question of the forward stationing of nuclear weapons or delivery systems to bog down the expansion initiative. In addition, with under 500 U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe and Russian efforts to either limit or eliminate NATO nuclear forces during previous negotiations, Alliance officials probably feared that formal negotiations on tactical nuclear systems in the context of NATO enlargement could lead to a “third zero” in Europe²—elimination of Alliance dual-capable aircraft (DCA) and stocks of their nuclear bombs in NATO vaults in several member countries. Moreover, given the vast difference in the sizes of Russian and NATO

the probability of an agreement on deployment limits for tactical systems is considerable

stockpiles, the Alliance would be at a distinct disadvantage in the bargaining that any substrategic negotiations would likely entail.

With the demise of the Soviet Union and dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, the utility of the remaining NATO forward-based tactical nuclear weapons could be challenged by a disparate group of anti-nuclear, pacifist, and environmental activists and exploited by Moscow in the debate over NATO expansion—or so many Alliance officials thought. In an attempt to eliminate any prospect of debate, which promises to be contentious, Alliance officials devised the three no’s policy while holding to the line that the peacetime role of nuclear weapons in NATO planning remains essential for Alliance cohesion. From this perspective, if the size or composition of the NATO nuclear force is going to be changed it should only be in the context of adopting a new or revised strategic concept or, if pressed, through far-ranging discussions with Russia to address more than nuclear issues. If the Alliance re-opened the sub-strategic issue in the midst of discussions on expansion and internal adaptation, the process might be debilitating for both Alliance cohesion and

institutional credibility. The last “new strategic concept” was debated by NATO for nearly two years.

Yet while the decision to skirt the issue of nuclear weapons was tactically astute, the reality is that many factors make it unlikely that Alliance members can avoid a more explicit discussion of the fundamental question of nuclear deterrence and its place in NATO strategy for much longer. At some point, moreover, this should include developing a mechanism for preparing new members to participate effectively in the Alliance nuclear planning process.

START and Tactical Systems

There is every indication that the United States and Russia are accelerating the arms control process by developing a framework for START III reductions, measures to induce the Russian Duma to ratify START II, and agreement on demarcation issues related to missile

defense research, development, and deployment. Expedited discussions on significantly reducing strategic nuclear stockpiles under a START III rubric is likely to pressure NATO to think more concisely about how nuclear weapons fit into its plans for the next century. On March 21, 1997, at the Helsinki summit, Presidents Clinton and Yeltsin agreed that after START II enters into force the United States and Russia will begin negotiations on a START III agreement to lower the ceilings of strategic nuclear inventories to somewhere between 2,000–2,500 warheads. They also agreed to enhance the transparency of their nuclear inventories and, for the first time, to include a provision on the actual destruction of strategic nuclear warheads to promote irreversibility in the cuts. Perhaps most important in terms of extended deterrence, or the U.S. nuclear guarantee to protect NATO Europe, was the agreement that, in the context of START III, Washington and Moscow would explore as separate issues the possibility of added controls on nuclear long-range sea-launched cruise

missiles and tactical nuclear systems, to include confidence-building and transparency measures.³ Although the exact nature of such measures was not stated, some have suggested that prospective transparency measures might involve broader exposure by Russia to NATO vault safety and security procedures as well as mutual visits to stockpile sites in the hope of bringing the Russians closer to meeting NATO standards.

In any event, the Helsinki agreements clearly reflect the intentions of both Presidents to put START III on the fast track, and this could have profound implications for nuclear force structure in NATO, particularly for U.S.-provided weapons stockpiled in Europe. The wording of the joint statement on these issues is ambiguous in places and, as usual, covers over some key differences of approach between the sides. On the one hand, the United States wants any measures relating to nuclear long-range sea-launched cruise missiles and tactical nuclear systems limited to confidence-building and transparency measures. Russia, just as clearly, wanted the statement to allow for the exploration of possible reductions or operational constraints on these systems; for example, limits on deployment locations or range capabilities. Which side succeeds at the bargaining table has yet to be determined, but it is possible that limitations on numbers or deployment modalities of tactical nuclear weapons in Europe could be negotiated in the near future with obvious implications for the NATO strategic concept and nuclear risk-sharing in the Alliance. Hence, while maintaining a low-profile policy with regard to substrategic forces, the Alliance nevertheless needs to quietly consider its options lest it be caught off guard.

The probability of an agreement on deployment limits for tactical systems is considerable, in part since it is not only Russia that is interested in applying some sort of arms control measures to NATO tactical nuclear weapons. The United States and its partners have an obvious stake in seeing the large stock of Russian tactical nuclear weapons—by some estimates over



Bombers destroyed under START I.

DOD (R.D. Ward)

Waning Asset?

The European view of these trade-offs may well depend on whether government officials are wearing their strategic hats or green eyeshades. Budget cuts and force restructuring in virtually every allied nation raise the question of whether a continuing nuclear role is feasible for countries with dual-capable certified squadrons, particularly Belgium, Italy, and Greece. Each faces difficult military modernization choices with little stomach for increased defense spending as it attempts to meet stringent monetary criteria for entry into the European Monetary Union. Converting nuclear-tasked squadrons into truly effective conventional assets (for example, based on stand-off missiles) might prove more costly than maintaining current nuclear assignments. However, this fact is not likely to dampen incentives to shed the nuclear role in an effort to reduce military expenditures. Even in more prosperous DCA-deploying countries, including Germany, anti-nuclear sentiments combined with a desire to assuage Russian concerns over NATO expansion could erode government support for continued participation in this aspect of Alliance defense cooperation.

Most European NATO members regard DCA as a necessary evil, perceiving that deterrence is existential and thus rather immune to the number of systems or specific deployment modalities. Yet even with sizable anti-nuclear minorities in their countries, governments tend to accept Alliance sub-strategic capabilities as crucial to the theory of deterrence and, more importantly, to the political cohesion of the Alliance. Viewed from this position, the sense of shared risks and responsibilities embodied in NATO planning, both in the conventional and nuclear realms, is basic to maintaining consensus on many strategic issues. That said, for many in Europe the deployment of Alliance nuclear weapons is not sacrosanct, as attested by the British decision to dismantle DCA assets in favor of deploying a sub-strategic Trident—a decision based on both the longer range and enhanced precision of submarine-launched ballistic missile platforms that give them the capability to target a

10,000—reduced or put under strict transparency and control regimes for two reasons.⁴ First, it is generally thought that central Russian government control over these weapons is much more tenuous than over strategic systems. The United States and its allies would like to increase that control and, at the same time, enhance their information on these systems to decrease chances of nuclear materials being stolen by or diverted to pariah states or used by some rogue actor.

Second, NATO members are aware that stability in Russia is tenuous, with the military less and less satisfied by their status in the country's fragile democratic development. In this context, and against the disastrous outcome of the Russian foray into Chechnya, NATO officials are all the more concerned over Moscow's apparent adoption of the old NATO doctrine of flexible response. Many Europeans believe that renewed Russian interest in reliance upon nuclear weapons to offset conventional inferiorities, with modernization programs to match, must be redirected if stability is to be maintained on the Continent.

Thirdly, since it is the 10,000-odd Russian tactical nuclear weapons that pose a special threat to NATO European states—given the ranges associated with their likely delivery systems—it stands to reason that U.S. allies would seek other avenues to reduce the Russian inventory of sub-strategic warheads

and render those that remain more safe and secure. The Netherlands, for example, has proposed initiating some sort of Nunn-Lugar program targeted specifically on assisting Russia in the secure containment and dismantling of warheads on theater and intermediate-range missiles.

But precisely how efforts to redirect Moscow's increasing reliance on nuclear weapons ought to proceed—under the rubric of a START III agreement, perhaps in conjunction with revision of the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty or as part of less formal transparency talks—is open to debate. Equally uncertain is how the European members of NATO would view trade-offs that would increase the transparency of Russian tactical nuclear forces or cut their number versus a requirement for the Alliance to reduce further or restrict the deployment of its own greatly diminished nuclear capability. Nevertheless, pressure does exist to support just this type of arms control initiative toward Russia, and it is likely to grow. Such pressure, moreover, could prove irresistible to Alliance members when presented as part of a package of incentives to ease Russian objections to NATO expansion and/or reconfigure the Alliance—both structurally and with regard to core missions—in ways that Moscow would find less threatening.



F/A-18E conducting in-flight tests.

McDonnell Douglas (Kevin Flynn)



Su-27 on flight deck of Admiral Kuznetsov.

U.S. Navy (Todd Summerlin)

wider array of aimpoints in any number of potential adversary countries.

However, this decision by the United Kingdom to opt out of DCA taskings—a transition that should be complete by the end of 1998—may reignite similar debates in other DCA-deploying countries, particularly those in which air force structures are proving unable to cope with the general decline in defense budgets. Of course only the British have the option of substituting one mode of platform deployment for another. A decision by any other member for a submarine-launched capability would require transferring sensitive technology from the United States, Great Britain, or France and would be more expensive for the DCA-deploying nations. But apart from platform changes these countries might choose to keep fewer aircraft—perhaps one rather than two squadrons—at a high state of readiness for a nuclear mission. Alternatively, support may grow for a consolidated multinational DCA wing, though this

option might require basing individual national contributions at a single site, thus increasing vulnerability and restricting flexibility.

And yet, with no decision to modernize the NATO nuclear arsenal on the horizon, Alliance DCA platforms will become waning assets over time by sheer obsolescence. Meanwhile, barring any negotiation that would reduce the current stockpile, more than one DCA-deploying nation can be expected to do everything possible to retain this mission (albeit at a reduced level of readiness) since it justifies force structure which otherwise would be cut from active inventories. For this reason alone, there will be mixed feelings on a debate over the future of NATO substrategic forces, even though there are powerful rationales for doing so.

The Promise of RMA

Aside from arms control and Alliance cohesion, there are doctrinal and technological issues that may persuade NATO to take a new look at nuclear weapons and how they fit into its deterrence posture. Some advocates of the so-called revolution in military affairs (RMA) argue, for example, that the relevance of nuclear systems and traditional concepts of deterrence more generally has been eroded in the wake of qualitative advances in conventional capabilities. These new generation non-nuclear technologies may, when

weaponized, provide a more credible basis for deterrence against regional adversaries than using the nuclear threat as a crisis management instrument. Proponents of this view claim that the central issue is nuclear credibility in a world in which public sensitivity to casualties is high and compellence and/or denial can be accomplished for the most part by non-nuclear means. From this perspective, it is not so much the concept of deterrence that needs to be overhauled as its one-dimensional association with nuclear weapons, which is seen as destabilizing and, in the case of

France would argue vehemently against any minimization of nuclear deterrence

Russian deployments, subject to questionable command and control procedures and technology. Those who hold this position will argue that NATO can afford to shrink its nuclear force structure even further and should readjust its strategic concept to allow for a broader view of deterrence which includes advanced conventional weapons and new operational concepts.

Notwithstanding their growing awareness that new and emerging non-nuclear technologies offer great potential for deterrence and defense planning, European elites also believe that nuclear weapons still count in tackling certain prospective risks, from the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) to the revival of a coherent Russian threat. The ambiguity of a response related to nuclear deterrence in an existential mode, which is partly rooted in the Alliance's refusal to adopt a sweeping "no first use" pledge and in support for a declaratory policy on nuclear weapons use in extreme circumstances, gives non-nuclear NATO members a sense of security that is unattainable from conventional weapons alone. And even if advanced conventional weapons were woven into the NATO deterrence concept, key issues about their availability in crisis—and by extension their credibility as deterrence assets—might remain unresolved, as it may be only the United

States that chooses to spend the money to field advanced non-nuclear systems.

France and NATO

Of course one Alliance member, France, would argue vehemently against any minimization of the role of nuclear weapons in deterrence. At present France's view of Alliance nuclear policy is more academic, given the limited status of its membership. However, with its leading role in Europe and its close partnership with Germany in particular, France entertains ideas which cannot be dismissed out of hand. If anything, French perspectives on nuclear weapons and concepts of deterrence are being more widely heeded since the strategic situation on the Continent has changed and continuing U.S. engagement is perceived to be more tenuous than during the height of Cold War tensions—a time, it is worth remembering, when many Europeans feared the United States would never really "trade New York for Hamburg."

Notable in this regard is the French initiative to engage the British more intensively in talks on cooperative deterrence and President Chirac's efforts to include Germany in his nation's concerted deterrence concept. At their Nuremberg summit in December 1996, Chirac and Chancellor Kohl of Germany signed a "common strategic concept" which includes provisions for reassessing the role of nuclear deterrence in European security planning.⁵ Playing on European fears of an erosion in the transatlantic security link, particularly if Alliance expansion dilutes the capacity for concerted action by NATO as expected by some, the French are promoting the notion of a "concerted deterrence" as central to an independent European security and defense identity (ESDI)—one that could become more directly tied to the European Union than to NATO.

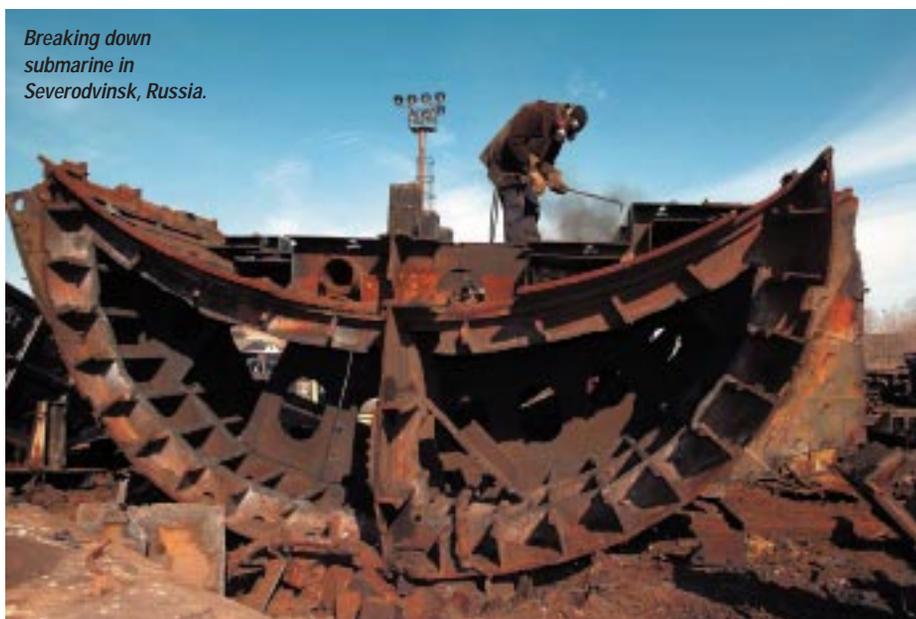
Counterproliferation Policy

A final factor that may cause NATO to reexamine how nuclear weapons fit into its security strategy is the growing WMD threat, particularly from states on the southern and eastern littorals of the Mediterranean.

Libya, Syria, and other states are upgrading the range of their missiles and will soon be able to strike Europe, perhaps even with chemical and biological weapons. NATO has considered counterproliferation and nonproliferation for years—mostly prompted by the United States but also with support from the southern tier, notably France, Italy, and Spain. But recent discussions—largely through the Senior Defense Group on Proliferation—have focused on passive and active defenses, with the adoption of a military operational requirements document circulated by Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) on counterproliferation that has since become mired in national politics, budgetary issues, and most recently the debate over NATO expansion.

Preliminary reviews by the NATO Nuclear Planning Group notwithstanding, the issue of how nuclear weapons fit into the Alliance counterproliferation calculus has not been fully addressed. SHAPE has included nuclear deterrence assets as one leg of its new counterproliferation triad—the other two being theater missile defense and conventional attack—but there has been little talk of their relative value in various WMD settings or of new operational concepts to render the deterrent leg credible in the future. Moreover, whatever SHAPE and NATO headquarters think, countries such as Italy—which is key to Southern Region perspectives—may be of two minds. On the one hand, the presence of U.S. nuclear weapons and bases on Italian soil could proffer targets for possible attacks by an adversary like Libya.⁶ On the other, the continuing presence of these weapons as part of the NATO European-based force structure could provide a degree of security that would be difficult to replicate otherwise, given the uncertainty surrounding conditions under which such weapons would be used. Beyond security-minded anxieties, Italy, like other smaller countries, sees participation in the DCA posture of NATO as essential to retaining its seat at the table in important Alliance deliberations. To forfeit a role in DCA planning and execution could relegate Rome to second-tier status in NATO circles according to this view.

*Breaking down
submarine in
Severodvinsk, Russia.*



U.S. Navy (Todd P. Cichonowicz)

Indeed, in the wake of substrategic-level consultations in Helsinki and among larger NATO powers (for example, France, Britain, and Germany), smaller DCA-deploying countries are likely to increasingly press for a voice as occurred when the infamous “quad”—the United States, Britain, Germany, and SHAPE—was said to be exerting undue sway over NATO nuclear policies. Dutch officials have argued, for example, that there is little value in working hard to retain the “special weight” that DCA participation is presumed to confer if it only comes to bear in the unlikely instance of consultation on actual nuclear use. Instead, it is peacetime deliberation on substrategic forces—including deterring a potential use of WMD against NATO’s Southern Region and the contours of future arms control and transparency talks—that matters most, many argue, now that the prospect of a nuclear exchange at the theater level has receded. If such sentiments are not fully appreciated by the larger NATO states, holding the line against a future “third zero” will become all the more difficult.

NATO Nuclear Posture

The above factors point to a need for NATO to reconsider its nuclear deterrence posture and strategy. However, as noted the Alliance is currently

overwhelmed by the politics of both internal adaptation and expansion, and NATO as an organization is very adept at avoiding discussions on issues that appear logically necessary to outsiders. It may be able to hold off this discussion for two to three years, depending on whether the U.S.-Russian arms control agenda moves forward or if the United States undertakes any significant unilateral initiatives related to its national nuclear deterrence strategy or its force structure—either conventional or nuclear—in Europe.

The prospect that the United States might make some sort of largely unilateral adjustment in its European force posture that could have an impact on NATO deterrence thinking cannot be ruled out. Both deterrence and nuclear forces were examined in the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) and will be assessed by the National Defense Panel (NDP), which follows an earlier nuclear posture review that was conducted parallel to the Bottom-Up Review and left untouched DCA deployments in Europe. In terms of conventional capabilities, the QDR report contains modest cuts in end strength and infrastructure in order to adequately fund readiness and modernization. Depending on the

outcome of the NDP report and congressional deliberations, other cuts such as reductions in dual-capable air assets or infrastructure to support the nuclear mission remain a possibility. However, changes in tactical nuclear forces may not drive a broad-based Alliance review of its deterrence posture.

So too, U.S. changes in nuclear strategy cannot be ruled out as the Nation contemplates its deterrent force under a START III regime of 2,000–2,500 strategic nuclear warheads that may also limit certain delivery platforms or deployment modalities. Whatever path we choose with regard to our nuclear arsenal and strategy, we must recognize that there will be consequences for European security, directly over NATO nuclear planning or indirectly in the context of broader moves toward a notion of ESDI that stands apart from NATO. In fact, the emergence of an independent European security identity centered around British and French national nuclear forces could be accelerated if there is a perception of significant erosion in the U.S. commitment. There is already growing concern in Europe that as America draws down its active force structure forward-based deployments will be further trimmed or eliminated, lending support to Allied concerns over U.S. disengagement.

Worse still from a European perspective is the likelihood that the United States, in efforts to develop an off-shore-based power projection force posture, would unilaterally withdraw its land-based air systems from Europe, forcing the Alliance to rely on off-shore assets for deterrence. The effective dismantling of the NATO land-based substrategic force structure in this manner would create a situation in which deterrence in Europe would thereafter be based essentially on American and British off-shore platforms and French nuclear forces, whose nuclear-tasked aircraft would be the only land-based nuclear assets in NATO Europe. Neither the substance nor symbolism of this new reality would be lost on NATO’s non-nuclear partners—one or two of which might be moved to reconsider their own nuclear options—nor on potential global adversaries, more than one or two of



Slava-class guided
missile cruiser
Marshal Ustinov.

U.S. Navy

whom are known to be involved in concerted efforts to develop national WMD postures.

The psychology and politics of deterrence rest on extremely subjective factors, and there is little solid data on the precise role of nuclear weapons in deterring chemical or biological weapons use or affecting strategic calculations by non-Western leaders. Apart from a limited understanding of what occurred behind the scenes in Desert Storm with regard to deterrence

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calculus and intuitive efforts to develop a correlation between U.S.-Soviet Cold War experiences and hypothetical contingencies centered around 21st century threats, empirical data that either supports or contradicts various deterrence paradigms is inadequate to guide anything except the most general projections of deterrence planning. Yet there is to date no credible alternative to retaining effective nuclear

assets. While there is certainly great attraction in embracing the conventional deterrence concept, for the Alliance this is really a nonstarter given the extent to which national forces are being reduced and the fact that resources are lacking to implement research and development programs needed to field non-nuclear technologies to influence national perceptions, particularly in crisis situations.

If NATO is to remain an effective alliance with a strategy that embraces a nuclear deterrent, it must address the various issues discussed above in a coherent manner before events in individual countries or negotiations which do not directly concern the Alliance dictate outcomes. At the end of the day, it takes the political will to tackle tough issues and reach a consensus—no matter how fragile—that has greater importance than any given weapons deployment or defense concept. The capacity of a group of sovereign democratic nations to come together to ensure stability, manage crises, and prevent crisis escalation is the core requirement of the new NATO. Hence the maturation process will require

adoption of a new deterrence concept that embraces nuclear and non-nuclear options for deterrence and crisis management. When and how that discussion and evolution will take place has yet to be determined, but several trends suggest it should be sooner rather than later, lest we risk having some options foreclosed. More importantly, we also risk the effects that avoiding a timely debate could have on an enlarged Alliance. It will be important to show new members that NATO can step up to the plate and handle difficult questions such as nuclear deterrence in a way that preserves Alliance cohesion as well as the security of individual members. **JFQ**

NOTES

¹ North Atlantic Council communiqué, December 10, 1996.

² The first two zeros resulted from the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty (which entered into effect in 1988) that eliminated long-range (1,000–55,500 kilometers) and short-range (500–1,000 kilometers) intermediate nuclear forces from U.S. and Soviet inventories. Subsequently, President Bush tacitly agreed to a third zero of sorts—for missile systems under 500 kilometers in range—when he decided to forego modernization of the Lance missile system.

³ President of the United States, “Joint Statement on Parameters of Future Reductions in Nuclear Forces” (Helsinki, Finland: Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, March 2, 1997).

⁴ Robert S. Norris and William Arkin, “Estimated Russian Nuclear Stockpile, September 1994,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, vol. 50, no. 5 (September/October 1994), p. 61. More recent sources put the number of deployed tactical weapons at much lower levels—approximately 3,200—but the number of nondeployed but not yet dismantled weapons is unclear. See Robert S. Norris and William Arkin, “Estimated Russian Stockpile, September 1996,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, vol. 52, no. 5 (September/October 1996), pp. 23–28.

⁵ The text of this agreement was reprinted in *Le Monde*, January 30, 1997, pp. 12–13.

⁶ This was brought home in 1986 when Libya fired two Scud missiles at the Italian island of Lampedusa, in apparent retaliation for American raids on Tripoli in the wake of the bombing of La Belle Disco in Berlin.