ATLANTIC COUNCIL
STRATEGIC ADVISORS GROUP
ISSUEBRIEF

Walter B. Slocombe & Annette Heuser

IDEAS. INFLUENCE. IMPACT.

NATO's Nuclear Policy in 2010: Issues and Options

A critical question for the new Strategic Concept is whether NATO's nuclear policy as outlined in 1999 needs to be altered and, if so, how. This issue brief outlines the questions that will need to be addressed and offers recommendations for addressing nuclear policy in the new Strategic Concept.

Bridging Divisions within the Alliance

Internal divisions within the Alliance will complicate decision-making on nuclear issues. The **United States** and the **United Kingdom**, the two states with nuclear weapons officially available to the Alliance, have adopted a policy of combining "Global Zero" as a long-term goal, progress in arms control and a diminished role for nuclear weapons, with maintaining a strong strategic nuclear deterrent in the interim. **France**, the other NATO nuclear state, remains committed to the independence of its deterrent. Several NATO allies, including **Germany**, seek to distance themselves from nuclear weapons by, among other measures, ending the current nuclear sharing arrangements. In contrast, some of **NATO's new members** perceive Russian territorial aggression as a continued threat and view proposed reductions in the Alliance's nuclear presence, nuclear missions or nuclear reliance as a weakening of the overall NATO security commitment and a danger to their own security.

Beyond NATO-specific military, political and doctrinal issues, NATO must address the larger context of policy regarding nuclear non-proliferation and arms control. NATO under the leadership of Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen seeks to play a more visible and united role in strengthening arms-control efforts via support of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). NATO as an institution, like its members individually, must decide how to deal with states that seek to obtain nuclear weapons, specifically Iran and North Korea. The Alliance must also formulate policy toward non-state actors that disdain commitment to international

The Strategic Advisors Group

To tackle the tough issues facing NATO and the transatlantic community, the Atlantic Council created the Strategic Advisors Group (SAG). Co-chaired by Atlantic Council Chairman Senator Chuck Hagel and Airbus CEO Tom Enders, the SAG is comprised of North American and European preeminent defense experts. Founded in 2007 by then-Atlantic Council Chairman General James L. Jones, General Brent Scowcroft and former Norwegian Minister of Defense Kristin Krohn Devold, the SAG provides timely insights and analysis to policymakers and the public on strategic issues in the transatlantic security partnership through issuing policy briefs and reports, hosting strategy sessions for senior civilian and military officials and providing informal expert advice to decision-makers.

The SAG and its activities are generously sponsored by the Scowcroft Group, EADS North America, and Airbus.

***Walter Slocombe** is Secretary of the Atlantic Council Board and is a Member of Caplin & Drysdale. He served as Under Secretary of Defense for Policy during the Clinton administration.*

***Annette Heuser** is Executive Director of the Bertelsmann Foundation in Washington, DC.*

Both authors serve on the Atlantic Council Strategic Advisors Group. The views expressed do not necessarily represent the views of the Atlantic Council.

treaties or submission to oversight by international organizations yet work towards acquiring nuclear capabilities. On these issues as well, no consensus within the Alliance exists.

Accordingly, a new balance among NATO's nuclear-armed members and the other allies, with their disparate views, must be reached. This balance must demonstrate the integration of all NATO members into the Alliance's nuclear decision-making process. Ultimately, NATO's nuclear policy will continue to be dominated by the United States. Nevertheless, the concerns of other allies must be considered.

Military Dimensions: Deterrence and Nuclear Sharing

Deterrence of nuclear attack. The most basic, most important and probably least controversial purpose for which NATO relies on nuclear weapons is to deter nuclear attacks against its members. This "nuclear umbrella" forms the core of the Alliance's Article 5 commitment and makes NATO's purpose clear to friend and foe. At the same time, maintenance of the nuclear umbrella is neither simple nor easy. It requires NATO's nuclear members to risk a nuclear attack on their own territory if they respond to a nuclear attack on a NATO ally. The central doctrinal issue for NATO is if it should rely on nuclear weapons for any purpose beyond the core mission of nuclear deterrence.

Deterrence of non-nuclear attack. As a corollary to nuclear deterrence, the Alliance must determine if a nuclear response to a major chemical or biological attack is legitimate or necessary.

The arguments for NATO's keeping open the option of a nuclear response to catastrophic, but non-nuclear, weapons of mass destruction attack include:

- the comparable level of destruction to a nuclear attack;
- NATO's abjuring of the chemical or biological weapons that would permit an in-kind response; and
- the increased risk to any nation considering such an attack.

The arguments against the nuclear option include:

- the current inability of a chemical or biological attack to cause the destruction of a nuclear attack;
- NATO's massive capacity for a non-nuclear response to chemical or biological attack; and
- the lack of credibility of threatening a nuclear response.

Deterrence of conventional war. During the Cold War, NATO's nuclear capabilities acted as a deterrent to Soviet conventional forces. A central issue for today's Strategic Concept is the need to maintain that deterrent. Today, no credible conventional threat to NATO as a whole exists, and definitive conventional superiority resides with the United States and allied militaries. Therefore, some argue that the Alliance should formally drop that deterrence mission as it is unnecessary. However, some allies – primarily NATO's new members – still perceive conventional threats. They, like Germany during the Cold War, recoil at the prospect of even a "successful" conventional war on their territories. These allies can be expected to argue for maintaining the current policy of deterrence.

Recommendation for the 2010 Strategic Concept:

Focus on deterrence of a nuclear attack. A "no-first-use" pledge purporting to foreclose the option of a nuclear response of a conventional attack would be politically divisive and militarily inappropriate. However, the 2010 Strategic Concept should emphasize that the only mission for which NATO *relies* on nuclear weapons is deterrence of a nuclear attack on its members or other interests vital to their security.

Nuclear Sharing Arrangements

Nuclear sharing arrangements are by no means the most important nuclear policy issue, but they are among the most prominent components of public debate.

Advocates of eliminating nuclear stationing argue that:

- The aircraft and their weapons have limited military utility, are vulnerable to attack, present safety and security concerns and entail significant direct financial and personnel costs (including the eventual costly replacement of the aging dual-capable aircraft [DCA] fleet).
- Retiring the aircraft and removing the weapons would not affect the credibility of nuclear deterrence because other nuclear systems, notably the American and British submarine-based weapons committed to NATO, are more numerous, more capable and more secure than DCA with gravity bombs. Therefore, NATO is unlikely to use DCA if it had to mount a nuclear attack.

- The arrangements are highly unpopular in some host countries, adding to pressures against the Alliance generally.
- There is a "democratic deficit" in maintaining nominally secret forces that are supposedly a critical element of NATO doctrine.
- Any political impact will be minimal since some DCA bases have been closed in recent years without incident.

Advocates of continuing nuclear stationing respond that the current arrangement is important to some host countries, notably Turkey. Some non-host countries consider the presence of U.S. nuclear weapons on allied territory as a key symbol of NATO solidarity and American commitment to European security. To some degree, allies consider the current arrangement as a means of avoiding complete reliance on the United States (or the United Kingdom or France) for nuclear missions.

Advocates also argue that DCA should be a bargaining chip for negotiations on Russian tactical nuclear forces, an approach that accepts ending stationing on appropriate terms.

Recommendation for the 2010 Strategic Concept:

The Strategic Concept should not address the nuclear sharing arrangements.

The stationing of American nuclear weapons under "dual key" arrangements has only very marginal military benefit, and is by no means the true measure of NATO's nuclear potential or the commitment of the nuclear-armed allies. However, as there is no consensus within NATO for withdrawal of existing weapons, proposing to alter the existing arrangements would set off a deeply divisive debate on a marginal issue. The basis for eventual change should, however, be laid by an initiative for enhanced sharing in nuclear policy-making for all allies and a new and more visible system for committing more survivable nuclear forces to NATO missions.

Political Dimensions

The Strategic Concept must also consider that, for NATO, nuclear weapons have been a political issue as much as they have been a military one. The Alliance's political, non-military, goals include:

- preventing nuclear-armed adversaries from engaging in nuclear coercion. Nuclear threats designed to discourage NATO from resisting hostile acts, even if directed initially against non-NATO countries, would threaten NATO members' security interests. In this context, missile defense systems designed to meet the threat of a state such as Iran will render a nuclear attack on NATO members not only fatal (through nuclear retaliation), but futile as well;
- maintaining a perceived balance against Russian nuclear capability, more for general political effect than for specific military operations;
- serving as a symbol of U.S. commitment and NATO solidarity, not so much to deter a particular threat as to manifest American engagement and its allies' willingness to share risk; and
- enabling NATO members capable of building nuclear weapons to refrain from doing so.

Conversely, NATO's reliance on or possession of nuclear weapons poses a political problem for politicians and citizens who believe that the Alliance's nuclear weapons:

- are a relic of the Cold War;
- present significant environmental dangers; and
- are incompatible with the "Global Zero" aspiration and NPT obligations.

Any restatement of NATO nuclear policy will need to consider these political elements.

Recommendations for the 2010 Strategic Concept:

Acknowledge the broader security framework.
Beyond specific military and political/doctrinal issues, NATO must address the larger context of policy regarding nuclear non-proliferation and arms control. The Strategic Concept should endorse the ultimate goal of "Global Zero," as well as near-term agreements reducing nuclear arsenals, including non-strategic nuclear forces. In addition, NATO must underscore the seriousness of addressing nuclear proliferation among "rogue" states and non-state actors, the issue that poses the greatest contemporary nuclear threat to the Alliance.

Endorse "Global Zero" while maintaining a strong deterrent.
The nuclear section of the Strategic Concept should endorse the goal of "Global Zero" as well as the international system supported and represented by the NPT and the IAEA. The goal of a nuclear-free world does not interfere with ongoing maintenance of the arsenal and plans that make nuclear deterrence credible and effective.

Summary

The issue of nuclear weapons and its appropriate inclusion in the Strategic Concept is highly sensitive within NATO. It should, however, be possible to gain consensus on updating the Alliance's nuclear doctrine by:

- focusing on deterrence of nuclear attacks;
- enhancing nuclear burden-sharing beyond the "dual key" arrangements;
- pledging robust resistance to nuclear proliferation;
- supporting reduction in both strategic and theater nuclear arsenals; and
- endorsing the long-term goal of a world free of nuclear weapons.

Thus updating NATO's nuclear policies will bring them into line with current realities and prepare for adaptation to a global security framework that is and will be in radical transition.

March 2010

STRATCON 2010

The Strategic Advisors Group's STRATCON 2010 project seeks to shape and inform the transatlantic debate over NATO's new Strategic Concept. STRATCON 2010 will issue publications to define the critical issues NATO must confront in drafting a new Strategic Concept. For more information about the SAG or STRATCON 2010, please contact Vice President and Director of the Program on International Security Damon Wilson at **dwilson@acus.org** or Program Associate Director Jeff Lightfoot at **jlightfoot@acus.org**.

The Atlantic Council of the United States has as its mission the renewal of the Atlantic community for 21st century global challenges through constructive U.S.-European leadership and engagement in world affairs. Led by Senator Chuck Hagel, Chairman, and Frederick Kempe, President and CEO, the Atlantic Council embodies a network of policy, academic and business leaders who foster transatlantic ties through non-partisan and cross-national discussions and studies.

1101 15th Street NW • 11th Floor • Washington, DC 20005 • (202) 778-4957 • **www.acus.org**

The Atlantic Council's Board of Directors

Strategic Advisors Group

Senator Chuck Hagel – U.S. SAG Co-Chairman
Chairman, Atlantic Council
Co-Chair, President's Intelligence Advisory Board

Thomas Enders – European SAG Co-Chairman
President and CEO, Airbus S.A.S.

Frederick Kempe – President and CEO
Atlantic Council

General Brent Scowcroft – Chairman, Atlantic Council International Advisory Board
President and Founder, The Scowcroft Group

Damon Wilson – Vice President and Program Director
Atlantic Council

Ian Brzezinski – Rapporteur
Booz Allen Hamilton

Neyla Arnas – Rapporteur
National Defense University

Paul Gebhard - Rapporteur
The Cohen Group

Mike Durkee – Rapporteur
Former Special Advisor to SACEUR

Jeff Lightfoot – Secretariat
Atlantic Council

Rafael L. Bardají
Strategic Studies Group

Marshall Billingslea
Deloitte

Hans Binnendijk
CTNSP

Sven Biscop
The Royal Institute for International Relations

Charles Boyd
Business Executives for National Security

Yves Boyer
Ecole Polytechnique

Edgar Buckley
Thales

Richard Burt
McLarty Associates

Ralph Crosby
EADS North America

Brian Dailey
Atlantic Council Board Director

Chris Donnelly
UK Defence Academy

Conrado Dornier
Dornier Aircraft

Julian Lindley-French
Netherlands Defence Academy

Ashraf Ghani
Institute for State Effectiveness

Edmund Giambastiani
Former Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff

Sebastian L. Gorka
National Defense University

Marc Grossman
The Cohen Group

Annette Heuser
Bertelsmann Stiftung

Robert Hunter
RAND Corporaton

Robert Hutchings
Woodrow Wilson School

Josef Janning
Bertelsmann Stiftung

Karl Heinz Kamp
NATO Defense College

Arnold Kanter
The Scowcroft Group

Franklin D. Kramer
Atlantic Council Vice Chair

Harald Kujat
Former Chairman of NATO Military Committee

Fabrizio W. Luciolli
Atlantic Council of Italy

Alexander Mirtchev
Krull Corporation

Boyko Noev
Center for the Study of Democracy

Ioan Mircea Pascu
Member of the European Parliament

Jean-Paul Perruche
Former Director-General, EU Military Staff

Thomas R. Pickering
Hills & Company

Norman Ray
The Spectrum Group

Tomas Ries
Swedish National Defense College

Walter Slocombe
Caplin & Drysdale

Harlan K. Ullman
Atlantic Council

Kurt Volker
Atlantic Council/Center for Transatlantic Relations

Chuck Wald
Deloitte

Rob de Wijk
Hague Centre for Strategic Studies