

ISSUE BRIEF

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PROGRAM ON INTERNATIONAL SECURITY

Future Options for NATO Nuclear Policy

NATO released a new Strategic Concept in November 2010 that maintained its traditional call for continued reliance on nuclear weapons as the ultimate guarantor of its security. But finalizing that document was not easy. Several compromises took place at the Lisbon Summit, including a decision by the Alliance to conduct a Deterrence and Defense Posture Review (DDPR) by 2012. In addition, the allies chose not to repeat some key wording that had remained unchanged since it was introduced in the 1991 Strategic Concept that the Alliance would “maintain adequate sub-strategic nuclear forces based in Europe.” This may provide a political opening for the Alliance to eliminate forward-deployed US nuclear weapons in Europe, should it decide to do so. This brief examines options for NATO nuclear deterrence and assurance policy if that occurs.

Background

For nearly 60 years the United States has deployed nuclear weapons on the territory of some European NATO members as part of the Alliance’s deterrence and defense capabilities. The Alliance relies primarily on the United States and its nuclear forces—those deployed in Europe as well as its strategic arsenal at sea and in North America—for its security. Yet today NATO faces pressures from multiple directions to reconsider keeping those US

weapons in Europe. The publication of the US Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) in 2010 made it clear that the United States is today less willing than in the past to provide leadership regarding the future of its non-strategic nuclear weapons (NSNW) in Europe, preferring to allow the Alliance to decide collectively the fate of those weapons. In Europe several of the older member states of NATO (though not France) are dealing with a general malaise regarding all things nuclear. Some of the allies that have traditionally carried out the dual-key nuclear mission with the United States via dual-capable aircraft (DCA) have recently called on NATO to review that mission to see if those weapons can be removed. The remaining European DCA states must replace their aging DCA aircraft this decade, and none of them has yet committed to purchasing nuclear-capable models. So far only Germany has actually decided on a replacement for its Tornado fleet, and it picked the conventional-only Eurofighter. Russia continues to pressure the United States to remove its remaining weapons stationed in Europe. NATO itself has, in recent years, marginalized the organizational aspects of its staff that deal with nuclear policy and planning.

Absent an open and honest debate on nuclear strategy, the Alliance’s strategy may be determined in the next ten years by acquisition decisions in several countries which must choose follow-on fighter aircraft to replace the current DCA

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fleet. Few officials in the Alliance are willing to discuss this future, or even this mission, openly and with candor, preferring to fall back on the familiar mantra from past Strategic Concepts that “the fundamental purpose of the nuclear forces of the allies is political: to preserve peace and prevent coercion and any kind of war”—wording that was also dropped from the 2010 Strategic Concept. It has been 20 years since that successfully vague explanation was first written in official NATO documents, and a generation of political-military leaders has grown to accept it without necessarily considering the underlying details that make the statement work.

There are forcefully expressed arguments on both sides of the debate over whether to maintain or eliminate the remaining US nuclear weapons in Europe. On the one hand, all parties agree that these weapons have provided a means of ensuring coupling, transatlantic linkages, military capabilities against an uncertain future, and risk and burden sharing. On the other, some allies see benefits to further reductions in the remaining arsenal in the cause of global disarmament—and they point to President Barack Obama’s 2009 Prague Agenda as justification for some of those views. Coupling may be strong enough, they argue, through conventional burden sharing or a new emphasis on cooperative missile defense. The long history of Alliance cooperation may preclude the necessity for continued deployment of nuclear weapons for that purpose. The contribution of a few hundred invisible weapons to coupling, according to this argument, is minimal, so the benefits of removing US nuclear weapons may exceed those of retaining them.

This issue has returned to center stage in NATO debates for the first time in over 20 years as the result of several recent high-level events: The April 2010 NATO Foreign Ministers Meeting in Tallinn, where Secretary of State Hillary Clinton provided a framework for discussions over nuclear policy with her Five Principles for a nuclear alliance; the release of the US Nuclear Posture Review in April 2010; the US Senate’s call upon ratification of the New START Treaty that negotiations over future reductions with Russia should include tactical nuclear weapons; NATO’s 2010 Lisbon Summit which resulted in a new Strategic Concept and associated documents; and the ongoing Deterrence and Defense Posture Review.

The thesis of this paper is that unless current trends are altered, US nuclear weapons may not have many years left

before they are removed from NATO Europe through mechanisms driven by everything except a conscious Alliance decision. The combined effect of anti-nuclear attitudes on the part of the host nations, the lack of interest in the mission by the US Air Force, and the unwillingness of the European DCA states to seriously consider a future for these weapons, or to base fighter aircraft acquisition decisions on such a future, may lead to a situation where all sides of the debate come to the conclusion that it is just easier to remove the remaining US warheads than it is to try to maintain this capability. If that happens, the allies must decide what will replace those weapons in their security arrangements. Even if, as some observers maintain, the Alliance chooses in its policy review to maintain the status quo—a continued reliance on existing DCA arrangements—the clock will still be ticking. Germany has extended its Tornado fleet as DCA delivery platforms until 2020, but the current government has called upon the Alliance to consider whether there remains a requirement for US weapons to remain on its territory. Once the Tornados are retired, that well-used NATO phrase “the foreseeable future” will be upon us. This paper considers nuclear alternatives for the Alliance if and when the final removal of US weapons from Europe takes place.

Alternatives

The interaction among the factors described above will lead the Alliance to adopt one of at least 13 identifiable options for its nuclear future. As shown in Figure 1, these range from modernization of the force, to a continuation of the status quo, to withdrawal of remaining American weapons, to the abdication of a nuclear role for the Alliance. The more intriguing insights come from an examination of those 11 options that fall between the two extremes, particularly the multitude of possibilities for replacing US weapons if they were withdrawn but the Alliance wanted to continue to have a nuclear deterrent of some type. In that case, one can envision a number of potential alternatives to the current nuclear deployment patterns and operational planning assumptions in NATO today that would still provide a nuclear deterrent umbrella for the Alliance.

NATO's Nuclear Alternatives

Spectrum Options

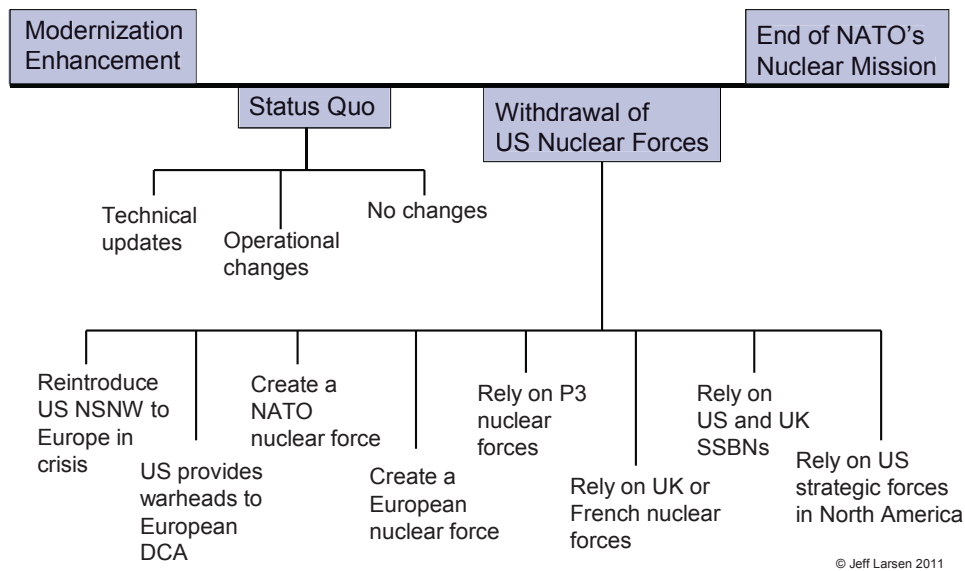


Figure 1: NATO's Nuclear Options

Modernization and Enhancement

Modernization and enhancement of NATO's nuclear forces constitute an unlikely option, barring a return to the Cold War or the rise of a new existential threat to Europe. Nevertheless, it is an option that must be considered in the range of alternative possibilities. The allies could agree that the current US tactical nuclear warheads and DCA should be replaced with something newer and more capable, perhaps even on a different delivery system, such as an air-launched cruise missile or land-based missile. The allies concerned could decide to replace their current Tornado, F-15, and F-16 fleets with a new type of aircraft, such as the nuclear-certified F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, in order to maintain the DCA role into the next generation. As the 2010 NPR stated, the United States is already pursuing this F-35 capability in order to provide the Alliance with the option of retaining a DCA mission. Similarly, the United States has decided to pursue a service life extension program for its arsenal of B61 bombs—the type currently stored in Europe for use by NATO DCA aircraft. One can call these steps “modernization” or simply “technical updates” to maintain the status quo. Regardless, the fact that the United States took such steps under a president who has expressed a nuclear disarmament vision showed a significant commitment to assuring its allies and maintaining this element of the Alliance's deterrence posture.

Status Quo

There are three alternatives under this option. Some variant of this alternative is officially preferred by every member state.

Technical Updates. The first category involves continued maintenance, upkeep, and modest technological improvements that could lead to improved capabilities. Even without a commitment to that level of investment, however, any decision to continue relying on NATO's long-standing deterrent forces as provided by the United States will require a renewed commitment to investment in modernized weapons, training, delivery systems, maintenance, and security issues, given the age of the existing systems in place. The life-extension program for the B-61 bomb is one step in this direction. New rationales that could justify keeping or enhancing NATO's nuclear weapons may include deterring chemical or biological weapons threats from the Middle East and North Africa, deterring a nuclear-armed Iran, or providing protection for deployed NATO forces by offering mobile deterrent capabilities. The European DCA states could decide to replace their aging F-15 and F-16 fleets with nuclear-capable F-35s, with or without Germany as a partner in that mission. Germany could decide to pay for the necessary hardware and software upgrades to make its new Eurofighter fleet nuclear-capable.

Operational Changes. A second broad category under the status quo would include operational changes to the way NATO thinks about its nuclear strategy and how best to achieve its twin goals of effective deterrence and assurance. The allies could, for example, decide to move all US nuclear weapons to storage sites in Southern Europe to be closer to the most likely near-term threats. Or one or more of the current DCA states may decide that it no longer wishes to participate in the Alliance's nuclear mission, focusing instead on "role specific tasking" contributions to Alliance security—much as the new East European member states must do now, and as some non-DCA member states have always done. It could precipitate changes to force deployments, DCA responsibilities, or even the inclusion of new states as members of the DCA "club," as long as NATO abides by its "three no's" commitment to Russia not to deploy nuclear weapons on the soil of new member states. One day, for example, we might see Polish F-16s on alert at a Belgian base prepared to carry American bombs.

Short of such a major step, new member states may undertake roles in nuclear crisis management operations such as air refueling, combat air support, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, or any of the myriad functions that would make up a combined strike package. Alternatively, the United States could continue to perform its historical role of nuclear delivery in Europe while all the European DCA states gave up that mission.

No Change. The third option, and the preferred choice over the past two decades among most member states, is to do nothing to change the status quo. "Let sleeping dogs lie" is not a policy, but it seems to be the preferred approach by member state governments that believe the current posture is the best available choice. The Alliance has a long history of muddling through and eventually reaching agreement on divisive issues. A significant number of allies and staff members in NATO Headquarters believe that dual-capable aircraft and their associated systems for nuclear sharing provide the best means of ensuring the widest possible risk and responsibility sharing within the Alliance. With some modest commitments to modernization, they argue, DCA can continue to do so indefinitely. As such, the status quo should be maintained.

One could argue, however, that no decision to select a replacement DCA aircraft in the near term would count as a decision, too. Nothing would change in the short term. But

that would then leave the Alliance at the whim of procurement decisions, with ambivalence, neglect, and obsolescence determining the future without a conscious decision by the allies. This is, in fact, the alternative preferred by some allies. They would rather not talk about it, nor change the direction of current procurement plans, with the result that eventually the DCA mission would simply wither away. Alternatively, without European support for this mission, the United States might decide that there is no longer a need for its forces in Europe, and could choose to withdraw its weapons unilaterally. Former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates warned of the possibility that America will tire of its open-ended, expensive commitment to European security in his farewell speech at NATO headquarters in June 2011. Either course would lead to the withdrawal of the remaining US nuclear weapons from Europe.

US Withdrawal and NATO Renunciation of Reliance on a Nuclear Deterrent

This is the most extreme alternative, and one that is particularly unlikely. One of the Clinton Principles from Tallinn states that "as long as nuclear weapons exist, NATO will remain a nuclear alliance." The same wording appeared in the new Strategic Concept. This option also has the greatest potential for causing irrevocable rifts in the Alliance, or even leading to its demise. On the other hand, should the Alliance survive such a change, many of the current coupling functions could be retained. The Nuclear Planning Group (NPG), for example, could be kept as a consultative body, perhaps with a new name to reflect its non-nuclear purpose. It is important to remember, of course, that since three of its members have independent atomic arsenals, as long as NATO survives as a political institution it will remain a *de facto* nuclear alliance.

Alternatives Following the Withdrawal of US Nuclear Weapons from Europe

Many in NATO fear any alternative that involves the removal of US nuclear weapons. Doing so in hopes that Russia would follow suit is dangerous, they argue. Many of the new member states from Central and Eastern Europe in particular see American extended deterrence guarantees as the bedrock foundation of the Article 5 commitments they signed up for. One senior NATO official has made the

claim that the removal of US weapons from Europe “would be the beginning of the end of the Alliance.”

On the other hand, others advocate the immediate and complete withdrawal of US weapons for the simple reason that the Alliance can no longer answer the foundational question of the purpose of those weapons in Europe. Removal would eliminate the last “NATO” tactical nuclear weapons on European soil, save money, and appease those in Russia who point to NATO’s nuclear forces as proof of its aggressive nature.

US Withdrawal but Continued NATO Reliance on Some Form of Nuclear Deterrent

This alternative carries the most possibilities for future nuclear options. Some are obviously less likely than others, but all are possible and therefore worthy of consideration. Some of these options were apparently considered by the High Level Group and the Group of Experts in the studies that led up to the Lisbon Summit. Whether any of these has greater merits than the status quo will be a major element of the DDPR debate.

The United States Withdraws its Weapons, but Keeps the Infrastructure in Place in Order to Reintroduce Weapons in a Crisis

One way to reduce public criticism of the current situation would be to remove all remaining US warheads from Europe, and announce the move for public relations purposes. But the Alliance would keep the technical and physical infrastructure associated with nuclear sharing in place—including the storage sites and associated security forces—so that the warheads could be reintroduced to the theater and mated with their DCA delivery vehicles quickly in a crisis. Given the Alliance’s current nuclear response time using NATO DCA aircraft (measured in weeks or months), and the ability to use realistic weapons trainers (practice bombs) to exercise the flight and maintenance crews, this type of “virtual nuclear sharing” could technically work. But it would be politically challenging and nearly as expensive as if the weapons were still there. Would allied governments maintain the investments for weapon site security, aircraft certification, training, personnel reliability programs, and so forth if the weapons were not in Europe?

The fact that the Alliance has not yet taken this step reflects concerns that political pressures might be too great to ever

allow the United States to reintroduce such weapons to Europe, particularly in a crisis when fears of taking steps that escalate tensions would abound. There is also some concern that absent the actual weapons on their soil, the European members of the Alliance may lose their interest in the weapons. Some proponents of the status quo fear that NATO’s nuclear policy may fade into irrelevance over time if the real weapons are withdrawn.

The United States Continues to Supply Warheads for European DCA

In this alternative the United States would withdraw its nuclear-capable aircraft from the European theater, or at least end the US DCA role in a NATO nuclear delivery mission. The other NATO states with a DCA responsibility, however, would continue to carry out that mission under dual-key arrangements with the United States for US warheads stored either in Europe or in the United States. This would resolve many of the US Air Force’s concerns about the costs of continuing to support the European DCA mission, and possibly its security concerns at weapons storage areas were the weapons stored outside Europe. This option might also prove valuable to American arguments to the world community about its commitment to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty and its Article 6 disarmament measures while still providing a nuclear guarantee to NATO. This would also show a level of Alliance cohesion and commitment to nuclear deterrence, and maintain the linkage between Europe and North America. However, while NATO has always planned any nuclear strike mission to include several member states’ aircraft to avoid singularity, it was understood that any mission would include one or more American jets in the package. The absence of US DCA might make such an option difficult to carry out politically, particularly given recent calls by several European states for the end of their nuclear sharing commitments.

Create a NATO Nuclear Force

This option could be accomplished with the development of a NATO combined air wing with DCA responsibilities, modeled along the lines of NATO’s Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) operation. Another possibility would be an internationally manned vessel, either an SSBN with submarine-launched ballistic missiles, perhaps a retired British Trident boat or a new submarine, or some other option, such as was considered in the Multilateral

Force (MLF) concept of the 1960s. MLF, for example, envisioned intermediate-range ballistic missiles on a vessel such as a barge or surface combatant, manned by a multinational crew with representation from at least three European nations at all times. This would avoid concerns over singularity, and would ensure a multinational decision to carry out an order to launch, with three hands on the trigger (or on the lock). But this alternative is also unlikely, given the historical memory of the MLF concept and the likely unwillingness of member states to rely on a committee decision regarding nuclear strike systems.

Create a European Nuclear Force

A European nuclear force could be provided by Britain, by France, by a joint commitment by those two nations, or by some type of new collective European nuclear force, possibly under the auspices of the European Union (EU). France has on some occasions implied its openness to dialogue about such an arrangement. Of course, this alternative raises a lot of questions, not least of which is the appropriate organizational venue for debating the issue. Some non-NATO EU members (such as Ireland or Sweden) object to nuclear deterrence in principle. The new nuclear force would need a body equivalent to NATO's NPG as its organizational and consultative heart.

Rely on the Nuclear Forces of NATO Nuclear States

Nuclear deterrence and assurance could be provided for NATO without the requirement for US weapons based in Europe by simply declaring that the three allies with nuclear weapons would extend their security guarantees over their neighbors and allies. The United States, Great Britain, and France (P3) could rely on their strategic weapons and delivery systems to extend a deterrence umbrella over the Alliance without the nuclear sharing arrangements currently found in NATO. The NPG might become simply a vehicle for the P3 states to announce their (possibly coordinated) national decisions regarding nuclear weapons and strategy. Of course, even under these circumstances France may not wish to participate in such an organization, given its refusal since 1967 to join the NPG.

Rely on British or French Nuclear Forces

The United Kingdom has committed its nuclear forces to NATO, subject to supreme national interest clauses, since 1962. Since 1972 France has declared that its deterrent

offers *de facto* protection to its neighbors and allies. The allies recognized the contributions of France and the United Kingdom to NATO's overall deterrent posture in the 1974 Ottawa Declaration and in the 1991, 1999, and 2010 Strategic Concepts. In 2006 President Jacques Chirac said: "The development of the European Security and Defence Policy, the growing interweaving of the interests of the European Union countries, and the solidarity that now exists between them, make French nuclear deterrence, by its very existence, a core element in the security of the European continent." These commitments could be made more explicit following removal of the remaining US tactical weapons. But it is not clear whether all European allies would regard British or French protection as an adequate substitute for US nuclear forces in Europe.

Rely on the US and UK SSBN Forces

Throughout the Cold War the United States supposedly dedicated a certain number of SLBMs in its Atlantic SSBN fleet to the Supreme Allied Commander Europe in time of war as part of the single integrated operational plan. That commitment may still be in place today, as is the continuing commitment of Britain's Trident fleet to NATO assignments. It would be fairly simple to make those commitments more public, and to codify them in NATO documents as necessary to enhance their deterrent value. France might be persuaded to commit some portion of its SSBN forces to a naval deterrent for NATO, as well.

Rely on US Strategic Forces Based in North America

This is a concept utilized in other parts of the world, and one that would seem to provide a simple solution to Europe's conundrum. But what effect would such a dramatic shift in the Alliance correlation of forces have on deterrence credibility in the eyes of NATO's adversaries? One of the rationales for NSNW based in Europe during the Cold War, after all, was to ensure coupling and a seamless web of deterrence based on an escalatory ladder, from conventional forces to tactical nuclear weapons to US strategic forces based at sea and in North America. This alternative would require a new level of reassurance to allies that have grown to expect that middle rung of the escalatory ladder to remain in place in Europe. The experience of America's allies in Northeast Asia may be instructive in this regard. South Korea and Japan, both beneficiaries of the so-called "Asian Model" of extended deterrence, are today apparently less assured of US deterrence guarantees than

they were when US weapons were physically located in the Pacific theater.

Conclusion

If current trends continue, with no decision on its future taken by the Alliance, maintaining the status quo with modest technical updates is most likely in the near term, with US withdrawal the likely mid-term result of the passage of time and neglect. At some point the United States will likely decide to end its long-standing deployment of nuclear forces in Europe, whether unilaterally, at the request of its allies in the DCA business, or as the result of current DCA partners deciding to end their role in that mission. When that point is reached, the Alliance will need to select one of the options discussed above, lest it find itself inextricably drawn into the extreme position of having to discard its long-standing nuclear extended deterrent policy.

There no longer appears to be a consensus on the need for nuclear weapons in the Alliance. But the end of NATO's nuclear capabilities is not foreordained. The allies could decide that a potential threat compels them to prevent the

current situation from continuing to drift toward a non-nuclear future. A nuclear Iran which threatens the Alliance, for example, or a more aggressive and potentially revanchist Russia could change this thesis. All it would take is political will and the consensus of the member states that maintaining European-based non-strategic nuclear capabilities is critical to the long-term health of the Alliance, and to the security of Europe and all the allies. If NATO can make that determination, we may yet see another generation of nuclear burden sharing within the Alliance.

That being said, however, an analysis of current trends cannot help but lead one to assume that it is unlikely that there will be any American nuclear weapons based on European soil ten years hence. That decision cannot be seen in advance as either good or bad; it is just likely. It is time to start thinking about the Alliance's preferred alternatives. In fact, doing so may be instructive in showing the allies that there is no better option than the existing arrangement for nuclear sharing. That would be an enlightening discovery, one well worth the political challenge of thinking about NATO's nuclear future.

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