



## Waking the Nuclear Dragon? NATO's Defence and Deterrence Posture Review

November 2011

**NATO is currently busy with preparations for a comprehensive Defence and Deterrence Posture Review (DDPR) to be ready for the NATO Chicago Summit in May 2012. Yet despite the hectic activity and despite the importance of the review, almost nothing is being said in public. NATO is well aware of the potential for a damaging nuclear decision crisis in NATO and the outcome of the process seems likely to stay close to the current status quo.**

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At the last 2010 NATO summit, member states tasked NATO to undertake a review of its overall posture in defending and deterring against the full range of threats to the Alliance in light of the changes in the international security environment. Importantly, by tasking the Alliance to review its defence and deterrence posture, the 'nuclear dragon' was reawakened after more than two decades of peaceful slumber, and difficult questions now have to be answered about deterrence posture, nuclear sharing and missile defence, as well as about what to do with NATO's remaining Non Strategic Nuclear Weapons (NSNWs) in the shape of 150-200 American-owned B-61 gravity bombs.

That NATO has chosen to undertake such a review may appear odd, as ambiguity in questions related to the role and use of nuclear weapons has served the Alliance well in the past. Moreover, throughout NATO's history all nuclear decisions have thrown the Alliance into crisis and raised serious questions about Alliance cohesion. It therefore seems clear that the decision to undertake a DDPR at this stage in NATO's history is not the result of a planned and wished-for process, but rather is part and parcel of NATO's struggle to maintain consensus on the role of nuclear weapons and its deterrence posture.

Although not many details about the DDPR are publicly available, it can be assumed that the process is a result of the return of nuclear issues to the global strategic agenda following President Obama's call for a nuclear-free world.

### POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

**NATO must ensure coherence between the stated objective in its Strategic Concept, and its stated defence and deterrence posture. In particular it must accept that the ambiguity which has surrounded defence and deterrence and especially the role of nuclear weapons may no longer be relevant. NATO should therefore:**

- **Make a clear decision on the fate of the remaining NSNWs and refrain from letting the fate of the weapons depend on what is likely to be a disadvantageous bargaining position with Russia.**
- **Avoid framing Russia simultaneously as a possible adversary and as a potential partner for cooperation.**
- **Identify alternative ways than nuclear sharing to ensure cohesion, in particular through missile defence sharing and shared contributions to NATO's role in crisis management.**
- **Acknowledge that the adoption of missile defence implies a greater emphasis on deterrence by denial.**
- **Provide an appropriate institutional setting for maintaining Alliance-wide dialogue about shared nuclear planning without physical nuclear sharing.**



The issue was placed on the NATO agenda when German Foreign Minister Guido Westervelle suggested NATO should withdraw its forward-deployed nuclear weapons. This was a suggestion that could easily have derailed the process leading towards the 2010 Strategic Concept. It therefore seems likely that the current DDPR is the result of a deal whereby the question of NSNWs was kept off the Strategic Concept agenda in return for a thorough debate about nuclear weapons and wider defence and deterrence issues following adoption of the Strategic Concept.

Given this context it is hardly surprising that DDPR is being conducted behind closed doors and that many allies seem decidedly unenthusiastic about the enterprise. However, although the decision to undertake the review seems to have sparked off a hectic flurry of activity, the 2012 Chicago Summit is likely to produce a modest statement, largely reinforcing the status quo and linking the fate of NATO's NSNWs to negotiations with Russia.

The problem is, however, that although the DDPR may be 'window dressing', the 'nuclear dragon' has been prodded and political controversy could ensue. If so, and if history is a guide to the present, the DDPR may only be the beginning of a long process with significant potential to erupt into a damaging nuclear weapons decision crisis in NATO.

## THE DEFENCE AND DETERRENCE POSTURE REVIEW PROCESS

NATO is well aware of its predicament and anticipated from the very beginning that forging Alliance consensus on the questions raised by the Lisbon 2010 Summit would be a difficult task. For that reason no specific outcome or deliverable has been defined. The position to be adopted in Chicago may well, therefore, be an interim one.

The process so far has been very different from the open and inclusive debate that preceded the adoption of the 2010 Strategic Concept. It started in January 2011, when Deputy Permanent Representatives were tasked with finding a new Alliance consensus on the role of nuclear weapons in NATO's overall defence and deterrence posture. However, the process was soon lifted to the level of the North Atlantic Council (NAC). The initial input from NATO's international staff was four so-called 'tasking papers', distributed to the national delegations before the summer recess. The tasking papers have remained classified, even though they reportedly contain no sensitive information.

In April, Poland, Norway, Germany and the Netherlands submitted a so-called 'non-paper' on increasing transparency and confidence with regard to NSNWs in Europe. Although a rather modest proposal, the non-paper represents the most substantial attempt at forging consensus so far, and has the added advantage of having received support from six other member states. The non-paper suggests

concrete steps towards increased transparency between NATO and Russia on NSNW issues. Given that this paper has support both from old and new members – and that it is not particularly far-reaching – it has a good chance of being quite influential. However, it only addresses the issue of NSNWs and is silent on the other key issues involved in the DDPR process.

## THE KEY ISSUES

The DDPR raises many practical and conceptual issues, all of which are loaded with highly symbolic value and supported by complex and esoteric reasoning. Some of the issues raised are:

- What is the appropriate mix of nuclear, conventional and missile defence capabilities?
- Does NATO need to have US forward-deployed NSNWs stationed on European soil?
- Is deterrence credibility enhanced by the NSNWs?
- If NSNWs are kept, what should happen about dual-capable aircraft, presently due for replacement?
- Who or what is to be deterred?
- How does the adoption of missile defence impact on deterrence by punishment?
- Can NATO find ways of showing unity and cohesion other than by nuclear sharing?
- Is deterrence by punishment still relevant in the new security environment?
- What are the implications of NATO's new role as a more active security institution, for Alliance cohesion and for meeting practical challenges?

Since the summer, the DDPR issue has been delegated to three NATO committees:

- The Nuclear Planning Group (NPG) – to discuss nuclear issues.
- The newly created Weapons of Mass Destruction and Disarmament Committee (WCDC) – to discuss arms control and disarmament.
- The Defence Policy Planning Committee (DPPC) – to discuss missile defence and the 'appropriate mix of capabilities'.

It is not clear why the process has been divided thus – especially as France, which holds very strong views on nuclear deterrence, is not a member of the NPG and, moreover, there are serious disagreements about the scope, mandate and status of the WCDC. Yet, drafting of the Chicago Statement will be based on the recommendations of the

three committees, to be ready for the Defence Ministerial Meeting in February, with a possible so-called 'Jumbo meeting' in March or April to ensure that the Summit is not disrupted by last minute disagreements.

### THREE STEPS TOWARDS NEW PRACTICES

NATO has always had a nuclear fixation and has always been preoccupied with proving that the promise contained in Article Five (that an armed attack against Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against all NATO members) is credible. For that reason US forward-deployed NSNWs have had a symbolic value and have given rise to a rather abstract strategic logic, deeply embedded practices and unquestioned truisms. However, the strategic environment has changed and NATO has recently recast itself as an active and engaged security organisation. The time has therefore come to challenge some of the truisms and to change taken-for-granted practices. But, as with all fixations, letting go is a long and difficult process, which is often characterised by setbacks and changes of direction. Nevertheless, three initial steps are now needed.

#### Step 1: Deciding the future of NSNWs

Firstly NATO should acknowledge that there is no military value in keeping the few remaining NSNWs in Europe – they have only symbolic value. Moreover, it is difficult to imagine a situation where NATO would contemplate the use of nuclear weapons, and where it would matter whether the weapons were launched from Europe or from the United States. NATO should therefore adopt the Asian model of a forward-deployable rather than a forward-deployed nuclear capability.

Withdrawal of NATO's NSNWs could take place either following a negotiated agreement with Russia or it could be a unilateral move. What matters is that it is an interest-based decision rather than the result of default. The arms control route would necessarily place NATO in a position where Russia has a significant numerical advantage, and

could leave NATO's room for manoeuvre restricted by Russian actions. The arms control route could therefore lead to eventual withdrawal by default, whereas the unilateral position would leave NATO in sole charge of Alliance decisions and provide added political credibility.

In any case, the arms control route seems illogical given that NATO has, over the past two decades, already unilaterally withdrawn 90 per cent of its NSNWs – without this being controversial. This begs the question – why engage in arms control now?

#### Step 2: Adapting the deterrent posture

Secondly NATO needs a deterrence posture that is relevant in the new security environment. As suggested by Lawrence Freedman, the key insight to be drawn from NATO's traditional deterrence posture is that mutual vulnerability is a source of a stability that could be perilous to disrupt. However, by adopting a missile defence system NATO has already abandoned this key insight at deterrence by punishment and moved further along the spectrum towards deterrence by denial. Furthermore, the new strategic concept and the emerging security environment are shifting, NATO's focus away from traditional territorial defence towards new security challenges and the *protection* of populations. These are changes that suggest a move towards the deterrence by denial end of the spectrum.

It is not suggested that the choice for NATO is between *either* deterrence by denial *or* deterrence by punishment, but merely that NATO now needs a new balance between its role and *raison d'être* and its defence and deterrence practice. NATO cannot remain relevant if it chooses to cling onto outmoded and irrelevant nuclear practices that cannot deter the very challenges NATO has itself identified and which do not support the role that NATO outlined for itself in the 2010 Strategic Concept. For this reason, identifying what constitutes the 'appropriate mix' of nuclear, conventional and missile defence capabilities in the

### THE RETURN OF DETERRENCE THEORY

The re-opening of debate on nuclear issues and the adoption of missile defence has brought deterrence theory back into NATO debates. Briefly, three types of issues are important.

1. Extended deterrence – issues relating to maintaining confidence in the dependability and credibility of American security commitments and Alliance cohesion, which has traditionally been ensured through nuclear sharing.
2. Deterrence by punishment – issues relating to whether the new security environment, characterised by a lack of a specific and known adversaries and a number of diffuse security threats, suggests that the days of emphasis on deterrence by punishment are over.
3. Deterrence by denial – issues relating to whether the adoption of missile defence and active defence against threats such as piracy, cyber and nuclear attacks from either rogue states or non-state actors implies a move towards a greater emphasis on deterrence by denial.



new security environment is, perhaps, the most important and (within an environment characterised by severe fiscal constraints) most difficult question to be addressed.

### Step 3: Maintaining cohesion

Thirdly, NATO needs to adopt new ways to ensure its cohesion as a modern active and engaged alliance. Most agree that NSNWs have had a deeply symbolic role for NATO because the deployment of American nuclear weapons in Europe was regarded as proof of the American commitment to Europe. This is now, however, an illogical and outmoded way of thinking which no longer corresponds to the 'new active and engaged NATO'.

NATO needs to be open to new ways of ensuring Alliance cohesion that are relevant to NATO's three core tasks (collective defence, crisis management and cooperative security) identified in the 2010 Strategic Concept. The logic and necessity of nuclear sharing made sense in a situation of extended deterrence against a specific adversary and a specific threat. In today's security environment with no specific threat and no specific adversary, it makes more sense to show unity through missile defence sharing, shared nuclear planning for forward-deployable nuclear forces *and shared practical contributions to NATO's active role in crisis management and peace support operations*.

In the security context of the 21st century, American commitment to the security of Europe must be achieved through relevant and shared contributions to combat a

variety of security challenges, rather than through hosting militarily outmoded nuclear warheads designed for a threat from a country that NATO now identifies as a potential partner; Russia cannot be both enemy and partner.

### CONCLUSION

NATO has set itself a difficult task, with no easy answers, in an environment of financial constraints and shrinking defence budgets. What has been outlined in this policy brief is unlikely to be achievable within the short time-frame of the DDPR process and within the constraints of consensus decision-making in NATO. However, the very process of undertaking the DDPR challenges the ambiguity about nuclear weapons and defence and deterrence that has served NATO so well in the past. Therefore, no matter what the outcome at Chicago, the 'nuclear dragon' is awake again and NATO will have to address issues that most allies would probably have preferred to fudge. The three steps suggested in this Policy Brief therefore look set to be issues of debate for some time to come, even though they are unlikely to figure in the Chicago Summit statement.

### FURTHER READING

Karl-Heinz Kamp, 'NATO's Nuclear Posture Review: Nuclear Sharing instead of Nuclear Stationing', *Research Paper*, NATO Defense College, no 68, May 2011.

Lawrence Freedman, 'A new theory for nuclear disarmament', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientist*, July/August 2009.

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*The opinions expressed in this policy brief are those of the authors alone and do not necessarily reflect the official opinion of the Danish Institute for International Studies.*