

NATO's Nuclear Deterrence in the Post-Ukraine Era

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This paper examines NATO's nuclear deterrence policy in the wake of Moscow's use of force in Ukraine and its annexation of Crimea. NATO's ability to conduct an effective deterrence strategy has faced serious challenges as a result of both divisions over the role of tactical nuclear weapons and incoherence regarding policy toward Ukraine. This essay argues that Russia's violation of the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, the increased emphasis it has placed on its strategic nuclear weapons, and its direct challenges to the resolve of the Alliance all demand that NATO be ready to respond forcefully to protect member states that are most vulnerable to attack, with particular emphasis on Poland and the Baltic states. However, amid a renewed rise in tensions between NATO and Russia over Ukraine, missile defense, and the threat to the Baltic states, the Alliance must also do its utmost to avoid an unintended nuclear escalation. In view of NATO's conventional superiority over Russia, the Alliance can afford to minimize the role of its nuclear weapons. The NATO summit in the summer of 2016 is an opportunity for the Alliance to declare its resolve to protect vulnerable member states while also placing a greater emphasis on conventional resources in its deterrence doctrine.

NATO's Identity Crisis

Nuclear deterrence, which during the Cold War was a fundamental component of NATO's defense policy and strategy, was developed almost exclusively to deal with the Soviet threat. With the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, serious questions arose regarding NATO's continued relevance in the wake of the declining threat from Russia. Although

since then the Alliance has had a significant role to play in conflicts outside of the European arena, such as in Afghanistan, with the diminishing threat from Moscow, question marks continued over its relevance well into the new millennium.¹ In tandem, the role of nuclear weapons was gradually downgraded, and NATO's conventional capabilities were deemed sufficient for meeting new threats from adversaries such as Serbia, Iraq, and Libya.²

NATO's missile defense system is a manifestation of the Alliance's efforts to deter and confront a threat emanating from the Middle East rather than Russia, and indeed, the capabilities of the missile defense system are too limited to pose a threat to Russia. In recent years, as NATO has focused on the new threats from the Middle East, concern has risen over the proliferation of ballistic missiles and weapons of mass destruction from the region. Notwithstanding the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) between the world powers and Iran in July 2015, there remains the potential threat of Iran acquiring a military nuclear capability. A nuclear Iran would pose an immediate threat to NATO as it borders Turkey, an Alliance member, and over time it will pose a danger to other NATO countries as well. The United States has taken the lead within NATO to establish a missile defense system to protect Alliance troops and populations from the growing missile threat from Iran. In May 2016, the US anti-missile shield site in Romania became operational, forming a significant part of the NATO missile defense system in Europe.

NATO views missile defense as a component that complements deterrence. Indeed, it can also be viewed as a form of deterrence (deterrence by denial) since it seeks to dissuade a potential adversary by demonstrating that its actions will be denied the benefits originally sought. A potential aggressor would have to take into account the strong probability that the retaliatory capacity of the targeted country would survive intact as a result of the anti-missile shield. Deterrence by denial must be backed up by the threat of punishment to be effective. The deployment of a missile defense system can significantly challenge an adversary's plans, while also devaluing the potential destructive impact of the aggressor's ballistic missiles.

The NATO anti-missile shield is intended to deal with threats outside the Euro-Atlantic area, and cannot realistically address the concerns of vulnerable Alliance member states regarding the Russian threat.³ In parallel, however, NATO has sought to open a new chapter in relations with Russia. The NATO Lisbon summit of November 2010 expressed its commitment

to establish “a lasting and inclusive peace” with Russia in the Euro-Atlantic region, and seek a “true strategic partnership between NATO and Russia.” The Alliance also announced its intention of pursuing cooperation with Moscow in the field of missile defense. The Strategic Concept that was adopted at the NATO Lisbon summit included an acknowledgment that the end of the Cold War had brought about a changed security environment with a significant reduction in the number of nuclear weapons deployed in Europe and a decreasing dependence on nuclear weapons in NATO strategy. It stated that NATO would work for further reductions in nuclear weapons, and would “seek a safer world for all and ...create the conditions for a world without nuclear weapons.”⁴ The Lisbon summit declaration matched the efforts of the Obama administration to open a new chapter in US-Russia relations. The improvement in ties between the United States and Russia culminated in the April 8, 2010 signing of the New START Treaty, which provided that the number of nuclear warheads of the two countries would be reduced to 1,550 and deployed strategic launchers would be reduced to 700 over a ten year period.⁵

However, the same Strategic Concept of November 2010 that acknowledged a reduced reliance on nuclear weapons also affirmed that “deterrence, based on an appropriate mix of nuclear and conventional capabilities, remained a core element of [NATO’s] overall strategy.” The document declared that the strategic nuclear forces of the United States, as well as the independent nuclear capabilities of Britain and France, constitute the “supreme guarantee” of NATO security. The Strategic Concept underscored that NATO will remain a nuclear alliance as long as nuclear weapons exist.⁶ This was reaffirmed at the NATO summit in Wales in September 2014.⁷ Furthermore, NATO’s Deterrence and Defence Posture Review (DDPR), which was unveiled at the May 2012 NATO summit in Chicago, declared that nuclear weapons were in fact “a core component of NATO’s overall capabilities for deterrence and defense,” together with its conventional and missile defense assets. The DDPR review claimed that NATO’s nuclear force posture satisfied the criteria “for an effective deterrence and defence posture.”⁸ Between 2010 and 2012, it was clear that in spite of differences within the Alliance over tactical nuclear weapons, nuclear deterrence remained an integral part of NATO’s strategic policy.

A Renewed Focus on Deterring Russia

Six years after the Lisbon summit and the New START treaty, the new reality of East-West tensions over Ukraine has resulted in a reassessment of the Alliance's nuclear deterrence policy. Since Russia's use of force in Ukraine and its annexation of Crimea in 2014, NATO has focused anew on its deterrence policy vis-à-vis Moscow.

Concerns over the threat from Russia have arisen as a result of several factors, including a significant increase in close military encounters between Russian and Western military forces following the annexation of Crimea. NATO conducted some 400 interceptions over Europe during 2014, with a similar number of interceptions during 2015, as NATO officials disclosed that the Alliance conducted over 250 scrambles against Russian aircraft in Europe during this time. Many of these interceptions were conducted over the Baltic region,⁹ with some 160 flights made by NATO Baltic Air Policing fighters to intercept Russian aircraft.¹⁰ It appears that Russia has directed its military forces and security agencies to act in a more aggressive manner to test the preparedness of NATO defense systems and the extent of cooperation among Alliance member states.¹¹ In May 2016, three British fighter jets intercepted three Russian military transport aircraft heading for the Baltic states.¹² A month earlier, two Russian warplanes flew simulated attack passes by an American guided missile destroyer in the Baltic Sea.¹³ In January 2015, Britain summoned the Russian ambassador to explain why two Russian Bear planes were flying without transponders over the English Channel dangerously close to civilian aircraft, which could have caused a serious aviation disaster.¹⁴ Turkey's downing of a Russian warplane in November 2015, in the context of the war in Syria, only serves to highlight the growing risks of a severe disaster and the dangerous implications that could follow such a development.

NATO deterrence policy is also directly affected by Russia's violations of the INF Treaty and the modernization of its strategic nuclear forces. Obama administration officials have held high level discussions with their Russian counterparts over Moscow's flight testing of a ground launched cruise missile. In a joint hearing before the House Foreign Affairs and Armed Services Committees in December 2014, Rose E. Gottemoeller, US Under Secretary of Arms Control and International Security, stated that the United States would be exploring military options to ensure that Russia would not obtain "a significant military advantage" from its failure to adhere to the

INF Treaty, and that continued Russian violations would demand measures by the United States and its allies to safeguard their collective security.¹⁵ NATO's concern is that Russia could launch a cruise missile attack on Europe, raising fears of a surprise attack on strategic targets with little or no notice.¹⁶ The violation further undermines the trust between NATO and Russia, and strengthens the need for an effective deterrence policy.

In 2016, NATO's nuclear deterrence policy is also shaped by Russia's modernization of its strategic nuclear forces. The upgrading of Russia's nuclear arsenal will involve a significant increase in the number of warheads loaded on submarines and new delivery systems for ballistic missiles. Russia has also begun production of a new class of submarines intended specifically for the delivery of cruise missiles. Indeed, Russian President Vladimir Putin has placed an increasing emphasis on nuclear weapons as a guarantor of Moscow's international prestige. In a speech in the summer of 2014 devoted largely to the Ukraine crisis, Putin referred explicitly to Russia's nuclear weapons and declared that other countries "should understand it's best not to mess with us."¹⁷ In September and November 2014, Russia successfully tested a submarine-launched Bulava intercontinental ballistic missile intended for carrying nuclear warheads.¹⁸ For its part, the United States is planning an extensive modernization of its own nuclear forces. Over the next thirty years, Washington plans to spend approximately \$1 trillion to maintain and modernize its existing nuclear arsenal, including the acquisition of replacement systems and the upgrading of nuclear bombs and warheads.¹⁹

Disagreements over the Role of Nuclear Weapons

There is a risk that NATO's nuclear deterrence policy could be compromised by disagreements within the Alliance. More specifically, there have been divisions over the role of the nuclear arsenal, with a number of NATO countries in Western Europe (particularly Germany) that have argued in the past for the return of tactical nuclear weapons to the United States, out of a belief that they have provided little military value.²⁰ With a resurgent Russia on NATO's borders, such divisions are likely to recede. The argument for the removal of tactical nuclear weapons has been challenged by the Russian military action in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea, with other NATO members taking the view that American B-61 nuclear warheads are required to reassure vulnerable member states. The United States has been upgrading the B-61 nuclear bomb in five European NATO member states.²¹

It is almost certain that US tactical nuclear weapons will remain in Europe for the foreseeable future. According to Nikolai Sokov and Miles Pomper, the debate over the withdrawal of tactical US nuclear weapons from Europe is now effectively over.²²

At the same time, there is a growing debate over the effectiveness of tactical nuclear weapons in deterring Russia. Some experts question whether NATO's nuclear deterrence doctrine is fit for the purpose in the wake of the failure to stop Russia in Ukraine. For example, Barry Blechman and Russell Rumbaugh maintain that NATO's conventional superiority over Russia dictates that the Alliance's tactical nuclear weapons have little value. In their view, NATO would be better off investing its resources in effective conventional and strategic nuclear forces. While a withdrawal of US tactical weapons from Europe might well be interpreted as a weakening of the American commitment to NATO, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has demonstrated that US tactical nuclear weapons have no deterrent impact and are ultimately "a particularly ineffective and wasteful way of keeping the continent safe."²³ There is also an argument that US tactical nuclear weapons in Europe are "useless" since they have not provided reassurance to the Baltic states most threatened by Russia.²⁴

Against this, Lukasz Kulesa has maintained that the argument over the "uselessness" of tactical nuclear weapons misses the point, since no fundamental interests are at stake in Ukraine. NATO was never threatened to the degree that it became necessary to activate nuclear forces. The threat to use nuclear weapons can be considered only in exceptional cases where the fundamental interests of the relevant countries are at stake.²⁵

A separate question is whether NATO enlargement has created a difficulty with regard to the shaping of an effective deterrence policy. At the NATO summit in Bucharest in 2008, the Bush administration supported admission of Georgia and Ukraine to the Alliance, but France and Germany were opposed, believing that this would anger Russia. A compromise was eventually reached whereby the Alliance held back from initiating the process of admitting Georgia and Ukraine to NATO but recognized their aspirations to membership.²⁶ NATO appears to be in a bind: having encouraged Ukrainian aspirations for membership, there is a sense that it must express some readiness to support Ukraine against Russian-backed attacks. However, since Ukraine is not a member of the Alliance, and the attacks on the east of the country do not directly endanger member countries, there is no fundamental interest at stake

and therefore less incentive to come to the aid of Ukraine. Indeed, President Obama acknowledged in early 2015 that the option of military support for Ukraine is limited, since it is not a NATO country.²⁷ There is likewise an argument that NATO was mistaken in encouraging Ukraine to join the Alliance, since the country has always possessed unique significance for Russia.²⁸ Rather than issuing half-hearted commitments to defend Ukraine, which only undermine a cohesive deterrence policy, the Alliance should focus on deterring potential attacks on member states.

In the wake of the crisis in Ukraine, there have been calls for the deployment of nuclear weapons in Eastern Europe as a means to strengthen deterrence.²⁹ However, such a move would be deeply provocative for Moscow, and may further escalate tensions between NATO and Russia while serving only to strengthen divisions between the western and eastern parts of NATO.³⁰

NATO's nuclear deterrence policy faces unique challenges in the wake of Moscow's declared readiness to resort to nuclear attacks to "deescalate" a conventional war. Britain's Defense Minister Michael Fallon voiced concern in February 2015 that Russia may have lowered the threshold for its use of nuclear weapons, and stated that Britain needed to update its own nuclear deterrent in response.³¹ In March 2015, the Russian ambassador to Denmark warned Copenhagen that Danish warships would become targets for Russian nuclear missiles if it participated in the NATO missile defense system.³² According to the amended Russian military doctrine approved in December 2014, "The Russian Federation reserves the right to use nuclear weapons in response to the use of nuclear and other types of weapons of mass destruction against it and/or its allies, and also in the event of aggression against the Russian Federation involving the use of conventional weapons when the very existence of the state is under threat."³³ The language here suggests that Russia now does not rule out a "first use" of its nuclear weapons.

Vladimir Dvorkin argues that the language of the military doctrine is little different from the American, British, and French nuclear strategic principles of the Cold War, which permitted a first nuclear strike because the Soviet Union held a qualitative conventional edge over the West. Today, with the Western advantage in conventional forces, Dvorkin maintains that the Russian right to a first strike is understandable, but he concludes that in spite of the Ukraine crisis and the military escalation, it is premature to suggest that the conditions dictating the Russian use of nuclear weapons have changed. Nevertheless, Russia has certainly placed a stronger emphasis

on the development of its strategic nuclear forces to maintain the balance with the United States.³⁴

In 2009, well before the Ukraine crisis, Russia conducted an extensive exercise that included a staged invasion of the Baltic states and a simulated nuclear attack on Poland. In 2013, Russia carried out simulated attacks on Sweden, Poland, and Lithuania, and also threatened to carry out preemptive operations against ballistic missile defense facilities in Romania and Poland.³⁵ Since the beginning of the Ukraine crisis, both NATO and Russia have expanded the magnitude and range of their war games.³⁶ Where there was once a relatively low likelihood of a military confrontation with Moscow, the dangers of an unintended escalation have certainly increased.

Managing Nuclear Deterrence Policy in a Climate of Rising Tensions

The question remains, how does NATO maintain a policy of nuclear deterrence in response to Russia's nuclear posture and its threats to Alliance members, without creating a dangerous nuclear escalation? On the one hand, NATO's nuclear deterrence doctrine must make explicit that a nuclear strike against a member of the Alliance will be met with a nuclear counterstrike.³⁷ Failure to do so would expose vulnerable NATO members such as Poland and the Baltic states to attack and could seriously damage the principle of collective security underpinning the Alliance. On the other hand, the present conflict with Russia over Ukraine presents grave dangers of unintended escalation. As Alexei Arbatov has pointed out, "In global politics, particularly when it comes to nuclear issues, words are deeds." After the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, both the Soviet and American leaders exercised great caution in their rhetoric on nuclear weapons. In some ways, the current situation may be worse than the Cold War, since previous generations of leaders gained extensive experience in dealing with crises relating to the threat of nuclear war and were able to avoid a nuclear cataclysm. The present generation of leaders and policymakers does not have the benefits of this experience, and instead must start from scratch.³⁸

Russia's former Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov has suggested that "in the absence of political dialogue, with mutual mistrust reaching historical highs, the probability of unintended accidents, including those involving nuclear weapons, is getting more and more real."³⁹ Ivanov is in good company. In March 2011, well before the Ukraine crisis erupted, a number of distinguished

former US statesmen, Kissinger, Nunn, Perry, and Shultz, argued that nuclear deterrence today is increasingly dangerous and ineffective, bringing with it a greater risk of an unintentional use of nuclear weapons. They contended that the United States, NATO, and Russia would be more secure if they avoid threatening nuclear postures and reduce their dependence on tactical nuclear weapons. The United States needs to work with its NATO allies in developing an extended deterrence strategy based less on a nuclear capability and more on conventional means.⁴⁰

Indeed, it can be argued that to some extent this is already happening. In the spring of 2016, NATO drew up plans to deploy four combat battalions of some 1000 troops each in Poland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, in order to reassure eastern Alliance members and to deter Russia.⁴¹

Kulesa maintains that the United States and its NATO allies were able to deter Russia from escalating the crisis in Ukraine with a focus on extended conventional deterrence, including the deployment of conventional forces in Eastern Europe, fighter aircraft, and reconnaissance flights with naval forces in the Baltic and Black Seas. While “nuclear weapons were employed in the background,” the Alliance countries focused on an increase in conventional forces, avoiding any public reference to the need for a more open nuclear deterrence. However, Kulesa also argues that a removal of US tactical weapons from Europe would not necessarily improve the situation: by investing instead in conventional capabilities, it would become necessary to strengthen conventional deterrence, which would only invite Russia to consolidate the role of its own nuclear deterrent.⁴²

Thus, NATO's nuclear deterrence policy will have to maintain a careful balance between deescalation with Russia over Ukraine, perhaps at the cost of ruling out future Ukrainian membership in the Alliance, and firm NATO resolve that any conventional attack on Alliance member states will be met with overwhelming conventional force. For the foreseeable future, NATO will need to retain its nuclear weapons in order to signal to adversaries that a nuclear strike against Alliance members will be met with devastating retaliation. At a time of growing concern among NATO members on Russia's periphery, a withdrawal of tactical battlefield nuclear weapons could damage Alliance cohesion and be viewed as a sign of weakness. Nevertheless, in view of NATO's conventional superiority over Russia and the grave dangers of unintended nuclear escalation, the role of nuclear weapons in its deterrence role should be deemphasized.

Conclusion

NATO's Deterrence and Defence Posture Review of 2012 has made it clear that nuclear weapons are at the core of the Alliance deterrence policy alongside its conventional forces and missile defense assets, even if there appeared to be signs in previous years that NATO was downgrading the role of its nuclear weapons. In the years following the collapse of the Soviet Union, NATO diverted its attention to the twin threats of the proliferation of ballistic missiles and weapons of mass destruction from Iran and other countries outside the Euro-Atlantic area. NATO's missile defense system was established with this threat in mind. In confronting threats from revisionist states outside the Euro-Atlantic area, NATO's deterrence strategy can be summed up as deterrence by denial reinforced by punishment.

At the same time, NATO sought to open a new chapter in its relations with Russia, illustrated by the overtures made to Moscow at the Lisbon summit in November 2010. These efforts to develop a new era of cooperation with Moscow were ruptured in 2014 in the wake of the Ukraine crisis. Yet the increased tensions between NATO and Russia are not limited to the Ukraine issue. US claims regarding Russia's violation of the INF Treaty and Moscow's modernization of its strategic nuclear arsenal have resulted in a growing climate of mistrust. This tension has been aggravated by the military encounters between Russian and NATO military forces since the beginning of the Ukraine crisis and Putin's belligerent rhetoric over nuclear weapons.

NATO faces the challenge of managing an effective nuclear deterrence policy that provides reassurance to vulnerable Alliance member states in Russia's "near abroad" while also avoiding an unintended escalation. De-escalating the tensions with Russia could involve NATO ruling out future Ukrainian membership of the Alliance. At the same time, in the present climate of mistrust, NATO can ill afford to withdraw its tactical nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, as long as there is no direct threat to Alliance members, NATO should place an emphasis on extended conventional deterrence as the means to deter threats to vulnerable member states.

The NATO summit in Warsaw, Poland, scheduled for July 8-9, 2016, provides a clear opportunity for the Alliance to affirm its resolve to protect states that are under threat while also placing a greater emphasis on its conventional resources in its deterrence doctrine.

Notes

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