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Revising NATO's Nuclear Posture: The way forward

In his historic April 5, 2009 Prague speech U.S. President Barack Obama pledged that the United States would take concrete steps toward a world without nuclear weapons. The first such step, he said, would be to “reduce the role of nuclear weapons in our national security strategy and urge others to do the same.”² NATO's revised nuclear posture, as outlined in the new Strategic Concept, adopted at the Nov. 19-20, 2010 Lisbon summit, does not live up to that promise.

Rather than finding a sustainable compromise between those allies that had advocated changes to NATO's nuclear posture and those in favor of preserving the status quo, heads of state and government in Lisbon agreed on the lowest common denominator on nuclear issues. On key questions, they settled on positions favored by those that had resisted meaningful reductions in NATO's reliance on nuclear deterrence.

On disarmament, the new Strategic Concept commits NATO “to the goal of creating the conditions for a world without nuclear weapons – but reconfirms that, as long as there are nuclear weapons in the world, NATO will remain a nuclear Alliance.”³

NATO allies state that they are pursuing nuclear disarmament “in a way that promotes international stability, and is based on the principle of undiminished security for all.”⁴ This is far less than the clear commitment to nuclear disarmament that many allies support and reflects French concerns about nuclear abolition as a political goal.⁵

On arms control, NATO makes reductions of tactical nuclear weapons dependent on Russian reciprocity, by stating that “[a]ny further steps must take into account the disparity with the greater Russian stockpiles of short-range nuclear weapons.”⁶ This linkage reflects the concerns of some Central and Eastern European states about

possible unilateral reductions. In effect, NATO's constrains itself by tying its policies to future Russian choices.

With regard to the continued deployment of about 150-200 U.S. tactical nuclear weapons in five European countries, NATO pledges to "ensure the broadest possible participation of Allies in collective defence planning on nuclear roles, in peacetime basing of nuclear forces, and in command, control and consultation arrangements."⁷ This indirect reconfirmation of the importance of nuclear sharing does not reflect the positions of host nations Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands. In February 2010 these countries had urged NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen to initiate "comprehensive discussions" of NATO's future nuclear policy.⁸

The new Strategic Concept does not change NATO's declaratory policy, despite the fact that the United Kingdom and the United States have recently declared that they will not use or threaten the use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear members of the NPT that are in compliance with their non-proliferation obligations.⁹ Yet, NATO as a whole appears to ignore the implications of the fact that the nuclear weapon states that contribute nuclear forces to NATO have significantly restricted the circumstances under which they might be prepared to use nuclear weapons.

Constructive ambiguities in NATO's revised nuclear policy

The new Strategic Concept does, however, leave room for future reductions in the role of nuclear weapons. It provides flexibility on three important issues. First, the document does not explicitly mention the need for the continued deployment of U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe and it also does not specify force requirements. Thus, there

seems to be room for future changes in numbers of tactical nuclear weapons deployed and deployment patterns.

Second, the new concept does not specify what kind of reciprocity from Russia is required before NATO can change its own nuclear posture. Some may argue that nuclear sharing arrangements can only be changed after a New START follow-on agreement with Russia has been agreed. Others may believe that agreement with Russia "to increase transparency on its nuclear weapons in Europe and relocate these weapons away from the territory of NATO members"¹⁰ is a sufficient precondition for NATO to adapt its own posture.

Finally, NATO's declaratory policy is more ambiguous than in the previous Strategic Concept, adopted in 1999. Specifically, NATO no longer states that the role of NATO nuclear forces is to "to prevent war or any kind of coercion."¹¹ The new concept merely states that "[t]he circumstances in which any use of nuclear weapons might have to be contemplated are extremely remote."¹² This leaves room for change, in the direction of declaratory policies adopted recently by the United States and the United Kingdom.

However, there is a great deal of pessimism whether NATO can now muster the political energy to exploit these ambiguities in order to reduce its reliance on nuclear weapons.¹³ The year leading up to the Lisbon summit witnessed considerable progress on nuclear arms control and disarmament. The NPT Review Conference adopted a comprehensive Action Plan to strengthen global nonproliferation and disarmament efforts, Russia and the United States agreed on New START to further reduce strategic nuclear arms, and the Nuclear Security Summit focused international attention on

the dangers of nuclear terrorism. The open and substantive discussions on NATO's nuclear policy in the run-up to the Lisbon summit raised expectations that NATO also could bring its nuclear posture in line with 21st century security requirements.

In 2011, however, nuclear policy appears to be off the agenda of policy-makers. After the summit, no NATO member state has indicated that it is sufficiently unhappy with the compromises reached in Lisbon to initiate a review of these issues. Libya and Afghanistan are perceived to be central challenges to the short-term success of the Alliance. Yet, pessimism with regard to lack of attention to NATO's nuclear posture may be exaggerated. There are several indications that the debate on NATO's nuclear policy is far from over.

- In April, at the informal Foreign Ministers meeting in Berlin, ten NATO members tabled a non-paper on transparency and confidence-building on non-strategic nuclear weapons, which had been drafted by Poland and Norway. This is a sign that a significant number of member states are ready to continue to push towards progress on tactical nuclear weapons.¹⁴
- U.S. officials have repeatedly highlighted the importance of including tactical nuclear weapons in the arms control dialogue with Russia and have a clear mandate from U.S. Congress to do so.
- Public and non-governmental interest in NATO's nuclear policy remains high.¹⁵

The way forward

At the Lisbon summit, NATO allies agreed on a "comprehensive review of its deterrence and defence posture (...), including NATO's nuclear posture, and missile defence and other means of strategic deterrence and defence." At the informal Foreign Ministers meeting in April, NATO formally launched this *Deterrence and Defense Posture Review* (DDPR), which is expected to deliver a report to May 2012 NATO summit in the United States. The DDPR will be a political process under the guidance of the North Atlantic Council and thus broaden the debate on NATO's nuclear posture, which was previously dominated by military considerations. While the mandate of the review is broad, most observers expect it to focus on nuclear issues.¹⁶

There are good reasons why the DDPR should entail a fundamental review NATO's nuclear policies, rather than a mere technical review on the details of NATO's future nuclear posture.

- U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe no longer serve a military purpose.
- NATO's current posture lacks legitimacy because in key countries there is solid Parliamentary and public support for a revision of current nuclear sharing practices.
- Forthcoming decisions about the modernization of nuclear weapons and nuclear-capable delivery platforms threaten to divide the Alliance.
- NATO's nuclear posture is an anomaly that influences the global debate about nuclear disarmament and undermines the credibility of nuclear nonproliferation efforts.
- NATO needs to position itself toward the possible reduction of tactical nuclear

weapons in the context of a New START-follow on agreement.

Against this background, there are four specific issues on Allies can and should change NATO's nuclear posture in the context of the DDPR.¹⁷

1. Allies should acknowledge that U.S. non-strategic nuclear forces deployed in Europe and assigned to NATO do not serve a deterrence or retaliatory function that cannot be provided by the strategic nuclear forces or conventional military assets of Alliance members. Senior U.S. officials, both military and political, have repeatedly stressed that from a military perspective, there is no requirement to continue basing of U.S. nuclear forces in Europe. In April 2010, General James Cartwright, Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, when asked whether there is a military mission performed by U.S. aircraft-delivered nuclear weapons deployed in Europe that cannot be performed by either U.S. strategic forces or U.S. conventional forces replied "No."¹⁸ Likewise, White House coordinator for arms control and weapons of mass destruction terrorism, Gary Samore, in a recent interview with *Arms Control Today* stated that the primary mission and value of tactical nuclear weapons is symbolic and political because "whatever military mission they serve could of course also be accomplished through the use of systems that are not tactical systems based in Europe."¹⁹

A statement by the Alliance acknowledging that tactical nuclear weapons in Europe no longer have a unique military task would thus be in line with the U.S. policy "to increase reliance on non-nuclear means" to assure deterrence and reassurance in

regional scenarios.²⁰ It would signal nuclear sharing has lost its military relevance and would signal that NATO recognizes these new realities and supports Washington's policy to reduce reliance on nuclear deterrence.

2. NATO allies in the DDPR should endorse further, verifiable reductions of all types of U.S. and Russian nuclear forces – strategic and nonstrategic, deployed and nondeployed – as well as nuclear weapons delivery systems. Such a statement would make it easier for Washington to engage Russia on tactical nuclear weapons. NATO allies could remain involved with such talks when and if they get underway, for example through the WMD Control and Disarmament Committee.²¹
3. Allies should *not* call for the modernization of the B61 nuclear warheads stationed in Europe and the dual-capable aircraft designated to carry them. The Obama administration has embarked on a major Life Extension Program of the B61.²² That program aims to consolidate various types of B61 into one new type, the B61-12, which is expected to have improved safety and security features but will also possess enhanced military capabilities. Specifically, these weapons be more accurate, even though it is not clear against what targets such improved targeting capabilities would be required.²³ Deployment of such weapons with increased military capabilities in Europe, which might begin as early as 2018, would be inconsistent with statements that nuclear sharing arrangements serve primarily a political function. It would suggest that there is also a military rationale for

maintaining more capable tactical nuclear weapons in Europe.

Modernization of dual-capable aircraft is likely to remain a divisive issue within the Alliance. Germany has already pledged not to procure a replacement for its ageing Tornado aircraft. Other host nations might also face domestic opposition against investments in new nuclear weapon-capable delivery systems.

A moratorium on the deployment of modernized B61 nuclear bombs in Europe and the procurement of dual-capable aircraft by European allies would strengthen NATO's disarmament and nonproliferation commitments, avoid a divisive debate within the Alliance and prevent unnecessary investments in systems that could be phased out in the medium-term under an agreement with Russia on the reduction of tactical nuclear weapons.

If Russia were to reciprocate by declaring a moratorium on the modernization of tactical nuclear weapons, both sides could send a strong signal that tactical nuclear weapons are legacy systems that have no future in a cooperative European security architecture. Such a message would go some way toward strengthening the global nonproliferation regime.

4. Allies should clarify that the fundamental purpose of nuclear weapons for the Alliance is to deter a nuclear attack by a potential adversary. NATO should pledge not to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear members of the NPT. The fact that NATO's current nuclear doctrine is more permissive than the doctrine of the United States and the United Kingdom undermines the credibility of efforts by NATO and

member states to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons.

Even if defense budgets in Europe are rising slower than they used to be, NATO still remains by far the world's strongest military alliance. NATO accounts for roughly 2/3 of global defense expenditure and military procurement and 80% of global military research and defense efforts. Eight of the fourteen states that have nuclear weapons on their territory are NATO members, three of the five official nuclear weapon states are NATO members. Because of this predominance, NATO is not only reacting to global trends but it is a trend-setter. If NATO argues that nuclear weapons are indispensable, what message is it sending to other states that do not have nuclear weapons and are in a less comfortable position?

In order to increase the legitimacy of NATO's nuclear weapons policy, all stages of the deliberations in the DDPR should be conducted in an open and transparent manner that involves key stakeholders such as Parliaments, the expert community, and the broader public.²⁴ Since it is unlikely that NATO members will have found a new consensus on all aspects of its nuclear posture by May 2012, it might be best to consider the DDPR as an open-ended process which will continue to provide political guidance to the process of adapting NATO's nuclear posture to 21st century requirements. From this perspective, the DDPR report to be delivered to the NATO summit next year will be an important opportunity to make good on President Obama's promise to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in the national security strategy of NATO.

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² “Remarks of President Barack Obama”, Embassy of the United States, Prague, April 5, 2009, <http://prague.usembassy.gov/obama.html>.

³ “Active Engagement, Modern Defence. Strategic Concept for the Defence and Security of the Members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. Adopted by Heads of State and Government in Lisbon. Lisbon. <http://www.nato.int/lisbon2010/strategic-concept-2010-eng.pdf>, Preface.

⁴ Ibid, paragraph 26.

⁵ See Paul Zajac: “NATO’s Defense and Deterrence Posture Review: A French Perspective on Nuclear Issues.” In: Paul Ingram/ Oliver Meier (eds.): Reducing the Role of Tactical Nuclear Weapons in Europe: Perspectives and Proposals on the NATO Policy Debate. Arms Control Association (ACA)/ British American Security Information Council (BASIC)/ Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg (IFSH) Washington, D.C./London/Hamburg, May 2011 http://tacticalnuclearweapons.ifsh.de/pdf/Tactical%20Nuclear%20Report_May_10.pdf, pp. 39–41.

⁶ “Active Engagement, Modern Defence”, op.cit., paragraph 26.

⁷ Ibid, paragraph 19.

⁸ On February 26, 2010, the Foreign Ministers of host nations Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands as well as Norway and Luxembourg wrote to NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen urging him to initiate “comprehensive discussions” on NATO’s nuclear policy. Letter by the Foreign Ministers of Belgium, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Norway to NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen, February 26, 2010, <http://www.armscontrol.org/system/files/Letter%20to%20Secretary%20General%20NATO.pdf>.

⁹ U.S. Department of Defense (2010): Nuclear Posture Review Report. Washington, D.C., April 2010, www.defense.gov/npr/docs/2010%20nuclear%20posture%20review%20report.pdf, p. 15; HM Government: Securing Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The Strategic Defence and Security Review. Presented to Parliament by the Prime Minister by Command of Her Majesty. London; October 2010, http://www.direct.gov.uk/prod_consum_dg/groups/dg_digitalassets/@dg/@en/documents/digitalasset/dg_191634.pdf?CID=PDF&PLA=furl&CRE=sdsr, pp. 37-38.

¹⁰ “Active Engagement, Modern Defence”, op.cit., paragraph 26.

¹¹ “The Alliance’s Strategic Concept. Approved by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Washington D.C.” NATO. Washington, D.C., April 24, 1999 http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_27433.htm, paragraph 46.

¹² “Active Engagement, Modern Defence”, op.cit., paragraph 17.

¹³ See Simon Lunn; Ian Kearns: NATO’s Nuclear Policy after Lisbon: The Summit Documents and the Way Ahead. European Leadership Network for Multilateral Nuclear Disarmament and Non-proliferation. London (ELN Background Brief), January 25, 2011, <http://www.nuclearsecurityproject.org/atf/cf/%7B1FCE2821-C31C-4560-BEC1-BB4BB58B54D9%7D/ELN-NATO-NUCLEAR-POLICY-AFTER-LISBON-01111.PDF>.

¹⁴ Host nations Germany and the Netherlands initially endorsed the Norwegian-Polish paper which was then also endorsed by Belgium, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Iceland, Luxemburg and Slovenia. See Hans Kristensen: “10 NATO Countries Want More Transparency for Non-Strategic Nuclear Weapons”, FAS Strategic Security Blog. Washington, D.C, 24 April 2011, <http://www.fas.org/blog/ssp/2011/04/natoproposal.php>.

¹⁵ In May 2011 alone, about half a dozen studies were published on the future of U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe. Among them were Jacek Durkalec: Reductions of Tactical Nuclear Weapons in Europe: Unbinding the Gordian Knot. Polish Institute of International Affairs. Warsaw (PISM Strategic File, 16), May 2011, http://www.pism.pl/files/?id_plik=7478; General Accounting Office: Nuclear Weapons. DOD and NNSA Need to Better Manage Scope of Future Refurbishments and Risks to Maintaining U.S. Commitments to NATO. GAO-11-387. Washington, D.C., May 2011, <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d11387.pdf>; Paul Ingram/ Oliver Meier (eds.): Reducing the Role of Tactical Nuclear Weapons in Europe: Perspectives and Proposals on the

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¹⁶ Oliver Meier (2010): NATO Revises Nuclear Policy. In: *Arms Control Today*, December 2010, pp. 28–31, http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2010_12/NATO_Nuclear.

¹⁷ A similar set of recommendations was recently endorsed by more than two dozen nuclear experts and former senior government officials in a letter delivered July 12 to NATO member states and Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen. For more information on the letter see <http://www.armscontrol.org/pressroom/Experts-Urge-NATO-Reduce-Role-Nuclear-Weapons>.

¹⁸ James General Cartwright cited in: Council on Foreign Relations Meeting on Nuclear Posture Review. April 8, 2010, http://www.defense.gov/npr/docs/Council_on_Foreign_Relation.pdf.

¹⁹ Pursuing the Prague Agenda: An Interview With White House Coordinator Gary Samore (2011). In: *Arms Control Today*, May 2011, http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2011_05/Samore, pp. 8–14.

²⁰ Nuclear Posture Review Report, op.cit., p. 28.

²¹ At the Lisbon summit, NATO agreed to set up an WMD Control and Disarmament Committee. The precise mandate of that committee is still under discussion, though it is widely assumed to coordinate NATO member states positions towards a possible New START-follow on agreement. See Oliver Meier: NATO Sets Up Arms Control Committee. In: *Arms Control Today*, April 2011, http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2011_04/NATO, p. 32.

²² General Accounting Office (2011): Nuclear Weapons. DOD and NNSA Need to Better Manage Scope of Future Refurbishments and Risks to Maintaining U.S. Commitments to NATO. GAO-11-387. Washington, D.C., <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d11387.pdf>.

²³ Hans Kristensen: “B61 LEP: Increasing NATO Nuclear Capability and Precision Low-Yield Strikes”, FAS Strategic Security Blog. Washington, D.C., June 15, 2011, <http://www.fas.org/blog/ssp/2011/06/b61-12.php>.

²⁴ See Oliver Meier/ Paul Ingram: A Nuclear Posture Review for NATO. In: *Arms Control Today*, October 2010, pp. 8–15. http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2010_10/Meier-Ingram.