

NATO's Deterrence Challenges

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Executive Summary

This workshop was the fourth in a series of conferences dealing with deterrence challenges facing the United States and its NATO Allies.^[1] The purposes of this workshop series are to encourage dialogue and to contribute constructively to the ongoing process of NATO policy development.

The workshop participants discussed the continuing critical importance for Alliance security of U.S. extended deterrence and the risk- and responsibility-sharing arrangements based on U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe and Allied dual-capable aircraft (DCA). They also examined the extent to which Russia might in some circumstances present a deterrence challenge for the Alliance and reviewed Russian policy concerning arms control for non-strategic nuclear forces and conventional military forces.

The participants considered how NATO might deal with the challenge of regional powers armed with weapons of mass destruction (WMD), notably in the Middle East, and assessed (a) the contingencies that might arise from efforts to dissuade Iran and other potential proliferants from acquiring nuclear weapons and (b) the feasibility of constructing a deterrence structure to contain the potential political-military consequences of a nuclear-armed Iran.

Another major theme concerned the implications for the Alliance of the concepts of "tailored deterrence" and "tailored assurance." The participants considered measures that might provide assurance to any allies that may feel threatened regarding the credibility of the Alliance's deterrence and defense posture, as well as the Article 5 (mutual defense) commitments of the Allies. Participants agreed that any search for U.S. security guarantees beyond Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty could present risks for solidarity and cohesion in the Alliance.

Several participants noted that U.S. extended deterrence commitments remain an important factor in nonproliferation, and said that the credibility of these commitments must be sustained during any process of nuclear disarmament. Nuclear deterrence and nuclear disarmament policies both present serious public communications challenges for the Alliance, participants agreed.

Some participants said that the Alliance as a whole should, in its new Strategic Concept review, address the challenge of deterring state-sponsored WMD terrorism. Finally, a participant argued that the Allies will have to face what he called new “jagged threats” to Alliance cohesion and collective defense, such as major terrorist attacks.

Key Findings

The key findings from the workshop are found below.

NATO’s nuclear-sharing arrangements remain a central element of U.S. extended deterrence.

The Alliance’s nuclear-sharing arrangements are not, a participant said, “carved in stone,” in that they could be modified under certain conditions. However, he said, one of the advantages of these arrangements is that they make possible Allied contributions to the constitution of “a trans-Atlantic security space”—“a common security space”—in which Allies on both sides of the Atlantic share risks and responsibilities regarding nuclear deterrence. This posture is both “non-provocative” and an expression of “Alliance solidarity.” U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe have “important political weight,” a participant said, as a visible manifestation of the U.S. commitment to Allied security as well as of the equitable sharing of risks and responsibilities by European Allies.

A participant said that the attitude taken by some Americans regarding the retention of U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe—to keep them in Europe “if the European Allies still want them”—implies that maintaining the Alliance’s nuclear-sharing arrangements is not important from a U.S. perspective. This attitude pushes the political responsibility for sustaining the Alliance’s nuclear deterrence posture onto the shoulders of European Allies that are, for the most part, non-nuclear-weapon states that would prefer to avoid a public debate about nuclear deterrence policies. Another participant said that the December 2008 Schlesinger report took the right approach in that it clearly affirmed that the Alliance’s risk- and responsibility-sharing arrangements support U.S. political and strategic interests, and not only those of the European Allies.^[2]

Some participants said that the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence commitments has been uncertain for decades, and that the removal of the remaining U.S. nuclear forces in Europe would raise even greater questions about that credibility. The Alliance requires, a participant said, “minimum sufficient visibility” of the U.S. nuclear forces that might be employed to honor U.S. extended deterrence commitments. U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe are, a participant said, “still salient for the transatlantic link and U.S. credibility.”

Deterrence is about “stability control,” a participant said. The presence of U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe is analogous, he said, to the British policy of “continuous at sea deterrence,” in that the objective is to maintain “a stable situation,” a form of “strategic stability.” Removing the remaining U.S. nuclear weapons from Europe could be destabilizing, because any effort to return them in a crisis could be characterized as an “escalation” of such a crisis. This concern would not arise if U.S. nuclear weapons were retained in Europe.

Nuclear policy consultations in the Alliance and Allied participation in NATO’s nuclear deterrence posture have continued to hinge to a significant extent upon U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe.

U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe, some participants said, make nuclear burden-sharing arrangements possible and make nuclear consultations more meaningful. Indeed, some participants said, if the U.S. nuclear weapons were withdrawn from Europe, Washington would

have less reason to consult with its NATO European Allies in the definition of nuclear deterrence policy.

A participant noted that the removal of U.S. nuclear weapons from Europe would mean the end of the burden-sharing arrangements based on these weapons and Allied dual-capable aircraft, and therefore the end of consultations concerning these capabilities. Another participant said that the assignment of Allied officers to U.S. commands, such as the U.S. Strategic Command, would fall short of the quality of engagement and experience furnished by Allies maintaining national delivery systems and operational responsibilities.

If Allies were not engaged via dual-capable aircraft or other delivery systems, a participant said, the NATO nuclear consultations would amount to “informational briefings” from the United Kingdom and the United States.^[3] Having an operational role promotes European Allied involvement. It was nonetheless recognized that the removal of U.S. nuclear weapons from Europe would not mean the end of U.S. extended deterrence or nuclear consultations in the Alliance.

With NATO enlargement, the proportion of the Allies with direct host and delivery responsibilities has diminished; and for this reason, a participant argued, the NATO Allies should strive to devise mechanisms for more extensive Allied contributions to the Alliance’s nuclear deterrence posture.

Another participant said, however, that any effort to enhance the participation of non-DCA Allies in upholding the Alliance’s nuclear deterrence posture could be risky, because it might be interpreted as an increased interest in nuclear employment contingencies. This could be “politically devastating,” because it would be difficult to explain the need for such an effort to public opinion.

The Allies should recognize, a participant argued, that they in fact have a “holistic” deterrence posture encompassing conventional forces, active and passive defenses, and consequence management capabilities in addition to nuclear forces. The nuclear deterrence element of this overall posture is distinctive in that its essential purpose is to preserve peace and prevent war. Since the end of the Cold War, the Alliance’s nuclear deterrence posture has been “capability-based” rather than “threat-based,” and for this reason it has sometimes been called “to whom it may concern” deterrence.

Several factors, including cost and nuclear disarmament advocacy, may affect decisions on the modernization of dual-capable aircraft.

One of the issues affecting NATO’s nuclear deterrence posture concerns the potential modernization of dual-capable aircraft (DCA). The European Allies providing DCA and contemplating the acquisition of replacement aircraft in the next few years will, a participant said, be influenced by U.S. decisions regarding the future of the Joint Strike Fighter.

Another factor, a participant said, is affordability. Shrinking defense budgets complicate the pursuit of modernization. Life-extension programs for current types of DCA may be needed, pending decisions on new aircraft.

Another participant warned that decisions on next-generation DCA aircraft cannot be postponed indefinitely, owing to the risk of aircraft obsolescence. In his view, NATO might run a risk of “losing control of the debate without taking action.” As a result, he said, instead of maintaining “a visible force,” NATO might find itself with “a risible force.”

The high level of attention given to visions of nuclear disarmament in the current political context may, a participant said, complicate the pursuit of DCA modernization.

A participant asked whether arrangements other than DCA are conceivable in order to achieve the same burden-sharing results. There is a risk, he said, that moving away from the DCA arrangements involving Allied aircraft would shift the burden further on to the shoulders of the United States; and this could be damaging for Alliance cohesion. Another participant said that ending the Alliance's nuclear-sharing arrangements based on DCA and U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe would "push all the burden on the United States" and that this would represent another example of "de-solidarization" in the Alliance.

Russia remains a potential deterrence challenge for the Alliance.

Some participants expressed concern about the conjuncture of several aspects of Russian sentiment today. That is, the Russians have a sense of conventional military inferiority in relation to NATO and express a perception of "encirclement," owing in part to the NATO enlargement process. The Russians have made clear that their reliance on nuclear weapons as a deterrent vis-à-vis China as well as NATO has increased since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The United States has no nuclear force modernization program at present, some participants noted, while Russia is developing and producing new nuclear delivery systems and conducting high-profile exercises involving simulated nuclear attacks. It is partly for this reason, some participants said, that the requirement for U.S. extended deterrence persists, and that the subtle reference to Russia's nuclear forces in the 1999 Strategic Concept remains valid.^[4]

A participant argued that Russia's nuclear force modernization efforts are not "menacing," because they are driven by factors other than military or political goals—for instance, bureaucratic and institutional inertia. Other participants questioned whether it is possible for outsiders to determine that political-military motivations are secondary or absent, and noted that, whatever the motivations for the acquisition of modernized nuclear forces, the Russian government could choose to employ them for various purposes.

The Russians have, some participants noted, concerns that the United States may have a superior "uploading" capacity that could support the reconstitution of capabilities in a crisis. However, there are no precedents for negotiated treaty constraints on stored warheads. Other Russian concerns in the strategic domain include U.S. missile defense programs and the proposed U.S. "prompt global strike" system that might be based on Trident submarine-launched ballistic missiles equipped with non-nuclear warheads. By contrast, some participants noted, Russia maintains many more non-strategic nuclear forces (NSNF) than does the United States, with estimates of Russian NSNF ranging from 3,000 to 8,000 warheads.

Russian capabilities and policies continue to pose challenges for arms control for non-strategic nuclear forces.

The Alliance must, a participant said, find the right policy, language, and tone to address the problem of arms control for non-strategic nuclear forces (NSNF). The Russians are believed to have thousands of weapons in this broad category, he said, and the problems of counting, monitoring, and verifying Russia's NSNF holdings have yet to be addressed. Given the numbers of Russian NSNF and the associated uncertainties, he said, Alliance security would not be enhanced by the elimination of the comparatively small number of U.S. nuclear weapons remaining in Europe.

Another participant argued that U.S. nuclear forces in Europe should not be withdrawn without compensatory action on the Russian side. U.S. nuclear forces in Europe could, he suggested, serve as instruments in negotiations directed at obtaining greater transparency regarding Russian NSNF. In contrast, the Russian position has for decades been that no negotiation is possible unless the United States first removes all its nuclear weapons from Europe.

The Russians have made clear, a participant said, that they value their non-strategic nuclear forces highly and are not prepared to engage in discussions about transparency measures, much less reductions in such forces. This remains the case, a participant noted, even though the numbers of non-strategic nuclear weapons are “much higher on the Russian side” than on the NATO side.

Conventional arms control in Europe is in crisis, owing in part to Russian policies concerning Georgia and the CFE Treaty.

Conventional arms control is important for deterrence and security, a participant said. For example, exercises involving Allied troops in areas such as northern Norway and eastern Turkey have historically sent a message of deterrence as well as reassurance. The Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (the CFE Treaty) is in crisis for several reasons, including a Russian perception of NATO’s conventional military superiority, Russia’s failure to fulfill its 1999 commitments to withdraw its military forces from Georgia and Moldova, and Russia’s suspension of its compliance with the CFE Treaty in 2007. Russia is no longer providing information every three months about its holdings of tanks, artillery, and other armaments at specific sites. Transparency under the terms of the CFE Treaty has therefore become, he said, “factually non-existent.” In the meantime, the Russians have complained that NATO has disregarded Moscow’s proposals for a new approach to the CFE Treaty, including the establishment of block ceilings and the abandonment of flank constraints (which Russia regards as discriminatory).

The more fundamental challenge for the CFE Treaty resides, a participant said, in Russia’s behavior during and since the August 2008 Georgia-Russia war. Russia has used conventional military forces to impose a de facto change in international borders, and this is contrary to the assumptions underlying the CFE Treaty and the Helsinki Final Act. After Moscow’s recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states, there may be “no way back” to the CFE Treaty.

Some workshop participants disagreed regarding the relationship of the CFE Treaty to nuclear deterrence between Moscow and NATO. According to one participant, nuclear deterrence between Moscow and NATO made the CFE Treaty negotiations possible. Another participant said, however, that there was a common interest in addressing levels of major types of conventional armaments independent of nuclear deterrence. The CFE Treaty provided for reductions in certain types of conventional armaments to agreed levels as well as transparency measures and other constraints and obligations. The transparency measures can be regarded as relevant to deterrence, owing to the high cost of violating them to launch military action. The loss of transparency about Russian conventional capabilities since Moscow’s suspension of compliance with the CFE Treaty “could lead to conflict,” a participant said.

NATO faces growing challenges from regional powers armed with WMD, notably in the Middle East.

In the next Strategic Concept, a participant said, NATO will have to discuss more directly the risk of contingencies involving regional powers armed with WMD, including nuclear weapons. The Alliance needs to move “out of the East-West strait-jacket” and recognize more explicitly that its security interests are affected by global developments, including in Afghanistan and Iran. The Allies took a step in this direction by recognizing in the April 2009 Declaration on Alliance Security

that “Our security is increasingly tied to that of other regions.”^[5] The Allies need, he concluded, to establish a link between NATO’s nuclear capabilities and the global security context.

As NATO Allies strive to reduce their dependence on Russian energy supplies, a participant said, some Allies will develop closer relationships with various Middle Eastern states. NATO will, he said, be obliged to take an interest in the security of these states, even if they are not allies. Israel may require “strategic assurance” from NATO, he added, to accept a comprehensive peace settlement with the Palestinians and to exercise restraint vis à vis Iran. Another participant noted that the potential Iranian nuclear threat is “not Israeli-specific”—that is, a nuclear-armed Iran would threaten the security interests of states in addition to Israel, in the Middle East and beyond.

A participant suggested that the United States and other NATO Allies should devote more attention to thinking about where and how to draw “red lines” that might deter Iran and other potential proliferants from acquiring nuclear weapons. The “red lines” might include producing plutonium or enriched uranium, expelling International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors, or testing a nuclear explosive device. How would the NATO Allies react if Iran attacked U.S. forces or allies in the Persian Gulf region? What would be the implications if Russia chose to intervene in support of Iran?

The Alliance or the United States and some of its NATO Allies might find it prudent to build a “deterrence structure” to contain the effects of a nuclear-armed Iran.

In view of the risk that efforts to dissuade Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons may fail, a participant argued, it is imperative to consider how the Alliance and/or the United States and some of its NATO Allies might contribute to the construction and maintenance of a deterrence structure designed to minimize Tehran’s ability to employ its nuclear arms to coerce its neighbors. Such a deterrence structure could contain the leverage that Iran might seek to gain with nuclear weapons, and limit the risks of further nuclear proliferation among Iran’s neighbors.

Part of the deterrent structure, a participant said, might consist of an expanded and redefined Operation Active Endeavor. This NATO maritime surveillance operation is currently limited to the Mediterranean, but its geographical scope could be expanded and its operational mission could be extended to include the interception of WMD-related materials.

The alternative to such a deterrent structure under U.S. and/or NATO leadership auspices, another participant argued, might be the pursuit of nuclear weapons by Egypt or Saudi Arabia or efforts by these or other states to seek the protection of other nuclear-armed states.

Whether the NATO Allies would be prepared to contribute to a deterrence structure of indefinite duration is uncertain, a participant said, in view of the sense that the Alliance may already be overstretched with its current missions. In his view, it would be more plausible for Britain, France, and the United States to offer such extended deterrence guarantees to certain Gulf states than for the Alliance as a whole to do so. These three Allies should, he said, devise “non-provocative tangible assets” to bolster the credibility of such guarantees.

Some participants said that successful political re-engagement with Iran would be preferable to a new “arms race” in the Middle East. There was general agreement that a diplomatic solution to Iran’s evident quest for nuclear weapons would be preferred. Moreover, if U.S. and European security partners in the region can be assured without the introduction of nuclear forces in the region, “all the better,” as one participant said.

Another participant said that it would be difficult to assure Iran's neighbors without nuclear weapons. With nuclear weapons, he said, people understand the high cost of mistakes and cannot rule out risks. Nuclear weapons provide, he said, "reassurance without provocation," and missile defense alone cannot offer such reassurance.

Some participants said that it might be possible to persuade the Iranian government not to acquire nuclear weapons by offering it an assurance that external powers would not seek regime change.[6] One participant asked if such an assurance would be "an unconditional guarantee" or "blank check," even if the Iranian government continued to support subversion and terrorism and to pursue its vision of being "the hegemon of the Gulf."

"Tailored assurance," the logical conceptual counterpart of "tailored deterrence," presents significant political and practical challenges for the Alliance.

"Tailored deterrence" is not a panacea, a participant said, but obviously it constitutes a desirable approach to strategic planning and action.[7] However, there are so many possible adversaries to study and understand that it is questionable whether the necessary intelligence resources are available. If the Allies cannot afford "tailored deterrence," they will be left with "sloppy deterrence"—that is, the "intrinsic deterrence" of an alliance of comparatively wealthy countries

Rather than focusing mainly on deterrence and "tailored deterrence," some participants said, the Alliance should also consider the challenge of "assurance" for Allies that feel threatened.[8] This led directly to discussion of the concept of "tailored assurance."

Is it possible, a participant asked, to envisage "tailored assurance" for Norway, Turkey, and the Baltic states? Could the Alliance make assurance arrangements tailored to the needs of specific Allies? How would that affect Alliance unity and cohesion?

Another participant said that "tailored assurance" was in principle "utterly wrong," because it implies that the Alliance's commitments are not equally valid for all Allies. Objectively, specific Allies are in different situations. However, he said, pursuing "tailored assurance" could reinforce "the centrifugal forces at work" in the Alliance.

Taking a somewhat different perspective, another participant said that contingency plans and reinforcement options necessarily differ for the defense of specific Allies, and these documents are of course classified. There may therefore be nothing new in "tailored assurance" but the name, and there is no need to use the phrase "tailored assurance" to describe prudent planning for distinct contingencies.

The process of preparing contingency plans may be more important for assurance, a participant said, than the quality of the plans. The engagement of all the Allies in the process would in itself, he said, provide a form of assurance to the new Allies anxious about Russia since Moscow's use of force against Georgia in August 2008. Reports of the process being underway would provide assurance to public opinion in these countries.

For the assurance of some individual allies, a participant said, what is probably needed is not knowledge of the Alliance's plans, but knowledge of the plans of Germany, the United Kingdom, the United States, and a handful of other countries. However, he said, the danger in such an approach is that it could lead to a loss of a sense of obligation by all the Allies to each other.

Another participant said that the danger in “tailored assurance” packages for some Allies is that they could be perceived by Moscow as anti-Russian, and this could “lock” the Alliance into an antagonistic relationship with Russia.

Since the Georgia-Russia war in August 2008, the Alliance has faced the challenge of providing assurance to the new Allies regarding the credibility of deterrence and Article 5 commitments.

During the Cold War, a participant noted, the NATO Allies reinforced the credibility of their Article 5 commitments (i.e., their mutual defense pledges) through planning, exercises, and force deployments — including U.S. military forces on the border between East Germany and West Germany. In his view, NATO today suffers from “a self-inflicted wound”—that is, that the Alliance failed to take similar steps with regard to the Czech Republic, Poland, and the other Allies that have joined NATO since 1999. Instead of basing Allied forces on the territory of the new Allies, he said, the Alliance decided in 1998 to adopt a “Norwegian model” of planning on reinforcements in a crisis and foregoing exercises and more detailed contingency planning for the defense of the new Allies. In the interests of deterrence and diminished dependence on nuclear weapons, he concluded, the Alliance needs to “add the missing dimension of Article 5” vis à vis the new Allies and prepare focused contingency plans and conduct reinforcement exercises.

In terms of “assurance packages,” a participant said, these already exist for older Allies such as Norway and Turkey. Assurance measures for the new Allies could, he said, provide a more solid basis for relations with Russia. Contingency plans and modest staff exercises for reinforcement could, he added, help to stabilize the Alliance’s relations with Russia.

The Georgia-Russia war of August 2008 demonstrated, a participant said, “the limits of virtual security assurance” and renewed the interest of the new Allies in Central and Eastern Europe in practical measures to lend credibility to the collective defense pledge in Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. It would, he said, be “tricky” for the Alliance to fail to prepare the contingency plans and other “assurance packages” desired by the new Allies, because this would contribute to the tendency on the part of some of these states to seek bilateral guarantees from the United States in addition to Article 5.

Pursuing U.S. security guarantees in addition to Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty could undermine Alliance cohesion and the credibility of NATO’s collective defense commitments.

Some participants said that the expressions of interest in some Allied nations regarding U.S. security commitments in addition to Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty were dangerous, in that they could weaken the credibility of Article 5. Moreover, they could undermine Alliance cohesion by implying that Allies with “extra” U.S. commitments concluded on a bilateral basis were somehow more protected than those benefiting only from Article 5.

A participant said that many Allied observers are concerned about a trend of “creeping de-solidarization.” This is visible, he said, in the “compartmentalization” of the responsibilities that specific Allies are willing to assume in Afghanistan. It was also visible, he said, in the drafting of the April 2009 Declaration on Alliance Security, when various Allies tried to insert their national concerns. Spain, for example, reportedly sought to include a reference to its concerns about the Mediterranean and North Africa. It raises the question, he said, of whether the Alliance is still able to function as an alliance.

Another participant highlighted the importance of credibility and cohesion in the Alliance by quoting Baltasar de Zuñiga, an advisor to King Philip IV of Spain: “A monarchy that has lost its reputation, even if it has lost no territory, is a sky without light, a body without a soul.”

The linkage sometimes made between nonproliferation and force reductions by the NPT-recognized nuclear-weapon states is at best debatable.

According to the original NPT bargain in 1968, a participant said, in return for access to civilian nuclear technology for peaceful purposes, the non-nuclear-weapon states would forego nuclear weapons programs and accept safeguards on their nuclear activities. Over the subsequent decades, he said, what was a less important bargain at the time of the treaty’s negotiation—a political requirement for moves toward nuclear disarmament by the treaty-recognized nuclear-weapon states—has grown stronger and more significant. There is no direct linkage between nuclear proliferation trends and arms control agreements between Moscow and Washington, he said, but negotiated reductions and enhanced transparency and predictability in the U.S.-Russian relationship may improve the context for the pursuit of nonproliferation measures.

Some participants said that there is no empirical evidence to support the proposition that there is a linkage between nonproliferation and the nuclear disarmament efforts of the NPT-recognized nuclear weapons states. Indeed, some participants noted, countries such as Iran, North Korea, and Pakistan seem indifferent to the nuclear arms reductions undertaken since the early 1990s by Britain, France, Russia, and the United States.

The credibility of extended deterrence must be maintained in order to promote nonproliferation during any process of nuclear disarmament.

Despite the widespread support for nuclear disarmament in NATO nations, a participant noted, there is also some anxiety among Allied observers about the implications for deterrence and security. Perceptions of a threadbare nuclear umbrella might tempt adversaries, and for this reason it is important to ensure that U.S. and Allied security is guaranteed at every step during a process of nuclear force reductions with a view to eventual disarmament. In other words, he said, extended deterrence must be maintained at all times during a process of nuclear disarmament, partly in order to discourage nuclear proliferation.

Several participants highlighted the importance of U.S. extended deterrence commitments for promoting nuclear nonproliferation. Some quoted what U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates said in October 2008:

[A]s long as others have nuclear weapons, we must maintain some level of these weapons ourselves: to deter potential adversaries and to reassure over two dozen allies and partners who rely on our nuclear umbrella for their security—making it unnecessary for them to develop their own . . . While some may not see a real nuclear threat to the United States today, we should be mindful that our friends and allies perceive different levels of risk within their respective regions. Here, our arsenal plays an irreplaceable role in reducing proliferation . . . [O]ur nuclear umbrella – our extended deterrent – underpins our alliances in Europe and in the Pacific and enables our friends, especially those worried about Tehran and Pyongyang, to continue to rely on our nuclear deterrent rather than to develop their own.[9]

Some also noted that U.S. President Barack Obama included a reaffirmation of U.S. extended deterrence commitments in his speech on nuclear disarmament in Prague in April 2009: “As long as these [nuclear] weapons exist, the United States will maintain a safe, secure and effective

arsenal to deter any adversary, and guarantee that defense to our allies—including the Czech Republic.”^[10]

Public opinion in NATO countries is generally not receptive to the logic of the nuclear deterrence policies upheld by the Alliance.

Some participants expressed the hope that the Strategic Concept review commissioned by the Allies at the Strasbourg/Kehl summit in April 2009 will function as a “uniting process” and that the new Strategic Concept will explain to the public in NATO nations the continuing need for nuclear deterrence. The paragraphs dealing with nuclear deterrence in the 1999 Strategic Concept are “still valid,” one participant said, notably the judgment that the circumstances in which the Alliance might contemplate using nuclear weapons remain “extremely remote.”^[11]

Messages for deterrence should be, a participant said, blunt, explicit, and precise. However, he said, politicians prefer circumlocution and euphemism when addressing their publics. The public prefers to think of peace and arms control, he said, and does not wish to hear about terrorists or nuclear weapons. Allied governments need to explain to their electorates what NATO is for, including the need to be able to counter potential enemies and the need to spend on certain capabilities. How, he asked, can politicians justify the costs without frightening people and losing votes?

The only solution during the Cold War to avoid thinking about the risk of “battlefield Germany” in a nuclear conflict, a participant said, was to cultivate confidence in the “war-preventing function” of nuclear weapons. It nonetheless remains difficult to pursue a public discussion of nuclear deterrence matters in Germany, he said. One of the difficulties, he noted, is the moral argument that nuclear deterrence cannot be a legitimate means of self-defense if it depends on the fallible rationality of human beings. However, he said, “rulers interested in survival cannot be assumed to be irrational,” and thus nuclear deterrence remains a means of preventing aggression or blackmail. The NATO Allies should, he concluded, explain the Alliance’s policy in “a non-confrontational way” and lessen their dependence on threats of nuclear retaliation by improving their conventional military capabilities. Another participant said that the latter part of this prescription disregards “the free fall of the defense budgets” in several NATO nations.

It is impossible, a participant said, to have a sustained public debate about nuclear deterrence issues in Western societies. Most people simply “switch off,” because they find the subject unpleasant; and most people do not go beyond “emotional judgments.” A public debate on NATO’s nuclear deterrence posture could thus soon become “uncontrollable.” National leaders must therefore take decisions as to what they deem sound policies and show political leadership. As an example of such leadership, a participant quoted former German Chancellor Helmut Kohl:

Political leadership also means not following the mood of the moment in existential issues. If Konrad Adenauer had followed public opinion polls our country would never have become a member of the North Atlantic Alliance. . . . If I had followed public opinion polls in 1982/83, then the NATO dual track decision would never have been implemented. As Mikhail Gorbachev himself told me, however, it was precisely the unity and steadfastness of the Alliance in the early 1980s that contributed to the ‘new thinking’ of the Soviet leadership and in the final analysis also to German unification.^[12]

In Germany, a participant said, the public debate is conditioned by the tendency to equate nuclear weapons to the Cold War. Because the Cold War has been over since 1989-1991, many Germans wonder why NATO’s nuclear deterrent posture is still necessary. In March 2009 Chancellor Angela Merkel highlighted the global nuclear proliferation context as a justification for maintaining what she called “Alliance nuclear burden sharing”:

NATO has already reduced its nuclear potential by around 95 percent compared to the year 1989 and reduced the readiness of nuclear weapons. At the same time, however, we have observed that the number of nuclear actors and nuclear arsenals has increased, as have the risks of nuclear proliferation globally. Therefore, this is one of the major security risks which we must confront in a decided and determined manner. This is one of the tasks whose management is in Germany's fundamental interests. For this reason the federal government fixed Alliance nuclear burden sharing as one of the anchors of the White Paper, because we know that this assures us influence in the Alliance, even in this extremely sensitive area.^[13]

To sustain NATO's nuclear-sharing arrangements, a participant said, it is not enough to point out that the Soviet Union accepted the U.S. position about the legality of these arrangements in 1968, when the NPT was concluded. The U.S. government and other Alliance governments should point out how these arrangements support alliance cohesion, provide options for deterrence and crisis management, supply evidence as to the genuineness of U.S. security commitments, and offer means for Allies to justify foregoing national nuclear force programs.

Nuclear disarmament policy constitutes a public communications challenge because of the risk of raising unrealistic expectations and delegitimizing the Alliance's own deterrence posture.

How should Allied governments prepare public opinion, a participant asked, for the possibility that "the weather might deteriorate"? That is, owing to international conflicts, the expectations raised about nuclear arms control and disarmament may not be satisfied. For this reason, he and other participants suggested, it might be wise to think about—and refer publicly to—the possibility of a "base camp" or "vantage point" of essential deterrence requirements.^[14] Because the prospects for success in nuclear disarmament are uncertain at best, and the path to a world without nuclear weapons is difficult to identify today, it is important to protect extended deterrence arrangements while pursuing what is possible in terms of nuclear disarmament.

Another participant said that some politicians have created confusion about goals. They have, for example, implied that a world without nuclear weapons would necessarily be more secure, when the examples of World War I and World War II demonstrate that extensive violence is possible in the absence of nuclear weapons. The more sensible goal might be a more secure world, even if that involves retaining nuclear weapons.

The current push for "global zero," a participant said, "delegitimizes" the Alliance's nuclear deterrence posture and justifies the advocacy of unilateral nuclear disarmament, as with the suggestion that NATO should terminate its nuclear-sharing arrangements and eliminate the U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe. The frequent references to the extensive reductions in the nuclear arsenals of NATO's nuclear powers since the end of the Cold War, he said, amount to "an admission of guilt" and imply that these powers are like smokers that have cut back to two cigarettes a day but are "still smoking."

Another participant disagreed. In his view, while the vision of a nuclear-weapon-free world raises questions about the legitimacy of nuclear deterrence, the risks of "serious delegitimization" are distant, notably in view of the widespread acceptance of the caveat expressed (as noted previously) by President Obama: "As long as these weapons exist, the United States will maintain a safe, secure and effective arsenal to deter any adversary, and guarantee that defense to our allies—including the Czech Republic."^[15]

The reluctance to engage in public debate or to respond to criticisms is unwise, several participants said, because it implies that the Allies are "guilty" and lack a strong case. Failing to engage in the public discussion leaves the field to the non-governmental organizations critical of Alliance policy and leads people to assume that Alliance policy is unsound. In fact, he said, NATO

has “a strong message” that is “sellable to the public” in the principles articulated in the 1999 Strategic Concept; but Allied governments need to explain to the public why these principles remain valid. The Strategic Concept is a means for communicating messages to the publics in NATO countries as well as to potential adversaries.

In order to promote more realistic public expectations about disarmament, a participant said, Allied governments should point out what has long been recognized by experts: force reductions and disarmament are by-products of improved political relations, and not necessarily in themselves a reliable path to international peace and security. With regard to nuclear disarmament in particular, he said, Allied political leaders ought to tell their publics that this is a very long-term and visionary objective.

Another participant pointed out that movement toward a nuclear-weapons-free world would require a fundamental reduction in the role of war in international politics; the resolution of current nuclear proliferation cases such as Iran and North Korea; and the establishment of highly intrusive verification, compliance, and enforcement measures. There would, some participants said, be an implicit requirement for dramatically improved relations among the great powers or possibly even world government in order to assure national governments that effective action would be taken against parties tempted to cheat and engage in competitive nuclear rearmament.

It is not that easy to convince partisans of a nuclear disarmament vision to moderate their expectations, a participant said. Their vision of an alternative security order within and beyond Europe is attractive and, for them at least, “un-disprovable.”

It may be difficult, a participant said, to manage expectations—and to deal with disappointed expectations—about what can be achieved concerning nuclear disarmament at the NPT Review Conferences in 2010 and 2015. Prior to the end of the Cold War in 1989-1991, the pressure from non-nuclear-weapon-state parties to the NPT concerning the commitment to nuclear disarmament in Article VI of the NPT “never got rancorous.” Since the end of the Cold War, however, the debate has become “more bitter,” and it has become hard to manage expectations. The caution expressed by President Obama in his April 2009 speech in Prague—that is, “This goal will not be reached quickly—perhaps not in my lifetime”^[16]—caused disappointment in some circles.

It is paradoxical, a participant said, that the salience of nuclear deterrence has declined in most NATO countries while it has increased outside NATO, notably in the Middle East and in South and East Asia. In his view, the “global zero” debate amounts to “a Western conversation with ourselves.” That is, nuclear disarmament is a much more popular theme in NATO countries than in most other parts of the world.

The near-term agenda of NATO governments is, a participant noted, the same as that of the abolitionists: pursuing ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, negotiating a Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty, securing nuclear materials, and addressing the diffusion of enrichment and reprocessing capabilities. Pursuing this agenda may help NATO governments manage public expectations, at least in the near term, he said.

Deterring state-sponsored WMD terrorism is a challenge that the Alliance as a whole has yet to address.

As some participants noted, the governments of Britain, France, and the United States have all made authoritative statements concerning their preparedness to retaliate against state sponsors of terrorist attacks conducted with weapons of mass destruction. No parallel statements by NATO as a whole have been made, nor is it clear whether the British, French, and U.S. policies are broad enough to encompass responding to such attacks against the NATO Allies as well. An

Alliance policy statement in this regard could strengthen deterrence by making clear the resolve of the Allies to act jointly in response to such attacks. Moreover, a participant added, the Allies would be well advised to build on their Military Concept for Defense Against Terrorism and articulate a clearer policy regarding WMD terrorism by non-state actors.

New “jagged threats” to Alliance cohesion and collective defense may emerge.

Terrorist attacks in Europe could, a participant said, be as large as those in the United States in 2001 or in India in 2008 or of smaller scale. Such attacks could undermine confidence in Alliance cohesion and collective defense, he said, and they amount to “jagged threats” that the Allies have not been focused on deterring. Other “jagged threats” that could undermine public confidence, he said, include large-scale illegal immigration, anonymous cyber attacks, coercion via an adversary’s exploitation of energy supply dependence, and the jamming of satellites.

About the Author

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1. The first workshop, entitled “NATO and Tailored Deterrence: Understanding and Communication in Deterrence,” was convened in Brussels on 16-17 October 2007 and co-sponsored by the NATO Nuclear Policy Directorate and the Defense Threat Reduction Agency’s Advanced Systems and Concepts Office (DTRA/ASCO). The second workshop, entitled “Tailored Deterrence in the Transatlantic Alliance: Nuclear, Conventional and Non-Military Strategies,” was convened at Wilton Park, England, on 16-19 March 2008, and co-sponsored by the NATO Nuclear Policy Directorate. The third workshop, entitled “NATO and 21st Century Deterrence: New Concepts, Capabilities, and Challenges,” was held in Rome on 29-30 April 2008, and co-sponsored by the NATO Nuclear Policy Directorate, the NATO Defense College, and DTRA/ASCO. The 10-12 May 2009 workshop in Vilnius was co-sponsored by the NATO Nuclear Policy Directorate, the Lithuanian Ministry of Defense, the Centre for Geopolitical Studies, Vilnius, and DTRA/ASCO. In accordance with the Chatham House rule, no views are attributed to specific workshop participants in this report.

2. James R. Schlesinger, Chairman, [Report of the Secretary of Defense Task Force on DoD Nuclear Weapons Management, Phase II: Review of the DoD Nuclear Mission](#) (Arlington, Virginia: Secretary of Defense Task Force on DoD Nuclear Weapons Management, December 2008). This report is available at <http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/pdfs/PhaseIIReportFinal.pdf>.
3. France has not participated in the deliberations of NATO's Nuclear Planning Group since this consultative body was established in 1966-1967.
4. "The existence of powerful nuclear forces outside the Alliance also constitutes a significant factor which the Alliance has to take into account if security and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area are to be maintained." North Atlantic Council, [Strategic Concept](#), 24 April 1999, par. 21.
5. [Declaration on Alliance Security](#), Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Strasbourg/Kehl on 4 April 2009.
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9. [Speech as Delivered by Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates](#), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, D.C., October 28, 2008, available at: <http://www.defenselink.mil/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1305>.
10. [Remarks by President Barack Obama](#), Prague, Czech Republic, 5 April 2009, available at: http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-By-President-Barack-Obama-In-Prague-As-Delivered/.
11. "The Allies concerned consider that, with the radical changes in the security situation, including reduced conventional force levels in Europe and increased reaction times, NATO's ability to defuse a crisis through diplomatic and other means or, should it be necessary, to mount a successful conventional defence has significantly improved. The circumstances in which any use of nuclear weapons might have to be contemplated by them are therefore extremely remote." North Atlantic Council, [Strategic Concept](#), 24 April 1999, par. 64.
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14. William Perry attributed the "base camp" concept to Sam Nunn in his [statement before the Committee on Armed Services](#), U.S. House of Representatives, 6 May 2009, 4. George Perkovich and Patricia Lewis discussed the "vantage point" concept in their 2009 paper, [The](#)

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15. Remarks by President Barack Obama, Prague, 5 April 2009.

16. Ibid.