



# NDC Conference Report

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## Keep Calm and Deter: NATO Nuclear Deterrence After the Warsaw Summit

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### Key points

- Nuclear deterrence is one component of NATO's strategy and must be in balance with other strategy elements and capabilities. But the nuclear dimension cannot be neglected without creating serious risks to security. The role of nuclear weapons and nuclear deterrence in Alliance security requires a clearer and more positive narrative. NATO needs to rejuvenate nuclear deterrence culture among its members and institutions. Central to this must be continuing dialogue among member states and a clear commitment to strategic education for current and emerging military and political leaders, something that is woefully lacking today.
- Russia is integrating nuclear weapons as tools of coercion, deterrence and, potentially, warfighting, into its strategy for leveraging political and military power across the spectrum of conflict. NATO need not match Russian doctrine and capabilities, but must maintain a posture that is credible in relation to prospective threats but responsible in its commitment to restraint and transparency.
- There is a lack of clarity on the posture of the Trump administration regarding US relations with Russia, Asia and the Middle East. This uncertainty poses a major challenge to the development of NATO policies.
- In the post-Cold War period NATO's nuclear deterrent strategy has suffered from neglect. Today the Alliance needs a grand strategy aimed at evaluating its performance and consistency with the Washington Treaty, achieving greater cohesion between NATO's missions, and increasing the credibility of its nuclear deterrent.
- Knowledge of deterrence and its role and value to the Alliance is scarce today--not only among the younger generation of officials, but also the current leadership. With the return of collective defense as a core mission, NATO's member states need to emphasize the education of their future leaders on nuclear weapons and the management of crises.
- Lessons from the Middle East and Asia are hard to determine, given the complexity of nuclear scenarios in those regions. For example, while the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action with Iran can be considered a success in many ways, the Iranian nuclear challenge persists. At the same time, North Korea's nuclear posture poses a serious threat to its neighbors and the West. Nonetheless, it remains unclear how the Alliance would respond to a nuclear crisis in the region.

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## Conference Overview

On December 5-7, 2016 the NATO Defense College (NDC) hosted the second in its revitalized series of annual NATO Nuclear Deterrence workshops in Rome, entitled “NATO Nuclear Deterrence after the Warsaw Summit.” The workshop was organized by the NDC Research Division, and co-sponsored by two other organizations: the Institute for Strategic Research (IRSEM) in the French Ministry of Defense, and the NATO Nuclear Policy Directorate (NPD). The seminar supported the NPD as part of its ongoing effort to assess the Alliance’s efforts to deal with the new security environment, help educate the current Alliance leadership on the importance of the deterrence mission, and identify changes in strategy, planning, or force structure that may be required to ensure the continued viability of Article 5 of the Washington Treaty and the deterrence mission.

This seminar continued a legacy of workshops on this topic going back nine years. The Research Division previously hosted conferences on deterrence in 2008, 2010, 2012, and 2015. This year’s event included 55 participants from 15 countries, including representatives of NATO Headquarters, SHAPE Headquarters, the NATO School, NATO Joint Force Command Naples, the French and UK Ministries of Defence, US National Defense University, US Naval Postgraduate School, US State Department, several members of the NDC faculty, and multiple think tanks and universities in Europe, Israel, East Asia, and North America.

The conference program included an update on NATO nuclear strategy, deterrence, and the Warsaw Summit; a similar update on Russian strategy and the role of nuclear weapons in its foreign and defense policy; a roundtable on developing a more systematic approach to raising NATO’s nuclear and deterrence understanding; a panel on the prospects for NATO grand strategy and the role of nuclear forces in that strategy; panels on nuclear developments in East Asia and the Middle East; and a wrap-up session that focused on the implications of the presentations and discussions for NATO nuclear strategy.

## NATO Nuclear Policy

The return of Russia as a global competitor and potential adversary to the East, as well as the rise of ISIL and other forms of instability in the South, has returned collective defense to the top of NATO’s agenda. This was made clear by the language in the July 2016 Warsaw Summit communique, as well as by decisions taken to ensure more robust forward presence and defense and enhanced deterrent capabilities.

The focus of the last two NATO summits, in Wales and Warsaw, was on conventional deterrence of Russia and assurances to those NATO allies in the threatened region of Eastern Europe. The strong language of the Warsaw Summit was as much as one could expect given that NATO is a consensus-based organization that requires all 28 nations to commit to approved wording. Still, the dilemma facing the Alliance was not fully resolved at Warsaw. In some ways the allies are counting on experts in Moscow to interpret the wording, including changes from previous communiqués. Furthermore, it will take additional work and continued emphasis to achieve a deterrent capability that is strong enough and right-sized for the new threats facing the Alliance.

The 2016 Warsaw Summit communique stated that *“The greatest responsibility of the Alliance is to protect and defend our territory and our populations against attack, as set out in Article 5 of the Washington Treaty. And so renewed emphasis has been placed on deterrence and collective defence.”* In some ways the declaration was an effort to fill the gap in Western defense capabilities so that the Alliance could respond to the initial stages of a concerted, unambiguous, but limited Russian assault. This included an emphasis on

enhanced forward presence with additional conventional forces in the region, which would give NATO time to respond and reinforce. Nuclear forces would provide the backstop for all of these conventional measures. But that will require some adaptation of NATO's current dual-capable aircraft mission to the new scenario.

Despite the strong language used in the declaration, two issues emerged in the months following the Warsaw Summit. First, the final communiqué had little resonance among mainstream media, the public and decision makers. There is, therefore, the need for a dedicated message on nuclear policy, ideally coming from the NATO Secretary General, to be delivered to NATO's public. The same message also needs to be delivered to Russia, possibly using the NATO-Russia Council or through bilateral meetings. Second, the credibility of what was stated in Warsaw with regard to nuclear deterrence has been challenged. Some analysts have questioned the ability and willingness of member states to use nuclear weapons, while Russia may doubt the credibility of NATO deterrence posture. Furthermore, at the time of the conference it was unclear whether the new administration of President Donald Trump would pose new challenges to the foundation on which effective Alliance deterrence is based.

NATO today is recovering from 20 years neglecting its nuclear deterrent forces. In many segments of society and in several NATO member countries nuclear weapons are seen as a liability with no military purpose. Some observers thus interpreted President Obama's 2009 Prague Agenda as emphasizing this message in its call for a nuclear-free world, further delegitimizing nuclear weapons. The West is slowly emerging from this era of neglect, but it is not happening quickly, or without controversy. There is little pro-nuclear support within Europe. This poses the need for a nuclear narrative that can help educate NATO's senior political leaders on the role and value of these weapons for deterrence purposes—while continuing to explore opportunities for equitable reductions.

One participant provided a valuable list of “don'ts” for the Alliance to consider as it develops its rejuvenated nuclear deterrence capability. These are summarized here:

- Do not panic. There is no evidence that Russia has actually lowered its nuclear threshold, so NATO should not overemphasize its fears over what the Kremlin's plans may be. Both sides see the other as a revisionist power, yet neither side wants a nuclear war. In short, NATO should “keep calm and deter.”
- Do not publicize NATO's war games and scenarios, since the results may hurt Alliance credibility if they reflect poorly on issues of political cohesion.
- Do not overemphasize either conventional or nuclear deterrence; there needs to be a hybrid approach.
- Do not blindly resurrect old Cold War concepts. For example, the concept of escalation dominance would be much more difficult to implement today than it was 30 years ago.
- Do not use the term modernization when referring to nuclear forces. The Alliance is actually adapting its current systems to the new realities of the return of a nuclear-armed revisionist state on its borders.

## **Russian Nuclear Strategy and Nuclear Weapons in its Foreign and Defence Policy**

Russia has demonstrated a range of aggressive behaviours toward the West in recent years, especially since early 2014. In addition to its well-known territorial moves, it has continued a major program of modernization of its nuclear forces; engaged in nuclear sabre rattling, including during large-scale snap exercises; continued to rebuff all offers by the United States to discuss the next round of nuclear arms

control; and has published documents that would appear to show an increase in the role of Russian nuclear weapons in its conflict management strategy. As one analyst put it, President Putin may be “the first in a new class of uninhibited nuclear manipulators.”

Russia appears to be integrating nuclear weapons into all elements of its political and military power, across the entire spectrum of conflict. This is much different from NATO’s emphasis on firebreaks and a threshold that one must consciously cross for nuclear use—keeping in mind that NATO’s official position regards any scenario requiring the use of nuclear weapons as extremely remote. Some participants argued that Russian doctrine shows less differentiation between types of conflict, so any adversary should expect to have to deal with the full spectrum of Russian capabilities early on in any future conflict. This argument goes on to say that this is the rationale for NATO restoring its own full spectrum of capabilities to deter and, if necessary, defend the Alliance.

Does this mean that Russia is more likely to use nuclear weapons today than it was during the Cold War? The consensus among conference participants was “no”—but there are signals that this may be changing. There are different circumstances in which the Russian Federation might use nuclear weapons. According to recent Russia military doctrine (December 2014), the Federation might use them in response to adversary use of nuclear or other types of weapons of mass destruction or in the face of an existential threat to the Russian state. Scholars believe that nuclear weapons might be employed to support a range of discrete objectives, e.g. demonstration or war termination. Some experts also speculate that Moscow might be ready to take more risks and losses than NATO’s member states to achieve its goals or protect its most vital interests.

NATO faces a choice regarding how to adapt its nuclear posture. If a conflict with Russia is judged to be likely – and likely, as well, to have a strong nuclear component – then the Alliance needs to undertake a significant or “deep” adaptation to its nuclear posture. If NATO believes that developments in Russian strategy and nuclear weapons are largely defensive and do not create significant new asymmetries, then the required adaptation is more modest or “shallow.” This second option seems more likely given that Russia does not appear to be engaged in activities that would represent a dramatic change to the balance of nuclear power in Europe. Russian information pressure might be greater than actual capabilities. The challenge is not knowing what Moscow is up to, or how best to respond. And NATO potentially finds itself in the challenging position of not having the right systems to meet Russian challenges.

## **Prospects for a NATO Grand Strategy**

A grand strategy can be considered as a narrative that persists over time, is comprehensive, sustainable and has core interests. The post-Cold War period, however, has been an era of uncertainty where strategy is driven by actions. NATO’s strategy over the past twenty years has been inductive and incoherent, changing in a response to ideas such as responsibility to protect and humanitarianism.

Most agree that at present the Alliance does not have a grand strategy, but rather a family of strategies that resemble a narrative. This situation tends to paper over some internal differences of opinion. For example, some governments prioritise the Eastern problem, while others prefer to focus on instability coming from the Southern flank. In some ways NATO with its 28 member states can be likened to a super tanker; any course change takes a long time to take effect. The Warsaw Summit communique of 2016 was a good step in the direction of a stronger deterrent narrative, but the practical results may be slow in coming. This should not be surprising, given that fully one-third of the Alliance’s history has occurred since the end of the Cold War, a period of de-emphasis on deterrence. During that earlier conflict, both sides had a solid grand

strategy and a correlation of forces that reflected deep thinking about their relationship. For the Alliance, the core task was collective defence. With enlargement, however, the Alliance is no longer as cohesive as it once was, and its mission set has expanded, so its strategy is understandably a bit fuzzier.

NATO's 2010 Strategic Concept mentions the role and purpose of nuclear weapons, but it has no strategy for an operational mission, role, or use for such weapons. One can logically ask what the ends of nuclear deterrence are for the Alliance, and to what ends it needs such a strategy. A strategy would be helpful, for example, in detailed planning at headquarters levels as they assess how many of what type of forces the allies need for effective deterrence, as well as planning for possible use in a conflict—something NATO stopped doing after the end of the Cold War. The current mission of nuclear deterrence is difficult to identify, and it is challenging to find a champion member state within the headquarters. On the other hand, some argue that a strategy does exist, but they also admit that it is not well articulated in one document, nor has it been made public. Still others believe that NATO's deterrence strategy can be discerned from the various documents.

It is possible that Russia places very little credibility in NATO's nuclear deterrent, thinking of the Alliance as a peace-loving organization whose fatal flaw is its fear of conflict with the Russian Federation. The little bit of credibility that the Alliance retains may be even more dangerous than none at all, since the West may choose to rely on it in a crisis, and it may not be sufficient to deter. On the other hand, one should keep in mind that Russia has only acted in locations where it knew it would not come into direct contact with NATO, implying that it does respect the Alliance and its capabilities.

Some analysts argue that the Alliance needs a grand strategy in order to tie together all the smaller strands of various quasi-strategies. From this perspective the role of strategy is to achieve greater cooperation across multiple domains and missions, while also serving as a way to collectively assess itself and its ability to abide by the articles of the Washington Treaty.

One headquarters participant emphasized the positive benefits of having a NATO strategy, including having a touchstone for answering difficult questions between allies in a crisis; to establish boundaries of behaviour by both sides prior to a crisis; to have a narrative able to answer critics of nuclear weapons, including the disarmament community; and because the benefits of a strategy come as much from the process of developing a strategy as they do from the final report. Some headquarters representatives agreed that there would indeed be benefits from having a strategy, but questioned whether those benefits were worth the political and practical trouble it would take to create one.

## **NATO's Low Level of Understanding of Deterrence and the Role for Education**

There is insufficient attention paid to educating future leaders on nuclear weapons, deterrence, and the requirements for managing complex escalation scenarios. In the United States, for example, the policy that guides professional military education (PME) does not include deterrence as an explicit learning objective. This is one factor explaining why the teaching of deterrence in US PME is not conducted in a systematic way – and therefore engages only a limited number of students. The same problem exists in allied defense establishments.

Anecdotal information from the PME world reinforces this. American participants noted that in talking with senior military leaders in command positions, many have admitted to not being prepared for the regional deterrence and escalation issues they have faced in their jobs. A senior academic at a military college observed that whereas in the 1990s his students understood deterrence, and its role in preventing war, today military officers see war as endemic, and do not understand what deterrence is.

But in the United States, at least, there is resistance to changing existing curricula to accommodate more discussion of deterrence if it means eliminating other important areas of instruction. One result is that new or innovative teaching programs are often the result of individuals who have a personal interest in the topic and make the effort to offer enhancements to the core curriculum. While many of these programs are excellent, a more comprehensive and purposeful approach to deterrence and nuclear education will require top-down directive guidance from leadership.

Participants from NATO headquarters also pointed to a serious shortfall in understanding deterrence and the role of nuclear weapons among the senior political leadership, as well, which could raise the risks in a crisis. The West has ignored these topics for over two decades, and requests for additional funding for education in these areas often meet bureaucratic resistance. Asked one speaker, “Do we need to await a deterrence savior? Or should we try to ‘manage up’ by putting recommendations in front of our managers to approve?” Some argue that in fact NATO is not doing too badly, especially given that it has just experienced 20 years of neglect of the subject. There are many concepts, lessons, and ideas from the Cold War that can be dusted off and re-applied. The Alliance has begun, modestly, the effort to rebuild its basic nuclear competencies by exposing senior leaders to the issues through experiential learning, seminars, and crisis management and command and control exercises. Additionally, the NATO School in Oberammergau and the NATO Defense College in Rome are updating their programs of instruction to include more on deterrence.

## **Developments in the Nuclear Landscape of Asia**

Are there any lessons that NATO can take from East Asia? The rise of nuclear weapons and policies in Asia has been much more understated than in Europe, while at the same time there is a shared belief in Asia on the political utility and centrality of nuclear weapons as a source of regional order. Currently, however, uncertainty reigns in the region. Concern is rising on the posture of the new US administration towards the region, on the increasingly competitive relationship between China and the USA, and on the nuclear threat posed by North Korea. Furthermore, many in the region believe that the ability of the USA to influence how things evolve in Asia is diminishing.

One concern is the Chinese nuclear program. According to Chinese scholars, nuclear weapons serve national security interests and political factors are considered in the calculation of nuclear stability. While some analysts believe that the People’s Republic of China is becoming a normal nuclear actor, misunderstanding and ambiguity still largely characterise US-China nuclear relations. Direct confrontation between the two powers, however, is avoidable. China is increasingly imposing itself on the European political, economic and social landscape, and is about to be a major player in the Western economic and political order. Beijing is also demonstrating its ability in using geo-economic tools to achieve broader goals. The Alliance needs to increase its counter-intelligence and cyber defence capabilities vis a vis China.

North Korea remains the wild card in Asia; its nuclear posture is posing a serious threat and new challenges. In 2016 it conducted two nuclear tests and 24 missile tests. Many believe that the government of Kim Jong-un is nearing the final stage of its nuclear program – completing a hydrogen bomb in the next five years and making its weaponry lighter – and that by 2020 it might possess 50 to 80 nuclear weapons. These will likely be used for strategic and tactical purposes, as well as for diplomacy and deterrence. The nuclear rhetoric of Pyongyang shifted from defensive in 2006 to offensive in 2016: its previous “no first use” statement changed to allow the possibility of preemptive strikes if national sovereignty is violated.

Currently South Korea is not considering the nuclear option. Instead, it is relying on conventional weapons and on US deterrence, and there is a prudent tendency to avoid escalation between the two Koreas.

Nonetheless, as the DPRK's nuclear capabilities grow, its rhetoric has also become more offensive, and it could become more aggressive at the lower end of the conflict spectrum, with increasing low level provocations and confrontations.

Participants debated whether a US-DPRK crisis with a nuclear dimension would be considered a NATO crisis. If yes, how would the Alliance respond, and in accordance with which treaty or obligation?

## **Developments in the Nuclear Landscape of the Middle East**

The speakers on the Middle East focused exclusively on two countries of particular concern to analysts of nuclear weapons and deterrence, albeit for very different reasons: Turkey and Iran.

Rumours of a Turkish nuclear program go back decades. Yet Turkey has not developed a nuclear program, according to one theory, because of three factors that have led to self-restraint: NATO membership, its ratification of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, and its application to join the European Union. Lately, however, all three factors are becoming less influential. NATO membership, for example, is losing credibility in the eyes of some Turkish experts and leaders; the Non-Proliferation Treaty has been criticised as being overly restrictive; and EU membership seems a very remote possibility. Nonetheless, the panellists believed that for the next five years at least Turkey is not likely to start a nuclear program.

The Iranian nuclear challenge persists despite the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPoA). For one thing, the final deal is quite far from the original plan, thus revealing Iran's successful bargaining strategy. Second, Iran has frequently violated the JCPoA – the heavy water limit had been violated twice by the time of the conference, for example – despite complying with the main concessions of the treaty. Third, Iran did not cooperate with the International Atomic Energy Agency in 2015 during investigations on a possible military dimension of its nuclear program. Furthermore Iran is collaborating with Russia as it stepped up its role in Syria. Nonetheless the JCPoA is still a success for many; before the deal was reached Iran was estimated to be only two or three months away from having a nuclear weapon. Even some NGOs which were initially against the deal now agree that important constraints have been set. In distinction from official NATO policy, some Western political leaders have suggested re-negotiating the JCPoA, arguing that post-deal dynamics need to be accounted for. According to this argument, a more comprehensive approach would clear up ambiguities in the deal with regard to the ability of the IAEA to inspect suspicious activities, redefine the P+5 attitude to Iran's past military nuclear activity, and formulate policies for dealing with Iranian nuclear procedures.

One expert on Iran stated that there will be no nuclear peace dividend in the Middle East; in fact, we can expect Iran to develop a nuclear *delivery* capability with the next two or three years. If Tehran then pursues a nuclear weapons capability to put atop its missiles, even if perhaps not until the end of the JCPoA in 2025, Turkey will have to ask itself whether it can live with a nuclear neighbor without having its own indigenous nuclear capability. At that point, Turkey may no longer have to rely on NATO's deterrent umbrella. According to another participant, however, this should not be a serious concern since Ankara also relies on the American nuclear umbrella for its ultimate protection.

## Conclusion

Key takeaways from the conference included the fact that the Alliance needs to get the next generation involved in deterrence issues, and that it can do this in part through wider education on nuclear and deterrence issues. At the same time, there needs to be more dialogue, especially with Russia. There is considerable uncertainty in US-Russian-Asian-Middle Eastern relations. As a result of all this, perhaps rather than trying to develop a grand strategy, the Alliance should just try to do things better.

One participant put the dilemma facing the Alliance today quite succinctly: “If NATO thinks it has an effective nuclear deterrent, but others don’t agree, then the Alliance risks the very outcome it is trying to deter.”

There remains a need to strengthen strategic stability through a combination of measures: focusing on deterrence requirements with a sustained commitment to that mission; continuing to strengthen NATO conventional and nuclear deterrent capabilities; and creating a posture of responsible nuclear stewardship. These goals, in turn, imply more strategic education, a full-spectrum deterrent posture, and an ability to respond to critics in the disarmament debates currently underway in the United Nations. NATO’s posture should be characterized by restraint, consistency, predictability, and transparency.

It is apparent that after a quarter century of peace in Europe, thinking about managing great power conflict is becoming something of a lost art. Deterrence should be seen as a contribution to the tool kit of security, and nuclear weapons are but one aspect of that tool kit. National and international nuclear policies need to be situated in the larger effort at Alliance adaptation. The world is a competitive environment, and the West is engaged in multiple struggles that cannot simply be wished away. Russia remains the preeminent stress test for the Alliance. Yet regional crises and struggles, even on the far side of the globe, also matter to NATO.



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