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NATO Adaptation to Russia's Nuclear Challenge

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In response to Russia's nuclear threats, NATO has strengthened its nuclear deterrence. The Warsaw Summit aimed to send a message of resolve and readiness to face nuclear risks. The Alliance's credibility depends, however, on its continued efforts in strategic communication, planning and exercises, and investment in maintaining effective capabilities.

Since the end of the Cold War, NATO has reduced the number of nuclear weapons in its arsenal and their role in Alliance security. It was forced to return to thinking in terms of nuclear deterrence as a result of Russia's aggression against Ukraine. This was in response to Russia's implicit and explicit nuclear threats, including aggressive statements from various sources, even President Vladimir Putin, whose seeming readiness to use nuclear weapons was used to intimidate and back up the forceful territorial changes to the status quo in Europe. Added to that, Russia has engaged in large military exercises that have incorporated different types of nuclear delivery systems combined with conventional capabilities and, provocatively, has flown nuclear-capable bombers near the airspace of NATO states and partners. Russia's actions have demonstrated that nuclear weapons are an inseparable part of its approach to a conflict. The concept involves the integrated use of a whole spectrum of non-military and military tools, including nuclear ones, not only for defence of its own territory but also to support aggressive actions beyond its borders. There also have been growing concerns that Russia's threshold for nuclear use during a conflict is lower than it has officially declared. Anxieties about this involve a scenario in which Russia could threaten or actually employ a so-called "de-escalatory nuclear strike" to dissuade NATO countries from coming to the aid of an attacked ally.

The Importance of the Warsaw Decisions. NATO's adjustment to the growing nuclear challenges from Russia was a necessity. It was, however, slower, more difficult and less visible than reinforcement of NATO's conventional deterrence, which began in March 2014. Nuclear discussions within the Alliance intensified only after the Wales Summit. This is highlighted by the three NATO Nuclear Planning Group meetings at the defence minister level that took place in just a year and a half (February 2015 to June 2016). The reason for the delay in response was because in past years nuclear weapons comprised one of the most sensitive topics within the Alliance. Some Allies emphasised the need for maintaining a credible nuclear deterrence while others wanted further steps toward disarmament. The differences were not fully resolved through either the 2010 Strategic Concept or the 2012 Deterrence and Defence Posture Review (DDPR). With the issue lingering, the resumption of the nuclear discussion within NATO raised concerns about new divisions and raising tension with Russia. The Warsaw Summit was a breakthrough in that it showed the Alliance had overcome the barriers and was not leaving Russia's provocations unanswered. The Warsaw Summit Communiqué demonstrates NATO's cohesion on nuclear matters, sharpens its nuclear rhetoric, and reverses the trend of fewer words on nuclear matters in Alliance public documents.

In the communiqué, the Allies cited Russia's "irresponsible and aggressive nuclear rhetoric, military concept and underlying posture" (par. 10). It is in fact the first public, common assessment of the evolution of Russia's nuclear doctrine. It also testifies to a consensus within the Alliance. Earlier, since spring 2015, Russia's nuclear emphasis met criticism from only NATO military leaders and officials, including the Secretary General, and a small number of member states, particularly the U.S. and UK. The communiqué underlined that "the fundamental purpose of NATO's nuclear capability is to preserve peace, prevent coercion, and deter aggression" (par. 54). This wording is significant because the role of nuclear weapons was not directly defined by either the Strategic Concept or DDPR, probably the result of the reluctance to emphasise it publicly. By repeating the traditional phrase, the Allies underscore that the "circumstances in which NATO might have to use nuclear weapons are extremely remote." At the same time,

however, “if the fundamental security of any of its members were to be threatened,” they declare that “NATO has the capabilities and resolve” to impose on any adversary unacceptable costs, which would far outweigh expected benefits.” It implies that nuclear weapons are meant to deter not only nuclear use by a potential adversary but their use might be contemplated in other scenarios when an attack threatens the existence of a NATO member. Additionally, the communiqué contains a veiled warning to Russia that by raising the potential for nuclear use in support of its conventional actions, it will not achieve its goals. The Allies stress that “nuclear weapons are unique” and, as stated by SG Jens Stoltenberg in Munich in February 2016, “any employment of nuclear weapons against NATO would fundamentally alter the nature of a conflict.”

NATO in its nuclear deterrence statement confirmed the role of U.S. non-strategic nuclear weapons based in Europe and infrastructure and capabilities provided by other Allies (par. 53). It is a reference to military bases with storage sites for B-61 nuclear gravity bombs and aircraft specifically adapted to carry them (dual capable aircraft, DCA). The Strategic Concept and DDPR did not contain a direct statement about the need for the further forward-deployment of U.S. weapons in Europe, which raised the question of NATO consensus on this issue. Even though NATO neither confirms nor denies it, U.S. nuclear weapons are reportedly based in Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, Italy, and Turkey. Except for Turkey, these countries are thought also to have DCA. To have the broadest possible participation of Allies in nuclear burden-sharing arrangements, other countries, including Poland, could support nuclear operations with conventional air tactics, for example, by providing fighter escorts. In addition, the Allies’ communiqué reinforced the usual message about the role of U.S. strategic nuclear forces (“the supreme guarantee of the security of the Allies”) and the “independent” strategic nuclear forces of the UK and France. It emphasised that because each of these countries makes its own decision about nuclear use, it is more difficult for a potential adversary to foresee the consequences of its aggression against a NATO ally.

In Warsaw, the Alliance avoided, however, nuclearisation of its policy. The role of nuclear weapons in the overall mix of capabilities for deterrence and defence was not raised, even though it has become more visible for the sake of a response to Russia’s nuclear-related behaviour. The sharp contrasts between NATO’s and Russia’s approach to nuclear weapons did not disappear. The return to nuclear deterrence does not also mean that the Alliance has abandoned its commitment to disarmament and arms control, which continue to play an important role in strengthening Alliance security (par. 62). Reciprocal reductions of U.S. and Russian non-strategic nuclear weapons in Europe remain a NATO goal. The Alliance admits, though, that the conditions for that do not currently exist. (par. 65).

Challenges. To sustain the credibility of NATO’s nuclear deterrence, consistent communication by all Allies is essential. Measures that would put its credibility into question should be avoided. An example of the former is provided by Germany’s July 2016 White Book. Germany reaffirmed the importance of its participation in nuclear-sharing arrangements. It was reluctant to do so earlier because of scepticism of basing U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe.

NATO’s cohesion on nuclear issues could be put into question if the United States, without the approval of the other NATO Allies, drops the option for first use of nuclear weapons in a conflict. Changing from declaratory policy to so-called “no first use” has been considered by the Obama administration. Such a step would not be in line with NATO’s long-term nuclear policy. It would also weaken the message of the Warsaw Summit Communiqué by negating the role of U.S. nuclear weapons in deterring some potential or hypothetical threats to the “fundamental security of any allies” to something other than nuclear use by a potential aggressor (Art. 54).

Even the most resolute rhetoric is, however, not sufficient for effective nuclear deterrence. Being prepared to tackle nuclear challenges and having the appropriate capabilities are also indispensable. Because of the integral role of nuclear forces in Russia’s approach to a conflict, NATO should clearly define the role of nuclear deterrence in its overall strategy to respond to potential threats. This could have an impact on operational planning and exercises. There is also a need for strengthening NATO’s intelligence capacities to properly read and cohesively respond to Russian nuclear signalling. Maintaining credible nuclear forces is also crucial. In the long term, this could be ensured by going forward with U.S. plans for modernisation of its strategic nuclear forces and if the UK acquires new submarines equipped with sea-launched ballistic missiles. The U.S. life-extension programme for the B-61 and adaptation of its F-35 aircraft for delivery of these bombs would also play a key role in ensuring the long-term credibility of NATO’s nuclear deterrence. In the short term, taking into account Russia’s growing air defence capabilities, the NATO allies should ensure that their DCA are adequate in number and readiness and have non-nuclear support.

At the same time, NATO and its members should take into account that changes to Alliance nuclear policy might be induced not only by further Russian actions but also by internal policy dynamics among the member states. This applies in particular to countries that reportedly host U.S. non-strategic nuclear weapons, including Turkey.

Poland should underscore that without credible nuclear deterrence, reinforcement of conventional deterrence on the Eastern Flank will not be sufficient. To strengthen its voice in the discussion, it should increase its capabilities for non-nuclear support of the NATO nuclear mission.