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*Reduce US Nukes in Europe to Zero, and Keep NATO Strong
(and Nuclear). A View from Poland.*

By Łukasz Kulesa

The nuclear dimension of NATO is rarely front page news, and this is no less the case in Poland than it is in other member states. While prominent as the central subject of a number of heated intra-Alliance debates during the Cold War, in recent years the question of nuclear weapons has disappeared from the NATO agenda, dominated as it is by issues of enlargement, military transformation, and the Alliance's increasing involvement in out-of-area operations. In fact, an overwhelming majority of the citizenry of all NATO countries would be surprised to learn of the existence of any nuclear element in the Alliance, including the citizens of those European allies whose air forces have been training to drop US-made thermonuclear gravity bombs in wartime.

The recent re-emergence of interest in the progress of nuclear disarmament, together with the start of discussions on the new NATO Strategic Concept, requires the member states of the Alliance to reflect again on this aspect of NATO's policy. In Polish strategic thinking, there is little space for idealistic support for the quick abolition of nuclear weapons, but also no appetite for nuclear adventurism or muscle-flexing. The usefulness of nuclear weapons is perceived by Poland within the wider context of assuring the viability of the transatlantic link and the credibility of NATO's Article 5 (mutual defence clause). Russia is often mentioned in the context of Article 5 commitments, but it should be stressed that safeguarding the political cohesion of the Alliance and strengthening its conventional military capabilities are currently much more important for Poland's interpretation of Article 5 than is the nuclear factor.

Does the Alliance still need a nuclear component?

Many analysts argue that it is time to move from the current low profile of nuclear weapons at NATO to their complete renunciation by the Alliance. For the critics of "nuclear" NATO, nuclear weapons as a part of NATO strategy is a legacy of the Cold War. Not only are they unnecessary, the critics argue, when one takes into account the lack of nuclear-armed enemies and the superior conventional capabilities of NATO militaries, but they are also detrimental to the cohesion of the NPT and to the efforts made to discourage other states from crossing the nuclear threshold.

It is true that the rationale behind the continued existence of NATO's nuclear component requires closer attention. The members of the Alliance often seem to act on the assumption that discussing publicly the present and future utility of nuclear weapons for NATO would open up new conflicts between the Allies, stir public opinion, or reveal too much of its current threat perception. In the long run, however, it will be hard to avoid difficult questions.

Since the end of the Cold War, the function of nuclear weapons at NATO has steadily evolved from their use as a military tool into that of a strictly political one, from an element in any conceivable war-fighting scenario into a kind of "dormant deterrence", to be used essentially as an insurance policy against the dangers of the future. This transition needs to be reflected in NATO's strategy and force posture. One should remember that nuclear weapons have no role in deterring or defeating the non-state actors, which currently constitute the most urgent threats to NATO member states. Neither a Taliban fighter nor a Somali pirate is likely to be deterred by the nuclear potential of the Alliance.

Granted, in some highly scripted “battlefield” scenarios of defending NATO countries (for example, that of an emergency strike on a buried and hardened site in enemy territory, e.g. WMD storage), military planners might recommend the use of nuclear weapons as the most efficient means of destroying a target. However, it is unlikely that such a situation would develop where there were no other options available. The political, social and environmental costs of any such nuclear strike, which might be conducted not only in the vicinity of NATO territory, but also close to some of the most important partners of the Alliance, would also probably outweigh its usefulness. In short, every use of nuclear weapons would have a strategic effect, regardless of the type of weapon used, its means of delivery, or the target.

What could the nuclear weapons be good for, then? As the UK’s 2006 White Paper on the future of the British nuclear deterrent puts it, nuclear weapons can function as “insurance against the uncertainties and risks of the future”. As the international system undergoes a fundamental transformation (the relative decline of the power of the United States and Europe, the re-emergence of the elements of the great powers rivalry, possible challenges to the stability of the system posed by the revisionist states), the “insurance” concept should be adopted as the backbone of the nuclear strategy of NATO.

The unique characteristic of nuclear weapons is the scale of the destruction they cause, and this should be kept in mind when discussing NATO’s strategy. The presence of nuclear weapons in the Alliance’s arsenal would keep the opponent ever vigilant of the possibility of the infliction of massive damage in response to an attack. To put it bluntly, in the future NATO might still need to emphasize the element of terror in keeping relations with its opponents in a delicate balance.

It would be premature to move towards a non-nuclear NATO. Nuclear weapons will remain a valuable tool in any future contingency in which the Alliance is confronted with a hostile, nuclear-armed country. This includes the worst-case scenarios of Iran armed with nuclear weapons, an autocratic and aggressive Russia, or a possible emergence of the next nuclear players, especially in the Middle East. The nuclear potential of NATO would in any case not be meant for fighting a war, but rather to establish a framework for relations with other nuclear-armed countries by removing both the direct possibility of strategic blackmail of the Allies and the threat of Europe emerging as the “second best” target for those engaged in a confrontation with the United States.

Do we still need US nuclear weapons in Europe?

Apart from those elements of the strategic nuclear arsenals of the US and the UK believed to be assigned for NATO missions (France insists on total independence on nuclear issues), the nuclear posture of the Alliance includes a number of US tactical nuclear weapons (B-61 gravity bombs) stationed at a number of military bases in Europe and manned by US personnel. NATO has never officially confirmed either the size of this arsenal or the specifics of its deployment, however, according to research conducted by Hans Kristensen of the Federation of American Scientists, in 2008, the United States kept between 150 and 240 weapons at six bases in Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, Italy and Turkey. During wartime, the weapons can be transferred and used by these five countries (though the status of Turkey is not clear), which, to that purpose, signed nuclear sharing agreements with the US and have at their disposal aircraft modified to deliver US nuclear gravity bombs (the so-called dual-capable aircraft).

The attention in the intra-Alliance discussions has so far been focused on the possibility of removing US tactical nuclear weapons from Europe and discontinuing the nuclear sharing arrangements. It is important to note that the strategic component of the nuclear deterrent would remain available to the Alliance even if a decision is made to reduce the number of US nuclear weapons in Europe to zero.

Any proposals to change NATO force posture should be a *consequence* of reflection by its members on the tasks assigned to the nuclear weapons, not the presumptuous point of departure. If one subscribes to the notion that the only function of nuclear weapons for the Alliance is the “insurance” role, the utility of the US tactical nuclear weapons stationed in Europe can be questioned. The strategic arsenals of the US and UK make these weapons redundant, as the credibility of the insurance function depends not on the deployment of US nuclear weapons in Europe nor on the modalities of transferring them to the Allies, but on the convergence of interests within the Alliance and the willingness of the nuclear weapon states to defend other members from armed aggression. Despite occasional disagreements over policy issues between the Allies, the level of interdependence and policy cohesion between the two sides of the Atlantic (and the two sides of the English Channel) has reached a point where Europe no longer needs “hostages” in the form of US bombs stored on the

continent. The fears, which were often expressed during the Cold War, concerning the unwillingness of the US to use its arsenal to defend Europe from a Soviet assault should finally be put to rest. It is hard to imagine a situation in which Washington and London (and Paris) would not react to an aggression against a member of the Alliance, even if conducted by a nuclear-armed adversary. Any failure of one to act on the other's behalf would result in an inevitable collapse of the "West" as a geopolitical construct.

The conventional wisdom holds that the countries of Central Europe, and especially Poland, would strongly object to any changes in the NATO nuclear posture because of their fear of Moscow. This is an oversimplification. Certainly, Poland, as well as other Central European nations, is interested in an alliance which can credibly fulfill its defence and deterrence function. As a consequence, as long as NATO is serious about remaining a military alliance (and not a kind of global crisis management organization), and counts three nuclear weapon states among its members, the nuclear component should be an integral part of the "Article 5 package". The extended deterrence, especially that provided by the United States to its European allies, both in its conventional and nuclear forms, remains a significant reason to treat the Alliance as the most important guarantee of the security of Poland. Does it mean that any changes in the nuclear strategy of NATO are a taboo for Warsaw? Not necessarily, but such changes would need to be conducted in a way that does not weaken the transatlantic link nor the image of the Alliance as a credible security provider in the eyes of outside actors, including Russia.

One cannot expect nuclear weapons to be a sort of magic glue holding the transatlantic alliance together in difficult times. It would be especially naive to think that the deployment of US nuclear weapons in Europe would guarantee the attention and support of the United States during a crisis. As we have learned recently in the context of the Iraq war, ups and downs in transatlantic relations are not connected with the state of nuclear sharing. In the context of the current US administration, it seems that a better investment in NATO's future on the part of the Europeans might be to strengthen their presence in Afghanistan rather than to allocate money for the replacement of the dual-capable aircraft currently in service.

The gravest danger of any move to eliminate US nuclear weapons from Europe, from the perspective of Central Europe, would be to create the impression that NATO has gone "soft" where its primary function of defending the territories of the member states is concerned. Therefore, such a move would probably need to be counteracted by a set of decisions giving credible reassurance on the value of Article 5. These should include first and foremost the affirmation of the function of the strategic nuclear forces as the supreme guarantee of security of the Allies. Moreover, practical measures can be agreed upon to strengthen the conventional defence potential of the Alliance. Finally, the role of NATO in creating a Missile Defence architecture covering all the territories of the Allies would need to be reaffirmed, thereby compounding the overall deterrence potential of the organization. On a parallel track, some of the Allies would likely expect the United States to increase its military footprint within the territory of those member states situated along the eastern border of the Alliance, though not necessarily by building major new bases or installations.

By making a decision on the discontinuation of nuclear sharing now, the members of the Alliance can count on three "bonuses". Firstly, this would provide an important contribution to the preparation for the NPT review conference in 2010. Even though this step would probably be criticized as insufficient, it can nevertheless serve (together with a possible US-Russian agreement on the strategic forces reductions) as evidence of the NATO states' determination to move towards nuclear disarmament. That, in turn, should help facilitate agreement on strengthening the non-proliferation side of the NPT bargain. Secondly, by moving forward with such an initiative unilaterally, NATO would be in a good position to press Russia into changing its tactical nuclear weapons posture. Thirdly, the Alliance would avoid potentially divisive discussions over the acquisition of next-generation means of delivery for US nuclear weapons, an otherwise inevitable mid-term eventuality given the aging of the dual-capable aircraft operated by Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and possibly also by Greece and Turkey.

Assuring the cohesion of the Alliance when such a change is agreed upon would remain the top priority. In practice, this calls for close consultations between the two sides of the Atlantic during all stages of the process. There should be a common assessment that the positive consequences of the discontinuation of the nuclear sharing arrangement will outweigh the negative ones, and that the other elements of NATO's nuclear policy will remain valid. It would be damaging for the Alliance to create the impression that the US weapons are being "pushed out" of Europe by pacifist Europeans, or that the US is weakening its commitment to NATO by initiating changes in the nuclear strategy without properly consulting its allies.

Where does Russia fit?

Poland is often perceived as a Cold War-style warrior, eager to use NATO to settle old and new scores with Moscow and in turn unnecessarily provoking “the Russian bear”. Despite the fact that the present direction of the internal and foreign policies of Russia are not viewed with much enthusiasm in Warsaw, the nuclear issues are nevertheless approached with a sober sense of realism. No one is interested in introducing the threat of nuclear confrontation into the present relations between Russia and NATO, and the 1996 political pledge of the “three nos” (no intention, no plan, and no reason to deploy nuclear weapons in the territory of new member countries) remains valid.

The problem arises when NATO members are confronted with aggressive statements coming from Russia, such as the threat to aim Russian nuclear weapons at Alliance territories (Poland and the Czech Republic) as a response to the construction of MD elements. Or in the case of President Medvedev’s announcement on the possible deployment of the Iskander SRBMs to the Kaliningrad region. Taken together with the increased significance of nuclear weapons in Russia’s own military doctrine, its plans for massive re-armament, and its disturbing habit of portraying the Alliance as a potential enemy, these signals from Russia make it increasingly difficult to treat it as a predictable and benign partner.

At the same time, the Alliance should avoid overreacting to Russian actions and statements, especially when planning the future of its nuclear component. From a Central European perspective, it is important to signal to Russia that Article 5 commitments remain viable without reducing them to a narrow insistence on the presence of US nuclear weapons in Europe. The proposed actions on the part of the Alliance should rather include the resumption of contingency planning for Article 5 scenarios, more frequent NATO exercises including in-area defence tasks (including participation by the NATO Response Force), and the beefing up of the general presence and the infrastructure of the Alliance within the new member states. To counter the assertive foreign and security policies of Russia, NATO does not need tactical nuclear weapons stationed in Europe.

Should NATO engage Russia as a part of the process of removing US nuclear weapons from Europe? The proponents of a “new opening” argue that such a withdrawal would alleviate Russian concerns about US and NATO intentions, and, in return, Russia might be willing to reduce the number of its tactical weapons, guarantee greater transparency, provide credible assurances that its arsenal is well secured, and also possibly agree to remove weapons from those regions bordering NATO countries.

This kind of bargain may look attractive at first sight, however, the fundamental decisions concerning the future of US nuclear weapons in Europe can and should be taken by NATO unilaterally. Russia may be invited to follow the process with its own reductions, but to make progress conditional on Moscow’s reciprocity would be a mistake. Russia would treat an offer to negotiate the issue of non-strategic weapons as a validation of its belief that NATO perceives these weapons to be part of a confrontational posture against Russia. As part of the talks, Moscow would probably want to include other aspects of the West’s policy which it finds disturbing, for example, the enlargement of NATO, NATO’s support for Georgia and Ukraine, NATO’s conventional capabilities, or the Missile Defence initiative. Such a proposal might even be read as an invitation to influence the internal decision-making of the Alliance, especially if Russia is invited to the bargaining table by the United States over the heads of the rest of the Allies. Russia may also wish to make any bargain conditional on NATO’s acceptance of its new European security architecture proposal, which clearly aims to weaken the role of NATO.

There is also the question of what exactly Russia could offer in return for a modification of the Alliance’s nuclear policy. If the bargain brings only a political pledge to reduce the number of deployments of tactical weapons, or to withdraw old types of weaponry, its value-added for NATO would be quite limited (if it would provide any at all). Having said that, it is nevertheless worth exploring the possibility of moving ahead with confidence-building measures to be agreed upon in consultation with Russia. Some promising initiatives in this area have already been realized, including expert-level seminars on nuclear doctrines and the physical security of nuclear weapons, as well as joint emergency response exercises. These activities could continue. And if the number of US weapons in Europe reaches zero, the Russian authorities would be left with the difficult task of explaining to their citizens why the “aggressive” Alliance is voluntarily giving up part of its nuclear potential.