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NATO and Nuclear Disarmament – I: NATO's nuclear posture

Last June there was all-party support for an extraordinary recommendation by the House of Commons Standing Committee on National Defence. It called on the Canadian Government to "take a leadership role within NATO in beginning the work necessary for achieving the NATO goal of creating the conditions for a world free of nuclear weapons." In October, the Government responded to say it agrees with the recommendation but essentially argued that its current policies and activities already constitute such leadership. A closer look at NATO's nuclear posture indicates there is still plenty of room for improvement.

The all-party recommendation came via the Defence Committee's (NDDN) report on its study on "Canada and NATO" and called for Canadian leadership to be undertaken as a matter urgency, given "the increasing threat of nuclear conflict flowing from the renewed risk of nuclear proliferation, the deployment of so-called tactical nuclear weapons, and changes in nuclear doctrines regarding lowering the threshold for first use of nuclear weapons by Russia and the US."[1] The Liberal, Conservative, and New Democrat members of the Committee all agreed – a welcome display of political solidarity in the face of growing global danger. In its response, the Government acknowledged that "NATO's deterrence and defence posture must be balanced with support for confidence-building measures that can help advance, step-by-step, the nuclear disarmament agenda," and noted its support for a fissile materials treaty and the development of "global nuclear disarmament verification capabilities."[2]

Whether NATO's overall nuclear posture qualifies as "balanced" is certainly open to question – in fact, it would be more accurate to say that it reflects the quintessential contradiction of the nuclear age. One the one hand, ever since the first (and only) use of nuclear weapons in war, near the end of World War II, the overwhelming majority of states in the international community have agreed that the only answer to the nuclear danger, to what Robert Oppenheimer called "the destroyer of worlds," is the prohibition and complete elimination of nuclear weapons – and so, NATO's nuclear posture incudes the by now *pro forma* declaration of NATO's support for the pursuit of a world without nuclear weapons. On the other hand, as an entrenched nuclear alliance, NATO extols nuclear weapons as the "supreme" guarantors of the security of NATO member states.

There is little doubt as to which side of this contradiction drives NATO's current policy and practice. The 2018 NATO Summit Declaration[3] features a fulsome, and oft-repeated, defence of nuclear weapons and their importance to NATO security. The language is not new, having appeared in earlier NATO Strategic Concept statements, and continues to insist that Alliance defence and deterrence continue to require "an appropriate mix of nuclear, conventional and missile defence capabilities" (para 34). The leaders continue to insist that NATO will "remain a nuclear alliance" for "as long as nuclear weapons exist," and they credit "the strategic forces of the Alliance, particularly those of the United States," with being "the supreme guarantee of the security of allies" (para 35).

Managing NATO's posture

The first thing to be clarified is that, even though three NATO members are nuclear weapon states and another five host US non-strategic nuclear weapons on their territories, NATO as an organization has no nuclear weapons under its own authority. Its status as a "nuclear alliance" is based on the willingness of its nuclear weapon state members to make their nuclear weapons available for collective operations by NATO[4] – essentially in the same way that NATO has a conventional military capacity only to the extent that its member states make their conventional military forces available for collective operations. NATO cannot *demand* that military forces (nuclear or conventional) be made available, it can *request* them. Even when Article 5 is invoked, it remains the sovereign responsibility of each member state to decide what, if any, military forces it will contribute to a collective mission.

As a result, NATO nuclear decision-making is ultimately not a NATO decision. A NATO request to use nuclear weapons in an armed conflict would require consensus among its 29 member states (no small thing in a diverse group with widely differing perceptions of threat or appropriate response). And once a request was issued, the decision would rest with the states that own those weapons. In the case of American non-strategic nuclear weapons based in Europe, each state hosting those weapons and operating aircraft capable of delivering them, would also have to give its consent. In other words, authorization to use B61 bombs based in Europe is subject to "dual key" arrangements. The US, as owner of the bombs, would first have to authorize their availability for use, and then the countries operating the aircraft that would deliver the bombs would also have to give their approval.

In the case of strategic forces, the discretion belongs entirely to the states with the weapons, and actual use would be processed and managed through their respective chains of command.[5]

Simon Lunn, a former secretary general of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly and former head of plans and policy on NATO's international staff, now linked to the European Leadership Network, summarizes the process:
> "…the decision to initiate the use of a nuclear weapon made available to NATO rests with the U.S. president or the British prime minister. If a decision were made to use a U.S. forward-deployed warhead [the B61] and have it delivered by NATO dual-capable aircraft (DCA), the decision to release the warhead would lie with the U.S. president; the use of a DCA would require the assent of the relevant host country. Although not required, it is widely assumed that such a decision would be made in close consultation with all allies, and it would be reasonable to expect that the NAC [North Atlantic Council], in permanent session, would play a central role. France also would be a likely participant, despite not being part of the NPG" [NATO's Nuclear Planning Group].[6]

All NATO member states (except France) participate in the Nuclear Planning Group (NPG) where alliance nuclear policies are developed and where the overall posture is shaped – but, as already noted, it is not where nuclear use decisions would be made. The NPG meets weekly at a staff level, but it has been some 15 years since it met at the NATO Ambassador level or higher. Issues addressed include safety, security and survivability, communications and information systems, deployment, arms control, and proliferation. Though the NPG is particularly linked to US nuclear weapons forward-based in Europe, if those were withdrawn, the NPG would still continue to meet and function.[7]

In addition to the North Atlantic Council (NAC) and the NPG, a US-chaired High Level Group (HLG) is described as a group that runs parallel to the NPG and is used by the US to consult and brief senior officials from national capitals. It is composed of senior policy makers and experts from national capitals, and it meets several times a year to address nuclear policy and posture, as well as the safety, security, and survivability of nuclear weapons.[8] There are other informal groupings that also address nuclear issues. The US, UK, France, and Germany form one such grouping, as do states focusing on arms control and disarmament. Another group concerned with nuclear issues is made up of states in closer proximity to Russia.

Non-nuclear NATO members of course develop their own policies towards nuclear weapons and arms control. Some, for example, prohibit nuclear weapons on their soil or in their ports in peace time, others extend that prohibition to all conditions – war or peace. Overall, the US obviously dominates NATO's collective nuclear file, and critics see a paucity of genuine consultation on key issues, such as the introduction of the B61-12 into Europe. As Simon Lunn concludes: "For the most part, the participation of allies continues to be passive rather than active."[9]

Words matter – changing the language:

The NATO nuclear contradiction is stark – seeking a "world without nuclear weapons" (para 44 of Brussels Communique), while nuclear weapons remain "essential" (para 34) and the "supreme guarantee" (para 35) of security. But the contradictions go further. On the one hand, the alliance insists that, though it collectively musters well over half of the world's military capability (its collective spending well over 10 times that of Russia's), NATO members would be rendered dangerously vulnerable without a nuclear deterrent. On the other hand, NATO states also insists that the rest of the world's non-nuclear states, all of them infinitely more vulnerable to being militarily overwhelmed than are any NATO states, have absolutely no need for any nuclear deterrent or guarantee. It's one of those enduring mysteries that shroud deterrence doctrine – why nuclear deterrence and guarantees are essential for the powerful but unnecessary for the weak, why the latter are an outrageous affront to humanity when they pursue what the powerful take as normal and their right.

In the July 2018 NATO statement, Russia is castigated for its "irresponsible and aggressive nuclear rhetoric" (para 6), but that is soon followed by the NATO leaders' own rhetorical offering: "If the fundamental security of any of its members were to be threatened, …NATO has the capabilities and resolve to impose costs on an adversary that would be unacceptable and far outweigh the benefits that any adversary could hope to achieve" (para 36). That threat concludes the communique's main nuclear weapons section, making the intent unambiguous – NATO threatens to attack, including the possibility of a nuclear attack, not only in response to a direct attack, but also in response to one of its members being threatened. It is aggressive language meant to convey a willingness to launch pre-emptive attacks, including the first use of nuclear weapons, and it is the kind of posture that deserves inclusion in any category of "irresponsible and aggressive nuclear rhetoric."

The result is a destabilizing posture. Any threat of pre-emptive nuclear attack, however imminent or remote, generates incentives for an adversary to make its own preparations to pre-empt the feared pre-emption – in a serious crisis, that would translate into a dynamic in which both sides could conclude that, if military combat appeared inevitable, there would be advantage in attacking first. Since the end of the Cold War, NATO military exercises have not involved nuclear attack scenarios, but that could be changing, given NATO's resurgent attention to a collective defence and deterrence posture. Hence, some analysts suggest that Alliance exercises could begin to include scenarios that practice the transition from political to conventional armed conflict to nuclear attack.[10]

Threatening nuclear attack in response to threats is also less than frank inasmuch as a willingness to initiate nuclear use is asserted without any acknowledgement to NATO's own publics that any nuclear attack it might initiate would inevitably result in, would trigger, a nuclear counter attack on NATO states, imposing costs that would certainly be unacceptable and far outweigh any "benefits" from NATO's use of nuclear weapons.

NATO leaders, to their credit, may be at least somewhat uncomfortable with the hawkish edge in their rhetoric, thus the effort to soften it with the assurance that "the circumstances in which NATO might have to use nuclear weapons are extremely remote" (para 36). But it's hard to have it both ways. If nuclear weapons are indeed the "supreme guarantee" of security, the deterrent threat must be seen as robust and credible, a posture that is hard to square with the claim that nuclear weapons are only marginal and their use extremely remote.

An alliance actually committed to creating the conditions for a world without nuclear weapons would hold up disarmament and a world without nuclear weapons, not nuclear weapons, as the only credible foundation on which durable security can be built. Acknowledging that deterrence – that is, systemic incentives and inducements to avoid nuclear use – remains necessary as long as nuclear weapons continue to exist, does not logically lead to the conclusion that nuclear weapons are the "supreme" guarantors of security. It should more logically lead to frank acknowledgement of the perils of nuclear armaments and the urgency of disarmament and point to two imperatives: 1) measures to reduce the roles of nuclear weapons in national defence strategies, and 2) the pursuit of pan-European political conditions that would encourage and facilitate reductions in nuclear arsenals, on the way to a world without nuclear weapons.

At least there is no ambiguity about the formal goal. According to the 2010 Strategic Concept, NATO states are "resolved to seek a safer world for all and to create the conditions for a world without nuclear weapons in accordance with the goals of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, in a way that promotes international stability, and is based on the principle of undiminished security for all" (para 26). And one welcome implication of that declaration is the recognition that pursuing disarmament really does make the world safer (not more vulnerable) – which should challenge the notion that disarmament is possible only after peace and harmony have been achieved.

Another implication of the Alliance declaring its resolve to create conditions for a world without nuclear weapons is the recognition that NATO collectively has a key role to play in creating a context or environment conducive to disarmament. The 2018 Brussels communique repeats that "resolve," but then adds that "the conditions for achieving disarmament have not become more favourable" in recent years (para 42). But that surely begs the question of just what NATO should be doing to fulfill its acknowledged responsibility to help create the favourable conditions now wanting.

Notes

[1] Report of the Standing Committee on National Defence, "Canada and NATO: An Alliance Forged in Strength and Reliability," 18 June 2018. http://www.ourcommons.ca/DocumentViewer/en/42-1/NDDN/report-10/

[2] Government Response to the 10th Report of the Standing Committee on National Defence, "Canada and NATO: An Alliance Forged in Strength and Reliability" (presented to the House of Commons, 16 October 2018). http://www.ourcommons.ca/DocumentViewer/en/42-1/NDDN/report-10/response-8512-421-430

[3] Brussels Summit Declaration, North Atlantic Council, Brussels, 11-12 July 2018. https://www.nato.int

[4] Stein-Ivar Lothe Eide, "A Ban on Nuclear Weapons: What's in it for NATO? International Law and Policy Institute, February 2014.

[5] Hans M. Kristensen, "NATO Nuclear Operations: Management, Escalation, Balance of Power," PowerPoint presentation at James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies, October 27, 2015. www.fas.org

[6] Simon Lunn, "NATO Nuclear Sharing: Consultation," in Steve Andreasen, Isabelle Williams, Brian Rose, Hans M. Krsitensen, and Simon Lunn, *Building a Safe, Secure, and Credible NATO Nuclear Posture*, Nuclear Threat Initiative, January 2018.

[7] Simon Lunn, January 2018.

[8] NATO. https://www.nato.int

[9] Simon Lunn, January 2018.

[10] Simon Lunn, January 2018.