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Briefing papers by Ernie Regehr, O.C., Senior Fellow in Arctic Security and Defence

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Doubling Down on a Retentionist Nuclear Posture: NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept

Nuanced changes to the nuclear weapons elements of NATO's new Strategic Concept do not alter its substance. Once again, the alliance propagates the dangerous myth that nuclear weapons are the "supreme" source of security, doubles down on the threat of nuclear weapons use in response to conventional attack, continues to insist that alliance security depends on stationing US tactical nuclear weapons in Europe. The overall nuclear posture remains stubbornly retentionist. It entrenches policies that bolster already daunting barriers to progress in nuclear arms control and disarmament and deepens strategic instability into the bargain.

The following reviews the nuclear dimensions of the new [2022 Strategic Concept](#) (as approved in June at the [Madrid NATO Summit](#)), with comparisons to previous Strategic Concepts. The focus is exclusively on nuclear weapons, even though NATO's conventional and nuclear strategies are obviously closely linked, because the formal objective of the international community, outlined in the [NPT's 64-point action plan](#) (supported by all NATO members), is to decouple them – the point being to “diminish the role and significance of nuclear weapons” in security policies (Action 5.c) on the way to “achieving a world without nuclear weapons” (Action 1).

1. The nuclear threat

NATO does acknowledge that nuclear weapons are in themselves a dangerous threat to security, but only when in the hands of others. The [2010 Strategic Concept](#) (SC) focused the nuclear threat on the dangers of nuclear weapons proliferation. The threat of terrorist groups acquiring nuclear capabilities was part of the horizontal proliferation threat, but the primary worry was about “the proliferation of nuclear weapons, and other weapons of mass destruction, and their means of delivery” (SC 2010, paras 9 and 10) to other states. In 2022 the definition of the nuclear threat harkens back to the [1999 Strategic Concept](#). Then the primary nuclear threat was defined as the “powerful nuclear forces outside the alliance” (SC 1999, para 21), while in 2022 the focus is on “authoritarian actors” that “are investing in sophisticated conventional, nuclear and missile capabilities,” with Russia's nuclear “modernization” and “coercive nuclear signalling,” and China's expanding arsenal, the primary threats identified (SC 2022, paras 7, 8, 13, and 18), although the threat of non-state actors acquiring nuclear capabilities is repeated (para 18).

To its credit, the new Strategic Concept's nuclear threats do include “the erosion of the arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation architecture,” negatively impacting strategic stability (SC 2022, para 18).

2. The Purpose/Role of Nuclear Weapons

When in NATO's hands, nuclear weapons, particularly those of the United States, are again claimed as "the supreme guarantee of the security of the Alliance" (SC 2022, para 29; SC 2010, para 18). The nuclear arsenals of other NATO members, the UK and France, are also once again said to add "a deterrent role of their own," arguing that "these Allies' separate centres of decision-making contribute to deterrence by complicating the calculations of potential adversaries" (SC 2022, para 29; SC 2010, para 18). In contrast, the UN Secretary General has just warned the world of the extreme and growing dangers we now face as a consequence of pursuing the ["false security"](#) of nuclear weapons.

To characterize weapons capable of annihilation on a global scale as the foundation of security is not only a moral outrage, or, as the [Treaty On the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons](#) puts it, "abhorrent to the principles of humanity and the dictates of public conscience," it is demonstrably false. The prevention of war and ensuring the security of states and humanity depend fundamentally on the rule of law, effective governance, meeting fundamental social and economic needs, persistent diplomacy across political divides, and all the other mechanisms, including arms control and national security forces and multilateral peace support operations, that the international community has painstakingly developed and assembled. Failure is frequent, but not only is the threat of nuclear catastrophe not the antidote to such failure, it is a threat that could one day be carried out, and should that happen, "failure" would not begin to describe the consequences.

Nevertheless, the 2022 Strategic Concept repeats the 1999 version's claim that the "fundamental purpose of NATO's nuclear capability is to preserve peace, prevent coercion and deter aggression" (SC 2022, preface; SC 1999, para 62). Relying on the oxymoron that the capacity for unlimited destruction is to preserve peace, the new strategy repeats the 2010 declaration that "as long as nuclear weapons exist, NATO will remain a nuclear alliance" (SC 2022, preface; SC 2010, preface and para 17). That stubborn insistence in turn is again said to require NATO to field "an appropriate mix of nuclear, conventional and missile defence capabilities" (SC 2022, para 20; SC 2010, para 17), with the 2022 version adding that these deployments are "complemented by space and cyber capabilities" (NATO 2022, para 20).

The Strategic Concept declares nuclear weapons to be "unique" and that "the circumstances in which NATO might have to [meaning, might *decide* to] use nuclear weapons are extremely remote" (SC 2022, para 28; SC 2010, para 17), but both versions pointedly do not say those remote circumstances would be confined to responding to nuclear attack. The [2021 Brussels Summit](#) is slightly more direct, making it clear that NATO retains the option of first use of nuclear weapons in response to conventional attack. While also insisting that the circumstances of nuclear use would be "extremely remote" (para 41), the Brussels statement adds in the same paragraph that "if the fundamental security of any of its members were to be threatened, ...NATO has the capabilities and the resolve to impose costs on an adversary that would be unacceptable and far outweigh the benefits that any adversary would hope to achieve." That warning is essentially in the same vein as Vladimir Putin's threat to impose ["consequences that you have never experienced in your history"](#) in response to further NATO interference in Ukraine. The context in Russia's case is obviously more immediately dangerous, but both warnings deliver the key message of the [threatened introduction of nuclear weapons into a hitherto conventional conflict](#).

3. US Nuclear forces in Europe

In the context of its declared commitment (SC 2022, para 33) to the "full implementation" of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), NATO continues to insist that its nuclear deterrence posture "relies on the United States' nuclear weapons forward-deployed in Europe" (SC 2022, para 29), which in practice means transferring

nuclear weapons to the territories of non-nuclear weapon states. In other words, it insists NATO security relies on *not* implementing Articles I and II of the NPT, which prohibit such transfers.¹ In addition, the declared intention that the “peacetime basing of nuclear forces” in Europe is to “ensure the broadest possible participation of Allies in collective defence planning on nuclear roles, ...and in command, control and consultation arrangements” (SC 2010, para 19; SC 1999, para 63), is itself contrary to the spirit of the two opening Articles of the NPT.

NATO, of course, insists that those forward deployment arrangements are not contrary to the NPT’s explicit prohibition on nuclear sharing because such arrangements were already in place when the NPT was negotiated more than four decades ago, without being challenged. But its interpretation is less sanguine, when it comes to Russia and Belarus exploring their own version of “nuclear sharing.” At this point, the only decision has been to make Belarusian Su-25 attack aircraft nuclear-capable and to deploy nuclear-capable Iskander cruise and ballistic missiles (ranges of 500kms) in Belarus, and a [Kremlin spokesman](#) has explained that the deployment of systems “technically capable” of carrying nuclear weapons would not necessarily mean they would be armed with nuclear warheads. But the Kremlin’s view clearly is that the precedent has conveniently been set.

With Russia’s limited conventional capabilities, compared with those available to NATO, it increasingly emphasizes nuclear weapons – which also, as the Vienna-based Russian analyst and former diplomat [Nikolai N. Sokov](#) has pointed out, follows a NATO Cold War precedent, when “NATO practiced the same approach.”

4. Arms Control and Disarmament

The new Strategic Concept on the one hand declares nuclear weapons to be the “supreme guarantee” (SC 2022, para 29) of security, and on the other hand it declares “NATO’s goal is to create the security environment for a world without nuclear weapons, consistent with the goals of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty” (SC 2022, para 33). It also says “arms control, disarmament, and non-proliferation strongly contribute to the Alliance’s objectives” (SC 2022, para 32), although it is less forthcoming on the importance of arms control and disarmament than was the 2010 version. The commitment to “the goal of creating the conditions for a world without nuclear weapons” was in 2010 (SC 2010, Preface and para 26) supported by the declaration that “NATO seeks its security at the lowest possible level of forces,” that “arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation contribute to peace, security and stability,” and that NATO would promote “disarmament of both conventional weapons and weapons of mass destruction, as well as non-proliferation efforts” (SC 2010, para 26).

In 2022 the focus is on rearming – with renewed pledges to increase military spending, along with decisions to increase forces at [high readiness levels](#), even as [some analysts warned](#) this could “driv[e] Russia and China into an enduring anti-American and anti-NATO alliance.”

5. Dialogue

[Rose Gottemoeller](#), a former Deputy Secretary-General of NATO, wondered before the summit whether NATO would “have something new to say on deterrence,” and while she assumed that under the current circumstances NATO and Russia would not soon return to a negotiating table, [she went on to make the key point](#) that “even the dialogue doubters among NATO member states would be unlikely to embrace a policy depending on deterrence and defense alone; it would doom NATO to being unable to change the status quo except by resort to the use of force.”

So it is noteworthy that the new Strategic Concept does reinforce the importance of dialogue: “...we remain willing to keep open channels of communication with Moscow to manage and mitigate risks, prevent escalation, and increase transparency” (SC 2022. Para 9). It declares that strategic stability is delivered through a

combination of “effective deterrence and defence, arms control and disarmament, and meaningful and reciprocal political dialogue” and promises to “make use of NATO as a platform for in-depth discussion and close consultations on arms control efforts” (SC 2022, para 32). [Engagement earlier this year](#) appeared to hold some promise, but the overt invasion of Ukraine by Russia [put paid to those already faltering efforts](#).

A decade ago, the Strategic Concept reflected a less vexing strategic environment and that led to language about NATO/Russia “partnership” and the pursuit of “political consultations and practical cooperation with Russia in areas of shared interests, *including missile defence*, counter-terrorism, counter-narcotics, counterpiracy and the promotion of wider international security” (emphasis on missile defence added – SC 2010, para 34). A decade before that Russia and NATO had “committed themselves to developing their relations on the basis of common interest, reciprocity and transparency to achieve a lasting and inclusive peace in the Euro-Atlantic area based on the principles of democracy and co-operative security” (SC 1999, para 36). The obstacles to cooperative security in the Euro-Atlantic are now obviously formidable, but the Cold War lesson is that, even in the darkest days, dialogue is essential to strategic stability, averting catastrophe, and building at least basic elements of an arms control infrastructure. The UK’s National Security Advisor recently [warned](#) an American think tank audience that the current breakdown of the kinds of dialogue channels that were relied on in the Cold War now leaves the world vulnerable to a “broader range” of risks and increased “pathways to escalation.”

Obstructing Disarmament

The [Polish Centre for Eastern Studies](#) comes to the general conclusion that the new Strategic Concept places a “greater emphasis on the role of nuclear deterrence in NATO’s strategy than the 2010 document.” Put another way, the barriers to disarmament have been fortified.

First off, in threatening nuclear use in response to a conventional attack, NATO not only rejects the no-first-use posture that had been [gaining currency in the Biden election campaign](#), but perpetuates the myth that nuclear weapons are useable and that advantage could accrue to the state willing to use them first in a hitherto conventional armed conflict.

Furthermore, forward-basing of non-strategic US nuclear weapons in Europe reinforces that threat of nuclear first use and propagates the false idea that nuclear weapons have military utility. It undermines faith in the arms control disarmament infrastructure by violating the letter and spirit of Articles I and II of the NPT, and it sets a dangerous proliferation precedent (of which Russia and Belarus have obviously taken note).

NATO prominently misrepresents the real impact of nuclear weapons on security and global stability. Claims that nuclear arsenals are “the supreme guarantee of the security of the Alliance” (SC 2022, para 29) ignore the obvious truth that there are no security guarantees. There are no absolutes in security, only policies and practices that tip the odds in favor or against security. Improved odds owe to good governance, enhanced human security, and persistent conflict resolution diplomacy. Worsening odds derive from threats and counter-threats, nuclear “modernization,” and downgraded diplomatic engagement. The threats of mutual nuclear destruction are not only confrontational and escalatory, making “good” on those threats is suicidal.

Finally, by affirming dialogue but insisting that now is not the time, NATO misrepresents the point of dialogue with adversaries in the first place – which is not to reward preferred behaviour, but to engage adversaries even when behaviour is at its worst. Fundamentally unacceptable behaviour is not the occasion to curtail dialogue, but to intensify it.

NATO's current security posture continues to hold up nuclear weapons as essential to peace, going further to accord them supremacy in alliance security efforts. If nuclear weapons are not only essential but supreme, all the other policies and measures for the pursuit of peace and security, notably arms control and disarmament, are by definition subordinate. In other words, the 2022 Strategic Concept, in reinforcing barriers to disarmament, has doubled down on an obstructionist approach to nuclear disarmament.

Notes

¹ Article I prohibits the "transfer to any recipient whatsoever nuclear weapons or ...control over such weapons ...directly, or indirectly;" Article II prohibits non-nuclear weapon states from "receiv[ing] the transfer from any transferor whatsoever of nuclear weapons or ...of control over such weapons ...directly, or indirectly."