

Roundtable on
Nuclear Weapons Policies and the NATO Strategic
Concept Review

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Rapporteur's Report
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Introduction

The roundtable was co-hosted by Des Browne MP, convener of the Top Level Group and Paolo Cotta-Ramusino, Secretary General of the Pugwash Conferences. It took place at the House of Commons, London, on January 15, 2010. There were twenty participants, all by invitation and in their personal capacities, including former senior ministers and government advisers from all major political parties; senior retired military; and key UK government and NATO embassy officials.

This report is not a consensus document, but a summary of the main points of the meeting, observing Pugwash/Chatham House rules.

The goal was to define better the issues surrounding NATO nuclear strategy and to identify areas that need further immediate examination. The meeting had a special focus on topical issues arising from recent statements from the German, Belgian, Norwegian and Dutch governments on the future role of nuclear weapons in Alliance strategy and resulting opportunities for UK leadership on these issues.

Currently, the US Nuclear Posture Review is considering how best to balance extended deterrence for allies with Obama's disarmament agenda. The forthcoming NATO Strategic Concept Review is set to discuss the revision of NATO's nuclear strategy. This presents policymakers with a rare and significant moment where strong political leadership can achieve positive change. In particular, a new dynamic has been created by the leadership shown by the new German Foreign Minister, Guido Westerwelle, in placing the withdrawal of US tactical nuclear weapons from Germany and the review of NATO nuclear strategy at the heart of the new coalition government's foreign policy. He has raised these issues with NATO ministers bilaterally and in the North Atlantic Council.

The experts group convened by NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen and led by Madeleine Albright has held three major seminars, and will convene a fourth, to be held in Washington DC, which will include an examination of NATO nuclear strategy. They are also consulting widely with NATO governments and taking advice from outside experts. There is a need to ensure that there is political leadership in this process, and that it is not conducted exclusively by experts and officials. Pugwash and the Top Level Group therefore convened this roundtable to examine possibilities and obstacles to the revision of nuclear strategy in Europe, and the opportunities for political leadership presented by the current processes.

Political Situation

The roundtable began with an assessment of the different pressures on NATO countries, and on the Alliance as a whole, with regard to its overall nuclear strategy; the US security guarantee to European allies; the presence of US nuclear weapons in Europe; and the practice of ‘nuclear sharing’ – whereby nominally non-nuclear nations are equipped and trained to use nuclear weapons in the event of war.

It was noted that these competing pressures include, on one side, a continued requirement by all allies for extended deterrence and a European desire for a visible symbol of the US security commitment to Europe. On the other hand, opposition to the continued US nuclear presence is growing amongst European publics. As one participant observed, the mainstream political position in Europe is now aligned in support of the disarmament programme outlined by President Obama in Prague. In the context of the NPT, there is also growing pressure from non-nuclear weapon states for NATO to end Cold War burden sharing practices and to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in defence strategy.

The Nuclear Posture Review/Strategic Concept Review Circular Political Dynamic

It was noted that a circular political dynamic is developing, which is inhibiting both the United States and European NATO nations from moving forward with arms reduction measures. Europeans are waiting for the outcome of the Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) before actively pursuing talks on nuclear strategy in the NATO context. And some in Washington DC are using European hesitation to argue for both the maintenance of forward based nuclear weapons in Europe, and for a continuation of relatively aggressive, counterproliferation based nuclear use strategy.

A need was felt to change this dynamic, to allow a mutually reinforcing dialogue across the Atlantic to replace the current mutually weakening absence of dialogue.

In the context of these current reviews, it was noted that nuclear disarmament has two important elements – the reduction and elimination of the weapons themselves, and the reduction of the role of these weapons in defence strategy. It was hoped that both the NPR and the NATO Strategic Concept Review (SCR) would reflect this reality.

Credibility of the Current Tactical Nuclear Weapons Deployment as a Deterrent

The NATO Strategic Concept states that “Nuclear forces based in Europe and committed to NATO provide an essential political and military link between the European and the North American members of the Alliance.” This policy requires widespread participation by all allies, including peacetime basing of nuclear forces.

There was some discussion as to the credibility of this arrangement. Most participants felt that this strategy had been a useful and necessary component of NATO’s defence posture during the Cold War. However, that has now changed. NATO is so uncertain of public support that nuclear weapons are no longer mentioned. Ministers no longer engage in nuclear decision-making as they

did in the Cold War. US nuclear weapons have been removed, without public attention, from Greece and the UK. Turkey has ended its participation in nuclear sharing. Now three of the five remaining basing countries have requested the withdrawal of weapons publicly. Most, including US EUCOM, believe that these weapons have no conceivable military use, and that their deterrent value is zero as it is widely perceived that they cannot be used.

These factors have combined to produce a situation where US nuclear weapons in Europe play a negative role in non-proliferation and disarmament debates, and no longer fulfill their intended role in Alliance security. The burdensharing element of nuclear strategy has to a great extent wasted away, while some (notably in Eastern Europe) continue to rely on it for their security—though participants recognized this is perhaps for primarily symbolic purposes.

It was noted that the Baltic republics and Poland, in particular, still see a strong value in a US extended deterrent, and in the presence of US nuclear weapons in Europe – this despite the dynamic described above. However, they also have strong security concerns, relating to issues including energy security or cyber security, for which nuclear weapons have no relevance. There is little or no consideration in their national debates of the negative effect that US nuclear deployments in Europe play in relations with Russia. They tend to see security as a zero sum game.

It was also noted that ending US TNW deployments in Europe would set a precedent that nuclear weapons are only based in the possessor country's own territory. This would be important to prevent the development of nuclear sharing arrangements by other countries in other regions in future.

Across Europe, it was noted that the political centre has coalesced around an end to TNW deployments on the continent, and looks to some other form of guarantee from the US.

Extended deterrence in Asia

The unstable security situation in North-East Asia was noted, and contrasted with the very stable situation in which most of Europe finds itself.

Despite this there are no US nuclear weapons deployed in Asia, and extended deterrence is provided by a combination of a conventional military presence and the US Trident submarine fleet.

A strong need for a step by step approach to reducing and eliminating nuclear dangers in East Asia is necessary and possible.

The need for political leadership

The roundtable recognized a need for political leadership in several different ways. One participant noted that, during the Cold War, individual leaders were able to have quite a dramatic effect on the international security situation – for example, Ronald Reagan's disarmament engagement with the Soviet Union, and Gorbachev and Shevardnaze on the Soviet side who

brought a completely new perspective to global politics. Such leadership is still possible, and indeed necessary.

Elected leaders have a duty to provide leadership to their officials. Absent such clear leadership, the decisions of officials tend towards the status quo when revising documents such as the NATO Strategic Concept.

President Obama has a particular duty to provide continued leadership, in the US and the world, because he has raised expectations with his Prague speech, and with the UN Security Council debate and resolution on nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation.

He has difficulties because the Prague speech was balanced, and the world heard the disarmament message, while many in the US heard his promise to maintain a strong deterrent.

Political leaders in Europe and Asia have a duty to provide leadership at home, and to communicate their support for the Prague agenda clearly to the President and other players in Washington DC, so the US debate is not conducted under false premises.

US security assurances for Europe

The vast majority of participants noted that US allies in Europe and North East Asia still feel a requirement for a strategic nuclear deterrent. This can be fulfilled with US and UK Trident forces which, it was felt, are far more credible than forward deployed TNW.

There is a perceived need, widely felt in both regions, for concrete US security guarantees. While some in Europe would still like these to include a forward based nuclear option, this is now a minority opinion. Some governments in Europe are promoting the presence of US and NATO integrated missile defence, based on tactical and theatre systems such as the US Patriot and Aegis systems, as a strong alternative to the continued presence of nuclear weapons in the continent.

Further Steps

Strong concerns were raised that the process of consultation on the NATO Strategic Concept Review is not providing opportunity for adequate political and public consultation. In particular, there is little or no political leadership from governments at present. The consultation process and seminars give an appearance, but not reality of open debate. In fact, the process is closed to all but a handful of officials and experts.

There was a commitment to discuss these issues further; to engage with elected and appointed officials in the US and NATO, as well as with the experts group, and to foster public debate on US and NATO nuclear strategy and the issues examined in this roundtable.