

NATO and Extended Deterrence in a Multinuclear World

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Concerns about nuclear proliferation have led to a new wave of enthusiasm for far-reaching nuclear disarmament schemes. According to their proponents, the United States must take the lead in generating a new global disarmament dynamic, including withdrawing the remaining U.S. tactical nuclear weapons from Europe. Such a step will not spell the end of extended deterrence, yet its drawbacks would far outweigh its gains. While achieving little in terms of relaunching disarmament, it would weaken nuclear sharing as an important achievement of managing alliance security. In an emerging multinuclear strategic environment, maintaining a visible nuclear bond between the United States and its NATO allies is not a Cold War relic, but a sensible and nonprovocative means of both deterrence and nonproliferation.

To a considerable extent, questions of nuclear weaponry and deterrence are questions of faith, beyond “hard” empirical science. The overriding rationale of nuclear weapons is to deter conflict, yet since one can never prove for certain why an event has *not* occurred, the war-prevention function of nuclear weapons remains, strictly speaking, a mere assumption. The same holds true for the more specific political and military functions attributed to nuclear weapons. The question of what constitutes “credible” deterrence has preoccupied legions of analysts for decades and has generated rivalling schools of thought. Yet at the end of the day, given the absence of solid proof, the issue remains one of competing assumptions.

However, one should not conclude from this that the absence of empirical evidence would allow for each and every view to be of equal value. For example, even if the absence of rain cannot be explained with complete certainty, the complexity of the weather still remains a more plausible explanation than the sun dance of a voodoo priest. If anything, questions that cannot be “proven” require an even greater amount of intellectual discipline. This is all the more true when it comes to pondering the future of extended deterrence. From the outset, this concept was burdened with severe credibility problems, yet it has nevertheless become a central pillar of Western security policy and indeed of political order. Given the new debate about nuclear abolition, in which key tenets of extended deterrence are being put up for grabs, it is particularly important to separate facts from fiction.

The New Nuclear Debate

Calls for the total elimination of nuclear weapons have been around since the dawn of the nuclear age, yet they never carried the day. Aside from their naive, pacifist air, they failed to provide convincing answers to the three key questions of nuclear abolition: How to get

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to zero? How to stay at zero in a world where nuclear know-how would continue to exist? How to guarantee effective deterrence without nuclear weapons? No matter how high their moral integrity, nuclear abolition proponents consistently failed to pass this basic test of realism.

Despite this frustrating track record, however, demands for the long-term elimination of nuclear weapons have resurfaced, notably in the course of the 2008 U.S. presidential election campaign. After eight years of the Bush administration's skepticism toward arms-control agreements, many observers are now pinning their hopes for a fully fledged renaissance of the idea of global disarmament. The fact that this cause is now also championed by prominent "realists," such as Henry Kissinger, Sam Nunn, William Perry, and George Shultz, has given it additional credibility. Above all, it has brought abolitionism out of its sectarian corner and turned it into a respectable policy position.¹

The key tenets of this new nuclear debate are simple and straightforward. As the world is reaching a nuclear tipping point, averting the spread of weapons of mass destruction becomes a matter of global survival. Hence, the nuclear weapons states should unequivocally embrace the vision of a world free of nuclear weapons. This would allow them to counter charges of pursuing a policy of "double standards," and to regain the credibility that is essential for launching dynamic and comprehensive arms control policies. Irrespective of the likelihood of the total elimination of nuclear weapons, "abolition" needs to become the overarching narrative for making progress in a number of areas, such as concluding new U.S.–Russian arms control agreements; strengthening the verification mechanisms of the International Atomic Energy Agency; enhancing the physical security of Russian nuclear weapons; internationalizing uranium enrichment, and many more.

In order to generate such a positive momentum, abolitionists argue that the nuclear weapons states should first and foremost visibly reduce their dependence on nuclear weapons. An important part of such a nuclear deemphasis would be the withdrawal of the remaining tactical nuclear weapons (TNW) that are based in various European North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) nations in the context of NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements. In the view of the abolitionists, the withdrawal of these "Cold War relics" would send a powerful message that the United States and its NATO allies were giving nonproliferation precedence over outdated nuclear dogmatism. This ties in with the arguments that have long been made by the antinuclear activists among the nongovernmental organization (NGO) community, who maintain that nuclear sharing arrangements are a violation of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Consequently, their withdrawal would be in line with not only political but also legal requirements, and help set the stage for a positive outcome of the next NPT Review Conference in 2010. Moreover, withdrawing European-based TNW would also remove a potential risk of theft by terrorists, and might put pressure on Russia to remove or reduce her oversized and possibly unsafe TNW arsenal. Finally, as NATO may soon start work on a new strategic concept, the alliance should seize this opportunity to further reduce its nuclear dimension, notably by ending its nuclear sharing arrangements.

If the relevance of nuclear weapons in Europe were indeed as marginal as these views suggest, and if, on the other hand, the link between extended deterrence and nonproliferation were as clear-cut as this school of thought maintains, the withdrawal of European-based U.S. nuclear weapons would indeed be wise and should be welcomed. Alas, the issue is far less clear-cut than the abolitionist school tries to portray it. The charge that extended deterrence, as institutionalized in NATO, is counterproductive, as it was highlighting rather than downplaying the nuclear dimensions of security, reveals a fundamental misreading of both alliance dynamics and global security developments.

Extended Deterrence and Nuclear Sharing

The nuclear arsenal of a state protects first and foremost that very state from external aggression. Nuclear weapons are therefore closely tied to notions of national sovereignty. There is widespread agreement, however, that nuclear deterrence can also be extended to nonnuclear allies. In principle, all that is required is a declaration by the nuclear weapons state that it will retaliate on an attack on its ally with nuclear means. Whether such a promise will be perceived as credible, however, is quite another matter. As for NATO allies, who relied on the U.S. “nuclear umbrella” early on, the question of credibility—and nuclear status—could only be resolved after long and controversial debates. In the late 1960s, a workable compromise was finally agreed on: U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe would symbolize the credibility of the U.S. commitment, and European delivery means and the newly created Nuclear Planning Group would address the European desire to exert influence on U.S. nuclear planning. These nuclear sharing arrangements would also ease European, notably German, worries with regard to signing the Non-Proliferation Treaty: the very notion of “sharing” would at least ameliorate the NPT’s inherent discriminatory character by suggesting, at least in intent, a tendency toward equalizing the status of allies. In conformity with the logic of the NPT, the United States would retain control of its nuclear arsenal, yet European allies would participate in the nuclear mission, both materially and conceptually.²

The end of the Cold War radically changed the political and military context of Western security, and, hence, of nuclear sharing arrangements. With a major conventional threat to NATO territory largely removed, and with Russia no longer being perceived as the main adversary, the nuclear and conventional dimensions of conflict have become disentangled. Accordingly, one of the traditional roles of tactical nuclear weapons, namely to enhance the credibility of NATO’s threat to escalate to the nuclear level if it were about to lose the conventional conflict, has disappeared. NATO enlargement, a key tenet of the West’s consolidation strategy in post-Cold War Europe, is another factor that has altered the alliance’s nuclear dimension. In order not to provoke Russia, enlargement had to proceed in a militarily “soft” way. Accordingly, NATO’s so-called “three no’s” (no intention, no plan, and no reason to deploy nuclear weapons on the territory of the new members) de facto ruled out a direct role of the new allies in the nuclear mission. Thus, while the new allies are fully involved in the deliberations of the Nuclear Planning Group, only some of NATO’s “old” members are actually hosting nuclear weapons on their national territory.

Moreover, since several categories of European-based nuclear weapons have been eliminated by various arms control agreements at the end of the Cold War, the specific military implementation of nuclear sharing arrangements is currently confined to gravity bombs mounted on dual-capable aircraft (DCA). Considering these aircraft’s range, vulnerability, and enemy airspace penetration capabilities, some analysts have raised doubts about the military value of this posture, particularly when compared to other options. Accordingly, the United States has been reported to be less insistent on maintaining TNW, all the more so as the U.S. Air Force is said to be increasingly disinterested in this particular mission, viewing it as an impediment to other global missions. This view was reinforced by the quiet withdrawal of TNW from Greece in 2000, from Ramstein Air Force Base in Germany in 2007, and evidently from the United Kingdom sometime before 2007. Given this apparent lack of interest, it is not surprising that some nations approach questions of modernizing their aging DCA fleet with considerable hesitation. Remembering the self-destructive nuclear debates of the mid-1980s, some Europeans might welcome the withdrawal of TNW

from Europe in a sweeping arms control context as an elegant way of avoiding a difficult nuclear modernization decision.

The specific implementation of extended deterrence in NATO is not cast in stone. In other parts of the world the U.S. nuclear commitment was neither dependent on nuclear weapons in theater nor elaborate sharing arrangements. It would therefore be incorrect to state that the withdrawal of these weapons would spell the end of extended deterrence. Europeans might well argue that what works for Japan will also be sufficient for them. After all, defining what constitutes “credible” extended deterrence is ultimately up to the United States and its allies. If they were to agree that relying exclusively on U.S. strategic systems would be enough from now on (and that notions of burden sharing would no longer apply for the nuclear domain), European-based TNW could safely be withdrawn. Since the Nuclear Planning Group would continue to exist, there would still be a modicum of “sharing,” even if that sharing were then confined to conceptual discussions only. Such a course of action would seem to correspond with the domestic preferences of some NATO allies, as well as with the abolitionist euphoria. However, reducing nuclear sharing to the question of what “sells” domestically underestimates the importance of this concept for the future context of alliance security: a multinuclear world.

The Second Nuclear Age

Within the past two decades, the end of the Cold War and the forces of globalization have invalidated virtually all traditional assumptions about nonproliferation. For example, the emergence of semiprivate transnational proliferation networks has undermined a central tenet of mainstream nonproliferation theory, according to which states with nuclear ambitions had to rely on the assistance of established nuclear powers. Today, a nuclear “black market” allows nuclear “have-nots” to buy centrifuge parts or even blueprints of nuclear warheads. Cooperation between proliferators is another phenomenon that challenges established views. Pakistan, Libya, Iran, and Syria have all been cooperating in nuclear and missile development, thereby cutting costs, speeding up development times, and reducing the requirements for testing. Iran and North Korea, for their part, were able to run clandestine uranium enrichment programs for many years. The global renaissance of civilian nuclear power will only add to these challenges. This may not lead to a rapid increase in the number of declared nuclear powers. However, the number of “virtual” powers will grow: these so-called “turnkey states” will be able to turn their civilian programs into military ones on short notice. Irrespective of the new optimism about arms control, these trends will ensure that nuclear weapons will continue to exert a powerful influence on world politics.³

Developments since the 1980s show that the widespread assumption, that past non proliferation successes were the result of the NPT, is highly questionable. The fact that almost all states have signed up to this treaty is a huge success, yet it does not reflect the emergence of a global norm. The reason why most states never pursued a nuclear weapons program, or terminated ongoing programs, is to be found in a cost-benefit calculus. For most nations, becoming a nuclear weapons state never offered sufficient military advantages to warrant the enormous financial costs and political ramifications. However, a change in a nation’s political and military environment can also lead to a change in its cost-benefit calculus. After all, nuclear abstinence in pivotal geopolitical regions is not a law of nature. Rather, it remains contingent on a predictable (i.e., U.S.-guaranteed) international order. It is no coincidence that indications of a nuclear domino effect have become visible exactly in those regions where doubts about the U.S. commitment are most serious.

The Japanese example is a clear reminder of the limits of a mere “virtual” security guarantee by the United States. Whenever there is another crisis around North Korea, the U.S. commitment is questioned, and Washington hastens to reassure Tokyo of its unflinching support. Japanese nervousness has meanwhile led to the break with an erstwhile taboo: a debate about a Japanese nuclear option is no longer considered illegitimate. For a host of political and historical reasons, the scenario of a nuclear Japan remains unlikely. Other U.S. allies in Asia, however, have demonstrated that doubts in the U.S. commitment could lead to the search for national alternatives, including nuclear ones. In the past, both Taiwan and South Korea tried their hand at civilian nuclear programs with clear military applications. These programs were only stopped after Washington exerted significant political pressure. Turkish analysts, too, have been warning that a nuclear Iran might change their country’s security calculus.

However, nowhere does the new nuclear reality become more obvious than in the Middle East and the Gulf. As a response to Iran’s nuclear ambitions, twelve countries in that region have declared their intention to launch or relaunch civilian nuclear programs. While not all of these programs may be intended as a hedge against Iran, it is widely assumed that Sunni Saudi Arabia will not remain passive if a nuclear-armed Shiite Iran were to strive for regional hegemony. Saudi Arabia’s longstanding ties with Pakistan would suggest that Riyadh could respond to a nuclear Iran rather quickly, namely by purchasing rather than developing weapons of its own. In any case, if the nuclearization of the Middle East were to happen, Europe would be faced with a neighboring region in which each conventional conflict would carry nuclear escalation risks.

This explains why the principle of nuclear sharing has not lost its relevance with the end of the Cold War. It is supposed to spare Europe the nervousness that is so palpable in the Middle East and Asia. Of course, with Europe’s security situation constantly improving, such reflections may appear far-fetched. However, it is only a matter of time until Europe will find itself in a much less comfortable position. Russia’s heavy-handed approach to the crisis in the Caucasus in the summer of 2008 offered a first example of how outside events can change European threat perceptions. Although Russia’s disproportional use of military force against Georgia arguably did not have a direct bearing on the military situation in Europe, it nevertheless led some of NATO’s easternmost members to publicly ask for changes in NATO’s military planning and deployments. The palpable desire of these countries to host NATO and/or U.S. installations on their national soil should serve as a healthy reminder of the limits of a “virtual” security presence. At the very least, it suggests that advocating a withdrawal of U.S. nuclear weapons from Europe would be seen by some allies as a security “minus” and risk to further undermine their confidence in existing security arrangements.

A nuclear test by Iran, followed by a nuclear “coming out” of Israel, is another scenario that could significantly change European threat perceptions. Once again, the demand for U.S. “reassurance” would grow. And the central function of nuclear sharing, namely to define North America and Europe as a common security space, would not appear as a Cold War relic, but as a modern and nonprovocative means of deterrence and collective defense.

Arms Control Delusions

How relevant are such reflections given the new opportunities for global disarmament? Would not the withdrawal of TNW be a small price to pay for generating a new disarmament dynamic? It probably would—if the relationship between disarmament and nonproliferation were as clear-cut as the new arms control euphoria postulates. Yet there is nothing to suggest

that there is a causal nexus between nuclear disarmament and proliferation. The far-reaching nuclear cuts that were agreed upon between the United States and Russia at the end of the Cold War had no discernible impact on the nuclear ambitions of other countries. Iran, Iraq, Libya, and North Korea pursued their nuclear programs for their own reasons, just as South Africa, Sweden, or Switzerland pursued their nuclear programs in previous decades. Each proliferation case is its own case.

Put differently, Iran is not going to give up its nuclear ambitions because NATO abandons its nuclear sharing arrangements. Even if this step were only meant as an initial move to demonstrate Western goodwill, it would have little, if any, effect. The NGO community, whose criticism of nuclear sharing meanwhile borders on the pathological, would simply argue that NATO had finally corrected a mistake it had been clinging to for far too long. Russia would argue along similar lines, pointing to the fact that she had returned her TNW back to Russia a long time ago and that NATO was only belatedly following Moscow's example. Indeed, it is difficult to find any party that would appreciate such an initiative beyond a sympathetic nod. Nor should this be surprising. In a political context dominated by abolitionist rhetoric, any limited disarmament measure will by definition fall short of expectations, and will thus not provide much political "mileage." What is gone is gone.

Thus, to argue that putting an end to nuclear sharing would constitute a major contribution to nonproliferation rests on shaky analytical ground. In clinging to these false causalities, the arms control and NGO community runs the danger of repeating the same mistake it made in the late 1980s. Back then this community was firmly wedded to the belief that the key to ending the Cold War was to be found in unilateral changes in the Western defense posture. Things turned out differently, however. The Cold War ended because of political change, which in turn paved the way for far-reaching arms control agreements. The arms control community's credo, that military change will induce political change, was proven spectacularly wrong. The community had fallen victim to its own reverse militarism.

What used to be true in the Cold War applies even more to the twenty-first century: the key to global security does not lie in unilateral changes in Western force posture, but in a sustained Western policy of supporting long-term democratic change. Such a policy might one day eliminate the causes that compel nations to seek nuclear protection. Until then, however, no one can ignore the fact that the global security environment will be characterized by the existence of nuclear weapons. Denying this nuclear reality, or pretending that it can be overcome by sweeping global disarmament schemes, remains a distinctly Western notion. Its only discernible effect will be the delegitimization of Western security policy.

Conclusion: Arms Control vs. Political Order

NATO's post-Cold War nuclear posture in Europe was in a holding pattern in order to preserve both the weapons and the key principles of nuclear sharing and extended deterrence in an unclear strategic environment. It is therefore not without irony that, just as the contours of a new nuclear environment are becoming clear—and should lead to a reappraisal of nuclear sharing—NATO's policy is being attacked even by some erstwhile political "realists" as being incompatible with their new, far-reaching global arms control schemes.

Whether NATO will endorse this logic of pitting nuclear sharing against disarmament objectives remains to be seen. Even if NATO is increasingly defined by its missions and operations, it also continues to play an indispensable role in maintaining Europe's political order. The desire of some allies to obtain bilateral security assurances from the United

States in addition to those of NATO is just the most recent indication that even in a Europe that is largely pacified, the need for the “American Pacifier” has not diminished. It is perhaps for this reason that, thus far, allied views have remained remarkably consistent in endorsing the need for nuclear deterrence, the presence of U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe, and the need for consultation and burden sharing. Neither the proverbial “nuclear allergy” in some allied nations nor the prospect of having to face up to some tough modernization decisions have changed this. NATO’s new strategic concept may thus reflect the same inherent conservatism on nuclear matters than its predecessors, even if it might contain more explicit language on the dangers of proliferation, on the need for missile defense, and, as a tribute to the 2010 NPT Review Conference, on the importance of arms control. Even if some allies were to champion an “abolitionist” cause, the need for consensus among 28 or even more allies would marginalize such views.

The new strategic concept thus might reiterate the longstanding NATO nuclear consensus. However, at some later stage, both the aircraft and the weapons will eventually have to be replaced, and the aging infrastructure will have to be modernized. For some nations, such a decision will be politically difficult. It is therefore all the more important that the strategic debate focuses on the challenges of managing security in a multinuclear world, and does not get hijacked by abolitionist delusions. True, withdrawing TNW from Europe would not mean the end of extended deterrence. It would, however, mean the end of a unique era of nuclear sharing and transparency; emphasize the difference between nuclear and nonnuclear members; and “renationalize” nuclear weapons by turning them again into symbols of purely national power and prestige. Although the NATO alliance would gloss over such a regression by simply redefining the requirements of extended deterrence, the preferred outcome of intra-Alliance deliberations in the coming years should be a different one. Acknowledging the emergence of a second nuclear age, allies should realize that arms control is a mere tactic, yet extended deterrence is a key principle of maintaining international order.

Notes

1. Henry Kissinger et al., Toward a Nuclear-Free World, *The Wall Street Journal*, January 15, 2008, http://online.wsj.com/public/article_print/SB120036422673589947.html accessed 13 August 2008.

2. On the fissures created by the NPT, see Hal Brands, “Non-Proliferation and the Dynamics of the Middle Cold War: The Superpowers, the MLF, and the NPT,” in *Cold War History*, vol. 7, no. 3, August 2007: 389–423.

3. On these developments and their implications for the NPT, see Michael Rühle, “Enlightenment in the Second Nuclear Age,” in *International Affairs* (Chatham House), vol. 83, no. 3, May 2007: 511–522.