



HELLO MISSILE DEFENCE - GOODBYE NUCLEAR SHARING?

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NATO finally has its long awaited strategic concept. On the surface the document sounds rather conservative on nuclear policy and the uninitiated reader could easily miss the significance of the brief mention of missile defence, and the only slightly changed wording on the role of nuclear weapons. Yet a close reading of the document reveals that actually the new strategic concept looks set to herald radical change in long cherished principles about nuclear sharing and to directly address sensitive issues of Alliance cohesion and deterrence posture.

NATO's new strategic concept agreed in Lisbon on the 19 November took the bold step to agree to install a Ballistic Missile Defence System and to invite Russia to cooperate on the new system. At the same time the new strategic concept commits the Alliance to the goal of creating the conditions for a world without nuclear weapons, although it also states that as long as there are nuclear weapons in the world, NATO will remain a nuclear Alliance. Despite the apparent combination of boldness on missile defence and reluctant change on nuclear issues, both the nuclear aspect and the missile defence aspect of the strategic concept, must be regarded as not only a major diplomatic achievement by Secretary General Rasmussen, but also as part of the same overall strategic plan, which contemplates the end of American based Non-Strategic Nuclear Weapons (NSNWs)¹ in Europe before the next strategic concept will have to be agreed around 2020.

Bold and sudden change – Ballistic Missile Defence

NATO's decision to adopt a missile defence and President Medvedev's acceptance of the invitation to cooperate on missile defence can only be regarded as historic. Although there are still many potential obstacles, especially in relation to the operational character and ownership of the system and precisely how the decision to launch an interceptor will be taken, a historic potential for NATO-Russian cooperation exists. The prospect therefore is that NATO will have

a Ballistic Missile Defence System in the foreseeable future and a fundamentally changed relationship with its former adversary.

Moreover, a missile defence system is a much more timely response to NATO's most pressing security issues. Granted, missile defence itself raises a number of questions in relation to deterrence posture, and if the changed relationship with Russia fails, a missile defence may do more damage than good. Even so under the conditions established in Lisbon, a BMDS nevertheless seems more appropriate than the current nuclear posture vis-à-vis the most likely security challenges of the 21st century. Furthermore, provided Russia is involved in a meaningful and mutually beneficial manner, the decision to install BMDS may finally endow the NATO–Russia Council (NRC) with real purpose as a site for practical missile defence cooperation and thereby possibly contribute to lifting the NATO–Russia relationship to an entirely new level. Finally, such a change is likely to fundamentally revise a number of established, but ultimately outdated and illogical practices related to deterrence by punishment and, not least, act as a means of maintaining Alliance cohesion and risk and burden sharing.

The puzzling question, however, is why NATO did not seize the day in Lisbon to also agree to the withdrawal of the NSNWs that most agree are of little strategic value and which were intended to support a nuclear posture now widely seen as defunct.

¹ American nuclear weapons based in Europe are commonly referred to as "tactical Nuclear Weapons". However, this name is specific to planned military use during the Cold War. The more precise term "Non-Strategic Nuclear Weapons" is therefore used in this Security Brief.



The return of the nuclear debate

NATO's nuclear debate has lain dormant since the end of the Cold War. However, since the beginning of 2009, several developments have combined to bring the nuclear issue back into policy debates and public awareness:

- Nuclear weapons were placed on the global agenda by President Obama's Prague speech in April 2009 where he raised the prospect of a world free of nuclear weapons.
- The issue was placed on NATO's agenda in October 2009 when German foreign minister Guido Westerwelle persuaded Angela Merkel that Germany should seek the withdrawal of American nuclear weapons stationed in Germany as part of a wider NATO effort to pursue nuclear disarmament and arms control. Germany has since actively lobbied for complete withdrawal of all NSNWs from NATO territory.
- Three crucial agreements in the first half of 2010 have kept the issue high on the global agenda: the new START follow-up; the nuclear security summit hosted by President Obama; and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference reaffirming the commitment to eliminating all nuclear weapons.
- The delivery systems for NATO's NSNWs (F-16 and Tornado aircraft) are due for modernisation or replacement within the next decade necessitating a decision about existing NSNWs. The German choice of the Eurofighter could complicate issues of transfer of technical information on making the aircraft dual-capable.
- At the urging of several member states (Belgium, Norway, the Netherlands, Germany and Luxembourg) Alliance foreign ministers discussed the nuclear issue at a meeting in Tallinn in April 2010. The meeting concluded with a statement that as long as nuclear weapons exist NATO will remain a nuclear alliance.
- The future of the independent nuclear deterrents in Britain and France has been a matter of national debate – especially in Britain in connection with deep cuts in the defence budget.

NATO's nuclear logic

The reason why NATO appeared reluctant to undertake change in its nuclear posture at Lisbon, has to be found in NATO's long held practice as a nuclear Alliance. The role of nuclear weapons in NATO has throughout NATO's history been described as political: to deter potential adversaries and to 'couple' the defence of the European NATO allies with that of the United States. American NSNWs are placed in European NATO countries to ensure that the United States will be drawn into any nuclear conflict. The deployment of American nuclear weapons in Europe was therefore partly intended to reassure European NATO members of the American nuclear guarantee

and the credibility of Article Five of the North Atlantic Treaty. Moreover, the nuclear weapons deployed in European NATO countries were seen as a symbol of NATO cohesion and solidarity through nuclear sharing, which meant that all members 'dipped their fingers in the blood' of a possible nuclear confrontation and that they shared risks and benefits as equally as possible through hosting nuclear weapons and by participating in nuclear planning. Since the 1960s all NATO countries except France have participated in the Nuclear Planning Group (NPG).



Country	Current Dual-Capable Aircraft	Location	Replacement Aircraft	Scheduled Replacement
Belgium	F-16	Kleine Brogel	F-35?	2020?
Germany	Tornado IDS	Büchel	Eurofighter	2015
Italy	Tornado IDS	Ghedi	F-35	2021–25
Netherlands	F-16	Volkel	F-35	2020?

Table 1: Current capabilities and scheduled replacements

Source: Malcolm Chalmers and Simon Lunn; *NATO's Tactical Nuclear Dilemma, RUSI, March 2010.*

Non-Strategic Nuclear Weapons in Europe

By the early 1960s seven NATO countries hosted American nuclear weapons (Belgium, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Turkey and the United Kingdom). The number of NSNWs peaked in 1971 at around 7300 after which it gradually declined then fell dramatically after the Cold War. In 1991 the United States unilaterally withdrew all ground-launched, short-range NSNWs worldwide, including 2400 artillery shells, surface-to-surface missiles and anti-submarine bombs in Europe. Approximately half of the original 1400 B-61 free-fall bombs remained in Europe. The US quietly withdrew all approximately 20 deployed warheads from Greece in 2001, followed by around 130 from Germany and 110 from the UK in 2004. Today 150–200 NSNWs are held in Belgium, Germany, Italy, Holland and Turkey.

(Source: NATO Parliamentary Assembly; US Non-Strategic Nuclear Weapons in Europe: a Fundamental NATO Debate)

Although NATO's nuclear posture may seem archaic in the present strategic environment, there are still NATO allies who insist that the cohesion of NATO is dependent on sharing the nuclear burden. Many new NATO members feel insecure vis-à-vis Russia and insist on the continued need for nuclear deterrence. It might be argued therefore that the value of NATO's existing nuclear stance is upheld more for internal reasons of cohesion than for realistic and relevant threat perceptions. Moreover, it follows that if nuclear weapons are a symbol of Alliance cohesion, disagreement about the role of nuclear weapons is equally a sign of lack of cohesion. As all nuclear decisions in NATO's history have inevitably led to crisis and threatened Alliance cohesion it is not surprising that most member states have been reluctant to revisit the nuclear issue, despite the many factors in favour of such a discussion. Westervelle's suggestion for withdrawal of American nuclear weapons and his invitation to discuss the nuclear issue in the run up to the Lisbon Summit was therefore not received with enthusiasm by most member states.

A window of opportunity for change

That the strategic concept did not opt for an equally bold decision to the missile defence decision, by outright agreeing to withdraw all NSNWs and thereby substitute nuclear sharing for missile defence sharing was always the expected outcome of the Lisbon Summit. However, now that the strategic concept is in place, one may ask for how long a non-decision on

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NSNWs can be maintained? There can be no doubt that the prospect of a BMDS invite new thinking on burden and risk sharing, and the nature of deterrence. Indeed the strategic concept does open up for gradual withdrawal of NSNWs and that missile defence will become “a core element” of the collective defence of the Alliance. This wording in the strategic concept follows quite closely the recommendations by the group of experts headed by Madeleine Albright, who stated that “a NATO missile defence system will enhance deterrence and transatlantic sharing of responsibility, reinforce that security is indivisible and allow for concrete security cooperation with Russia”. The wording of the strategic concept facilitates the complete withdrawal of NSNWs, by simply emphasizing that NATO will remain a nuclear Alliance as long as nuclear weapons exist, but by also emphasizing that the supreme nuclear guarantee is provided by American (as well as British and French) strategic forces – with no particular mentioning of NSNWs. It seems likely that the combination of the political aim of moving towards Global Zero, and the adoption of BMDS and practical security cooperation with Russia are only first, albeit important, steps towards changing NATO’s outdated nuclear posture and deterrence strategy. The only puzzling question is why was it not simply included in the strategic concept?

Danes, who have known Anders Fogh Rasmussen as Prime Minister, recognise that ‘chance’ and ‘coincidence’ are not words in his vocabulary and that it is fairly safe to assume that everything the Secretary General does has been carefully planned and very precisely scripted. It seems likely that Fogh Rasmussen’s scripted plan is gradual and discreet change on nuclear posture to be undertaken *after* the adoption of the new strategic concept and after the placement of the new BMDS but *before* the next strategic

concept looms. Given NATO’s consistently bad experience with highly public nuclear decisions it is probable that the ‘script’ of the Secretary General foresees a quiet and discreet withdrawal of the remaining B-61 free-fall bombs as and when the dual capable aircraft to deliver the bombs are withdrawn. Such a timetable would mean that member states who value nuclear sharing and deterrence have a few years to adjust to the situation as the number of NSNWs is quietly reduced. In this strategy the emphasis is on internal dialogue rather than potentially damaging public nuclear decisions. As NATO has no specified minimum necessary nuclear force level, the retention of a symbolic handful of NSNWs would be in line with the text on nuclear forces in the new strategic concept. This, along with the changed relations with Russia and the agreed installation of BMDS, indicates that the Secretary General’s strategic thinking goes well beyond the concept agreed in Lisbon. Anders Fogh Rasmussen is known to be a long-term strategic planner and never to tolerate departure from a carefully planned script. The fate of nuclear weapons and NATO’s move from nuclear sharing to missile defence is no exception. As a result, the change on the horizon may well signal the beginning of the end of NATO’s over-reliance on NSNWs – despite the conservative sounding document agreed in Lisbon.

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