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NATO's Future Nuclear Dimension: Managing Expectations for the Strategic Concept Debate

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by [Michael Rühle](#)

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Introduction: Great Expectations

At NATO's 60th Anniversary Summit in April 2009, the Alliance's Heads of State and Government agreed that work should start on the development of a new Strategic Concept. The momentum for such a decision had been building up for quite some time. Over the past few years, NATO's growing number of operations and missions, and in particular its engagement in Afghanistan, have put strains both on the Allies' military capabilities and their political consensus. In addition, Russia's new assertiveness, and notably the war in Georgia in August 2008, fueled a debate on the proper balance between collective defense at home and expeditionary missions abroad. Finally, the fact that new threats, such as a cyber attack or an energy cut-off, do not affect all Allies in quite the same way, has also led to calls for a re-definition of the meaning of Alliance solidarity. In short, ten years after the publication of the current Strategic Concept, there were found to be a number of good reasons to develop a new document.

Initially, nuclear issues did not really feature among these reasons. Despite the long battle of a range of NGOs against NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements and the deployment of U.S. non-strategic nuclear weapons on the soil of some European Allies, NATO's nuclear "acquis" has long been considered as essentially sound. Neither doubts in expert circles about the military utility of aircraft armed with nuclear gravity bombs, nor occasional anti-nuclear sentiments in the Parliaments of some NATO countries, would trump the logic of Alliance reassurance and risk-sharing.

However, several recent developments now require NATO to revisit its nuclear dimension and to carefully consider how this is reflected in the new Strategic Concept. In particular, heightened concern about nuclear proliferation has prompted a change in U.S. rhetoric and policy. Guided by the conviction that restoring an eroding non-proliferation regime requires the United States to lead by example, President Obama's Prague speech of April 2009 espoused the vision of a nuclear-weapon-free world. To be sure, the President qualified this long-term objective with the proviso that as long as other states possessed nuclear weapons, the United States would maintain a nuclear deterrent of its own, including for the protection of its friends and Allies. In doing so, he remained within the tradition of every U.S. President since Harry Truman. In the public perception, however, these qualifications received little attention. Although the U.S. President did not touch upon NATO's nuclear policy or posture, some European politicians were quick to interpret his plea for a nuclear-weapon-free world as support for their own goal to see U.S. non-strategic nuclear weapons removed from Europe. Predictably, several NGOs reacted in similar

ways, interpreting the President's speech as an invitation to unilateral gestures by the United States and NATO. As a result, while U.S. policy on NATO's nuclear dimension may not necessarily have changed, the public debate is characterized by expectations to the contrary.

Two Nuclear Narratives

The current debate appears to mark a divergence between two rather distinct "nuclear narratives." On the one hand, the international context is dominated by concerns about nuclear proliferation and calls to repair the global non-proliferation regime, notably the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Against this background, the U.S. Administration has concluded that employing "abolitionist" rhetoric may help to create a political climate that is conducive to achieving substantial arms control measures such as, inter alia, U.S.-Russian reductions in strategic weapons, U.S. ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), and the negotiation of a Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT). It is obvious that the initial goals of the "global zero" vision are tactical, i.e., to ensure a successful outcome of the 2010 NPT Review Conference and thus provide a new basis for tackling the major challenges posed by Iran and North Korea. By contrast, its long-term goals are at best hazy, and U.S. officials, including the President himself, consistently stress the difficulties of achieving, let alone verifying, a nuclear-free world. However, what gives the "global zero" narrative real strength is the fact that it is a "top-down" project. Unlike grassroots movements, which tend to flounder without sustained support by the political class, it is now the political class itself that touts "global zero," thus making it much less vulnerable to allegations of naiveté.

By contrast, for over 60 years, NATO's nuclear narrative has focused on extended deterrence, i.e., on the continued utility of nuclear weapons as a means of reassuring Allies in a strategic environment that is likely to remain nuclear for the foreseeable future. Put differently, NATO's nuclear "acquis" is a reflection of a distinct interpretation of political order: rather than the NPT, it is ultimately the U.S. nuclear umbrella that keeps proliferation in check. The U.S. global role dampens the proliferation incentives of Allies and, by providing for a more predictable strategic environment more broadly, it also dampens nuclear ambitions by others. Thus, while all NATO Allies have a strong interest in a viable NPT, a successful 2010 NPT Treaty Review, and in the CTBT and FMCT, many Allies have also indicated that they do not want to see a lessening of the U.S. nuclear commitment to European security. Unlike some ardent abolitionists, mainly in academic circles, who seem oblivious to such concerns, the Obama Administration is keenly aware of the Alliance context—and its Nuclear Posture Review, to be transmitted to Congress in February 2010, is likely to reflect this awareness.

It is obvious, at the same time, that the "non-proliferation" and "reassurance" narratives do not sit together very well. The concepts of extended deterrence and nuclear-sharing not only run counter to "global zero" aspirations; they also keep U.S. nuclear force requirements higher than a purely national deterrent might suggest. Put differently, seen through the prism of the vision of a nuclear-weapon-free world, Alliance extended deterrence requirements are a liability: an obstacle to more far-reaching reductions. Seen through the prism of reassurance, however, nuclear-sharing remains a precious political achievement by the NATO Allies. Whichever side one prefers, it is clear that the renewed interest in non-proliferation has turned NATO's nuclear acquis, once considered to be essentially an intra-Alliance concern, into an issue of global significance.

NATO's New Strategic Concept: The Process

The development of a new Strategic Concept for NATO will be substantially different from previous similar exercises. Unlike past Concepts, which were essentially written behind closed doors at NATO Headquarters, the Allies have now embarked on a far more "open" process with considerable involvement by the broader strategic community. The incoming NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen has designated a "Group of Experts", to be chaired by former

U.S. Secretary of State Madeline Albright. This group is composed of 12 individuals representing a combination of insiders and outsiders, including from the private sector, think tanks and the academic community. It is expected to produce a report by April 2010 which should guide a subsequent internal drafting process. In parallel, and to inform the work of the "Group of Experts," NATO will also organize a series of conferences with a large cross-sample of think-tankers, academics and other outside experts from NATO and non-NATO countries. The basic aim of this approach is to raise both public and political awareness, and to generate a sense of "ownership" that reaches beyond the NATO capitals. It is clear, however, that this approach is not without risks, not least because it may create overblown expectations about the degree of outside influence on what will ultimately be a political document.

Since the "Group of Experts" consists of experienced security analysts and practitioners, and will be closely supervised by the new Secretary General, it may not stray too far from common wisdom. That said, there may initially be different views within the group on the nature of its report: while some may see the group's mandate as developing a very political, "Harmel-type" report, others will aim to formulate general guidelines for the "real" drafting process. Irrespective of the nature of the report, Allies will eventually need to ensure that it ties in with actual NATO policy, or else it will hinder rather than advance their work. And this is particularly true for the nuclear dimension. The report will be written in the period before the global non-proliferation conference which President Obama plans to convene in the spring of 2010. While this may encourage and support the current non-proliferation dynamic, the "Group of Experts" will no doubt want to guard against undermining NATO's nuclear acquis.

The actual drafting of the new Strategic Concept will start in the summer of 2010, after the Secretary General has consulted the group's findings with Allied governments. Only at this stage will all 28 Allied governments be fully involved, and able to air their views about the future role of nuclear weapons in NATO's strategy in detail. By that time, as will be discussed below, it should be possible to gauge the real state of progress in international non-proliferation with greater certainty than during the first half of the year. Yet even then it will undoubtedly remain difficult to draft a compromise between the desire of some nations for a dramatic gesture intended to contribute to non-proliferation, and the wish of other nations to reaffirm the central tenets of NATO's nuclear policy and posture.

NATO's New Strategic Concept: The Timing

The NATO Allies have set themselves a rather generous timetable for drafting the new Strategic Concept. As noted, nations will only start drafting in earnest in Summer 2010, after the "Group of Experts" delivers its report, and after the Secretary General's consultations with capitals. Unlike the extensive drafting process that led to the 1999 Strategic Concept, the Secretary General will want to avoid a discussion that could drag well into 2011. Instead, he will prepare "his" draft of the Concept, and he will meet with Permanent Representatives to discuss the evolving drafts. This should allow for a new Concept to be unveiled in the fall of 2010. [1]. In any case, the process will be completed well after the US Nuclear Posture Review, after President Obama's global non-proliferation conference in the spring of 2010, and, even more importantly, after the next NPT Review Conference in May 2010.

This generous timetable will also be helpful to NATO for several other reasons. First, it will allow the Allies to take into account progress in the U.S.-Russian arms control talks. Second, it will allow them to better evaluate developments in Iran, where post-election unrest in June 2009 has made international engagement even more difficult, and in North Korea, where a leadership succession appears imminent. Third, longer timelines will also allow a clearer view of the overall centrality of arms control on the global agenda. While the U.S.-proposed global non-proliferation conference and the NPT Review Conference will ensure a certain level of attention throughout the first half of 2010, it is far from certain whether issues of nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament can sustain their political salience if, for example, there should be a worsening

security situation in Afghanistan and/or Pakistan, or if protracted economic woes should force the U.S. Administration to turn inward. The bottom line is that the NATO Allies will have ample time to evaluate the evolution of the nuclear debate before agreeing on the nuclear dimension of NATO's new Strategic Concept.

NATO's New Strategic Concept: The Content

Given this complex backdrop of new non-proliferation and old reassurance concerns, what could a new Strategic Concept conceivably say on nuclear matters? The first point to note is that the collective political, military and public diplomacy requirements of an alliance that features three nuclear weapons states and 25 non-nuclear weapons states differ significantly from those of any single nation. Compared to the rather explicit U.S., British and French pronouncements on their respective national nuclear doctrines, NATO will have to bridge a spectrum of views that arguably runs from nuclear abolitionism to fears of a resurgent Russia. Thus, the key to Alliance cohesion will be to get to political consensus rather than to demonstrate intellectual rigor.

With this in mind, it appears likely that assurance will be at the heart of NATO's deliberations, and that irrespective of its "global zero" rhetoric, the U.S. Administration will go along this path. First, NATO's easternmost members in particular view the nuclear reassurance provided by the United States as central to their membership in NATO. Second, given the current debate about Alliance solidarity in Afghanistan, there will be a reluctance to open any Pandora's box that could further undermine the notion of a common transatlantic security space. Third, while NATO Allies are less vocal about new nuclear threats than South Korea and Japan, it is clear that a nuclear Iran poses not only a latent proliferation challenge to NATO's Middle Eastern neighborhood, but also to certain Allies. Finally, some of the Obama Administration's major non-proliferation goals, such as ratification of the CTBT, require bipartisan support. It is already becoming clear that this support will only be forthcoming if the Administration can demonstrate that its commitment to non-proliferation does not weaken the U.S. bonds with its Allies.

In light of all this, NATO's new Strategic Concept may well contain nuclear policy language not very different from the rather well-crafted wording in the 1999 document. The new Strategic Concept may contain more explicit references to an emerging strategic environment characterized by the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and their delivery means, along the lines of the Alliance's 2006 "Comprehensive Political Guidance." It may also include more extensive references to the importance of disarmament and non-proliferation, including a more detailed explanation of NATO's contribution to these aims. On the other hand, the logic of maintaining a small number of highly secure U.S. non-strategic nuclear weapons in several European NATO countries will probably be reaffirmed, as will be the principle of Allied risk- and responsibility-sharing. It seems certain that the Allies will also stay clear of certain "red flags," such as employment policy. All in all, therefore, the end result may be much more conservative than the current "abolitionist" debate might suggest. Simply put, the NATO reassurance narrative is likely to trump the "global zero" narrative—and disappointment in some quarters is almost a foregone conclusion.

Conclusion

The ambitious timetable of major non-proliferation events, the continuing need for U.S. extended deterrence, and not least the participatory approach that NATO has chosen to elaborate a new Strategic Concept, provide a complex challenge for the Alliance in as much as they raise expectations about far-reaching change that are unlikely to be met. Hence, rather than hype the new Strategic Concept as a solution for all of NATO's problems, it will be crucial to manage public expectations. While taking care to avoid perceptions that NATO is insensitive to global non-proliferation concerns, the Alliance should, above all, focus on security rather than on a near-term nuclear disarmament agenda. In any event, as long as NATO remains a nuclear-armed Alliance,

it will not escape the charge that it is applying double standards. Yet given the confusion of the new nuclear debate, where some are seeking a nuclear-weapon-free world while others appear to aim at providing for more security in a nuclear world, this is a charge the Alliance can live with. As long as potential adversaries are seeking, maintaining, or expanding WMD capabilities, NATO is well advised to hedge its bets.

About the Author

Michael Rühle is Deputy Head, Policy Planning Unit of the NATO Secretary General. The views expressed are the author's own and do not necessarily represent the views of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The author would like to thank Rad van den Akker, Guy Roberts, and David Yost for helpful comments and suggestions.

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References

1. For background on the projected Strategic Concept process, see "[Group of Experts](http://www.nato.int/strategic-concept/experts-strategic-concept.html)" at: <http://www.nato.int/strategic-concept/experts-strategic-concept.html>; and "[A Three-Phased Approach](http://www.nato.int/strategic-concept/roadmap-strategic-concept.html#approach)," at: <http://www.nato.int/strategic-concept/roadmap-strategic-concept.html#approach>.