



briefing

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NATO's Strategic Concept and the Emerging Nuclear Abolition Imperative

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Even as NATO's official strategic doctrine continues to describe nuclear weapons as "essential to peace," the world is undergoing an extraordinary reawakening to the unique threats posed by nuclear weapons and the need to finally eliminate them.

For some in the growing gallery of nuclear abolitionists, the focus is on the 20,000-plus nuclear warheads, several thousand of them poised on missiles ready for firing at a moment's notice, that remain in the arsenals of the nine states with nuclear weapons.¹ Sixty-four years into the nuclear age, the destructive power of these arsenals remains well beyond imagining. For others, including many of those more recently converted to the pursuit of zero nuclear weapons, the focus is on the growing fears that these weapons, as well as weapons-friendly technologies and nuclear materials, will spread to more and more states, and even to non-state groups.

These concerns have produced a series of public appeals by a broad range of world figures (see "Recent statements" below²), all insisting anew that our collective well-being, and that of our fragile planet, requires that nuclear arsenals be eliminated and permanently banned.

At the same time, of course, the security community remains divided. While demands for an unambiguous commitment to nuclear abolition are growing, retentionist doctrines remain entrenched in core institutions, not least in NATO and its Strategic

Concept.³ But all that could begin to change. The 60th-Anniversary NATO Summit, scheduled for April in Strasbourg, France and Baden-Baden and Kehl, Germany, is expected to launch a process to review the Alliance's current Strategic Concept with a view to adopting a new strategy at a future Summit. That review will be an important opportunity for NATO to rethink its nuclear doctrine in the light of the growing fears that the indefinite retention of nuclear weapons by some will lead inevitably to their spread and use.

This briefing a) reviews NATO's current nuclear posture; b) reviews the growing calls among security professionals and political leaders for concrete measures in pursuit of a world without nuclear weapons; and c) suggests ways in which NATO's Strategic Concept should be amended to bring it into sync with the emerging nuclear disarmament imperative and the obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

NATO's current Strategic Concept

The Strategic Concept adopted by the Washington NATO Summit in 1999 (NATO 1999) remains the Alliance's official statement of purpose and outlines its approach to collective security, its force posture, and its nuclear doctrine. Eight of the paragraphs in the current NATO Strategic Concept include substantive references to nuclear weapons.⁴

The document argues (para 46) that, due to “the diversity of risks with which the Alliance could be faced, it must maintain the forces necessary to ensure credible deterrence and to provide a wide range of conventional response options.” It then goes on to say, “the Alliance’s conventional forces alone cannot ensure credible deterrence. Nuclear weapons make a unique contribution in rendering the risks of aggression against the Alliance incalculable and unacceptable. Thus, they remain essential to preserve peace.”

Deterrence is presented as a broad, essentially open-ended, threat to use nuclear weapons against any aggressor – including, by implication, non-nuclear weapon states. A Middle Powers Initiative (MPI) briefing paper describes NATO’s policy as one that “permits the use of nuclear weapons when deemed militarily useful in virtually any circumstance” (MPI 2008). The ultimate deterrent, i.e., “the supreme guarantee of the security of the Allies,” is described as being “provided by the strategic nuclear forces of the Alliance, particularly those of the United States” (NATO 1999, para 62). In effect, within the context of NATO expansion to the east, the post-Cold War era has been one of the steady geographic expansion of the West’s nuclear “umbrella.”

The NATO Strategic Concept sets out a commitment to the indefinite retention of nuclear weapons in Europe (para 46): “To protect peace and to prevent war or any kind of coercion, the Alliance will maintain for the foreseeable future an appropriate mix of nuclear and conventional forces based in Europe and kept up to date where necessary, although at a minimum sufficient level.” There are currently estimated to be between 150 and 240 nuclear weapons, all US B61 gravity bombs, held in five countries in Europe – Belgium, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, and Turkey (Kristensen 2007). All of the European countries hosting US nuclear weapons are non-nuclear weapon state parties to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

NATO strategy also holds 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. The Alliance will therefore maintain adequate nuclear forces in Europe” (para 63).

It seems appropriate to ask what the rest of the world is to make of the latter claim. How long, one might ask, should the rest of the world be expected to tolerate a global nuclear threat so that America and Europe can continue to feel politically and militarily connected? Europe and North America are obviously linked by trade, a myriad of historical ties, and broadly shared political values (as the Strategic Concept puts it in para 27).

The nuclear abolition imperative

To fully appreciate the extent to which NATO’s retentionist doctrine – the claim that nuclear weapons must be retained for the foreseeable future because they are essential for peace – has become an anachronism, it is necessary to also appreciate the full extent of the remarkable shift in both professional judgment and public opinion toward nuclear abolition.

United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon took up that theme with a new directness when he told a New York audience of academics and diplomats in October 2008 that “a world free of nuclear weapons would be a global public good of the highest order.” He spoke of a nuclear “taboo,” recalled that the very first resolution of the UN General Assembly was a call for the elimination of all weapons of mass destruction, challenged nuclear weapon states to meet their disarmament obligations under the NPT, and urged them to finally negotiate a global convention prohibiting all nuclear weapons.

More noteworthy in many ways was the statement in January 2007 by former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and three other senior American leaders in diplomacy and security affairs to “endorse setting the goal of a world free of nuclear weapons and working energetically on the actions required to achieve that goal.” Former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in turn endorsed their commitment to eliminate nuclear weapons: “It is becoming clearer that nuclear weapons are no longer a means of achieving security.” Although he did not name

NATO, Gorbachev directly contradicted its claims with the further assertion that “in fact, with every passing year they make our security more precarious.”

A group of recently retired British generals has also rejected the United Kingdom’s nuclear weapons as “completely useless as a deterrent to the threats and scale of violence we currently, or are likely to, face.” The UK is in fact already engaged in examining the verification mechanisms needed to support the reliable elimination of nuclear weapons and Prime Minister Gordon Brown (2008) has promised UK leadership in an “international campaign to accelerate disarmament amongst possessor states, to prevent proliferation to new states, and to ultimately achieve a world that is free from nuclear weapons.” And this month the UK Foreign Secretary set out a six-point plan to rid the world of nuclear weapons (Guardian 2009).

Despite NATO’s formal doctrine that nuclear weapons are “essential” to “preserve peace,” most of its member states are non-nuclear weapon state signatories to the NPT and thus have already disavowed nuclear weapons for themselves. They still, according to current strategy, formally seek cover under Washington’s nuclear umbrella, but now even the US is led by an Administration committed, as the Obama White House website puts it, to pursuing the “goal of a world without nuclear weapons.” Indeed, the Obama Administration is preparing for talks to extend or replace the 1991 US-Soviet Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), which expires in December. Reports suggest that “President Obama will convene the most ambitious arms reduction talks with Russia for a generation, aiming to verifiably slash each country’s stockpile of nuclear weapons by 80 per cent” (Reid 2009).

Political and military figures in Germany, including former Chancellor Helmut Schmidt; the United Kingdom, including three former Foreign Secretaries; Norway; Italy; and other countries have called for the elimination of all nuclear arsenals. So too has a former NATO Secretary-General, George Robertson, along with groups of Nobel Laureates

and security and foreign policy professionals from many countries.

A recent global appeal, under the banner of Global Zero, which is supported by The Simons Foundation of Canada, declares that “to protect our children, our grandchildren and our civilization from the threat of nuclear catastrophe, we must eliminate all nuclear weapons globally. We therefore commit to working for a legally binding verifiable agreement, including all nations, to eliminate nuclear weapons by a date certain.” Reflecting not only the sentiment of traditional disarmament advocates, it is the initiative of Richard Burt, chief arms negotiator for the first President Bush. He is joined by a diverse group, including US Senator Chuck Hagel, former Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister Lloyd Axworthy, former US President Jimmy Carter, US author and academic Jonathan Schell, former US Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa, and dozens of others. A significant added feature of the Global Zero appeal is its call for a strict and accountable timeline.

Publics around the world, long alert to the nuclear danger, are by all accounts eager to support efforts to eliminate nuclear weapons. A survey of 21 key states found that 76 per cent of people questioned favour a global agreement that “all countries with nuclear weapons would be required to eliminate them according to a timetable,” while “all other countries would be required not to develop them” (World Public Opinion.Org 2008). Public support for the total elimination of nuclear weapons is higher than the global average in China, France, the UK, and the US, but lower than average in Russia and India (although still 69 per cent and 62 per cent respectively). In Pakistan support is only at 46 per cent, but even there more favour total nuclear disarmament than oppose it (World Public Opinion.Org 2008).

This global nuclear weapons taboo is buttressed by an international movement that involves national and municipal governments and a global civil society that includes nongovernmental organizations, faith communities, professional and service groups, researchers, and academics. Mayors for Peace, led

by the Mayor of Hiroshima, has mobilized the leaders of 2,635 cities in 134 countries and regions around the world to endorse a campaign to eliminate nuclear weapons by 2020. It is a community that shares the inescapable conviction that the almost infinitely destructive power of nuclear weapons can never be a source of human safety or the foundation for durable peace.

Toward an abolitionist NATO Strategic Concept⁵

NATO strategy is thus increasingly out of sync with the advancing nuclear disarmament imperative, making the 2009 NATO Summit a potent opportunity to set in motion a process to rethink and restate its strategic doctrine in terms that a) welcome the groundswell of calls for a world without nuclear weapons; b) acknowledge that regional insecurities as well as existing nuclear arsenals are among the reasons that some states and even non-state actors seek nuclear weapon capabilities; c) confirm NATO's commitment to the objectives of the NPT, i.e., a world free of nuclear weapons; and d) commit NATO to security and arms control policies that are designed to achieve the nuclear disarmament promised in Article VI of the NPT.

Both the rationale and the language for this new approach to nuclear weapons are available in the burgeoning anthology of nuclear abolition statements, as well as in the logic on which the NPT was originally constructed – namely, that nuclear weapons, far from being “essential to preserve peace”, are ultimately an unacceptable risk to humanity; that their elimination, not their retention, is essential to security. Rather than asserting that the “strategic nuclear forces of the Alliance” are “the supreme guarantee of the security of the Allies” (NATO 1999, para 62), NATO's new Strategic Concept could reflect the new reality articulated by Gorbachev's warning that “with every passing year [nuclear weapons] make our security more precarious.” Indeed, a new NATO statement could borrow from the 2008 statement by Henry Kissinger and his colleagues and thus also acknowledge that “without the vision of moving toward zero, we will not find the essential cooperation required to stop our downward spiral” toward greater insecurity.

With a formal acknowledgement of the risks of a nuclear-armed world, and with abolition endorsed as a strategic objective and core value, it would be understandable for NATO to note, as does the Obama nuclear abolitionist policy, that the road to abolition must be traveled by all nuclear weapon states together. The 1999 document makes this point (para 21) with the simple acknowledgement that “the existence of powerful nuclear forces outside the Alliance also constitutes a significant factor which the Alliance has to take into account if security and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area are to be maintained.” Although in 1999 the paragraph read as a rationale for indefinite retention, in a new context of abolition it would become a reason for accelerated mutual disarmament.

The current Strategic Concept says that the fundamental purpose of NATO nuclear forces is “political” – to prevent coercion and “any kind of war” (para 62). On this point Canada offers alternative language. The Government's 1999 response to a Parliamentary Committee report on nuclear disarmament (Graham 1999) agreed with the Committee recommendation that Canada “work consistently to reduce the political legitimacy and value of nuclear weapons in order to contribute to the goal of their progressive reduction and eventual elimination” (Government of Canada 1999).

The current Strategic Concept emphasizes repeatedly (in paras 42, 63, and 64) the importance of retaining tactical nuclear weapons in Europe, for deterrence and especially to link Europe and North America. In a new context, that line of reasoning should be superseded by one reflected in the counsel of Helmut Schmidt regarding his own country: “all remaining U.S. nuclear warheads should be withdrawn from German territory.” Thus NATO should require the removal of the remaining few hundred nuclear weapons (all of them non-strategic) from European soil, in support of longstanding international calls that all nuclear weapons be returned to the territories of the states that own them.

Such a measure would be especially welcomed by non-aligned states, if the concerns they express at successive NPT Review Conferences are any

measure. Not only do they doubt that the presence of nuclear weapons on the territories of European non-nuclear weapon state parties to the NPT is essential to regional solidarity, they regard the removal of nuclear weapons from the territories of non-nuclear weapon states as essential for full compliance with Article I of the Treaty. The NPT requires that “each nuclear-weapon State Party to the Treaty undertakes not to transfer to any recipient whatsoever nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices or control over such weapons or explosive devices directly, or indirectly.”

In the context of denuclearizing Europe it will be necessary to take up the Kissinger call for a dialogue “within NATO and with Russia, on consolidating the nuclear weapons designed for forward deployment to enhance their security, and as a first step toward careful accounting for them and their eventual elimination.” Progress toward that end will obviously require a new kind of strategic relationship with Russia.⁶ This in turn will require an end to what has been a remarkably cavalier attitude toward Russia’s concerns. Step 9[v] of the “practical disarmament steps” adopted in 2000 at the NPT Review Conference commits nuclear weapon states to “a diminishing role for nuclear weapons in security policies to minimize the risk that these weapons will ever be used and to facilitate the process of their total elimination” (Review Conference 2000) – a commitment not honoured by the eastward geographic expansion of the American nuclear umbrella. Furthermore, Russia accounts for about 6 per cent of world military spending while NATO states collectively account for 60 per cent (IISS 2008, pp. 443-448). As long as Russia regards this overwhelming conventional force as, not necessarily an overt enemy, but a challenge to its regional interests, it is unlikely to be amenable to significant further reductions to its substantial arsenal of tactical nuclear weapons.

Two other references to nuclear weapons in the current Strategic Concept are badly dated. The discussion of arms control (para 19) is rooted in the 1990s. A new Strategic Concept should emphasize the urgency of disarmament as essential to preserve peace and welcome new prospects for resumptions

of US-Russian strategic arms reduction talks, noting the importance of early engagement in the process by all states with nuclear weapons.

The document’s reference to NATO-Ukraine relations (para 37) is also rooted in the early post-Cold War period. While it emphasizes and welcomes the Ukraine’s new status as a non-nuclear weapon state, the central point behind the reference is NATO enlargement. In a new document, the issue of NATO membership should be recalibrated, not only to take account of the legitimate security fears and interests of Russia, but also to focus on the development of mutual security arrangements throughout the entire region of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, rather than the expansion of a military alliance of selective states within the region.

The path to zero

The goal of zero nuclear weapons is well established; the path to zero is well marked.⁷ This goal is eminently reachable. Furthermore, a world facing rapidly advancing climate change and severe economic recession cannot afford (economically or psychologically) to continue to be burdened with the threat of nuclear annihilation.

Of all the daunting challenges the human community faces – from the economic crisis and climate change to energy deficits, burgeoning pollution, acute water shortages, unrelenting hunger, grossly inadequate health services, and chronic armed conflict – the nuclear threat should be the easiest to resolve. There is no economic downside to eliminating nuclear weapons; there is no environmental price to pay and no negative social fallout to worry about.

But the nuclear disarmament and nonproliferation regime is under severe stress just when it is needed most. Nuclear weapon states have been in flagrant denial of their obligations under Article VI of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty; instead of pursuing the disarmament it demands, they have focused on elaborating nuclear use doctrines and weapons modernization. Regions of chronic conflict – the Middle East, South Asia, and Northeast Asia – have become dangerous focal points of proliferation,

and as the stability of Pakistan comes increasingly into question, so too does the fate of its nuclear arsenal. A growing demand for nuclear energy is placing extraordinary strains on global safeguard mechanisms. And the Geneva-based Conference on Disarmament, the only UN disarmament negotiating forum, remains deadlocked after a scandalous decade of inaction.

A world divided into nuclear weapon “haves” and “have nots” is a world of perpetual instability, hovering on the brink of annihilation. Pulling back from that brink needs only the political will to act on the agreed disarmament agenda – action that, once taken, will immediately improve security and offer economic, environmental, and social benefits. And such action will rescue the NPT, the one Treaty that envisions a world without nuclear weapons, from the certain disarray it will face if the 2010 NPT Review Conference is not shown evidence of disarmament progress.

NATO, on the 60th anniversary of its founding, is well positioned to spearhead such progress.

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Notes

1. China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States are the officially recognized nuclear weapon states party to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. India, Israel, and Pakistan have nuclear weapons but have never joined the NPT. North Korea, having tested a nuclear device and with materials for a small number of warheads, was a party to the NPT but withdrew.

2. All the references to nuclear abolition are taken from these documents.

3. Much of the debate over NATO’s strategic concept focuses on the need to elaborate guidelines and doctrines for NATO expeditionary operations, that is, non-Article 5 operations beyond its North Atlantic region. The focus here, however, is on the

nuclear elements in the strategic concept – a subject that has received relatively little attention in the discussions leading to the April Summit.

4. A ninth, para 65, simply notes the Alliance’s conventional and nuclear posture “will be kept under review in the light of the evolving security environment.”

5. The Alliance’s Strategic Concepts have gone through successive changes. The original focused on collective operations for the territorial defence of its member territories; in the mid-1950s “massive retaliation,” including nuclear, was emphasized; in 1967 “flexible response” replaced “massive retaliation”; in 1991 there was a new emphasis on cooperation with former adversaries; and in 1999 a commitment was added to wider Euro-Atlantic peace and stability and non-Article 5 operations. The current debate is focused on further development of out-of-area operational guidelines. Throughout this evolutionary process the Alliance has always agreed on a nuclear component and affirmed nuclear deterrence (see NATO 2002 and Hatfield 2000).

6. A point forcefully made in Steinbruner 2009.

7. One of the extraordinary features of the global nuclear disarmament consensus is that it has produced a detailed program of action. In 2000, diplomats at the NPT Review Conference set out “13 practical steps” to bring nuclear weapon states into compliance with their NPT obligations. High on that list of priorities are entry into force of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, the negotiation of a treaty to ban the production and stockpiling of fissile materials for weapons purpose, progressive reductions to current arsenals, and taking all deployed weapons off high alert (Review Conference 2000, Parts I and II, Vol. I, Article VI and eighth and twelfth preambular paragraphs, para 15, pp. 14-15).

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