



## SYMBOL OR SUBSTANCE? THE ROLE OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS IN NATO'S UPDATED STRATEGIC CONCEPT

A reading of the nuclear weapons sections of the NATO Updated Strategic Concept and of its 1991 predecessor clearly indicate a continuing commitment to nuclear weapons on the part of the Alliance. Indeed, the wording of the relevant substantive sections of the two documents is unchanged. It would seem that the Allies agree that nuclear weapons have continuing utility for the Alliance. It can be understood that the Updated Strategic Concept and other relevant documents, such as the Basic Fact Sheet on nuclear weapons issued at the time of the Washington Summit in April 1999, represent a consensus on their purpose and role. However, it is debatable as to how solid this consensus actually is. Nonetheless, the commonalities between the 1991 Strategic Concept and its updated successor may be taken as evidence that the form of words adopted is something that all the Allies (including the French) can agree on. They might not be able to agree on a more radical policy, but at least they can agree on this one which has already survived for a decade.

In other words, the strategic concept is a political document. With respect to nuclear weapons this is made

explicit. "The fundamental purpose of the nuclear forces of the Allies is political: to preserve peace and prevent coercion and any kind of war."<sup>1</sup> Of course, ever since nuclear weapons were introduced into Alliance military planning in the 1950s, the Alliance's declaratory strategy has always been political. However, the variations on what became known as "flexible response", reflected in the military planning documents MC 14/2 and MC 14/3, did constitute a genuine strategy designed to deal with a specified threat in a manner that most of the Allies, most of the time, could accept. Like their predecessors, both the 1991 and 1999 variations on the current strategic concept emphasize the deterrent value of nuclear weapons; however, unlike the situation during the Cold War, there is no elaboration as to how this is to be achieved. Moreover, except in the most general terms, there is no indication as to how nuclear weapons contribute to the objectives of preventing coercion and any kind of war. The Alliance has a policy with respect to nuclear weapons, but it is questionable whether it has a strategy. One result is that nuclear planning rests on the

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gaming of hypothetical scenarios rather than on planning for the actual use of nuclear weapons according to agreed guidelines and principles. Nuclear weapons have been marginalized in current NATO strategy, and the question arises as to whether the nuclear force posture and the strategic rationale behind the posture, such as it is, are sufficient to possess any credibility, both to any putative enemy and to allied publics.

Up until the end of the Cold War, the object of NATO strategy was war avoidance in the face of a nuclear adversary. How this was to be achieved was subject to continuous debate and controversy. How the politics were managed became central to Alliance cohesion and persistence. Nuclear strategy, to be effective, had to guide the strategic relationship with the adversary, as well as meet the political needs of the Allies. Such needs reinforced the tension between the declaratory strategy and how that strategy was reflected in operational plans. The interpretation of 'flexible response' at the declaratory level became almost scholastic and theological in character, while NATO's nuclear posture and the operational planning behind it became the occasion for major crises in Alliance cohesion and will (the last major one being the so-called Euro-missile crises of the early 1980s).

The current declaratory doctrine of the Alliance, as expressed in the Updated Strategic Concept, represents a consensus that all appear able to live with and is expressed at a level of generality that can be glossed in a variety of ways. However, unlike earlier Alliance strategic doctrines, issues of implementation are far less

contentious than before. Effectively, nuclear weapons have been decoupled from the conventional posture of the Alliance. They are no longer part of a seamless web of deterrence, nor do such concepts as escalation control and escalation dominance have any immediate relevance. Nuclear weapons now appear to stand alone in Alliance strategy, and most, if not all governments are happy to keep them there.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, it is worth noting that although nuclear weapons have been decoupled from conventional forces, and that there appears to be no urgency in converting the Alliance's policy of retaining them into operational doctrine, many policy rationales from the Cold War period are retained.

### THE PURPOSES OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS

Nuclear weapons, we are told, serve a number of purposes.<sup>3</sup> They create uncertainty in the mind of a potential aggressor and they ensure that aggression is not a rational option. Furthermore, the linkage of NATO's nuclear forces with those of the United States and those of Britain and France provide the supreme guarantee of Allied security. The 'sub-strategic' forces still deployed in Europe provide for widespread participation in collective defence planning and command and control arrangements. It is also claimed that they provide a link to the strategic forces of the United States and Britain, although how 'sub-strategic' forces are coupled with strategic forces remains unclear in the absence of an adversarial relationship with a nuclear-armed challenger to Allied vital interests. It is worth noting that the approximately 85 percent reduction in the number of US weapons deployed in Europe since 1991 means that there now exists rough parity in the number of French and British warheads and the number of American warheads remaining in Europe.

Nonetheless, the presence of US nuclear weapons in Europe remains a feature of the current strategic concept because they are seen as a symbol of the continuing centrality of the Alliance to American strategic interests. They also symbolize American leadership in the Alliance and reinforce the willingness of the US to exercise it.<sup>4</sup> The visibility of the US commitment is still regarded as important, and it is for this reason that suggestions that US nuclear forces assigned to European security be based offshore have been resisted. The position of the three newest members of the Alliance must also be taken into account, since these countries joined the Alliance in the expectation that they obtained full Article 5 guarantees which, given the history of the Alliance, meant being placed under the American nuclear umbrella. Admittedly, the Strategic Concept envisages the circumstances in which the employment of nuclear weapons might be contemplated as extremely remote, but nonethe-

less, the newest members have an interest in ensuring that NATO retains its nuclear credibility.

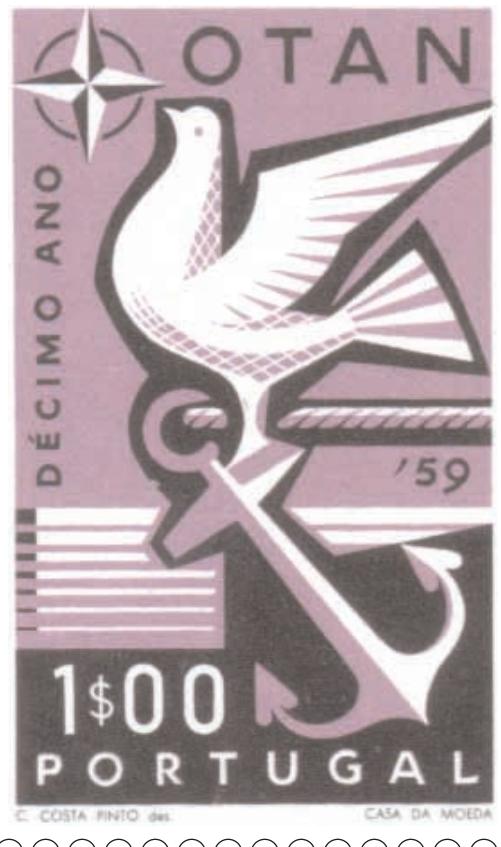
In part because of their consciousness of Russian sensitivities, the new Central European members of the Alliance have been largely silent on the question of NATO nuclear policy; however, they share with others a sense that an overall strategic balance in Europe should be maintained. What this might in fact mean is discussed largely *sotto voce*, and it is noticeable that reference to this objective was dropped in the 1999 document. It is noteworthy also that the Cold War balance between NATO and Russia has been reversed. Now it is Russia that relies on nuclear weapons to deprive others of the strategic initiative, and NATO that enjoys manifest conventional superiority. Additionally, during the negotiations that led up to the 1999 enlargement, NATO articulated three ‘noes’ with respect to nuclear weapons; the Alliance had no intention, no plan and no reason to deploy nuclear weapons on the territory of the new members. When this is coupled with the commitment not to deploy nuclear weapons on the territory of the former Eastern Länder of the Federal Republic of Germany, and with the withdrawal of all former Soviet nuclear weapons within the borders of Russia, then there has come into being a *de facto* nuclear weapons-free zone in Central and Eastern Europe. This, together with the fact that there are now in the order of only 490 US owned and controlled, aircraft-delivered nuclear warheads deployed in Europe<sup>5</sup> (compared to a diversified arsenal of nearly 7000 at the height of the Cold War), means that the kind of war-fighting strategies designed to produce escalation control as part of the strategic concept of flexible response are no longer available to the Alliance.

### THE CREDIBILITY OF DETERRENCE

A major problem for NATO nuclear strategy in the post-Cold War period has been that the context for a nuclear strategy has been difficult to delineate in circumstances in which the Allies have faced no direct military threat. Ideas about nuclear strategy were developed with a known adversary in mind, and, moreover, an adversary capable of threatening Allied national interests. It was within this context that deterrence was adopted as the central component of Allied defence policy and was central to the Alliance’s strategic doctrine. Most conceptions of strategy are based on the premise that its purpose is to confound an enemy or to meet a threat; in other words, the need for a strategy arises only in circumstances in which your objectives meet resistance and in which the use of force is contemplated or used. The revolutionary impact of nuclear weapons on such conceptions of strategy has been that it has

made imperative the art of making threats while at the same time avoiding war. If, in a situation of mutual vulnerability, recourse to nuclear weapons could no longer serve any meaningful political purpose, then the deterrence of the use of nuclear force by others becomes their central rationale. In addition, despite the mutual imperative of war avoidance in the circumstances of mutual vulnerability that characterized the Cold War, deterrence was congenial to the Alliance because it was compatible with the allied objective of preserving the *status quo*. A deterrent strategy is one most appropriate to a *status quo* power or coalition because it is designed to prevent an adversary from changing a particular political order by force or by the threat of force.<sup>6</sup> Thus so long as NATO remains a defender of the *status quo* then deterrence in some form or another remains an appropriate security policy for the Alliance.

The problem is that deterrence involves having the capability to make a credible threat, and the ability to communicate that threat against a known adversary. The circumstances in which a threat might be implemented and the form in which the threat might be exercised allow some scope for ambiguity, but capability, credibility and communicability (the three “Cs”) are the necessary components of a nuclear deterrence strategy. Today, the Alliance faces no direct military threats, and it cannot identify a specific adversary. There is no measure of capability because there is no adversary to measure against; there is no gauge capable of measuring the credibility of a non-specific threat because the political purpose of such a threat cannot be identified, and there is no one to whom a nuclear threat can be communicated. No one is challenging the Alliance’s will by the threat of nuclear weapons, and in these circumstances



the deterrent function of the Alliance's nuclear weapons becomes moot.

NATO, it seems, is very ambivalent about nuclear weapons. The Allies have agreed that they want them, but it is not clear in the current Strategic Concept why

such a threat is likely to be low. Anyway, Alliance communiqués have always stressed that *non-proliferation*, not counter-proliferation, is the object of Allied policy. Moreover, the Alliance has options, other than threatening the use of nuclear weapons (for example, pre-emptive conventional counterforce), that are likely to be more credible and politically acceptable, particularly in circumstances in which the threat is to Allied forces and not directly to Allied territory.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, in so far as NATO has a strategy for its nuclear weapons, it is implicit in the force posture and the fact that they are overwhelmingly US owned and controlled. (British nuclear forces remain committed to NATO under the Nassau arrangements.) First, as under MC 14/3, the requirement for flexibility is retained. "Taking into account the diversity of risks with which the Alliance could be faced, it must maintain the forces necessary to ensure credible deterrence and provide a wide range of conventional weapons options. But the Alliance's conventional forces alone cannot ensure credible deterrence. Nuclear weapons make a unique contribution in making the risks of aggression against the Alliance incalculable and unacceptable. Thus they remain essential to preserve the peace."<sup>8</sup> Secondly, operationally it is the case that the Alliance strategy is *de facto* an outgrowth of the nuclear planning process. This remains linked to the nuclear plans of the United States. The US 1994 Nuclear Posture Review retained a wide range of tasks for American nuclear weapons, including a capacity for 'adaptive targeting', which



requires an ability to rapidly and flexibly re-target "spontaneous threats which are more likely to emerge in a new international environment unconstrained by the Super-Power standoff."<sup>9</sup> NATO's retention of a first-use option is a function of the American Single Integrated Operations Plan (SIOP) which keeps open the possibility of first-use against aggressors, now deemed to

include non-nuclear countries that have “prospective access to nuclear weapons”.<sup>10</sup> Obviously, there is the possibility of tensions arising here between the counter-proliferation implications of such a targeting policy and the reluctance of the Allies to endorse it. The establishment of a Weapons of Mass Destruction Centre at NATO Headquarters nonetheless is testimony to the seriousness with which the Allies take the possibility of new WMD threats emerging.

Although NATO’s ‘sub-strategic’ weapons have not been specifically targeted against anyone since 1994, planning does take place on the basis of “Political Principles” agreed in the Nuclear Planning Group in October 1992. For the purpose of exercising the implementation of these principles, a notional continent has been created that contains target sets conforming to a wide range of contingencies. In other words, the mechanisms necessary to implement a deterrent threat are being maintained. Such capabilities, however, do not constitute a deterrent strategy in the classic sense in which it was understood during the Cold War. It is also incorrect to characterize current NATO strategy as one of ‘minimum deterrence’, as some have done, because a minimum deterrent strategy made sense for Britain and France, and for that matter China as well, only within the context of the Cold War superpower balance; that is, minimum deterrent capabilities possessed credibility because of the damage they could do to a superpower adversary in relation to its superpower rival. This context no longer exists, and it is necessary to re-conceptualize what capabilities are necessary to a strategy of deterrence in the contemporary situation. Nor again, as some have suggested, do NATO’s nuclear forces create ‘existential deterrence’ – the idea that nuclear weapons by their very existence deter major conflict. It all depends on what is meant by ‘major conflict’, but recent history does not justify a sanguine view of the purportedly existential inhibitory effect of nuclear weapons on large-scale use of force. In any case, whatever the existential effect possessed by nuclear weapons, the phenomenon does not constitute a strategy since it has not been demonstrated how such an ambiguous effect could be operationally harnessed to some political purpose.

## LATENT DETERRENCE

In effect, in so far as NATO possesses a strategy, it is one that might best be termed “latent deterrence” – the retention of a capacity to reconstitute a credible deterrent should the need arise. What NATO has is a *de facto* strategy of deterrence in waiting. The effective rationale for NATO’s nuclear weapons is the reassurance of allies that the capacity to deal with latent threats is retained. For the European allies, anyway, the context

for these latent threats would be regional; in any regional conflict that involved NATO, the Alliance’s adversaries would be aware that they are dealing with a coalition armed with nuclear weapons and with the operational capacity to use them. In the absence of a known adversary, this is the best that can be done. Whether the Alliance’s nuclear posture will be adequate to the task will depend on the circumstances in which a policy of deterrence is attempted. In this respect, not surprisingly, the Alliance’s strategy parallels the difficulties faced by the United States. The Americans have the same problem of planning for unknown contingencies, but whereas the US posture retains a large and wide range of capabilities that retain a global reach, those available to NATO planners are limited in range and flexibility. If NATO planners do practice ‘adaptive targeting’, then it is premised on contingencies in which, just as during the Cold War, NATO nuclear forces would constitute only a subset of overall US targeting policy. This simply underlines the point that as long as US weapons are deployed in



Europe, then American nuclear planners cannot disconnect NATO’s nuclear forces from overall US targeting policy. Therefore, coupling between US strategic forces and the sub-strategic weapons available to NATO is maintained.

Under a *de facto* strategy of latent deterrence, there are no clear operational criteria that can determine how many nuclear weapons are needed because there are no pre-determined target sets. The publicly quoted figure of 490 warheads, all of them to be delivered by dual-capable aircraft, probably conforms to the number of weapons needed to supply the limited number of dual-capable squadrons of aircraft deployed by the Allies and the US in Europe. With the exception of the United Kingdom, which has phased out the nuclear strike role of the RAF and transferred this task to its SSBN force, all of the European countries that had agreements with the US to accept nuclear weapons for their forces on the authorization of the President continue to maintain



nuclear-capable strike aircraft. Simple arithmetic offers an estimate of the numbers of weapons required independent of various published figures. The size of the NATO stockpile is thus determined not so much by the operational needs of deterrence, as by the need to ensure that all the allies willing to participate in the nuclear game can continue to do so. The German concern with ‘non-singularity’, the idea that Germany, compared with the other Allies, should not be subject to a special regime, and that the risks of involvement with nuclear weapons should be shared, has not entirely disappeared from Alliance considerations.

The idea of latent deterrence also should not be confused with the concept of ‘general deterrence’ advanced by Patrick Morgan more than 20 years ago, although there are some superficial parallels.<sup>11</sup> The concept of general deterrence draws attention to the fact that in a nuclear environment nuclear adversaries pay attention to the overall strategic balance between them even in the absence of a crisis, even though neither side is contemplating the actual use of nuclear weapons. Where general deterrence operates, neither side wishes to be perceived as significantly weaker strategically than the other. Each side seeks to influence the strategic options

of the other (a form of compellence), and each seeks insurance against a change in circumstances. Such a state of affairs characterized East-West relations for much of the Cold War, but for NATO at least, there is no longer a context for such a general deterrence function. Although latent deterrence indeed provides insurance against an uncertain future, it also offers the significant possibility of exploiting the compellent potential of nuclear weapons against a strategically weaker adversary.

The 1999 Strategic Concept, even more than its immediate predecessor, places great emphasis on crisis prevention and management, and on the development of intervention forces capable of reinforcing Allied security against instabilities arising in regions of importance to the European allies. The experiences of the Gulf War and Yugoslavia have significantly informed the development of Allied strategic thinking in the post-Cold War period. Alliance forces have been configured away from territorial defence and towards power projection out of area. In these circumstances, the utility of NATO nuclear weapons lies in their latent potential to deter an adversary on the periphery of the Euro-Atlantic area (however extensively that periphery might be defined) from threatening or resorting to weapons of mass destruction.<sup>12</sup> In short, nuclear weapons still have a role to play in backing the potential use of conventional force by the Alliance and remain an integral part of Alliance strategy. This is implicit in the Strategic Doctrine, but for reasons of political sensitivity is not spelled out. At the moment, the Allies wish to avoid any public controversy with respect to nuclear policy, even though in the longer term it is unlikely that a low nuclear profile can be maintained. Perhaps it would help de-fuse any future problems if NATO adopted more explicitly a strategy of ‘latent deterrence’.



## NOTES

- The Alliance's Strategic Concept*, Washington D.C., April 23-24, 1999, para. 62.
- The experience of Lloyd Axworthy and Oskar Fischer at the ministerial meetings in Brussels in December 1999 is salutary in this respect. The attempt to raise the nuclear issue again after having signed off on the Updated Strategic Concept in April was not appreciated in many quarters.
- Strategic Concept*, paras. 62-64.
- The singular position of the French and the latest developments in the development of a European Common Security and Defence Policy are relevant here, but are beyond the scope of this paper.
- Senate Committee on Armed Services, *Briefing on the Results of the Nuclear Posture Review*, September 22, 1994, 103rd Congress, 2nd sess,

- (Government Printing Office, 1994). As cited in Janne E. Nolan, *An Elusive Consensus: Nuclear Weapons and American Security After the Cold War*, Washington D.C., Brookings, 1999, p. 59.
- Arguably, Khrushchev's re-formulation of the Leninist doctrine of ‘peaceful coexistence’ in 1956 signalled on the part of the purportedly revolutionary Soviet Union a recognition that in the presence of nuclear weapons any attempt at changing the *status quo* by direct military means was not a viable policy option.
- It is worth noting that both the United States and France appear to have excluded chemical and biological weapons from the negative security assurances offered to NPT signatories. The United Kingdom has been more circumspect and ambiguous on this point.

- Strategic Concept*, para. 46.
- Quoted in Hans Kristensen, “Targets of Opportunity: How Nuclear Planners Found New Targets for Old Weapons”, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 53 (September/October, 1997).
- Nolan, *op cit.*, p. 13.
- Patrick Morgan, *Deterrence: A Conceptual Analysis*, Beverley Hills, Sage, 1971, pp. 28-29.
- Whatever the reasons that led Iraq to refrain from the use of chemical weapons during the Gulf War, for all the ambiguity surrounding this question, Saddam Hussein does appear to have taken the implicit threat of possible American nuclear retaliation seriously. Certainly, others have drawn their own conclusions.