Institute of European Right

COMMENTARY

NATO's Nuclear Deterrence Strategy in the Context of Russia's War in Ukraine

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DATE
4 July 2024



This memo summarizes the insights from a panel discussion held in Vilnius on June 17, 2024. The event was organized by the Institute of European Right in collaboration with the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung.

Panel Participants:
– Dr. Karl-Heinz Kamp, Associate Fellow at the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP)
– Fabian Rene Hoffmann, Doctoral Research Fellow at the Oslo Nuclear Project

The audience comprised journalists, experts, Lithuanian policymakers, and diplomats based in Vilnius.

Introduction

The ongoing Russia's war against Ukraine has thrust nuclear deterrence back into the global spotlight. The strategic landscape of Europe has been dramatically altered, with nuclear weapons playing a critical role in the geopolitical calculus of both NATO and Russia. This renewed focus on nuclear strategy underscores the importance of understanding NATO's nuclear game plan and its implications for global security. Russia's use of nuclear threats, particularly under President Vladimir Putin, has escalated tensions and necessitated a re-evaluation of NATO's deterrence strategies.

Since the onset of the war in Ukraine, significant developments have emerged in the nuclear strategies of both NATO and Russia. Putin's unprecedented nuclear threats have shielded Russia from direct NATO involvement, allowing Russia to pursue its objectives with reduced fear of large-scale military retaliation. The collapse of nuclear arms control agreements and the abandonment of a nuclear-free world have further complicated the strategic environment.

1. Evolution of Nuclear Deterrence during War in Ukraine

Nuclear weapons have played a significant and multifaceted role in the ongoing Russia's war against Ukraine. From the outset, nuclear deterrence has been a critical factor in Russia's and NATO's strategic calculations. Russian President Vladimir Putin's explicit nuclear threats, unprecedented even during the Cold War, have underscored the importance of nuclear weapons in protecting Russia from external intervention. These threats have served as a shield, deterring NATO and other Western powers from engaging more directly in the conflict. This deterrent effect is primarily due to the catastrophic potential of nuclear escalation, which has forced NATO to calibrate its support for Ukraine carefully.

Without Russia's nuclear arsenal, the conflict might have unfolded differently. The presence of nuclear weapons has effectively prevented NATO from intervening more robustly, fearing the escalation to a nuclear exchange. This dynamic has allowed Russia to pursue its military objectives in Ukraine with a degree of impunity, knowing that the risk of nuclear escalation deters significant military intervention from NATO. This protection has been crucial in Russia's strategy, shaping the conflict's course and limiting NATO's options.

The conflict in Ukraine has prompted NATO to reassess and adapt its nuclear deterrence strategy. The alliance has had to navigate a complex and evolving security environment where the threat of Russian nuclear use is a constant consideration. NATO's deterrence strategy has emphasised the importance of maintaining credible and effective nuclear capabilities to counter any potential Russian aggression. This commitment ensures that NATO's nuclear forces are safe, secure, and reliable.

One significant aspect of this reassessment is the consideration of the sufficiency and modernisation of NATO's nuclear arsenal. Questions have arisen about whether the current number of nuclear weapons is adequate for deterrence in today's strategic context. The relevance of existing nuclear bombs designed during the Cold War is also under scrutiny, with discussions on whether more modern delivery systems, such as standoff missiles, might be more effective. Additionally, there is a debate on the potential relocation of nuclear weapons closer to NATO's eastern borders to enhance deterrence against Russian threats.

The deterioration of nuclear arms control agreements between Russia and the West has profound implications for global security. The collapse of these agreements has eliminated crucial communication channels and confidence-building measures that helped manage the risks of nuclear escalation during the Cold War. Without these mechanisms, the potential for miscalculation and unintended escalation has increased, making the current strategic environment more precarious.

NATO has responded to these developments by reiterating its commitment to maintaining a credible nuclear deterrent. The alliance has emphasised the need to ensure its nuclear forces' effectiveness, safety, and security. This stance reflects the recognition that nuclear deterrence remains an indispensable component of NATO's security strategy in the face of evolving threats and the end of traditional arms control frameworks.

2. The Strategic Considerations Behind Russia's Nuclear Weapons Playbook

Russia's nuclear threats have been a cornerstone of its intimidation tactics during the war. President Vladimir Putin's rhetoric has been explicitly threatening, more so than during the Cold War. This aggressive posture aims to deter NATO from intervening more directly in Ukraine by leveraging the catastrophic potential of nuclear escalation.

Putin has made explicit nuclear threats, which have been unprecedented in their directness. This marks a significant escalation in Russia's use of nuclear intimidation, designed to prevent NATO from engaging more robustly in Ukraine. Despite the aggressive rhetoric, there has been no significant movement towards the actual preparation for the use of nuclear weapons. Actions such as mobilising nuclear warheads or increasing the readiness of strategic forces have not been observed, indicating that the threats might be more strategic posturing than imminent actions.

The critical question is whether Putin believes the benefits of using nuclear weapons outweigh the costs. Currently, the significant costs appear to outweigh the benefits. Using nuclear weapons would break the post-1945 nuclear taboo, isolating Russia internationally and economically and potentially provoking a strong NATO military response. States like China and India, which currently support Russia, would likely withdraw their backing if Russia used nuclear weapons.

Using nuclear weapons would have profound implications for Russia, both domestically and internationally. The reputational costs would be immense, as Russia would become the first state to use nuclear weapons since World War II, leading to severe international condemnation and long-lasting reputational damage. This action would isolate Russia further, turning it into a pariah state similar to North Korea. Economically, the consequences would be severe. Economic sanctions against Russia would intensify, further straining its already weakened economy. Countries like China and India, which have provided implicit support, would likely distance themselves, exacerbating Russia's economic isolation. Militarily, a nuclear strike would likely provoke a substantial response from NATO. This could include conventional military strikes targeting Russian forces and assets, significantly weakening Russia's military capabilities. Airstrikes on vital military installations, missile sites, and command centres could be employed to demonstrate NATO's capabilities and resolve without escalating to a full-scale nuclear exchange.

In the long term, the consequences for Russia's international standing would be profound. The stigma of using nuclear weapons would hinder Russia's ability to engage in international diplomacy, trade, and cooperation. Future Russian leaders would face significant challenges in rebuilding international relationships and trust, which would impact Russia's global influence and power for decades.

3. Asymmetry in Nuclear Thresholds

The concept of nuclear thresholds involves the conditions under which a state might consider using nuclear weapons. Historically, there has been a significant asymmetry between how Russia and Western nations, mainly NATO members, perceive and articulate their nuclear thresholds.

In the post-Cold War era, Western nations like the U.S., France, and the UK substantially changed their nuclear postures. They agreed to "detarget" their nuclear weapons during peacetime and to disintegrate nuclear and conventional exercises and war planning. This approach was part of a broader strategy to reduce the immediacy of nuclear threats and promote global stability. Conversely, Russia maintained a lower threshold for nuclear use, which has been evident in its strategic doctrine and rhetoric. Russia's approach to nuclear weapons has been one of leveraging nuclear threats as a means of coercion, particularly to inhibit Western actions that could threaten its interests.

At the end of the Cold War, the geopolitical landscape shifted dramatically. Western nations, seeing a reduced immediate threat, adopted policies to de-emphasise the role of nuclear weapons in their defence strategies. This included measures such as retargeting, which means that in peacetime, nuclear weapons are not aimed at any particular target, and deintegration, which separates nuclear from conventional military planning. The creation of strategic commands in the U.S. and the reorganisation of nuclear planning were part of these efforts to reduce the role of nuclear weapons.

However, Russia, facing economic constraints, chose a different path. Instead of reducing the emphasis on nuclear weapons, it focused on nuclear coercion. This strategy aimed to use the threat of nuclear weapons to deter Western intervention in areas Russia considered vital to its interests.

This divergence in nuclear postures has led to the current asymmetry in nuclear thresholds. Russia's lower threshold for nuclear use contrasts sharply with the higher thresholds and more restrained policies of Western nations.

4. European Nuclear Deterrence

France's nuclear arsenal plays a pivotal role in European nuclear deterrence, particularly against potential threats from Russia. The French nuclear capabilities, encompassing strategic and non-strategic weapons, provide a credible deterrent. The strategic component involves high-yield warheads designed to deter large-scale aggression, while the non-strategic component offers flexible and responsive options to counter limited or regional threats. The French doctrine of "deterrence of the weak by the strong" underscores the ability to respond to any form of aggression, whether conventional or nuclear, through a demonstrative signaling strike capability that introduces ambiguity, thereby enhancing deterrence.

France might employ its nuclear capabilities when European security is severely threatened. For instance, a limited nuclear strike on a military target could signal France's willingness to escalate further, deterring continued aggression by making the costs unacceptably high for the adversary. Moreover, if the United States were less willing or able to commit its nuclear forces, France's nuclear arsenal would serve as a crucial element in maintaining a credible deterrence posture for Europe.

However, strategic uncertainties persist regarding the assurance derived by other NATO members from France's nuclear capabilities, especially in the absence of U.S. guarantees. Questions remain about the sufficiency of France's arsenal to independently deter a primary adversary like Russia. Furthermore, advancements in missile defence and development new nuclear and conventional weapons complicate the strategic environment. To address these uncertainties, France must continually adapt its atomic posture, ensuring its forces remain capable and credible in the face of evolving threats.

5. NATO's Adaptation to Russian Threats

NATO's response to Russian nuclear threats has been characterized by strategic reassurances and a careful balancing act to avoid escalation while maintaining deterrence. The alliance has repeatedly emphasised its commitment to defending all member states, invoking Article 5 as the cornerstone of its collective defence strategy. This reassurance is vital for maintaining the credibility of NATO's deterrence posture.

NATO has increased its militarily active presence in Eastern Europe, deploying battlegroups in the Baltic states and Poland to serve as a tangible deterrent against potential Russian aggression. Enhanced readiness measures, including frequent and comprehensive military exercises incorporating conventional and nuclear scenarios, ensure that NATO forces are prepared for any contingency.

NATO has maintained its commitment to nuclear sharing arrangements, keeping U.S. nuclear weapons stationed in Europe and integrated into the alliance's broader deterrence strategy. Discussions about modernising and potentially relocating these weapons closer to NATO's eastern borders are part of ongoing strategic reviews.

Despite these measures, there is a clear need to update NATO's strategic concepts and posture to address the evolving security environment better. The NATO-Russia Founding Act, which limits the deployment of nuclear weapons and substantial combat forces to new NATO member states, is increasingly debated. Given Russia's aggressive actions, a growing argument exists for re-evaluating this agreement to allow for more flexible and robust deployments.

An updated Strategic Concept, last revised in 2010, must reflect current geopolitical realities, including new forms of hybrid warfare, cyber threats, and the specific challenges posed by Russia's nuclear strategy. This review should comprehensively assess NATO's nuclear posture, ensuring it can respond to potential threats. Enhancing the integration of nuclear and conventional forces and improving the readiness and survivability of NATO's nuclear capabilities through new technologies and systems are crucial steps in this process.

6. Broader Strategic Arms Control and Economic Implications

The landscape of strategic arms control has become increasingly uncertain. Key agreements like the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty have collapsed, and the future of the New START Treaty is still being determined. This erosion of arms control frameworks increases the risk of an arms race.

Negotiating new arms control agreements in the current geopolitical climate is challenging. Mutual distrust, differing security priorities, and the involvement of emerging nuclear powers like China complicate efforts to establish new frameworks. Future agreements must address not only strategic nuclear weapons but also tactical and non-strategic arms, which are increasingly relevant in regional conflicts.

The economic implications of a renewed arms race or the collapse of arms control agreements are significant. Russia's economy, already weakened by sanctions and structural issues, would struggle to sustain a prolonged arms race. The costs of developing and maintaining a modern nuclear arsenal would divert resources from other critical areas, exacerbating Russia's financial challenges and leading to long-term strategic vulnerabilities. Western nations, particularly the U.S., would also face substantial costs in maintaining and modernising their nuclear forces, potentially impacting economic growth and social programs due to increased defence spending.

Managing the risks of an arms race is crucial to maintaining global stability. Continuous diplomatic engagement between nuclear powers is essential to manage tensions and prevent misunderstandings that could lead to escalation. Establishing new confidence-building measures and communication channels can help reduce the risk of accidental or unintended nuclear use.

Promoting multilateral approaches is vital. Engaging other nuclear-armed states, such as China, India, and Pakistan, in arms control discussions is necessary to address the broader spectrum of nuclear threats. Multilateral agreements that include these emerging nuclear powers can enhance global security and reduce the incentives for nuclear proliferation.

Investing in robust verification and monitoring mechanisms is critical to ensuring compliance with arms control agreements. Technologies and international institutions that support verification can build trust and transparency. Strengthening the role of organisations like the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) can help monitor nuclear activities and prevent the spread of nuclear weapons.

Balancing deterrence and disarmament is essential. While maintaining a credible deterrent is necessary, efforts towards gradual disarmament should continue. This balanced approach can help manage the risks of an arms race while working towards the long-term goal of reducing nuclear arsenals. Initiatives such as the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) should be supported and strengthened to promote disarmament and prevent proliferation.

7: Recommendations for Strengthening NATO's Nuclear Strategy

Strengthening Nuclear Public Dialogue

In the context of increasing global tensions and the renewed focus on nuclear deterrence, it is imperative to enhance public and political awareness about its complexities and critical importance. The general public and political figures often need a deeper understanding of nuclear deterrence and its implications. This knowledge gap can lead to misinformed public opinion and policy decisions that only partially consider nuclear deterrence's strategic importance and potential consequences.

Several initiatives and strategies can be implemented to address this knowledge gap and improve nuclear literacy among NATO countries. One critical approach is to include nuclear policy and deterrence topics in educational curricula at various relevant levels, encompassing higher education institutions, military academies, and public educational programs. Universities and military academies must integrate nuclear policy and deterrence into their curricula, ensuring that future military and policy leaders are well-versed in these areas. Public education programs that explain the basics of nuclear deterrence and its importance in an accessible manner are also essential. These can include seminars, public lectures, and online resources that demystify nuclear strategy.

Political and media engagement is crucial. The capacity of politicians and journalists to understand and communicate the intricacies of nuclear deterrence must be strengthened. This can be achieved through regular briefings and workshops for policymakers and media personnel, keeping them updated on current developments and strategic considerations in nuclear policy. Establishing platforms for public dialogue, such as town hall meetings, webinars, and discussion forums, will enable citizens to engage with experts and policymakers on nuclear issues. International collabo-

rations and dialogues that share best practices and educational strategies across NATO member states can foster a more uniform understanding of nuclear deterrence and strengthen collective security through shared knowledge and strategy.

Recommendations for Enhancing NATO's Nuclear Deterrence Capabilities:

1. **Modernizing Nuclear Forces.** Modernising NATO's nuclear forces, including upgrading delivery systems and ensuring warheads are secure and effective, is essential for maintaining a credible deterrent. Investments in standoff weapons and advanced missile systems will provide NATO with more flexible and reliable deterrence options against potential threats.
2. **Expanding Nuclear Sharing and Participation.** Increasing member states' involvement in nuclear-sharing arrangements enhances deterrence by expanding the number of countries hosting U.S. nuclear weapons and improving the readiness of those forces. Broader training and exercises across NATO members ensure comprehensive participation and preparedness.
3. **Improving Missile Defense Systems.** Strengthening NATO's missile defence capabilities is critical for protecting against potential nuclear attacks. Strategically deploying and integrating advanced missile defence systems into NATO's overall defence architecture complicates adversaries' calculations and reduces the likelihood of a successful first strike.
4. **Enhancing Strategic Communications.** Effective communication of NATO's deterrence strategy involves clear messaging to adversaries and allies about the consequences of aggression and NATO's resolve to defend its members. Public education and awareness campaigns build support for NATO's nuclear strategy and ensure populations understand the importance of deterrence.
5. **Increasing Nuclear Readiness.** Implementing immediate measures to increase NATO's nuclear readiness through regular exercises and simulations under realistic scenarios enhances preparedness. Improving the security of nuclear storage facilities and enhancing conventional support for nuclear operations ensures readiness across the alliance.
6. **Investing in Technological Advancements.** Long-term investments in modernising NATO's nuclear arsenal to keep pace with technological advancements and evolving threats are crucial. This includes updating delivery systems and command and control infrastructures and integrating new technologies like artificial intelligence and cybersecurity measures to protect against cyber threats.
7. **Enhancing the Role of European Allies**. European allies are pivotal in strengthening NATO's nuclear strategy through political support and active participation in nuclear deterrence missions. With its independent nuclear arsenal, countries like France can provide additional deterrence capabilities within Europe, ensuring cohesive and unified decision-making processes.
8. **Improving Infrastructure and Missile Defense.** European nations can enhance NATO's nuclear operations by establishing dispersal bases for nuclear-capable aircraft and improving missile defence systems. Sharing the burden of nuclear deterrence distributes risks and responsibilities more evenly across the alliance, strengthening collective security.

9. **Enhancing Resilience and Response Capabilities.** Building a robust defence against nuclear threats requires enhancing military and civilian preparedness. NATO should develop comprehensive plans for civil defense, including public education on nuclear threats and emergency response procedures, ensuring civilian populations are informed and ready to act during a nuclear crisis.
10. **Strengthening Global Partnerships.** Strong partnerships with non-member states and international organisations ensure a coordinated global response to nuclear threats. Hardening critical infrastructures, enhancing mobility and survivability of nuclear forces, and conducting joint exercises that simulate nuclear scenarios improve military resilience and response capabilities.

Conclusion

The evolving nuclear landscape, marked by the resurgence of great power competition and emerging technological threats, necessitates reevaluating and strengthening NATO's nuclear posture. Key points discussed include modernising NATO's nuclear capabilities, the crucial role of European allies, and the need for enhanced resilience and response strategies. Immediate steps are essential, such as increasing readiness through realistic exercises and improving nuclear infrastructure security. Long-term investments in modernisation and technological integration will ensure that NATO remains prepared for future threats.

A cohesive and credible nuclear deterrence strategy is fundamental to maintaining global stability. NATO's nuclear posture must be transparent and credible to deter adversaries effectively and reassure allies. By enhancing both military and civilian preparedness, improving the integration of European allies into NATO's nuclear strategy, and continuously adapting to new technological and geopolitical realities, NATO can ensure its nuclear deterrence remains robust and reliable. This cohesive approach deters potential nuclear threats and reinforces NATO's commitment to collective security and global stability.

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