

NATO's tactical nuclear headache

IKV Pax Christi's *Withdrawal Issues* report¹

Wilbert van der Zeijden and Susi Snyder

In the run-up to the 2010 NATO Strategic Concept, the future of the American non-strategic nuclear weapons deployed in Europe and the future of NATO's nuclear sharing became one of the most contentious issues. According to insiders, debates on a text acceptable to all 28 members continued in Lisbon until the last possible moment. The result is a carefully worded text, that leaves open all options. Failing to bring the debate to a satisfactory conclusion, the Alliance found a way out by deciding that the issue of the non-strategic (or 'tactical') nuclear weapons is to be part of a comprehensive review of NATO's entire defence and deterrence posture, a process leading to a new posture document to be agreed at the next NATO summit in 2012.

The report: *Withdrawal Issues*

In March 2011, IKV Pax Christi's report *Withdrawal Issues* showed that the majority of NATO member states support the idea of the eventual withdrawal of the last U.S. tactical nuclear weapons (TNW) from Europe. Whether that is enough for withdrawal in the near future remains to be seen. Concerns about the Russian TNW stockpile, the effects of withdrawal on the cohesion of the Alliance and the resistance of a handful of members stand in the way of a swift decision. Unable to bring the debate to a satisfactory conclusion before the Strategic Concept, the Alliance now hopes to come to a unified position on this sticky issue during the consultations and deliberations part of the Defence and Deterrence Posture Review.

In researching the report, the authors met with every NATO delegation (and some delegations more than once) in advance of the Strategic Concept to ask a series of questions: what are their country's main security threats over the coming period? How does that relate to NATO? What is the key threat they perceive to the Alliance as a whole? How do they see nuclear weapons in general as a way to address future security challenges? And, how do the U.S. TNW fit into that picture - do they see a future for the continued deployment of these weapons in Europe? The *Withdrawal Issues* report then analyses individual country positions, and debunks oft-repeated myths in the process.

It has long been stated that so-called 'new' NATO countries are more reluctant to have the bombs removed, but the report shows that is not the case. Neither are countries closer to Russia more likely to want to keep these nuclear weapons. Nor was the persistent assumption that Turkey would build its own nuclear bomb if the TNW are withdrawn mentioned by any delegation. In fact, the report demonstrates that there are no easy formulae for determining a country's position on the TNW issue: the only way to find out is to ask.

The report shows half the Alliance is actively seeking scenarios to remove TNW from Europe. Ten more will not object to their removal. Only three countries (France, Hungary and Lithuania)

stated a clear national position that hopes to keep the TNW in Europe. While countries are looking for ways to have the weapons removed, it is necessary to recognise that they do not necessarily expect them to be out today, or tomorrow. Most countries expressed a desire for removal of the weapons, conditionally. NATO countries list a number of obstacles that need to be cleared prior to the removal of the TNW, most frequently citing Alliance cohesion, reciprocity with Russia and overcoming French resistance. Above all, NATO countries see that consensus and Alliance solidarity are crucial before making any changes.

The most strongly identified security concern mentioned in interviews was the need to reaffirm the Alliance's commitment to collective defence, or Article V. Each delegation, regardless of its position emphasized that TNW withdrawal should not undermine Alliance cohesion. The visibility of the transatlantic bond needs to be guaranteed. In addition, if TNW were to be withdrawn, new forms of 'burden sharing' should be developed to retain a sense of shared responsibility within the Alliance. This should not be a difficult obstacle to overcome as many countries indicate they have ideas lined up for "more practical" or "more useful" forms of burden sharing that could be further elaborated during the on-going *Defence and Deterrence Posture Review* (DDPR).

At the Lisbon summit, NATO and Russia agreed to "bolster a NATO-Russia partnership that enhances security for all in the Euro-Atlantic areas and beyond."² Yet in the new Strategic Concept, NATO stated that its "aim should be to seek Russian agreement to increase transparency on its nuclear weapons in Europe and relocate these weapons away from the territory of NATO members."³ Reciprocity with Russia, in some form, is a necessity for half of NATO delegations for TNW withdrawal. Six NATO countries say they will only agree to TNW withdrawal if Russia agrees to relocate (at least part of) its TNW arsenal. Others are less attached to the reciprocity idea, saying that some form of reciprocity "would be preferred" or "would help to speed along the debate within NATO." Only one country admitted to being disappointed about the link made with Russia as it is a way to project a stalemate and prevent any change at all.

Ten delegations specifically mentioned France as a key obstacle to making any changes in NATO's nuclear status. In the run up to the November 2010 NATO Strategic Concept, delegations elaborated on the ways that France went out of its way to make sure that both the nuclear posture (force deployment, numbers and locations) and nuclear sharing policy of the Alliance remained unchanged.

Responses: focusing the debate, hardening positions?

By and large, responses to the *Withdrawal Issues* report have been very positive. Both from the diplomatic community and from the expert community, the most often heard response is that the report contributes to the on-going debate on TNW in Europe. Readers have valued more than anything that the report debunks some myths, and with that, helps focus the debate on key issues: burden sharing, how to engage with Russia and what to do about French resistance to change.

The report has been presented inside NATO Headquarters, in the Belgian, German and Italian parliaments, in public sessions in Holland, Belgium, Germany, Italy, the U.S. and Finland and led to comments or questions in the German, Belgian and Dutch parliaments. Spin-off articles were published in all those countries, as well as in France.

The most eye-catching - but also the most controversial - feature of the *Withdrawal Issues* report is a map of the Alliance depicting all individual country positions. Publishing a map depicting NATO countries positions on any issue is seldom done. And publishing one on an issue as contentious as TNW, is frowned upon by some. Careful to maintain an image of indivisibility within the Alliance, not all NATO staffers and diplomats have welcomed the explicit visualisation of the tension that clearly exists within the Alliance. Nevertheless, a much larger group of diplomats and staffers commented that the report has contributed to the debates in national capitals as well as in NATO HQ.

Some have reflected that it actually created a debate in their capitals where none existed before. Several representatives of national foreign ministries reflected that they received copies of, and questions about, the report from their parliamentarians. As such, the report strengthened the call for open and transparent national debates and democratic oversight over a once highly secretive arrangement. As NATO is an alliance of democracies, these efforts to democratize decision making on the future of national and collective security arrangements contribute to the safety and security of the populations across the Alliance.

While most countries appreciated the reflection of their national position in the report, one country - Estonia - has objected. In the report, Estonia is listed as one of the 14 countries favouring eventual withdrawal of the TNW. According to recent conversations with Estonian diplomats, they no longer subscribe to that view, if they ever had in the past. It points to a methodological point of concern about the report itself. While the strength of the report is that it reflects the opinions of all 28 member states - and not just a few key states - it also means that the analysing of the individual country positions was done mostly on the basis of talks with one, or a few, diplomats per country. The report - to put it differently - manages to provide a broad picture of opinions within the Alliance, but was perhaps unable to accurately reflect on the complexities existing within some countries, as the Estonian objections seem to suggest. In addition, it needs to be noted that since the publication of the report, and perhaps partly as a consequence, several countries have hardened their positions, for or against withdrawal of TNW.

Increased debate nationally, but also the beginning of a new round of discussions on the issue within the Alliance, seems to make countries more outspoken. Time is running out for NATO to find a new consensus that brings together the NATO Strategic Concept guidelines saying that “as long as there are nuclear weapons in the world, NATO will remain a nuclear Alliance”⁴ and the NPT obligations subscribed to by its member states “[t]o further diminish the role and significance of nuclear weapons in all military and security concepts, doctrines and policies.”⁵ In each case, it should be noted that Estonia’s Permanent Representative to NATO is now one of the most vocal supporters of retaining TNW deployment in Europe.

Looking ahead: engaging Russia

NATO's trouble finding a new consensus on its nuclear policies and posture is reflected in the November 2010 Strategic Concept. Unable to take a clear position on TNW, the text remains vague and effectively pushed the issue onto the DDPR that should conclude by the 2012 NATO summit in the U.S.

Withdrawal Issues is written to inform and influence that DDPR process. The report confirms that the Russian reciprocity issue is the biggest concern. The process of "aiming to seek" Russian reciprocity is currently at an impasse. NATO says it will only relocate the TNW back to the U.S. if Russia 'gives something' too. Russia says it will not even start talking about its TNW until the U.S. brings its nukes home. The U.S. basically says it would be willing to do so, but only if backed by NATO consensus. Moving beyond that Russia-NATO reciprocal loop will be the biggest challenge in the months ahead.

While the U.S. took a back-seat position in the TNW discussions in 2010, in 2011 it seems determined to regain a leadership role. In his message to the U.S. Senate, on the occasion of the New START ratification, President Obama wrote that he will seek to initiate negotiations with Russia on TNW "following consultation with NATO allies but not later than one year after entry into force of the New START treaty."⁶ The deadline is clear: European allies have one year to deal with their internal divisions on TNW.

The May 2011 'non-paper' issued by ten European NATO members (Belgium, the Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Luxemburg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland and Slovenia) is a first serious attempt by the Europeans to live up to the challenge of finding a European common position. An initiative of Norway and Poland, the non-paper focuses primarily on the question how NATO can engage with Russia in a cooperative and reciprocal scenario, starting with mutual transparency measures.⁷ And ending, if all goes according to plan, with agreed reductions or withdrawal of TNW on both sides. The proposals are rather modest, and limited to incremental or even purely symbolic steps. But the importance of the document is not so much in the content, but in the list of states that signed it. For the first time, some of the most vocal advocates for TNW withdrawal, such as Germany, Iceland, Norway and The Netherlands, managed to engage more reluctant countries like Hungary in the process of establishing a common position.

That said, regarding Russia the non-paper fails to address the biggest questions currently on the table:

First, why would Russia go along with any of this? Russia's defence posture is much more reliant on nuclear deterrence, including non-strategic nuclear deterrence. Furthermore, Russia maintains that it keeps TNW not to counter NATO TNW, but to counter NATO's overwhelming conventional superiority. More problematic even is that the plans presented in the non-paper fail to address Russia's oft repeated demand that - before Russian TNW can be discussed - the U.S. should do what Russia did in the 1990's: Stop deploying nuclear weapons in other

countries. It is hard to imagine how NATO would be able to convince Russia to let go of that particular demand.

Second, what will NATO do if no Russian reciprocity is found? It might provide an excuse to not withdraw U.S. TNW, but it wouldn't change the military redundancy or even obsolescence of the weapons. Furthermore, Germany's choice not to invest in maintaining the capability to fly nuclear missions in the future could result in a de facto ending of NATO nuclear sharing within ten years, regardless of NATO consensus, and regardless of Russian reciprocity.

The heart of the matter is that if getting Russia to give up much or all of its TNW capabilities is the main aim of the exercise, then holding on to the U.S. deployment of TNW in Europe may actually make progress on the Russian side impossible. To get Russia to move on its TNW, NATO needs to be bold enough to think beyond Cold War logic of disarmament through bilateral paring of numbers. What it needs to do is show Russia that it feels secure enough about Alliance security that it can get over the reliance on TNW, and invite Russia to do the same.

The coming months could decide on the future of TNW. A single minded focus on Russian reciprocity will do more harm than good. NATO needs to work internally to reach consensus on what it means by "an appropriate mix of nuclear and conventional weapons." It needs to focus on achieving consensus on new, non-nuclear forms of burden sharing that allow allies across the board to pitch in on missions and infrastructure that are - as many countries called it - more practical, more visible and more useful.

As to Russia, the last positive thing the European NATO countries can possibly squeeze out of the redundant TNW system is to use it as a bait towards Russia. How? As the *Withdrawal Issues* report argues, the best way is for NATO to mandate the U.S. to approach Russia and offer immediate withdrawal of the TNW back to U.S. territory, if Russia promises to allow NATO concerns about the Russian TNW arsenal to be part of upcoming bilateral talks. That would change the game from Cold War style reductions negotiations to Presidential Nuclear Initiatives-style cooperative reductions. It would do justice to the wishes of the large majority of 24 of the 28 NATO member states. And most importantly: it would result in a real and much needed improvement of security across the North Atlantic.

Wilbert van der Zeijden is the researcher for IKV Pax Christi's Nuclear Disarmament program. Susi Snyder is the program leader for IKV Pax Christi's Nuclear Disarmament program.

1. The report *Withdrawal Issues – What NATO countries say about the future of tactical nuclear weapons in Europe* can be downloaded from the website www.NoNukes.nl.
2. NATO-Russia Joint Council Statement, 20 November 2010.
3. 'Active Engagement, Modern Defence,' NATO Strategic Concept adopted in Lisbon, 2010.
4. NATO Strategic Concept 2010: Preface.
5. NPT/CONF.2010/50.
6. New START Treaty: Resolution Of Advice And Consent To Ratification, paragraph 12(i) (page 5).
7. Non-paper presented at the 2011 Berlin NATO foreign ministers meeting, available on-line: <http://www.fas.org/blog/ssp/2011/04/natoproposal.php>.