



# NATO nuclear adaptation since 2014: the return of deterrence and renewed Alliance discomfort

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## Abstract

For most of the post-Cold War era, modernization for NATO has meant a reduced role for nuclear weapons and an enhanced role for crisis management policy and politico-diplomatic partnership. This NATO approach advanced cohesion among allies, some of which were politically uncomfortable with if not borderline opposed to nuclear deterrence. Allied comfort is now under siege, however. Russian military doctrine threatens the early use of nuclear weapons, and states such as Iran and North Korea expose fault lines in the nuclear arms control regime that in recent years has sought to further the full abolition of nuclear weapons. NATO finds itself challenged by the twin requirements of ensuring credible deterrence and meeting the concerns of Alliance members who thought reliance on nuclear weapons was a thing of the past.

**Keywords** NATO · Nuclear · Strategic · Deterrence · Doctrine · START · INF · Russia · No-first-use

NATO has had a nuclear deterrence force forward deployed in Europe since the earliest days of the Alliance. That force has been the ultimate guarantee of US-provided security but also a catalyst for some of the sharpest debates on strategy and burden sharing between members of the Alliance. Since the end of the Cold War, though, as NATO visualized a reduced role for nuclear weapons and an enhanced role for crisis management policy and politico-diplomatic partnership, NATO has been able to advance nuclear cohesion among allies. In particular, NATO has reduced its declaratory reliance on nuclear weapons—declaring the circumstances under which they could be used ‘extremely remote’ and committing to seeking the lowest possible level of nuclear force—and has thus brought into the fold allies which were politically uncomfortable with if not borderline opposed to nuclear deterrence.

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Allied comfort is now under siege, however. Russian military doctrine threatens the early use of nuclear weapons, and threshold states such as Iran and new nuclear state North Korea expose fault lines in the nuclear arms control regime that until very recently sought to further the full abolition of nuclear weapons. NATO allies are thus caught between opposing forces—adversaries that must be deterred by nuclear weapons, and a global policy community that increasingly challenges the weapons' legitimacy. Nuclear deterrence is thus once again testing the Alliance, though this time in a global age.

Russia's behaviour on the international scene over the past decade, and especially since 2014, has changed the nature of the debate about the future of European relations with Moscow and clarified NATO's collective defence role. Modest initiatives taken at the Wales Summit in September 2014 did little to enhance NATO's nuclear deterrent, but the July 2016 Warsaw Summit agreed to a much tougher set of force goals that quite clearly brought deterrence and collective defence back as NATO's first priority.<sup>1</sup> Those decisions have since been validated in meetings of Defence Ministers, by the most recent US Nuclear Posture Review, and in the declaration of the Alliance's 2018 Brussels Summit.<sup>2</sup> With these commitments, NATO must once again manage the internal politics of nuclear deterrence as well as the presumably more straightforward external dimensions. Many member states will be uncomfortable with a return to Cold War concerns and the policies necessary for effective deterrence. Given Russia's assertive behaviour in recent years, the Alliance has proved itself capable of responding with significant force structure improvements, decisions that surprised some observers.

Despite Europe's seeming complacency over security matters in the generation since the end of the Cold War, NATO's 29 nations have shown steadfast commitment to deterrence and its enduring elements, including nuclear weapons. Will this remain the case over the longer term, however? As long as an existential threat remains on its eastern borders, presumably yes. But in the case of a serious crisis, or even a significant milestone such as a need to replace the dual-capable aircraft fleets of some nations, one is less certain of the outcome.

<sup>1</sup> See 'Wales Summit Declaration Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Wales', 5 September 2014, para. 22, at [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_112964.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm); also 'Warsaw Summit Communiqué issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Warsaw, 8–9 July 2016', NATO Press Release (2016) 100, 9 July 2016, at [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_133169.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_133169.htm).

<sup>2</sup> See *Nuclear Posture Review* (Washington: Department of Defense, 2018), at <https://media.defense.gov/2018/Feb/02/2001872886/-1/-1/1/2018-NUCLEAR-POSTURE-REVIEW-FINAL-REPORT.PDF> and Brussels Summit Declaration issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Brussels, 11–12 July 2018, NATO Press Release (2018) 074, at [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_156624.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_156624.htm).



## NATO nuclear policy in the Cold War: balancing deterrence and diplomacy

Nuclear weapons have been in Europe almost from the beginning of the Alliance. The USA deployed its first battlefield nuclear weapon, the 280-mm atomic cannon, to Europe in 1953.<sup>3</sup> The first American non-strategic nuclear weapons (NSNW) were deployed in West Germany as a means of countering the massive conventional superiority of the Soviet armies. These weapons were also meant to provide 'coupling' between the fates of the European and North American members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization by threatening to escalate a conventional war to the nuclear level. The USA meant to intimidate the Soviet Union with this prospect while simultaneously reassuring its NATO allies that it was fully committed to their defence.

By the early 1970s there were over 7200 US warheads deployed in Western Europe for potential use on well over a dozen different types of delivery systems.<sup>4</sup> This was still a modest percentage of the total US NSNW inventory, which reached 20,000 tactical nuclear warheads at one point.<sup>5</sup> These weapons were truly ubiquitous; the US military had nuclear bombs for fighter aircraft, nuclear artillery shells, atomic demolition munitions (nuclear land mines), atomic bazookas, surface to air missiles, and rockets of all shapes and sizes, deployed on land and at sea, in multiple countries around the globe. The largest concentrations of stored weapons were in Western Europe and in South Korea, but US tactical nuclear weapons have been stored in 18 different countries at one time or another.<sup>6</sup>

The Soviet Union lagged behind the USA in its deployment of tactical nuclear forces until the 1970s, when it undertook a massive expansion programme that resulted in strategic and tactical parity and by the 1980s, theatre superiority in numbers and types of TNF weapons deployed in Europe.<sup>7</sup> From 1977 through 1979 NATO debated the deployment of a new class of land-based nuclear missiles known as long-range theatre nuclear forces as a counter to Soviet force improvements. These new missiles included the ground-launched cruise missile and the Pershing II. In December 1979, NATO's foreign and defence ministers agreed to a dual-track arrangement, calling for the deployment of those missiles if the Soviet Union did not remove its own TNF weapons, or if arms control initiatives to eliminate this category of weapons proved unsuccessful.<sup>8</sup>

The groundwork was thus laid for NATO's 1983 Montebello Decision, which codified calls for a dual-track approach to dealing with security issues and the Soviet

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<sup>3</sup> See Record [1]. October 1953 was the date of National Security Council memorandum 162/2 instructing the Joint Chiefs of Staff to base their defence plans in Europe on the massive use of nuclear weapons.

<sup>4</sup> Secretary of Defence Clark Clifford, quoted in Leitenberg [2].

<sup>5</sup> See O'Neill [3], Figs. 1–4, p. 46; Kristensen [4].

<sup>6</sup> See Norris et al. [5].

<sup>7</sup> See Freedman [6]; Arbman and Thornton [7]; and U.S. Department of Defense, *Soviet Military Power*, 1981.

<sup>8</sup> France did not participate in this special meeting of ministers that led to the dual-track agreement.



Union.<sup>9</sup> This included the responsibility to provide continued military strength, with upgraded weaponry where appropriate, and a parallel track of diplomatic approaches, including arms control negotiations. The first half of that approach ran into public demonstrations in Europe when the Alliance deployed two new theatre-range ballistic and cruise missiles to Germany, Italy, and Great Britain in the 1980s. Still, the host governments' desire to have that continued nuclear commitment overruled any popular opposition. Simultaneously, and in line with the Montebello Decision, NATO quietly removed thousands of NSNW warheads and delivery systems and successfully pursued arms control negotiations with the Warsaw Pact. These led to a number of arms control agreements, including the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, the 1989 Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty (and its corollary, the 1992 CFE-IA treaty), the 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START I), and the 1993 START II Treaty. Only the first of these agreements, however, addressed theatre-range nuclear forces. Shorter-range tactical warheads and their delivery systems were left uncovered by any formal treaty—as is still the case today.

## NATO nuclear policy in the early post-Cold War era: new priorities

Non-strategic nuclear weapons did not disappear with the end of the Soviet threat or the closing of the Cold War. Nor, for that matter, have many of the missions for which they were designed and deployed. Still, in the two decades following the end of the Cold War the Alliance found itself increasingly unwilling to rely on, or at least openly discuss, its nuclear deterrent.

NATO recognized that dramatic changes were in prospect at its July 1990 London Summit, declaring that Russia was no longer an enemy. The allies expressed their determination to 'reach out to the countries of the East which were our adversaries in the Cold War, and extend to them the hand of friendship'.<sup>10</sup> But it still considered nuclear weapons crucial to Alliance security, as stated in the communiqué from the NATO Nuclear Planning Group (NPG)'s meeting later that year:

nuclear weapons, strategic and sub-strategic, play a key role in the prevention of war and the maintenance of stability; European-based nuclear forces provide the necessary linkage to NATO's strategic forces; and widespread participation in nuclear roles and policy formulation demonstrates Alliance cohesion and the sharing of responsibilities, and makes an important contribution to our nuclear posture.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> See Larsen [8]

<sup>10</sup> 'London Declaration on a Transformed North Atlantic Alliance', Issued by the Heads of State and Government Participating in the Meeting of the North Atlantic Council, 5–6 July 1990, para. 4, at [www.nato.int/docu/comm/4995/c900706a.htm](http://www.nato.int/docu/comm/4995/c900706a.htm).

<sup>11</sup> 'Final Communiqué', NATO Defence Planning Committee and Nuclear Planning Group, 6–7 December 1990, para. 13.



Within 6 months, the NPG had hit upon the wording that, with minor tweaking, would be installed in the 1991 Strategic Concept and carried forward in Alliance documents for the next 20 years:

Nuclear weapons will continue for the foreseeable future to fulfil their essential role in the Alliance's overall strategy, since conventional forces alone cannot ensure war prevention. We will therefore continue to base effective and up-to-date substrategic nuclear forces in Europe, but they will consist solely of dual-capable aircraft, with continued widespread participation in nuclear roles and peacetime basing by Allies.<sup>12</sup>

The surprisingly swift end of the Cold War led to renewed haste in removing most of NATO's remaining nuclear weapons from Europe. This move was accelerated by President George H.W. Bush's Presidential Nuclear Initiative in the fall of 1991.<sup>13</sup> The overall effect of these initiatives led to a reduction in US nuclear forces deployed to Europe from approximately 4000 in 1990 to only 'a few hundred' gravity-dropped bombs. There were no substantial efforts to modernize or reconstitute Cold War levels of nuclear forces in NATO Europe for more than 20 years thereafter, with the exception of upgraded storage, safety, and security measures for those weapons that remained.<sup>14</sup>

At the time, the USA made a series of decisions, with the full concurrence of its allies, to expedite the withdrawal of most of its remaining nuclear weapons from European bases. Following the 'largest nuclear weapons movement in US history', these warheads were removed from Europe and flown to the USA. The reductions were completed by July 1992.<sup>15</sup>

The UK gave up most of its NSNW forces at this time, as well, including its nuclear Lance missile tubes, atomic artillery, maritime weapons, and air-launched nuclear weapons.<sup>16</sup> In the mid-1990s, both Great Britain and France further reduced their sub-strategic nuclear systems. The UK eliminated its WE177 gravity bomb, ending any nuclear role for its dual-capable aircraft. Today Great Britain's only nuclear capability resides in its Trident submarine fleet, with less than 200 nuclear warheads. Its four boats remain dedicated to NATO missions. France has eliminated four of the six nuclear delivery systems it had in 1991. Today it retains nuclear submarine-launched ballistic missiles and air-delivered cruise missiles, with a total

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<sup>12</sup> 'Final Communiqué: Ministerial Meeting of the Defence Planning Committee and the Nuclear Planning Group', NATO Press Release M-DPC/NPG-1 (1991) 87, 7 June 1991, para. 8. Emphasis added.

<sup>13</sup> For the U.S. Presidential Nuclear Initiative and Russia's responses, see Larsen and Klingenberg [9], Appendices C and D, pp. 273–290.

<sup>14</sup> NATO Nuclear Fact Sheets [10], para. 64.

<sup>15</sup> Quote from McGuire AFB website, [www.mcquire.af.mil](http://www.mcquire.af.mil), reprinted in Alexander and Millar [11], p. 190, endnote 8. President Bush declared in July 1992 that '...all of the planned withdrawals are complete. All ground-launched tactical nuclear weapons have been returned to U.S. territory, as have all naval tactical nuclear weapons'. George H.W. Bush, 'Statement on the United States Nuclear Weapons Initiative', 2 July 1992.

<sup>16</sup> NATO Handbook, pp. 54–55.



arsenal of about 300 warheads.<sup>17</sup> By the dawn of the twenty-first century the total number of nuclear warheads in Europe had been reduced some 95 percent as compared to the height of the Cold War.

The only remaining weapons were several hundred B-61 bombs located at some a handful of bases in several European countries.<sup>18</sup> And those remaining aircraft were no longer poised to deliver their weapons from an alert posture; decisions made in 1995 reduced the dual-capable aircraft (DCA) readiness levels from minutes to weeks, and further decisions in 2002 reduced that readiness level even further, to 'months'.<sup>19</sup> The number of nuclear storage sites in Europe was reduced dramatically, as well.

With no direct threat to European security, and former adversary Russia now considered a 'strategic partner' of the Alliance, the nuclear deterrence mission seemed to many member states to be much less important, if not obsolete.

NATO's reduced nuclear posture tied in with its enlargement policy and need to reassure Russia of its benevolent intentions. Shortly after NATO announced in December 1994 that it would be willing to admit new members, it declared its 'three no's' policy: it had 'no intention, no plan, and no reason to deploy nuclear weapons on the territory of new member countries, nor any need to change any aspect of NATO's nuclear posture or nuclear policy, and that it does not foresee any future need to do so'.<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, all new member states have acceded to the provisions of the Washington Treaty and become full members of the Alliance in all respects, including their commitments to NATO's nuclear policies and consequent nuclear guarantees.<sup>21</sup>

Nuclear disarmament efforts followed these initiatives. In 1997, Presidents William Clinton and Boris Yeltsin met in New York to finalize plans developed earlier that year in Helsinki to begin the START III process—the third major treaty in the strategic arms reduction process begun under President Ronald Reagan. The plan for START III included a separate venue for the two countries to 'explore, as separate issues, possible measures relating to nuclear long-range sea-launched cruise missiles and tactical nuclear systems, to include appropriate confidence-building and transparency measures'.<sup>22</sup> But the START III talks never began, exposing limits to the disarmament process that were inherently political. The Moscow Treaty signed

<sup>17</sup> The current arsenal strengths for both the UK and France are widely reported. See, for example, Cirincione et al. [12], 'France', p. 191; and Kristensen [13].

<sup>18</sup> Unofficial data on basing can be found in Kristensen, U.S. Nuclear Weapons in Europe, p. 8.

<sup>19</sup> NATO Handbook, p. 12.

<sup>20</sup> The three nos were originally announced by NATO's Foreign and Defence Ministers in December 1996, and reiterated by the NATO Heads of State and Government at the May 1997 'Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation'. It repeated at the NATO-Russia Summit in Rome in May 2002, which established the NATO-Russia Council, and at the November 2002 Prague Summit. An important though implicit 'fourth no' was the NATO commitment to not build or reopen any closed Warsaw Pact nuclear weapons storage sites in new member states for use as potential future storage facilities. Interviews in Europe, March 2006.

<sup>21</sup> NATO's Nuclear Fact Sheets, p. 13.

<sup>22</sup> 'Joint Statement on Parameters of Future Nuclear Reductions', Clinton-Yeltsin Summit, Helsinki, 21 March 1997, at [www.nit.org/db/nisprofs/treaties/abm/abm\\_heje.htm](http://www.nit.org/db/nisprofs/treaties/abm/abm_heje.htm).



by Presidents George W. Bush and Vladimir Putin in 2002 reduced the number of nuclear warheads but was light on verification mechanisms, and it brought strategic negotiations to a halt for nearly a decade. NSNW were left out in the cold as the only nuclear weapon category not covered by any arms control treaty or agreement.

The politics of deterrence can be gauged by the 1999 Alliance Strategic Concept's reference to nuclear weapons as political in nature. This had multiple layers of meanings to the Allies. On one level, these weapons reassured the allies that they had the ultimate weapon available as a deterrent against threats and, were it to become necessary, one that they could use for warfighting.<sup>23</sup> The second level of reassurance comes from knowing that the USA has made a visible, physical commitment to the defence of Europe as shown by its weapons and forces being forward deployed in NATO Europe. More fundamentally, the DCA mission kept the USA involved in European political affairs, and allowed the NATO members access to US defence decision-making through the NPG and direct bilateral and multilateral forums with the USA. The intangible benefits of this close relationship were, and remain, well understood by the European allies. Would those benefits be lost if US weapons were withdrawn from Europe, or would they simply take on a new complexion? At the time, no member of the Alliance seemed willing to risk finding out the answer to that imponderable.

## Striking a balance, 2010–2012

Nuclear policy returned to centre stage in NATO debates for the first time in over 20 years as the result of several high-level events in the years 2010–2012 that were intimately related to underlying issues of NATO enlargement and Russian doctrine. The policy return involved an April 2010 NATO foreign ministers meeting in Tallinn, where Secretary of State Hillary Clinton provided a framework for discussions over nuclear policy with her Five Principles for a nuclear alliance; the release of the US Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) in April 2010; the US Senate's demand upon ratification of the New START Treaty that negotiations over future reductions with Russia should include tactical nuclear weapons; NATO's 2010 Lisbon Summit which resulted in a New Strategic Concept and associated documents; the 2012 Deterrence and Defence Posture Review; and the stirrings of a more aggressive Russia on the Alliance's Eastern border.<sup>24</sup>

Key allied documents invited renewed debate. For example, despite 20 years of US and NATO documents stating that US non-strategic nuclear weapons would be 'kept up to date as necessary' and 'deployed in Europe', and that these weapons 'provided an essential military and political link between Europe and North

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<sup>23</sup> There were differences in perspective on these two points which had been carried over from the debate over MC14/2, the strategy of flexible response, in the mid-1960s. Europeans generally supported the deterrence value of nuclear weapons, whereas the USA also considered the potential flexible use of tactical nuclear weapons in a warfighting sense.

<sup>24</sup> See Larsen [14]; also 'Nonstrategic Nuclear Weapons', CRS Report RL32572, Congressional Research Service, updated January 2019, at <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/nuke/RL32572.pdf>.



America', the 2010 US NPR dropped all of this critical phrasing.<sup>25</sup> So did NATO's new Strategic Concept that was approved during the Lisbon Summit in November 2010, as well as the 2012 NATO Deterrence and Defence Posture Review.<sup>26</sup> This change in verbiage, while not publicly highlighted by US or Alliance leaders, was a significant departure from the standard post-Cold War deterrence phraseology and opened the door to a potential future Alliance decision to remove the remaining US warheads located in Europe. In fact, the DDPR explicitly recognized this possibility, stating that the allies needed to prepare 'in case NATO were to decide to reduce its reliance on non-strategic nuclear weapons based in Europe'.<sup>27</sup> There were rumoured discussions within the halls of NATO Headquarters in 2012–2013 about yet more reductions in the stockpile in coming years.

Nonetheless, the statements in NATO's Deterrence and Defence Posture Review, released at the Chicago Summit in May 2012, committed the USA and NATO to retain US non-strategic nuclear weapons stationed in Europe indefinitely. As the DDPR stated, 'Nuclear weapons are a core component of NATO's overall capabilities for deterrence and defence alongside conventional and missile defence forces. The review has shown that the Alliance's nuclear force posture currently meets the criteria for an effective deterrence and defence posture'.<sup>28</sup> This agreement on the status quo was hailed by many in the Alliance as a show of continuing commitment to the underlying deterrent foundations that buttress NATO's ultimate security guarantee to its members, as stated in Article 5 of the Washington Treaty. Yet others have argued that this was simply a convenient way station, a temporary halt, to the vector on which Alliance nuclear policy was headed—towards the goal of a nuclear free world.

President Obama notably envisioned such a goal in his May 2009 Prague speech. He pointed out that 'Today, the Cold War has disappeared but thousands of those weapons have not. In a strange turn of history, the threat of global nuclear war has gone down, but the risk of a nuclear attack has gone up'. He pledged 'America's commitment to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons'.<sup>29</sup> References to this goal of 'global zero' began appearing in NATO documents, as well. For example, both the 2010 Strategic Concept and the 2012 DDPR supported

<sup>25</sup> The 1999 NATO Strategic Concept, repeating the nuclear paragraphs from the 1991 version of the *NATO Handbook*, included this phrase: 'The presence of United States conventional and nuclear forces in Europe remains vital to the security of Europe, which is inseparably linked to that of North America.' 'The Alliance's Strategic Concept, 24 April 1999, para. 42, available at [www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official\\_texts\\_27433.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_27433.htm).

<sup>26</sup> 'Active Engagement, Modern Defence: Strategic Concept for the Defence and Security of the Members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation', adopted by the Heads of State and Government in Lisbon, 19 November 2010, available at [www.nato.int/lisbon2010/strategic-concept-2010-eng.pdf](http://www.nato.int/lisbon2010/strategic-concept-2010-eng.pdf).

<sup>27</sup> *Deterrence and Defence Posture Review*, para. 12, NATO Press Release (2012) 063, Chicago, 20 May 2012, para. 8, available at [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official\\_texts\\_87597.htm?mode=pressrelease](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_87597.htm?mode=pressrelease).

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, see footnote 27.

<sup>29</sup> 'Remarks by President Barack Obama in Prague as Delivered', White House Press Release, 5 April 2009, at <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-barack-obama-prague-delivered>.



the long-term vision of a world free of nuclear weapons.<sup>30</sup> Some thought this was a transformational opportunity for the Alliance to end its long-term reliance on nuclear deterrence. Indeed, as Brad Roberts has written, ‘NATO’s decision [in the 2012 DDPR] to retain nuclear weapons in Europe was nonetheless surprising to many experts and government officials, who interpreted the Prague speech to imply that the Obama administration would withdraw the remaining US nuclear weapons in Europe at an early moment’.<sup>31</sup>

Reconciling those divergent views within the Alliance has not been easy. As one European observer recently put it, since 2010 ‘NATO has faced a nuclear identity crisis’.<sup>32</sup>

Still, NATO’s nuclear identity crisis could develop only so far, since the enlarged membership of the Alliance brought fresh concerns with the risk of a militarily strong, anti-Western Russia on NATO’s eastern borders. New members watched Russia warily, suspicious of what they saw as a corrupt and undemocratic Moscow and its modernization programmes and underlying motivations. Military planners are required to think about worst-case scenarios, of course. The combination of Russian opacity as to its nuclear arsenal and intentions, its apparent unwillingness to abide by the terms of the 1991-92 Presidential Nuclear Initiatives regarding non-strategic nuclear weapons, its development and testing of new strategic rockets, the centralization of political power within a hierarchically governed executive branch, and President Putin’s decision to no longer cooperate with the West led these allies to the pessimistic but unassailable conclusion that Russia sought to overturn the rules-based international order established following the end of the Cold War. These concerns were enhanced in 2006-07 as Russia reacted to global trends—including US strategic initiatives such as missile defence and prompt global strike capabilities—and spoke of its need to develop new nuclear weapons to maintain the strategic balance in the new ‘arms spiral’ with the USA.<sup>33</sup> President Putin emphasized this message in a strongly worded address to the Munich Security Conference in 2007.<sup>34</sup>

## NATO’s adaptation to the new threat environment

The events of 2014 dramatically changed the thinking at NATO—although not immediately, and not at the same speed for all member states. But the aggressive military action taken by Moscow in Crimea and Donbas was a game changer

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<sup>30</sup> 2010 NATO Strategic Concept.

<sup>31</sup> See Roberts [15].

<sup>32</sup> See Durkalec [16].

<sup>33</sup> See Putin [17]. Also see Putin’s 12 February 2007 speech at the Munich Security Conference, at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/02/12/AR2007021200555.html>.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. It is apparent in retrospect that at the time very few Western observers recognized the menace or sincerity in Putin’s challenge to the existing international order.



in terms of the sanguine attitude taken by many in the West as regards European security. The need for deterrence, and for robust conventional and nuclear forces to effect it, was back. Russia's national security doctrine since the end of the Cold War now resembles NATO's Cold War strategy: first use of nuclear weapons if necessary to control the escalation ladder (called, paradoxically, 'de-escalation' in Russian papers).<sup>35</sup> Russian nuclear doctrine also calls for early nuclear use on a conventional battlefield. Indeed, some analysts report that however good Russia may be at hybrid warfare and signalling via snap exercises, its conventional capabilities at the operational level remain weak. That would imply that in a conventional conflict which appeared not to be going their way, one might anticipate a jump to nuclear use.<sup>36</sup> Putin's March 2018 speech on Russian nuclear strength confirmed its power-based approach to relations with NATO.<sup>37</sup>

At the same time, NATO's response to Russian policy was complicated by new threats arising from South of Europe. Mediterranean member states felt less threatened by the return of Russia as a threat. Moreover, the challenge of North Korea and possibly over the longer term China were particularly worrisome to the USA and Canada. In other words, the entire Alliance was suddenly awakened to the realities of a new and more dangerous world, one that required greater emphasis on the security of the original treaty defined territory of NATO, but which also required a renewed political engagement with the basic political building blocks of effective nuclear deterrence.

## NATO's response to 2014

The events of 2014 forced NATO to reconsider its 20 years of emphasis on out-of-area expeditionary operations and its focus on the crisis management and cooperative security pillars of the 2010 Strategic Concept at the expense of the core responsibility of collective defence.<sup>38</sup> With the rise of surprising new threats on two flanks, the member states realized they would have to reassess the importance and centrality of collective defence and deterrence.

NATO's initial reaction to the events of 2014 was modest. Russia's foreign-policy behaviour in Crimea, in Ukraine, and in public statements attacking the Alliance came as a shock to most member states. NATO had grown to think of Russia as a strategic partner, not an adversary. Obviously, the hoped-for peace dividend that had been expected to follow the end of NATO's military mission in Afghanistan, scheduled for December 2014, was no longer going to happen. With Russian behaviour in the East and the rise of the Islamic State threat to the South, the Alliance would

<sup>35</sup> For a summary of Russian nuclear policy today, see Sokov [18]. Also see Persson [19] and Schneider [20].

<sup>36</sup> See Larsen and Kartchner [21].

<sup>37</sup> 'Vladimir Putin's Speech on 1 March 2018: Are you Listening, America?' on 'The New Cold War: Ukraine and Beyond' website at <https://www.newcoldwar.org/vladimir-putins-speech-march-1-2018-listening-america/>.

<sup>38</sup> See footnote 26.



have to respond in some way—it could not sit still. The threat had returned, but most NATO members were not immediately prepared to deal seriously with it, militarily or psychologically.

The Alliance thus responded to the Ukraine crisis in a measured and limited way. It deployed some modest conventional forces to the Baltic States and Poland in an effort to restore confidence in its Article 5 commitments on the part of Allies and the potential adversary. While senior leaders of the Alliance placed the emphasis on collective defence, the Alliance as a whole had difficulties coming to grips with a clear, growing, and dangerous military imbalance in Eastern Europe that could potentially be exploited by Moscow. This had to be addressed, and much of the Wales and Warsaw Summit Declarations did just that.<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, NATO policy towards Russia in the first 2 years after Crimea remained relatively cautious. The debate within the Alliance was whether to emphasize defence or dialogue. Some member states preferred a minimal response, hoping that by not overreacting they might entice Russia to ‘return to normal’. By 2016, however, the return of Russia as a potential threat to NATO interests had become obvious to all members.

That said, not all members agreed on the degree of the threat from the East. Some looked first to the South when considering their security situation, and preferred to see either multiple strategies that addressed each flank, such as deterrence through an enhanced forward presence in Eastern Europe, with a concept of projecting stability to the South. This debate continues, and it threatens NATO cohesion by risking the creation of a fissure between three groupings of states: those with borders shared with Russia, who fear any appearance of weakness; those who are more concerned with Mediterranean issues such as migration, maritime security, and ungoverned spaces in North Africa and the Middle East; those who prefer to see a balanced approach with a 360-degree threat assessment.<sup>40</sup> The return of deterrence thus brought a wave of discomfort to the Alliance, one which required each nation to assess the depth of its views on nuclear weapons and the role they can play.

## Wales Summit

At the Wales Summit in September 2014 and in follow-on meetings of NATO Defence Ministers, various initiatives were developed to serve as a conventional counter to Russian threats to NATO’s Eastern Flank. These were all included under the umbrella of the Readiness Action Plan (RAP), meant to provide assurance to

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<sup>39</sup> ‘Wales Summit Declaration Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Wales’, 5 September 2014, para. 22, at [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_112964.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm).

<sup>40</sup> See Larsen [22]. Also ‘The Shadow NATO Summit IV: NATO’s 360-Degree Approach to Deterrence and Collective Defence: Over-Stretched and Under-Powered?’ conference report, 9 July 2018, at <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/college-social-sciences/government-society/iccs/news-events/2018/iccs-nato-shadow-summit-report-2018.pdf>.



member states that felt exposed to rising threats, and simultaneously to adapt the Alliance to the new security environment.<sup>41</sup>

These all made NATO stronger, providing some measure of reassurance to allies in the East, and some measure of deterrence vis-à-vis the Russian military. But no one could be certain whether these modest conventional improvements will suffice to deter Russia. Hence, the need to keep nuclear weapons as a deterrence back-stop—although with no change to the Alliance’s nuclear posture. Finding consensus for any change to NATO’s nuclear strategy or forces was deemed too politically sensitive.

Military programmes and plans for enhanced emphasis identified at the Wales summit included missile defence, cyber defence, joint intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, and nuclear deterrence. Consensus on new, strong language regarding nuclear deterrence appeared in the summit declaration. This reflected discussions in three Nuclear Planning Group meetings over an 18-month period leading up to the summit. The declaration contained language that made it clear NATO was responding to Russian provocations. Alliance policy reiterated that the ultimate security of NATO rests on an appropriate mix of conventional, nuclear, and missile defence forces. Officially, the communique stated that ‘the circumstances in which any use of nuclear weapons might have to be contemplated are extremely remote’.<sup>42</sup>

## Warsaw Summit

Most of the Wales initiatives were noted at the Warsaw Summit as either successfully implemented or nearing completion. The July 2016 meeting in the Polish capital had two major outcomes: putting enhanced security measures in place, with a focus on the Eastern Flank, and greater emphasis on exporting stability to regions along NATO’s Southern Flank.<sup>43</sup> Most importantly, the meeting adopted a 360-degree threat assessment that spoke to the political discomfort of the Alliance. It underscored NATO’s character as an ‘all for one and one for all’ military alliance that must respond in a balanced and appropriate manner to its full range of threats.

The Alliance thus gained the political cohesion necessary to recognize that there was a need to re-emphasize deterrence in the face of its diminished conventional capabilities, its lack of military forces in potential hot spots along its eastern borders, and belligerent Russian sabre-rattling and illegal behaviour. In the Warsaw Summit, it clearly stated that ‘The greatest responsibility of the Alliance is to protect and defend our territory and our populations against attack, as set out in Article 5 of the Washington Treaty. And so renewed emphasis has been placed on deterrence

<sup>41</sup> Details of the conventional improvements made by NATO since 2014 are well covered by other authors in this Special Edition.

<sup>42</sup> Wales Summit Declaration, para. 50.

<sup>43</sup> ‘Warsaw Summit Communique issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Warsaw, 8–9 July 2016’, NATO Press Release (2016) 100, 9 July 2016, at [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_133169.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_133169.htm). See also Lasconjarias [23] and Kacprzyk [24].



and collective defence'.<sup>44</sup> More specifically, the Alliance stated its principle that 'As long as nuclear weapons exist, NATO will remain a nuclear alliance. The strategic forces of the Alliance, particularly those of the USA, are the supreme guarantee of the security of the Allies'.<sup>45</sup> And in a new statement emphasizing the importance of America's partners in nuclear sharing, it said that 'NATO's nuclear deterrence posture also relies, in part, on US nuclear weapons forward deployed in Europe and on capabilities and infrastructure provided by Allies concerned. These Allies will ensure that all components of NATO's nuclear deterrence remain safe, secure, and effective'.<sup>46</sup> NATO also sent a strong message to Moscow that combined old and new elements of communique language to counter any attempts at nuclear sabre-rattling by Russia. This paragraph forms the heart of NATO deterrence policy, stated in clear, classic deterrence language:

Any employment of nuclear weapons against NATO would fundamentally alter the nature of a conflict. The circumstances in which NATO might have to use nuclear weapons are extremely remote. If the fundamental security of any of its members were to be threatened, however, NATO has the capabilities and resolve to impose costs on an adversary that would be unacceptable and far outweigh the benefits that an adversary could hope to achieve.<sup>47</sup>

### Brussels Summit

The NATO Summit in Brussels, July 2018, did not focus on nuclear weapons or policy, but it nonetheless, and significantly, reiterated all of the key language in the 2016 Warsaw declaration.<sup>48</sup> One of the primary new elements of NATO policy to come out of this summit meeting was the conventional deterrence '30/30/30 over 30' commitment.<sup>49</sup> The Alliance also announced several new structural changes, which will restore some of the Cold War era organizational elements lost during the previous restructuring and downsizing in the 2008–2012 time frame. And it reminded readers that 'the greatest responsibility of the Alliance is to protect and defend our territory and our populations against attack, as set out in Article 5 of the Washington Treaty'. In language meant to impress on any adversary the seriousness of its commitment, it said that 'No one should doubt NATO's resolve if the security of any of its members were to be threatened'.<sup>50</sup>

The ultimate measure of that resolve is the willingness to resort to nuclear weapons as the ultimate deterrent and, if necessary, warfighting weapon. The summit

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<sup>44</sup> Warsaw Summit Communique, para. 6.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, para. 53.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, para. 53.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, para. 54.

<sup>48</sup> Brussels Summit Declaration, see footnote 2.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, para. 14. The 30/30/30 over 30 commitment is one for which member states agreed to provide from within their overall pool of forces, 30 major naval combatant ships, 30 heavy or medium manoeuvre brigades, and 30 kinetic air squadrons within 30-day readiness.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, para. 33.



thus claimed that ‘NATO has taken steps to ensure its nuclear deterrent capabilities remain safe, secure, and effective’.<sup>51</sup> Finally, while still acknowledging that it ‘reaffirms its resolve to seek a safer world ...and the ultimate goal of a world without nuclear weapons’, it also made clear that the Alliance did not support the Nuclear Ban Treaty signed in the United Nations General Assembly the previous year as being ‘inconsistent with the Alliance’s nuclear deterrence policy’.<sup>52</sup>

## Nuclear deterrence is back: is that comforting?

As a result of Moscow’s nuclear sabre-rattling and aggressive language during its exercises since 2014, the Alliance once again found itself focusing on the nuclear dimensions of collective defence and deterrence—much to the chagrin of some member states that are generally anti-nuclear and that thought this mission was a relic of the Cold War. The Alliance continues to assert that deterrence rests on an appropriate mix of conventional, nuclear, and missile defence forces and that ‘as long as nuclear weapons exist, NATO will remain a nuclear Alliance’.<sup>53</sup> This requires a robust, well-trained, modern, and reliable nuclear force. The 2012 DDPR stated that NATO’s current nuclear sharing arrangements, which included risk- and responsibility sharing across as many member states as possible, remained the best option for the Alliance. That assessment, however, was made before the current troubles with Russia, so some are arguing that the DDPR needs to be reconsidered in light of changing circumstances. Some analysts have called for modernization of NATO’s modest nuclear force of US tactical nuclear warheads forward deployed in Europe, plus the fleet of dual-capable aircraft operated by European member states.<sup>54</sup>

The importance of nuclear deterrent forces has been made apparent through Russian behaviour the past half-decade, leading to renewed interest in the subject by military and civilian leaders. But, some members asked, to what extent should the Alliance emphasize its nuclear deterrent in the face of Russian behaviour? For two years after the annexation of Crimea there was a difference of opinion within the Alliance over whether to downplay or highlight the nuclear aspects of NATO forces.

The rationale for retaining these capabilities has changed in recent years, but it is still cogent. Nuclear weapons serve as a deterrent against existential threats, such as those posed by Russia. They serve as an indispensable link between North America and Europe, coupling the two continents in a single security arrangement. Their existence discourages possible proliferation by allies that might otherwise pursue their own nuclear capabilities. They provide assurance to allies, particularly those feeling most exposed or threatened by a potential adversary. They prevent feelings

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., para 34.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., para 44.

<sup>53</sup> Deterrence and Defence Posture Review.

<sup>54</sup> For example, see Colby and Solomon [25] and Kroenig [26].



of abandonment or vulnerability among allies. They create uncertainty in the mind of potential adversaries. They can serve as potential bargaining chips in future arms control negotiations with Russia. Keeping them in Europe can reduce the political strains that would occur if they were to be removed. All of these reasons are in line with those that the USA considered when it drafted the 2010 Nuclear Posture Review, which stated that the USA would continue to provide extended deterrence to its allies in Europe (and Asia) using forward-deployable tactical and strategic aircraft.<sup>55</sup> This was part of the justification for a nuclear variant of the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter currently in production, as well as the B-61 life extension programme. President Obama called for ‘maintaining military capabilities to deny the objectives of, or impose unacceptable costs on, any aggressor’.<sup>56</sup> Since the 1940s, such language has been code for nuclear deterrence.

In the Trump administration’s 2018 NPR, US extended deterrence guarantees to NATO were confirmed in no uncertain terms. In a move away from the previous administration’s Prague Agenda and the 2010 NPR, the 2018 version stated that ‘No country should doubt the strength of our extended deterrence commitments or the strength of US and allied capabilities to deter, and if necessary to defeat, any potential adversary’s nuclear or non-nuclear aggression’.<sup>57</sup> The NPR highlighted the continued development of several non-strategic nuclear programmes meant to enhance extended deterrence, including the nuclear variant of the F-35 fighter (to be used as a DCA replacement in Europe) and the B61-12 nuclear bomb. It also announced two new systems meant to enhance regional deterrence: a low-yield version of the submarine-launched ballistic missile, and research into a new nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missile.<sup>58</sup> These systems represent an effort to correct an ‘exploitable gap’ in America’s extended deterrent. In addition to US efforts to improve nuclear forces, the NPR called for ‘the need to maintain NATO’s nuclear sharing arrangements’ involving the ‘broadest possible participation of Allies in their agreed burden sharing arrangement regarding the DCA mission, nuclear mission support, and nuclear infrastructure’.<sup>59</sup> As if preparing the ground for this US policy, at Warsaw in 2016, the Alliance took a public stance on the continued importance of deterrence and nuclear weapons as one of the foundations for its security, with some of the strongest words seen in a NATO communiqué in over 20 years.

The Alliance is now left with the challenge of matching words with deeds. NATO’s nuclear forces have never aligned perfectly with the doctrinal prescriptions for their use. Today, with much smaller nuclear arsenals, many of the Cold War concerns no longer apply. Nevertheless, as Jeffrey Record correctly pointed out years ago, when it comes to the forward deployment of US nuclear weapons in Europe,

<sup>55</sup> *Nuclear Posture Review Report* (Washington: Office of the Secretary of Defense, April 2010), at [http://www.defence.gov/Portals/1/features/defenceReviews/NPR/2010\\_Nuclear\\_Posture\\_Review\\_Report.pdf](http://www.defence.gov/Portals/1/features/defenceReviews/NPR/2010_Nuclear_Posture_Review_Report.pdf).

<sup>56</sup> *Sustaining US Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defence* (Washington: Department of Defense, January 2012), at [http://archive.defence.gov/news/Defence\\_Strategic\\_Guidance.pdf](http://archive.defence.gov/news/Defence_Strategic_Guidance.pdf).

<sup>57</sup> *Nuclear Posture Review* (Washington: Department of Defense, February 2018), p. 8.

<sup>58</sup> 2018 NPR.

<sup>59</sup> 2018 NPR quoted in Durkalec, p. 18.



‘the deployment’s psychological value within NATO far outweighs whatever military contribution the weapons may make to overall deterrence of aggression’.<sup>60</sup>

Matching words with deeds in a new era is challenging because for more than 20 years Alliance communiqués minimized any threat in Europe, called Russia a ‘strategic partner’ with special benefits, and sought a peace dividend through the overall diminution of military forces. At the same time, the Alliance created a different type of military, one better suited to out-of-area operations that required greater responsiveness, greater flexibility, a smaller footprint, and ease of transportation. This meant less of the old-fashioned expensive equipment that the Alliance previously had to keep on hand in large numbers in Central Europe to deter or respond to Soviet aggression. There was very little of that kit left in Europe at a time when the Alliance wished it had some to deploy to the weak spot on its perimeter.

Given this combination of factors—the diminishment of conventional capabilities, major cuts in the European missile defence programme plan, the need for greater reliance on collective defence, the overall diminishment of conventional military readiness by all member states in NATO since the global economic crisis began, and the call for greater levels of security reassurance by some of NATO’s eastern member states—one would have expected to see an *increased* level of emphasis on the Alliance’s remaining pillar: nuclear forces. This, one could argue, would have been especially true in the short term, as the Alliance found itself having to respond to aggressive behaviour by a major nuclear state on its borders with inadequate conventional capabilities readily at hand. This increased reliance might be seen, for example, in any of the following steps:

- a halt to any further planned reductions in nuclear forces
- signalling to the adversary, whether by way of exercises, nuclear force movements, or simple announcements as to the increased reliance on nuclear deterrence
- an increase in replacement decisions for the dual-capable aircraft fleets of many nations that are nearing retirement
- a reversal of the Prague Vision and its call for nuclear disarmament, which the Alliance took up in its DDPR
- an increase in the frequency or visibility of Nuclear Planning Group meetings
- more formal and pointed US commitments to the extended deterrence guarantees it provides its NATO allies.

Steps such as these would imply a return to some of the old ways of dealing with Russia during the Cold War, when nuclear deterrence was understood and brandished as a legitimate source of Alliance power. Yet very few of those things have happened in recent years—at least not in a structured, public manner designed to reassure the new member states and deter Moscow. There was apparently little desire within the Alliance to emphasize nuclear capabilities in response to Russia’s

<sup>60</sup> Record, p. 68.



return as a great power threat. It appears the Alliance remains more focused on ‘not rocking the boat’ than on an informed public discussion over nuclear matters.<sup>61</sup>

It is of course possible that the value of NATO’s Article 5 commitments and its existing deterrent capabilities remain strong, as was shown by the lack of direct Russian action against NATO territory, particularly the fact that it has not yet attempted to make trouble with the Baltic States or Poland. This line of argument suggests that Moscow still respects the Alliance’s collective defence capabilities and political will. Nuclear weapons remain the ultimate insurance policy for the West, and the exact shape and contour of that policy may be less important than its existence. If that is the case, the restrained language in recent summit communiqués suffices as a reminder of NATO’s red lines.

Since 2014 there have been some signs of increased awareness of, and interest in, NATO’s nuclear weapons policies and the deterrence mission. This can be seen in subtle aspects: increased exercises and war games, including table top exercises at the highest political echelons at Headquarters; more frequent meetings of the NPG; and continued progress towards allied purchases of next-generation DCA aircraft and the eventual deployment of the B61-12 bomb. Still, for as long as NATO maintains a low profile and eschews steps such as the ones outlined above, it is tempting to conclude that NATO is tenuously balancing between deterring Russia, which requires an explicit posture, and avoiding Alliance discomfort, which requires a low-profile policy.

## Conclusion

Sixty years ago Professor Klaus Knorr captured concerns that were already arising over NATO’s continued ability to conduct its primary mission—concerns still extant today. He wrote:

In 1958, it is fair to say, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization began to be seriously strained by a profound crisis of confidence... Increasingly the question was put: Can NATO, with its present forces and strategy, still be expected to defend the West against possible aggression and aggressive threats—indeed, to deter military aggression? Is the alliance still able to fulfill its central function?<sup>62</sup>

Obviously these concerns remain valid in 2019.

Official NATO policy still views non-strategic nuclear weapons as a deterrent to any potential adversary, and they serve as a link among the NATO nations, with shared responsibility for nuclear policy planning and decision-making. They also present a visible reminder of the US extended deterrent and assurance of its commitment to the defence of its allies. Some argue that because these weapons play a marginal military or political role in Europe, they no longer serve as a symbol

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<sup>61</sup> These are not new perspectives. For an explanation of the use of such terminology, see Larsen [27].

<sup>62</sup> See Knorr [28].



of Alliance solidarity and cooperation. Others, however, including some officials in newer NATO member states, have argued that US non-strategic nuclear weapons in Europe not only remain relevant militarily, in certain circumstances, but that they are an essential indicator of the US commitment to NATO security and solidarity—and they may be more important in that role today than they have been in decades.<sup>63</sup>

At Warsaw in 2016, NATO reinforced its credibility as a strong, formidable military machine in the eyes of its allies, partners, and antagonists. It reiterated that commitment in Brussels in 2018. NATO's long-term adaptation to the new security environment will require steps that harken back to the days of the Cold War. Some member states may be uncomfortable with those decisions. But as a military alliance charged with defending its members against adversary threats to Europe and North America, it is incumbent upon the allies to act to meet that responsibility. The world is unlikely to see a quick return to the comfortable way things were only a few years ago. Accepting this reality will have consequences for the North Atlantic Alliance. This may require improvements to existing command structures and may require changes to existing nuclear forces. That will most certainly be expensive, requiring all member states to abide by their defence investment pledge.

The Alliance certainly can maintain its nuclear deterrent in the face of Russian aggression on its eastern borders. But it may not wish to do so indefinitely. Should the parties become complacent with the situation, deterrence may once again suffer as a result of benign neglect. As recently as 6 years ago NATO's nuclear forces faced the possibility of withering away, and some member states welcomed that possibility. Furthermore, the next nuclear modernization cycle is quickly approaching, as certain states with DCA responsibilities must consider whether to modernize their fleets with new nuclear-capable bombers.<sup>64</sup> This will require substantial political will and judicious leadership in the face of economic costs and possible societal opposition. Yet it may have to be done to retain Alliance cohesion and a viable deterrent.

NATO remains the ultimate guarantor of European security. Today, it is once again placing increased emphasis on its core mission of collective defence. As a political and military alliance charged with defending its member states' territory, people, and vital interests, this is NATO's primary mission. All other missions added since the end of the Cold War are secondary to this. In its recent summit declarations, as well as in the US NPR, NATO members reminded the world, including their own publics and potential adversaries, of this responsibility.

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<sup>63</sup> See Woolf [29]. Also see Lunn [30] and Shulte [31].

<sup>64</sup> For representative reporting on this modernization dilemma, see Goure [32].



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