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## NATO'S Nuclear Future: Deter, Reassure, Engage?

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### SUMMARY

NATO leaders meet in Warsaw in July 2016 facing a complex security and political environment and an array of threats. The alliance must now focus on crafting defense policies and programs that support a balanced approach to deterrence, reassurance, and engagement and reflect the interests of all allies. In defending its core interests, NATO should demonstrate a willingness to engage Russia on both differences and areas of potential cooperation and seek to reduce tensions in a region that remains central to global security.

Simon Lunn, Isabelle Williams, and Steve Andreasen



## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

The NATO Summit in July 2016 is an important opportunity for NATO members to craft a balanced approach to deterrence, reassurance, and engagement and reflect the interests of all allies. In this paper the authors offer the following key recommendations:

- The alliance must seek to avoid escalating tensions and drifting toward a new confrontation with Russia when taking steps at the Warsaw summit to strengthen NATO's deterrence and defense posture and reassure allies.
- Strengthening NATO deterrence and defense should be accompanied by dialogue with Russia on both differences and areas of potential cooperation. Engaging Russia on the risk of an accident, mistake, or miscalculation leading to an unintended conflict should be a high priority.
- NATO defense policies and programs must be derived from a balanced threat and capabilities assessment that reflects the interests of all allies; they should not simply mirror those of Russia.
- NATO's enhanced conventional capabilities should be sufficient for credible deterrence in the east and flexible for other contingencies. An enhanced forward presence should avoid levels and deployments that could reinforce the perception of offensive intent.
- Allies should refrain from taking steps in Warsaw relating to NATO's nuclear policies or posture that could be seen as lowering the threshold for nuclear use or reinforcing the peacetime basing of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons in Europe.
- After Warsaw, Washington and NATO should reconfigure the nuclear component of NATO's deterrence and defense posture based on the continuing requirement to strengthen NATO's conventional capabilities and the increasing risk of a terrorist attack against NATO nuclear bases. This would include consolidating U.S. tactical nuclear weapons back to the United States; redirecting resources now committed to modernizing the B61 nuclear bomb and NATO dual-capable aircraft to conventional reassurance initiatives; and establishing a safer, more credible nuclear posture with updated nuclear sharing arrangements with allies, making clear that NATO will remain a nuclear alliance for as long as nuclear weapons exist.
- Nuclear threat reduction through engagement with Russia must remain an integral part of alliance policy.

### **About the Nuclear Threat Initiative**

The Nuclear Threat Initiative works to protect our lives, environment, and quality of life now and for future generations. We work to prevent catastrophic attacks with weapons of mass destruction and disruption (WMDD)—nuclear, biological, radiological, chemical, and cyber. Founded in 2001 by former U.S. Senator Sam Nunn and philanthropist Ted Turner, NTI is guided by a prestigious, international board of directors. Sam Nunn serves as chief executive officer; Des Browne is vice chairman; and Joan Rohlfing serves as president.

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# Foreword

By Former Senator Sam Nunn, NTI Co-Chairman and Chief Executive Officer

The crisis in Euro-Atlantic security today has severely damaged the NATO-Russian relationship and eroded trust among Europe, Russia, and the United States. Political and military communication and cooperation in this vital region has been all but frozen since the crisis in Ukraine erupted more than two years ago, and there is an ongoing risk of conflict—either intended or unintended—fueled by continuing political tensions and military actions.

So with a wary eye on Moscow and a focus on strengthening deterrence and defense, NATO members convene in Warsaw in July for the 2016 Summit. Will they set a path that holds promise for reducing the danger of conflict or one that drifts closer to confrontation?

This paper, by three respected security experts, offers important recommendations for adopting a balanced approach to strengthening deterrence and defense, reassuring vulnerable allies, and engaging with Russia. They assert, and I agree, that all three pillars, including a commitment to renew dialogue with Moscow, must be present—and integrated—in order to build a sound foundation for improving Euro-Atlantic security.

NATO and Russia can no longer afford to treat dialogue as a bargaining chip when the region holds more than 90 percent of the world's nuclear weapons and weapons-usable nuclear materials, as well as large concentrations of conventional forces. At the height of the Cold War, the West and Russia worked together to maintain strategic stability by fostering an open and direct dialogue, and we did not allow communications on nuclear issues to be held hostage to whatever else was wrong in the relationship. If we could do it then, why can't we do it now?

Today we are in a race between cooperation and catastrophe, and cooperation seems to be moving slowly and often backward. Unless we change course together, we risk leaving a more dangerous world for our children and our grandchildren than the one we inherited at the end of the Cold War.

# Introduction

The 2016 NATO Summit comes at a time when the security and cohesion of Europe has been badly shaken by numerous destabilizing factors. These include terrorist attacks in Brussels and Paris and a continuous influx of refugees; questions from the United States, including by a major-party candidate for president, about the value and cost of the transatlantic link; and a deteriorating relationship with Russia that has increased the perceived, if not potential, threat of nuclear weapons.

Today, tensions between Moscow and NATO, elevated by Moscow's illegal annexation of Crimea and by its continuing support for separatists in Ukraine, are high. Military activities are becoming increasingly unconstrained, and dialogue at both the political and military levels is limited. This unpredictable and unstable situation creates an ominous sense of drift toward an inevitable confrontation with potentially catastrophic consequences.

In Warsaw, NATO members must avoid exacerbating a cycle of action and reaction while devising a consensus-based strategic response to the current environment that addresses competing priorities. These priorities include deterring and defending against perceived threats from the east and south; reassuring allies who feel vulnerable by providing credible and flexible conventional capabilities for a wide range of contingencies; reflecting allies' long-held nonproliferation and disarmament commitments; and engaging Russia at all levels to reduce tension and create long-term stability.

During the Cold War, nuclear catastrophe was averted through caution, careful engagement, and dialogue. Today these elements are dangerously absent. In a region that holds 90 percent of the world's nuclear weapons and weapons-usable nuclear materials, dialogue is essential to maintain stability. If allies do not adopt a balanced approach in Warsaw and beyond, they risk sleepwalking into a new nuclear confrontation—with all the inherent dangers that entails for the region.

# Political and Security Environment Facing NATO Members

Given the current challenging political and security environment, internal NATO deliberations have been focused on the effectiveness of NATO's deterrence and defense. Rethinking how NATO deters and defends against threats from the east and finds a suitable strategy to deal with challenges from the south is a daunting task for an alliance whose focus for much of the past decade has been out-of-area contingencies in Afghanistan and Libya.

Complicating this endeavor is a political climate in both the United States and much of Europe that is making consensus even more difficult. Although debates over NATO burden-sharing have been held for decades in Washington, it has been many years since NATO has emerged as an issue in U.S. presidential politics. This year a major-party candidate has called NATO "obsolete" and accused NATO of "ripping off" the American taxpayer and failing to contribute its fair share.<sup>1,2</sup>

The basis for such charged comments is a growing resentment that the United States pays nearly three-quarters of total defense spending by NATO members and realization that most European members may have difficulty in increasing their share anytime soon. Last year, the United States spent about \$650 billion on global military operations, accounting for slightly more than 72 percent of NATO members' total defense expenditures.<sup>3,4</sup>

Although some European NATO members have increased their spending on defense, most are faced with competing defense and domestic priorities that will continue to limit any increases. The effects of the 2008–2009 global recession and Europe's austerity policies are still being felt across the continent. The refugee crisis has become a major focus of European politics, requiring additional spending, threatening social cohesion, and undercutting solidarity between members. Moreover, a British exit from the European Union could have spillover effects on Britain's NATO membership, or at least its commitment.

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## NATO's Eastern Borders

As long as Russia continues its intervention in Ukraine, NATO has made clear it cannot be "business as usual." At the same time, there is general agreement on the need to follow a dual-track policy of increasing NATO's ability to defend against aggression (as outlined below) while selectively and carefully working to re-engage with Russia.

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<sup>1</sup> Ashley Parker, "Donald Trump Says NATO Is 'Obsolete,' UN Is Political Game," *New York Times*, April 2, 2016, available at [www.nytimes.com/politics/first-draft/2016/04/02/donald-trump-tells-crowd-hed-be-fine-if-nato-broke-up](http://www.nytimes.com/politics/first-draft/2016/04/02/donald-trump-tells-crowd-hed-be-fine-if-nato-broke-up).

<sup>2</sup> This argument resonated with the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, who pressed NATO's Secretary General Stoltenberg publicly on this point during his April trip to Washington. See John Hudson, "Senators Slam NATO Free-Riders in Closed-Door Meeting with Secretary General," *The Cable, Foreign Policy*, April 6, 2016, available at <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/04/06/senators-slam-nato-free-riders-in-closed-door-meeting-with-secretary-general>.

<sup>3</sup> Expenditure related to NATO membership and activities is difficult to quantify. Note these figures represent U.S. spending for global affairs.

<sup>4</sup> "Defence Expenditures of NATO Countries (2008–2015)," NATO Press Release PR/CP(2016)011, January 28, 2016, available at [www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf\\_2016\\_01/20160129\\_160128-pr-2016-11-eng.pdf#page=3](http://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2016_01/20160129_160128-pr-2016-11-eng.pdf#page=3).

There is no question that Russian foreign and defense policy will remain a challenge for NATO for the foreseeable future. Given that reality, all members appear to agree that it is in the interest of the alliance and the stability of the Euro-Atlantic region to engage in a dialogue with Russia that recognizes both sharp differences and shared interests. At the same time deep differences remain among members on how and under what conditions a policy of re-engagement should be implemented.

## NATO's Southern Borders

Due to the complexity and volatility of the situation there is far less clarity about NATO's actions on its southern borders. NATO's decision to deploy a multinational naval force to the Aegean Sea to help control the flow of refugees from Turkey highlights increasing concern about Mediterranean security and challenges from the south. These include the mounting refugee crisis, the challenges posed by the Islamic State (ISIS), and the increased threat of terrorism.

# NATO's Conventional Forces Policy

To address the current scope of threats, the alliance needs to maintain a range of capabilities covering conventional forces, nuclear weapons, and missile defense. Because the threats will inevitably change, it is important that allies promote a flexible approach, including the ability to deploy mobile conventional forces where they are most needed, east or south.

In central and eastern Europe, however, some allies are insisting on enhanced forward land presence on the eastern borders with enough combat capability to create doubt about whether an aggressor could prevail.

How much combat capability is enough to deter Russia remains an open question. The calculation depends on assessments of military capabilities and political intentions in Moscow and on assumptions of what NATO and Russian forces can be brought to bear and in what time frame. These are calculations that will certainly change over time as Russia adjusts its position and forces in response to NATO's policies.

Precise numbers will be agreed in Warsaw, but early press reports suggest a commitment of four battalions to the eastern flank from different members, with the degree of permanence nuanced by reference to “persistent” and “rotational” deployments.<sup>5</sup> Most observers believe this force is below a “substantial” deployment—the limiting but undefined term used in the NATO Russia Founding Act. Russia, on the other hand, will inevitably claim the force is “substantial.” This will almost certainly lead to a cycle of force adjustments on either side and a consequential increase in tensions. Although the current numbers may be too low to risk a renewed confrontation, NATO should avoid levels and deployments that could reinforce the perception of offensive intent.

Ensuring a robust defense in the east for the purpose of deterrence while maintaining a degree of flexibility in order to respond to other contingencies presents a real challenge for alliance defense planners and contributing nations. At the same time, agreement and eventual implementation of this enhanced forward presence places a new premium on restarting a dialogue with Russia on respective defense postures. Without such discussions there is a serious risk of a continual cycle of action and reaction.

An additional cause for alarm is the increase in the intensity and gravity of incidents involving Russian military and security agencies, along with the quantity and complexity of military activities along NATO's eastern border.<sup>6</sup> As NATO takes steps to enhance its capabilities and activities increase, one key issue that must urgently be addressed is the potential risk of an accident, mistake, or miscalculation leading to an unintended conflict. Given current trends, this situation can only get worse, and it makes developing a balanced approach to deterrence and dialogue, including crisis avoidance and crisis management, even more essential and urgent in Warsaw.

Members will also have to address the instability in the south, because it is possible that at some point the rapid response forces developed for NATO's eastern borders will need to be deployed in the south (e.g., Libya).<sup>7</sup> This possibility reinforces the call for flexibility in alliance deterrence policy to address the diverse nature of threats being faced. It also risks conflicting with calls from eastern allies for a more “permanent” commitment to their security.

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<sup>5</sup> In addition to these plans, elements of a U.S. armored brigade based in Germany will also be available from 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Ian Kearns, Lukasz Kulesa, and Thomas Frear, *Preparing for the Worst: Are Russian and NATO Military Exercises Making War in Europe More Likely?*, European Leadership Network, August 12, 2015, available at [www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/preparing-for-the-worst-are-russian-and-nato-military-exercises-making-war-in-europe-more-likely\\_2997.html](http://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/preparing-for-the-worst-are-russian-and-nato-military-exercises-making-war-in-europe-more-likely_2997.html).

<sup>7</sup> Ian Lesser, *NATO Looks South*, German Marshall Fund, February 17, 2016, available at [www.gmfus.org/blog/2016/02/16/natos-aegean-deployment-shape-things-come](http://www.gmfus.org/blog/2016/02/16/natos-aegean-deployment-shape-things-come).

# NATO's Nuclear Policy

In Warsaw, members appear unlikely to revise any of the principal elements underlying the role of nuclear weapons in NATO's 2010 Strategic Concept or 2012 Deterrence and Defense Posture Review (DDPR).<sup>8</sup> However, some allies may seek an alliance statement that selectively highlights from these documents. For example, some may wish to add back the reference in the 2010 Strategic Concept to “peacetime basing” that was dropped from the 2012 DDPR and avoid any mention of the possibility of further cuts in tactical nuclear weapons as mentioned in both the Strategic Concept and the DDPR. Some allies also may push for a statement that commits to increase the readiness of alliance nuclear forces. Looking ahead, these allies are likely to want to initiate work on changes to the alliance's nuclear posture.

As discussed later, however, it is important that allies avoid steps in Warsaw and beyond that could preclude further consolidation of U.S. nuclear weapons stored in Europe back to the United States as part of future efforts to establish a safer, more credible, and more affordable nuclear posture.

NATO's nuclear policy also should be viewed as part of a larger effort to strengthen alliance deterrence and defense capabilities following Russian actions in Ukraine. During the Cold War, alliance strategy was determined by the relationship between its nuclear and conventional forces; for decades, perceived deficiencies in conventional forces meant greater reliance on the nuclear element. Today, Russian officials frequently argue that their nuclear weapons are needed to compensate for deficiencies in their conventional forces and the resulting imbalance in overall force levels.<sup>9</sup> NATO members must remain mindful of this dynamic as they plot their future course.

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## Extended Deterrence

The core of NATO strategy historically lies in translating the deterrence extended by the United States—including the nuclear guarantee—in a way that responds to the security concerns of all allies. The degree of deterrence and reassurance sought depends on perceptions of the threat that are based on assessments of capability and intent. Today, perceptions within the alliance of the threat posed by Russia differ sharply. Some countries are convinced that Russia is a potential adversary, whereas others still look for some form of partnership with Russia on common threats and interests. Summarizing the difference between the demands of deterrence and reassurance, former U.K. Defense Minister Denis Healey once noted that “it takes only five percent credibility of American retaliation to deter the Russians but ninety-five percent credibility to reassure the Europeans.”<sup>10</sup> The observation remains valid for some allies, particularly those bordering Russia.

Discussions within the alliance on NATO's nuclear posture should maintain a sense of proportion and perspective, and where appropriate, draw on past experiences. The Cold War was a period in which the mutual fear of nuclear war underpinned relations and drove the need for restraint and engagement—a different context than that which exists today. Nevertheless, the characteristics of nuclear weapons and the consensus-driven nature of alliance politics—although more complex today due to the addition of new members in direct contact with Russia—do not change.

<sup>8</sup> For an assessment of the discussion of the role of nuclear weapons in the development of the DDPR, see Simon Lunn, “The Role and Place of Nuclear Weapons—A NATO Perspective” in *Tactical Nuclear Weapons and NATO*, eds. Tom Nichols, Douglas Stuart, and Jeffrey D. McCausland (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> This relationship means that improvements to NATO's conventional forces that might reduce reliance on its nuclear forces inevitably risks having the opposite effect on Russian forces. This inconvenient reality emphasizes the need for dialogue on force structures and doctrines.

<sup>10</sup> Denis Healey, *Time of My Life* (London: Michael Joseph, 1989), 243.



The recent attention to nuclear policy and the potential for review and revisions within NATO was triggered by provocative statements from Russian officials on the possible role of nuclear weapons in Russian security policy.<sup>11</sup> Some allies interpret these statements, heard in the context of various military exercises and movements, as Russia intimidating NATO members by demonstrating the threat of its nuclear capabilities.<sup>12</sup> This concern is understandable. The existence of nuclear weapons casts an ominous shadow over any European crisis, and loose talk that suggests their usability worries both leaders and publics.

Nevertheless, it is important to remember that statements and military activities have their own logic and rationale, in addition to conveying messages. Russian statements can be seen as intimidating but likely are designed to make clear to NATO members the potential consequences of certain political and military actions they see as a direct threat to Russian security. NATO military activities and statements likewise make clear the deterrent role of its nuclear posture<sup>13</sup>—NATO officials frequently note that NATO's deterrent capabilities are working every day—and presumably send similar messages to Moscow.<sup>14</sup>

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It is impossible to know whether and under what circumstances President Vladimir Putin would be willing to use nuclear weapons. There is an underlying assumption by some that Russia has a lower threshold for the use of nuclear weapons than leaders in the West, but it is equally important to remember that the devastating and sobering laws of nuclear physics remain the same for both sides. Using any nuclear weapon is a forbidding and awesome prospect with unknowable but certainly horrific consequences.

Similar qualifications must be added to discussions of using nuclear weapons for escalation or de-escalation. Both concepts amount to the same thing—the limited use of a nuclear weapon to influence an adversary's actions. Both are typically couched in language aimed at making the use of nuclear weapons credible, and both show an astonishing disregard for the immense and unpredictable consequences of even one nuclear detonation.

Some observers also believe that nuclear weapons are more integrated into Russian military thinking, although this is not a recent development.<sup>15</sup> There has always been a difference between military preparation and the political decision to use nuclear weapons, and it is problematic to compare a collective entity of 28 members to a single state. Clearly it is easier for a single state to make and communicate decisions than it is for a consensus-based organization.

Nevertheless, the concerns expressed by ministers over the credibility of alliance nuclear policy suggest that adjustments will continue to be sought by some members, and talks have been underway in the relevant planning groups. Achieving agreement on any changes to existing policies will require reconciling the diverse approaches of members to the role of nuclear weapons in alliance strategy. For some members, the credibility of NATO deterrence requires a greater emphasis on nuclear weapons and thinking through their use by way of declaratory policy, exercises, and credible capabilities. For these members, the storage of U.S. nuclear warheads in Europe has political and symbolic significance as the visible demonstration of the U.S. commitment.

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<sup>11</sup> Robert Burns and Josh Lederman, "U.S. Defense Secretary Says Russia Is Nuclear Sabre-Rattling" Associated Press, May 3, 2016, available at <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/05e706bea1814cbd8d691ffe27da5a76/defense-secy-carter-says-russia-nuclear-saber-rattling>.

<sup>12</sup> Jacek Durkalec, *Nuclear-Backed "Little Green Men:" Nuclear Messaging in the Ukraine Crisis*, (Warsaw: Polish Institute of International Affairs, July 2015), available at [www.pism.pl/publications/PISM-reports/Nuclear-Backed-Little-Green-Men-Nuclear-Messaging-in-the-Ukraine-Crisis](http://www.pism.pl/publications/PISM-reports/Nuclear-Backed-Little-Green-Men-Nuclear-Messaging-in-the-Ukraine-Crisis).

<sup>13</sup> For example, NATO frequently deploys dual capable aircraft on various missions, including Baltic Air Policing.

<sup>14</sup> Although military activities are frequently used for communicating messages, it is not always clear that everyone is using the same language; the issue of military activities is one that calls urgently for discussions with Russia, as called for by the European Leadership Network.

<sup>15</sup> For discussion of the Russian views on nuclear weapons, see the respective contributions of Jacob W. Kipp and Nicolai Sokov in *Tactical Nuclear Weapons and NATO*, eds. Tom Nichols, Douglas Stuart, and Jeffrey D. McCausland (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2012).

Allies must be cautious, however, about taking any steps that could be seen as lowering the nuclear threshold by making the use of nuclear weapons more likely. Because of their characteristics, the short-range nuclear systems based in Europe are in many respects the least “usable” nuclear weapons, as well as vulnerable targets for terrorists.<sup>16</sup> As is discussed later, the alliance must now focus on reducing the role of nuclear weapons while maintaining a safer and more credible nuclear posture and enhancing NATO’s conventional capabilities.

## The Logic of “Coupling”

The arrangements in place for the United States to provide extended nuclear deterrence in Europe add a further dimension to the debate. The credibility of NATO’s nuclear deterrence rests on perceptions of the capability and willingness of the United States to protect its allies. However, different perceptions are held by different audiences, among them the protector, the protected, and the assumed aggressor. For some members, the threat of a response involving the alliance’s strategic nuclear forces (held by the United States, Britain, and France) is enough. For other members, credibility requires the location of U.S. warheads in Europe and alliance nuclear sharing arrangements—known as “coupling.”<sup>17</sup>

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Currently coupling takes the form of U.S. warheads deployed in Europe for use on the dual capable aircraft (DCA) of four allies as the non-U.S. contribution to the NATO nuclear deterrent. The use of alliance DCAs for a nuclear response would follow appropriate alliance consultation. The final decision for the release of these warheads remains with the U.S. president.

It is not, however, the physical stationing of U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe that will determine the future credibility of extended nuclear deterrence and the nuclear cohesion of the alliance. As stated in the 2010 Strategic Concept, “The supreme guarantee of the security of the Allies is provided by the strategic nuclear forces of the alliance, particularly those of the United States.” Much more important is credible nuclear sharing—the readiness of the United States to keep the allies informed about nuclear issues and the willingness of the allies to contribute to the common deterrence effort.

NATO in the past had very elaborate sharing agreements focused on four areas: (1) information sharing, (2) nuclear consultations, (3) common nuclear planning, and (4) common execution. These agreements all stemmed from the Cold War and must be adapted for existing and future security challenges. If NATO, over time, is able to further evolve the system of nuclear sharing, it will have a safer, more secure, and more credible extended nuclear deterrence without the need for U.S. nuclear bombs being stationed in Europe.

Of course, any move to consolidate U.S. B61s now stored in Europe back to the United States will be opposed by some NATO members as signaling weakness to Moscow. So for enhanced nuclear sharing to be perceived politically as “adequate,” members who have had little or no substantial involvement in NATO’s nuclear planning will need to be engaged in evolving the system of nuclear sharing—and reassured that a new posture is safe, secure, and credible.

## Financial Considerations

Looking to Warsaw and beyond, the alliance should be assessing all capabilities and resources based on existing and emerging threats and still-declining defense budgets in many countries. This must include the financial considerations relating to maintaining the current nuclear arrangement, including the opportunity costs relating to conventional forces.

The current life-extension program for the U.S. B61 tactical nuclear bombs (the type deployed in Europe) would consolidate both the strategic and non-strategic variants of the B61 into one weapon (the B61-12), with the first production unit

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<sup>16</sup> Karl-Heinz Kamp and Robertus C.N. Remkes, “Options for NATO Nuclear Sharing Arrangements,” and Robertus C.N. Remkes, “The Security of NATO Nuclear Weapons: Issues and Implications” in *Reducing Nuclear Risks in Europe*, eds. Steve Andreasen and Isabelle Williams (Washington, DC: Nuclear Threat Initiative, November 2011), available at [www.nti.org/analysis/articles/reducing-nuclear-risks-europe-framework-action-full-report/](http://www.nti.org/analysis/articles/reducing-nuclear-risks-europe-framework-action-full-report/).

<sup>17</sup> Despite the obvious point that the physical location or presence of a weapon has little relevance to the certainty of response, some allies continue to adhere to the symbolic value of the presence in Europe of U.S. nuclear warheads, notwithstanding the security risks and costs identified in this paper.

available in 2019. Approximately 400 B61-12s are to be produced by the end of 2023; roughly half of those weapons would be deployed in Europe. A January 2014 report estimated that the B61-12 is projected to cost \$13 billion through 2038.<sup>18</sup>

NATO DCA are also reaching the end of their original service lives. Estimates regarding the financial costs of either extending the life of existing aircraft or providing funds for nuclear-capable replacement aircraft, particularly the F-35, are not as precise as those for the B61 life extension program. That said, giving the F-35 the capability to deliver the B61 will add hundreds of millions of dollars (or euros) to the price of the aircraft (\$350 million in the United States alone)—with hundreds of millions of dollars or euros more to upgrade and maintain nuclear storage facilities in Europe.<sup>19</sup>

In view of current trends and the emphasis on strengthening conventional capabilities, there is a strong case to be made for continuing conventional reassurance requirements beyond what is now budgeted by the United States. New resources from Washington and Europe will be needed to pay for increasing and then sustaining the American military presence in Europe, providing more exercises and training, and building partner capacity. Washington and NATO allies should consider redirecting the large amounts associated with modernizing the B61 to decisively alter the nuclear component of NATO's defense posture and use these savings to capitalize various conventional reassurance initiatives over at least the next five years.

*A substantial portion of the savings from restructuring NATO's nuclear deterrent could be applied to sustaining and expanding conventional reassurance over the next five years.*

Under this scenario, NATO would commit to restructuring NATO's nuclear deterrent so that it is safer, more credible, and more affordable. This will include maintaining the supreme guarantee provided by the strategic nuclear forces of the alliance, particularly those of the United States, and providing a more visible demonstration of this guarantee to European allies (e.g., visits of U.S. strategic bombers to European bases), modifying NATO nuclear sharing arrangements to enhance information sharing, consultations, common planning, common execution, and phasing in a consolidation of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons to the United States.

The U.S. B61 modernization program and associated DCA modernization would then be scaled back, and a substantial portion of the savings from restructuring NATO's nuclear deterrent could be applied to sustaining and expanding conventional reassurance over the next five years.

## Security Considerations

Another key factor in the current debate that must be addressed is the risk of a terrorist attack against a European NATO base. In March, the Pentagon reportedly ordered military families out of southern Turkey, primarily from Incirlik Air Base, due to ISIS-related security concerns.<sup>20</sup> This report came shortly after the Brussels terrorist attacks and what appears to have been a credible threat to Belgian nuclear power plants.<sup>21</sup> It is fair to hypothesize from these two recent developments that terrorists are aware of and targeting NATO bases and nuclear-related sites—perhaps in countries (still not identified by NATO) that host nuclear weapons storage facilities.

<sup>18</sup> Jon B. Wolfsthal, Jeffrey Lewis, and Marc Quint, *Trillion Dollar Nuclear Triad: US Strategic Modernization over the Next Thirty Years* (Monterey, CA: James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies, January 2014), available at [http://cns.miis.edu/opapers/pdfs/140107\\_trillion\\_dollar\\_nuclear\\_triad.pdf](http://cns.miis.edu/opapers/pdfs/140107_trillion_dollar_nuclear_triad.pdf).

<sup>19</sup> Barry Blechman and Russell Rumbaugh, "Bombs Away: The Case for Phasing Out U.S. Tactical Nukes in Europe," *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2014, available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/europe/2014-05-29/bombs-away>.

<sup>20</sup> Barbara Starr, Ryan Browne and Elise Labott, "Pentagon Orders Military Families Out of Turkey Due to ISIS Threat," CNN.com, available at [www.cnn.com/2016/03/29/politics/pentagon-orders-military-families-to-leave-southern-turkey/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/2016/03/29/politics/pentagon-orders-military-families-to-leave-southern-turkey/index.html).

A U.S. defense official told CNN that the base had been placed under Force Protection Condition Delta for weeks, the highest level of force protection for U.S. military bases. Delta level means that either a terrorist attack has just taken place in the immediate vicinity or "intelligence has been received that terrorist action against a specific location or person is imminent," according to military guidelines.

<sup>21</sup> Alissa J. Rubin and Milan Schreuer, "Belgium Fears Nuclear Plants Are Vulnerable," *New York Times*, March 25, 2016, available at [www.nytimes.com/2016/03/26/world/europe/belgium-fears-nuclear-plants-are-vulnerable.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/26/world/europe/belgium-fears-nuclear-plants-are-vulnerable.html).

The issue of the security of U.S. nuclear weapons stored in Europe is not new; indeed, deficiencies were cited a few years ago in a study by the U.S. Air Force.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, former senior NATO officials, including a former U.S. Air Force General who commanded the 39th wing at Incirlik Air Base and later J5 EUCOM, wrote in 2011 of the ongoing security risks associated with storing tactical nuclear weapons in Europe and the severity of the political and security consequences of any infiltration of a site for the alliance, whether or not the attackers gained access to the weapons themselves.<sup>23</sup>

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*It should be even clearer now that tactical nuclear weapons stored in Europe are potential targets for terrorist attacks.*

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The terrorist threat to Europe is evolving. It should be even clearer now that tactical nuclear weapons stored in Europe are potential targets for terrorist attacks. The question is whether NATO can take the steps to reduce this threat by removing tactical nuclear weapons from Europe before an incident occurs and NATO is asked why it did not do more sooner. Given their far larger stockpile of tactical nuclear weapons, Russia too should reexamine the current practice of storing tactical nuclear weapons in Europe.

In the wake of a successful terrorist attack against a NATO nuclear storage site, it will be difficult to explain that vulnerable and potentially lethal targets were left in place due to a need for visible reassurance. As described, there are ways to reduce risk by removing the obvious targets but providing the required assurance of extended deterrence through less visible, less dangerous, and less costly means.

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<sup>22</sup> Hans M. Kristensen, "USAF Report: 'Most' Nuclear Weapon Sites in Europe Do Not Meet U.S. Security Requirements," FAS Strategic Security Blog, June 19, 2008, available at <https://fas.org/blogs/security/2008/06/usaf-report-most-nuclear-weapon-sites-in-europe-do-not-meet-us-security-requirements/#>.

<sup>23</sup> Robertus C.N. Remkes, "The Security of NATO Nuclear Weapons: Issues and Implications" in *Reducing Nuclear Risks in Europe*, eds. Steve Andreasen and Isabelle Williams (Washington, DC: Nuclear Threat Initiative, November 2011), available at [www.nti.org/analysis/articles/reducing-nuclear-risks-europe-framework-action-full-report/](http://www.nti.org/analysis/articles/reducing-nuclear-risks-europe-framework-action-full-report/).



## Conclusion

Looking to Warsaw, alliance policy makers must agree and articulate a comprehensive strategy that addresses the wide range of threats facing the region. NATO defense policies and programs should not simply mirror those of Russia; rather, they must be derived from a balanced threat and capabilities assessment that reflects the interests of all allies.

Maintaining the credibility of deterrence will involve measures to reassure allies who feel most vulnerable. Wherever possible, these measures should be designed and implemented to avoid exacerbating tensions and demonstrate a willingness to engage Russia on both our differences and areas of potential cooperation, such as reducing risks of accidental conflict. It is now even more urgent that NATO's nuclear policies and posture—including the future of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons stored in Europe—be cast in a larger security framework that focuses on how NATO's nuclear posture can be made safer, more credible, and more secure. Such a framework should be built on an updated set of understandings and arrangements within NATO, agreed on by member states, and designed to strengthen the trans-Atlantic security guarantee.

An essential element of a new nuclear policy will be a concomitant willingness to strengthen conventional capabilities. Arriving at a conventional posture that is sufficient for deterrence but does not provoke will not be easy but can best be done through engagement with Russia.

There are important incentives for NATO to contribute to the definition of the contours of a new security strategy for the Euro-Atlantic region, one that includes reassurance and deterrence—but also engagement and dialogue. Indeed, that dual approach must be the basis for the way ahead. Leaders from the West should continue to offer to discuss with Russia pathways out of the current crisis in Ukraine. Without new diplomacy during this difficult period, NATO's efforts to provide reassurance risk contributing to another generation of East-West tension, confrontation, and consequently a higher risk of conflict.

## Authors

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# NTI Resources

Resources from NTI related to discussions leading up to the 2016 NATO Summit in Warsaw:

- Steve Andreasen and Isabelle Williams, “How to Shore Up NATO for the Long Haul,” *Politico*, February 26, 2016.
- Des Browne, Wolfgang Ischinger, Igor Ivanov, and Sam Nunn. *Building Mutual Security in the Euro-Atlantic Region: Report Prepared for Presidents, Prime Ministers, Parliamentarians, and Publics*. Washington, DC: Nuclear Threat Initiative, 2013.
- Steve Andreasen and Isabelle Williams, eds. *Reducing Nuclear Risks in Europe: A Framework for Action*. Washington, DC: Nuclear Threat Initiative, 2011.

These resources can all be found at [www.nti.org/Warsaw](http://www.nti.org/Warsaw).



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