

GERMANY OPENS PANDORA'S BOX

By Franklin Miller, George Robertson and Kori Schake

The agreement that brought Germany's ruling parties into coalition in November 2009 committed Chancellor Angela Merkel's government to "the withdrawal of all US nuclear weapons from Germany". Senior Americans close to President Barack Obama are said to be similarly advocating the elimination of nuclear weapons stationed in NATO countries. We believe these steps would be damaging, both to Germany and the alliance as a whole.

Since the 1950s, NATO countries have shared responsibility for the stationing and potential use of nuclear weapons. As NATO's 1999 strategic concept states, the alliance believes that "the presence of US nuclear forces based in Europe and committed to NATO provides an essential political and military link between the European and North American members of the alliance, demonstrates alliance solidarity [and] the common commitment of its member countries to maintaining their security." This formula has worked well over the decades, even as the threats facing NATO have changed, as has the alliance's nuclear posture. Solidarity among NATO countries rests on the principle that all allies share the burden of defending NATO, and that defence still requires nuclear weapons.

¹ *As this note is published there is some indication that the German government may be moderating its position.*

For Germany to want to remain under the nuclear umbrella while exporting to others the obligation of maintaining it is irresponsible.¹ Moreover, the pressure created by Germany's unilateral announcement will be unhelpful to other countries, especially Turkey and the new member-states. Denied the protection of NATO's nuclear weapons in Europe, Turkey would have additional reasons

to worry about Iran's nuclear programme – and perhaps to develop nuclear weapons of its own. Newer NATO members in Central Europe, who see in the nuclear weapons a symbol of US commitment to defend them, would be left feeling vulnerable. They are likely to respond by demanding that NATO move its forces and bases, now heavily concentrated in Germany, closer to Russian borders.

However, we believe that the proposal could be turned to advantage if NATO collectively negotiated with Moscow asymmetric but multilateral reductions to Russian and allied tactical nuclear arsenals. Such an approach would reaffirm NATO solidarity and the value of nuclear deterrence in preventing aggression, and thus advance the allies' security. It would also set a positive example of western commitment to disarmament in advance of the 2010 review conference of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Nuclear posture

According to the Federation of American Scientists (FAS), the US possesses about 1,200 tactical nuclear weapons, of which 500 are operational warheads (the rest are in storage or in the process of being dismantled). The FAS indicates that 200 of the operational weapons are deployed in Europe, stationed with US and allied air crews in Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy and Turkey.² They are all bombs, to be delivered by aircraft.

² *Federation of American Scientists, <http://www.fas.org/blog/ssp/2009/03/russia-2.php>.*

These 200-odd weapons are the residual force left after NATO cut 85 per cent of its tactical nuclear arsenal in the early 1990s and made additional cuts thereafter. Russia did not make corresponding cuts. NATO also reduced the readiness of its aircraft and crews involved in nuclear missions from response times measured

in minutes and hours to times measured in months. In addition NATO eliminated contingency plans that directed the targeting of the weapons; this means that no NATO nuclear weapons are currently targeted at any country, including Russia.

Their presence in Europe, however, affirms the coupling of US nuclear forces – including US strategic forces – to the defence of NATO's territory. Bluntly put, the nuclear arsenal in Europe serves to put the US homeland at risk to nuclear attack if NATO is forced to resort to using Europe-based nuclear bombs to defend its borders. This in turn signals to any potential aggressor that the risks of an attack against NATO far outweigh any possible gains.

In contrast, Russia, according to the FAS, currently has 5,400 tactical nuclear weapons, of which approximately 2,000 are deployed and operational for delivery by anti-ballistic missiles, air-defence missiles, tactical aircraft, naval cruise missiles, depth bombs and torpedoes. Russia has resisted NATO's efforts to begin a dialogue on the disparity of these arsenals, or even to disclose their role and exact size.

Germany's commitment

The coalition agreement between the Christian Democratic Union (CDU)/Christian Social Union (CSU) and the Free Democratic Party (FDP) states that "in the course of developing a NATO strategic concept, we will, both in the alliance and towards the American allies, pursue the withdrawal of the remaining nuclear weapons from Germany." The statement was made to give a boost to nuclear disarmament and to discourage the spread of nuclear weapons in advance of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) review conference, which begins in May 2010. A similar proposal advanced by then-Foreign Minister Walter Steinmeyer last April was rejected by Chancellor Merkel. It is a measure of the FDP's strength in the elections that she has now been forced to concede it.

Advisors to Chancellor Merkel say that Germany is just doing its part to further President Barack Obama's policy (the US president has called in early 2009 for a world without nuclear weapons, in order to stop the circle of nuclear powers from expanding). But this is self-serving.

Nuclear disarmament, were it to happen, would need to take place in carefully orchestrated moves, which avoid destabilising existing alliances. The US government has proceeded in small steps, focusing initially on reducing strategic nuclear arsenals with Russia. And President Obama has never called for the removal of tactical nuclear weapons from Europe (though some of his former campaign advisers, now diplomats, did).

The new foreign minister and FDP party chair, Guido Westerwelle, has personally advocated nuclear withdrawal, tapping into Germany's strong anti-nuclear sentiment. His commitment is sure to be a popular stand. It may defuse some public concern about the continuing German contribution to NATO operations in Afghanistan. Perhaps the CDU/CSU agreed to the nuclear weapons pledge in order to offset anti-nuclear activists' concern about extending the life of Germany's nuclear power plants (another element of the coalition agreement).

Even so, encouraging such trade-offs is a risky game, for the principal effects of Germany opening the nuclear issue will not be felt in Germany. While some European NATO countries are probably not too concerned about abolition of the nuclear arsenals (on the grounds that modern Russia represents much less of a threat than the USSR) that complacency is unlikely to be evenly spread throughout Europe; nor will it necessarily be appreciated by potential aggressors.

Burden shedding

The problem with Germany piously stepping first in line to renounce nuclear weapons on its territory is that the country has not concurrently renounced nuclear deterrence. It wants to continue to enjoy the protection of America's nuclear umbrella, without sharing the burden of risk associated with stationing weapons in Germany. In other words, the country wants others to risk nuclear retaliation on its behalf, but it would rather not be a target itself.

That would be a nice deal if Germany could get it. But it is a beggar-thy-neighbour policy. Germany is expecting Britain, the Netherlands, Belgium, Italy, Turkey and the United States to do the hard work of explaining the logic of nuclear deterrence to their own publics so that Germany may enjoy the benefits. Or, worse still, if the German policy were taken up by other governments on the continent, the US would be left alone to bear the burden of defending its European allies. That would not be well regarded by the

American public or by their elected representatives. Nor are other allies satisfied with the current arrangement likely to be impressed.

Turkey

There could scarcely be a worse time to open the nuclear sharing debate in Turkey. Recent revelations of yet another secret Iranian nuclear enrichment plant and the determination by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) that the plant constitutes another Non-Proliferation Treaty violation have dramatically raised the stakes for Turkey. Ankara has in recent years pursued a rapprochement with Tehran; the government has been positioning itself as the natural interlocutor between the West and Iran. But Turkey also competes with its neighbour for power in the Muslim world. The possession of nuclear weapons would strengthen Iranian influence throughout the region. Also, the acquisition of nuclear weapons by Iran could prompt other Middle Eastern states, such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, to follow suit. If so, and if NATO's nuclear guarantee is called into question at the same time, the Turkish government may feel compelled to develop or buy nuclear weapons of its own.

If Turkey moved to acquire nuclear weapons it would have to leave the NPT, at a great damage to the country's reputation and global standing. If it decides to produce them indigenously, Turkey would also need time to build those weapons. This could lead Ankara to try to accommodate rather than confront a nuclear Iran, at least in the interim. German calls for weakening the nuclear pillar of NATO's mutual defence is thus pushing Turkey into more equivocation on Iran's nuclear policy at a time when the West is seeking to demonstrate broad international condemnation of Iran's nuclear activities.

We may already be seeing signs of it: Turkey broke with its NATO allies at the recent meeting of the UN nuclear agency, the IAEA, convened to review Iran's nuclear programmes; it abstained from the vote condemning Iran which even Russia supported. Prime Minister Recep Erdogan has also muted criticism of Iran, repeatedly saying that he does not believe the country's nuclear programme to be aimed at producing weapons. This is partly due to Turkey's new policy of balancing between the West and the Middle East. But equally, the more Germany and others cast doubt on the strength of NATO's nuclear deterrence, the more reasons they give to Ankara to seek accommodation with Iran. This, in turn, further encourages Turkey-sceptics in Europe to oppose the country's accession to the European Union.

Eastern concerns

After the Obama administration's recent decision not to deploy missile defence bases slated for Poland and the Czech Republic, Central Europeans both want and deserve reassurance from other NATO allies. They want a signal, especially from the US, that NATO's commitment to their defence remains firm. Germany's rhetoric on nuclear weapons achieves the exact opposite.

³ See 'NATO's Nuclear Forces in the New Security Environment', <http://www.nato.int/issues/nuclear/sec-environment.html>.

In the mid-1990s, during talks with Russia on NATO enlargement, the alliance declared that it had "no intention, no plans, 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".³ Poland and the Baltic states in particular are likely

to argue with merit that a withdrawal of nuclear weapons from Europe would constitute a material change to those commitments, and to NATO's mutual defence guarantee, 'Article V', as they understood it. They will be particularly worried that the security of the United States is being decoupled from the security of Europe – the new NATO countries still trust the US more than their west European counterparts. The new allies will probably compensate by demanding from NATO a series of war plans and exercises to determine how to adjust operationally to the changes in nuclear posture.

This would spark a corrosive internal debate within NATO.⁴ Russia can be relied upon to claim that any steps to revise NATO defence planning or exercises are provocative (despite the fact that it still possesses 5,400 tactical nuclear weapons. It has also recently completed military exercises in Kaliningrad involving 13,000 Russian and Belarusian troops, which featured a notional nuclear attack on Poland). While without foundation, Moscow's protests would divide the allies, who, even after the Russian exercise, have been unable to agree that full planning should be undertaken for defence of the countries bordering on Russia (though limited planning has taken place, and the United States has agreed to conduct annual military exercises in the Baltic states beginning in the autumn of 2010). A spiral of tensions with Russia would also make it more difficult for the Obama administration to achieve bilateral strategic nuclear reductions with Russia.

⁴ See Tomas Valasek, 'NATO, Russia, and European security', CER working paper, November 2009, for more on the divisions in NATO on how to prepare for a possible conflict with Russia.

Crisis instability

It may be suggested that the alternative to permanent stationing is to ‘remove and deploy’. But a policy of storing nuclear weapons in the US and deploying them to Germany or other NATO countries in times of crisis would be destabilising: Russia would view such deployment as a drastic escalation. For that reason, deployment would be extremely unlikely to occur. This would give enemies every reason to doubt whether the United States would heighten tensions during a crisis by sending nuclear weapons to Europe. Or that a German government in the midst of a crisis would choose to accept them, either for use in defence of a NATO ally or even its own country. To use the clumsy language of NATO communiqués, if the alliance withdrew nuclear weapons from Europe it would make aggression “calculable”. In other words, a potential aggressor could more easily imagine splitting Europe off from the United States.

As a practical matter, the withdrawal of Europe-based weapons to the US would make it difficult for the allies to keep those portions of their forces tasked with deploying the weapons in top fighting shape. They would have to compensate by increasing exercises, which is also likely to raise tensions with Russia and cause concern among domestic critics of nuclear weapons.

To some, these calculations may seem outdated; the use of nuclear weapons seems a very distant prospect. But we should not lose sight of the fact that more and more countries are seeking to acquire these weapons. The world may look very different in even ten years if Iran’s nuclear ambitions set off a spiral of proliferation in the Middle East, or if concerns grow about the security of the Russian nuclear arsenal.

To be fair, German advocates of denuclearising Germany believe that they are helping the cause of non-proliferation by demonstrating that Germany considers itself secure without nuclear weapons. We think it will have the opposite effect. We hope that the German coalition reconsiders, and that Germany and other NATO governments recommit to sharing the political and operational responsibilities for stationing nuclear weapons. In fact, Germany already is: at the recent Munich security conference the new defence minister, Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg, spoke of the need for NATO to maintain “a proper mix” of conventional and nuclear weapons.

A better way

That is not to say that NATO countries should not hold a debate about their nuclear posture. If framed properly, this debate could help to engage the Russians in a US-Russia or NATO-Russia negotiation to reduce tactical nuclear weapons. As we have already noted, the Russian tactical nuclear arsenal is more than five times that of the United States, and more than twenty-six times greater than the inventory of American weapons committed to NATO.

Parity would, of course, be the preferred outcome for NATO countries. Reducing Russia’s tactical nuclear arsenal to the 200 weapons held in NATO would be an extraordinary achievement. The Russians are unlikely to come down that far, or allow NATO to achieve such an outcome without compensation of some kind, but parity is the principle to strive for. It would simplify and therefore speed the negotiations, emphasise the common security that Russia and the West seek, and provide transparency into how NATO plans and conducts its nuclear activities, which increases Russia’s confidence in its own security.

If parity is unachievable, NATO could envision cutting both sides’ forces by a common percentage; deep cuts along these lines could be acceptable as long as European allies retain some credible force on their soil.

We could see such negotiations occurring in any of three different settings: an “INF-treaty” model (based on the 1987 treaty on intermediate-range nuclear weapons), in which the US develops proposals with the allies but represents NATO in one-on-one negotiations with Russia; a “CFE-like” model (based on the Conventional forces in Europe treaty from 1990), taking place outside NATO but with all allied governments represented; or a new model that uses the NATO-Russia Council as the negotiating forum.

The INF model is tried and true and could easily be effective. A CFE-like forum in which all allies had a seat could engender grandstanding of the kind the German coalition government has engaged in, diminishing alliance solidarity and maximising Russian opportunities for sowing discord. A NATO-led negotiation could pose problems for the US Senate, which would have to ratify any treaty on tactical nuclear weapons – it may take a dim view of the NATO secretary-general being the negotiator for reductions of US weapons.

But the Obama administration may see a NATO-led negotiation as the kind of multilateralism that empowers American allies into leadership roles and fosters wider participation. However, Russia has long been uncomfortable with a NATO-Russia frame of reference. While it agreed the creation of the NATO-Russia Council (NRC) in 2002, it has remained unhappy with the lack of progress on the initial ambitious

agenda – a feeling confirmed by lukewarm attitudes to co-operation from the last US administration and some NATO states. Russia tends to see itself as the peer of the United States and it thinks that its rightful

⁵ See Bobo Lo, 'Medvedev and the new European security architecture', CER policy brief, July 2009.

place is across the table from American negotiators, rather than a NATO secretary-general representing the 28 allies. Its recent proposals for new European security architecture seek to preserve the option of speaking to individual NATO states or groups of states, bypassing NATO.⁵

But the NRC may be a useful place for negotiations to occur, if Russia would allow it to become the forum. It includes all the relevant states and is committed to advancing common security among former adversaries. An NRC format would also emphasise the indivisibility of transatlantic security for NATO countries. And a NATO-Russia negotiating format could bring Russia closer to the alliance by involving it deeper in the workings of the bureaucracy in Brussels.

While either the INF model or the NATO-Russia Council forum is possible, the allies should choose the one that offers the best prospect for success in achieving a treaty-based deal with the Russians.

Why both sides win

Whatever format is chosen, a treaty would bring a significant advantage: verification protocols (standard for arms control treaties) would allow inspection of Russian and NATO nuclear storage facilities. The West has long harboured concerns about the security of Russian weapons, and the possibility that they may fall in the hands of terrorists. The allies would be more confident if allowed to take an inventory of Russia's tactical holdings. NATO should also seek to include in the new treaty a common safekeeping standard for nuclear arsenals.

When NATO introduced tactical nuclear weapons in Europe in the 1950s, it did so to compensate for the perceived inferiority of NATO's conventional forces. That concern no longer applies – NATO armies, air forces and navies are the world's best, especially in the high end of the war-fighting spectrum.

If the West is negotiating from a position of such strength, what does Russia stand to gain from agreeing a deal? More, even, than the NATO countries, in our view. It gives Russia a co-operative role in European security at a time when many European countries are suspicious of its motives and political direction. Moscow has sought to redesign European security architecture in recent years, and in 2009 it proposed a new treaty to this effect, which received a cool response in the West. If Russia were to include tactical nuclear weapons among the subjects for talks, it would stand a better chance of convincing its European neighbours that it does not intend to threaten their security.

A new treaty on tactical weapons would also strengthen Russia's disarmament credentials in advance of the NPT review. Russia, like the US and other nuclear powers, has an interest in preserving its right to hold nuclear weapons under the NPT while stemming their spread to other states. One useful way to discourage new countries from seeking to join the nuclear club is for the established powers to start cutting or eliminating their arsenals.

Negotiations on tactical weapons would also give the Russian government the prominent role it desires and reduce the arsenal of Russia's least secure and most vulnerable nuclear weapons (while achieving corresponding cuts from NATO). Moscow faces a growing Islamist insurgency in its southern republics such as Dagestan and it cannot afford to be complacent about the possibility of its nuclear weapons falling into the hands of terrorists. The fewer weapons it has, and the better guarded they are, the more Moscow reduces the probability of this catastrophic scenario.

Little is likely to be achieved before the May 2010 Non-Proliferation Treaty review conference, but if NATO initiated a conversation with the Russians it would achieve the stated effect of the new German government's proposal. And if the negotiations eventually account for and limit Russian nuclear weapons, Chancellor Merkel's government, in an unintended and clumsy way, will have done the alliance a great service.



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