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NATO's Nuclear Guardians:

Why NATO's bureaucracy is unable to initiate change to, or support reform of, Alliance nuclear policy

Introduction

The past few years have seen a resurgence of interest in the nuclear weapons based in Europe under the auspices of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Much of this renewed interest stemmed from a series of reviews and decisions by the North Atlantic Alliance from 2009-2012 (the 2009-2010 Strategic Concept negotiation process; the 2010 Lisbon Summit; the 2011-2012 Deterrence and Defense Posture Review (DDPR) negotiation process; and the 2012 Chicago Summit), in which the continued deployment of U.S. B61 theater nuclear weapons in Europe,¹ and the 'dual-capable' aircraft (DCA) meant to deliver them, were repeatedly examined and discussed by NATO's 28 member nations.

This process has been explored in some detail by outside observers as well, with one exception – the internal dynamics of NATO's committee system, especially as it pertains to Alliance decision-making on NATO's 'nuclear sharing' arrangements, a creaky historical

legacy with roots extending back over half a century ago:

At the December 1956 meeting of the North Atlantic Council, the British (with support from Germany, Holland and Turkey) called for more extensive sharing of short-range nuclear weapons within the alliance in order to reinforce the U.S. guarantee. The French went further, asking the United States to give up its exclusive control over atomic warheads and transfer them to national forces.

Eisenhower, sensitive to the political rationale behind these requests, was neither surprised nor dismayed. Even before the Suez crisis, he had given enthusiastic support to Norstad's proposal that the United States offer delivery systems to the allies and create a stockpile of warheads that would be under the SACEUR's authority and could be released to NATO armies on the

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The views expressed in this paper are the author's own.

command of the North Atlantic Council. John Foster Dulles called this an "act of confidence which would strengthen the fellowship of the North Atlantic Community".²

This paper, based upon a number of interviews with recently serving officials at NATO, explores the history of NATO's structural, internal responses to the vexing issues of nuclear weapons policy and posture, specifically how it chose to delegate such responsibilities within its internal committee structure. It then examines whether that structure, forged and revised as it was during the height of the Cold War, is still fit for purpose. Finally, it offers some suggestions on how NATO can make real changes to its current nuclear policy, and why it must in the near future.

The Origins of NATO's Nuclear Committee Structure

For many years, NATO left the oversight of nuclear weapons-related issues to its normal committee structure; that is, military advice arose from the Military Committee (MC) and political decisions were rendered by the North Atlantic Council (NAC), with subsidiary organizations created under both bodies as needed.³ Thus, in 1954 the MC provided guidance to the NAC on *The Most Effective Pattern Of NATO Military Strength For The Next Few Years*, a document that made 79 references to nuclear weapons and their potential use in its 22 pages.⁴ In contrast, the final communiqué from the NAC in December of that year, which approved the MC report, did not mention nuclear weapons once.⁵

By the early 1960s, however, there was a perception on the part of the U.S. government that Allied officials were insufficiently versed on the unhappy truths of nuclear war-fighting, 'tactical' or otherwise. As one official interviewed for this report noted, '[Then-U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert] McNamara

created the Nuclear Planning Group (NPG) so as to help the other NATO defense ministers understand the horrors of nuclear war.'⁶ This move in December 1966 was considered a success in Washington:

It allowed the member nations to contribute to the decisions that affected them and their publics. It institutionalized and legitimized major decisions and force level requirements made by the Alliance, thus giving a united face to these decisions. This impacted on two important audiences for NATO: the Soviet Union, which could be expected to prefer a divided and rancorous Alliance to which it could direct divisive policy initiatives; and the European members' publics, who would be more apt to accept the arguments given for a particular position if the Alliance seemed firmly behind it. It would also improve the domestic political position of the incumbent party in each participating country.⁷

Another major piece of NATO's nuclear committee puzzle fell in place in October 1977 with the creation of the secretive NPG High Level Group (HLG), made up of senior defense officials from NATO capitals and chaired by the U.S. Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Policy.

The HLG... was created to study NATO's nuclear requirements and the appropriate military and political responses to the Soviet TNF build-up in Eastern Europe... [it] served the innate European desire for ever more consultation with Washington, especially over nuclear matters. It has proved resilient and successful in this respect, as seen by its incorporation into the permanent NATO decision-making structure. It also provides a forum for continued American leadership of the Alliance in matters pertaining to nuclear

weapons, in two ways: first, the U.S. chairmanship of the committee, and second, because matters are often worked out through the interagency process in Washington first, then briefed to the allies in Brussels for their concurrence and approval.⁸

To summarize: The NPG meets at Permanent Representative (Ambassadorial) or Ministerial level and infrequently (usually only once a year); it is chaired by NATO's Secretary General. The HLG meets several times a year, is staffed by senior defense ministry personnel who travel from Allied capitals, and is chaired by a U.S. Assistant Secretary of Defense. Another body, the NPG Staff Group (NPG/SG), meets at least once a week, is staffed by personnel from Allied missions at NATO headquarters in Brussels, and is chaired by the director of NATO's Nuclear Policy Directorate (an American). It prepares for meetings of the NPG and 'carries out detailed work on their behalf'.⁹

It is important to note here that France has chosen not to participate in any of these bodies:

In 1966, President Charles De Gaulle decided to withdraw France from NATO's integrated military structure. This reflected the desire for greater military independence, particularly vis-à-vis the United States, and the refusal to integrate France's nuclear deterrent or accept any form of control over its armed forces.¹⁰

When the NPG was formed a year later, France opted out, and has refused ever since to participate in any of NATO's formal nuclear decision-making bodies, other than in NATO's ultimate forum for policy decisions, the North Atlantic Council (NAC). Even when President Sarkozy brought France back into the

integrated military structure in 2009, nuclear issues were exempt.

It should also be mentioned that the Military Committee has no policy inputs into NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements whatsoever. Policy decisions are made by the NPG and, ultimately, the NAC – once they are promulgated, it falls on the Military Committee to turn political decisions on nuclear matters into military reality:

The Military Committee also plays a key role in the development of NATO's military policy and doctrine within the framework of discussions in the Council, the Nuclear Planning Group and other senior bodies. It is responsible for translating political decision and guidance into military direction to NATO's two Strategic Commanders – Supreme Allied Commander Operations and Supreme Allied Commander Transformation.¹¹

The Military Committee has accordingly produced a number of policy translation documents over the years – from DC 6/1, *The Strategic Concept for the Defense of the North Atlantic Area* on December 1, 1949, to MC 400/2, *Military Committee Guidance for the Military Implementation of the Alliance Strategy* on February 12, 2003. It is unclear when (and whether) MC 400/2 will require substantive modification in the near future, given that recent policy decisions on nuclear sharing have sustained the status quo.

There are other committees at NATO, past and present, which have discussed nuclear issues from a different perspective: arms control, non-proliferation, even disarmament. They share one common trait, however – unlike the policy bodies mentioned above, they have no direct impact on, or control over, NATO's nuclear sharing program. The first of note was the *Special Group on Arms Control and Related*

Matters (SG), created in April 1979, and representing the other side of NATO's 'dual-track decision' to both modernize intermediate-range nuclear forces (INF) and engage the Soviet Union on their withdrawal from Europe:

The SG was very much a European initiative. Published accounts suggest that the German government was the prime mover behind its creation, with the Netherlands acting in strong support. These two states, as prospective INF 'hosts', had an obvious interest in seeing arms control considered. Bureaucratic politics may have played a role more generally. The formation of the SG, which grouped senior officials from national foreign ministries as well as the NATO International Staff and International Military Staff, reflected foreign ministries' interest in securing an equivalent NATO group to the HLG, which was staffed by defense ministries.¹²

The SG, renamed the Special Consultative Group (SCG) and given a more public role in December 1979 when the 'dual-track' decision was announced, did important work within the Alliance by involving Allies in nuclear matters which previously had appeared in Brussels as U.S. government diktats.¹³

The SCG ran out of steam, ironically, when INF negotiations between the Soviet Union and the U.S. shifted into high gear in February 1987 – the deal was completed in an extremely rapid ten months, leaving little time for consultation with Allies. Follow-on discussions to deal with NATO's remaining short-range nuclear forces (SNF) were stymied as well, largely over the belief that verifying the removal of items as small and easy to conceal as nuclear artillery shells would be too difficult.¹⁴ These artillery shells, and other SNF systems, were unilaterally removed from NATO arsenals through the Bush Presidential Nuclear Initiatives (PNI) of 1991-92.¹⁵ This left

only the B61 bomb/DCA weapons system in NATO's nuclear sharing program.

Moving ahead to 2010, NATO's Lisbon Summit declaration reflected the fundamental inability of Allies to agree on meaningful discussions of SNF/TNW reductions. Rather than addressing the concerns of TNW host nations (principally Germany and the Netherlands), Allies would only agree to establish a process for reviewing NATO's 'deterrence and defense posture' ('nuclear posture' was blocked by an unnamed Ally, most likely France) in a 'Deterrence and Defense Posture Review' (DDPR) and to create a new committee to staff work on the DDPR, the WMD Control and Disarmament Committee (WCDC).¹⁶

The final text of the DDPR was misleading in at least one instance:

Allies believe that the Weapons of Mass Destruction Control and Disarmament Committee has played a useful role in the review and agree to establish a committee as a consultative and advisory forum, with its mandate to be agreed by the NAC following the Summit. (DDPR Text, paragraph 30)

In fact, the WCDC's terms of reference were only agreed to after months of discussions, and ultimately the WCDC played no role in negotiating the text of the DDPR (the NATO body which consists of Deputy Permanent Representatives instead ended up with that task). Furthermore, the DDPR language quoted above meant that the whole process had to start over with a new 'consultative and advisory' committee, guaranteeing further months of discussion before the new body could actually do anything – despite the wishes of certain Allies to have the WCDC continue in that very capacity.¹⁷

As predicted, the new committee's terms of reference also took months to negotiate, with consensus only achieved in February 2013.

The agreed-on name for the committee gives some indication of the nature of the nine-month gestational period for its terms of reference: The ‘Special Advisory and Consultative Arms Control, Disarmament and Non-Proliferation Committee’.¹⁸ It also signifies an interest in returning to the SCG concept, where the U.S. will engage bilaterally in negotiations with the Russian Federation on arms control topics, but will consult with Allies on a regular basis via the new committee.

There is no confirmation yet of an acronym for the new committee, but there is hope that ACDC (Arms Control & Disarmament Committee), or perhaps ADNC (Arms Control, Disarmament and Non-proliferation Committee) will win out over the accurate, but hopeless, SACACDN-PC. Currently, analysts are calling the new committee ‘The New Committee’.

Structural Conservatism...

The nuclear committee structure outlined above has been in place since 1977, and appears to be extremely stable – there are no explicit mechanisms in place to amend the structure, and no Allies have suggested fundamental changes for many years. Capitals seem willing to ignore the challenges of the structure itself, perhaps in recognition of the obstacles to anyone seeking reform, as shown in the ongoing debates between the Germans and the French over the new committee.

There is a cultural and institutional bias towards incrementalism or the status quo for several reasons, chief among them the requirement for consensus which favors blocking tactics on the assumption that change is the enemy of cohesion. When suggestions for change appear within NATO’s ranks or from outside, the natural tendency is to pull together to resist them. While there have been major reductions in European TNW deployments over the last 20 years, largely

quietly and on the basis of military judgments or unilateral U.S. moves, more public calls for complete withdrawal of the remaining remnants of the force have met with strong resistance.

...Reinforced by Conservative Forces within the Structure

It may appear to the uninitiated that the end of the Cold War and the lack of a defined threat for NATO would form an important driver for major change in the priorities and planning for the Alliance. The reality is far different, however. Without an external impetus demanding a response, the natural tendency for the Alliance is to stick with strategies it believes have served it well over the years, and for there to be a lack of leadership:

It appears that the United States maintains its nuclear weapons in Europe primarily because it thinks its European allies want it to continue to do so. The European DCA states, on the other hand, remain committed to the nuclear mission largely because they think the United States expects them to do so, remaining reluctant partners in the DCA mission. There is no consensus on the need for nuclear weapons in the Alliance. Both sides are talking past one another—or more accurately, not talking to one another. Nobody wants to rock the boat.¹⁹

In management theory circles, this phenomenon is known as ‘the road to Abilene’: members of a group agree to take actions which none prefers, simply because they believe others in the group are keen to take such actions.²⁰

Officials interviewed agreed almost unanimously that the existing nuclear structures at NATO are unlikely to act as agents of change; rather, change if and when it

comes will be driven by key Allies, and be resisted by the institutions. One official stated:

I don't really see any of NATO's nuclear institutions being an agent for change. Almost by definition they are agents of the status quo and you can see that in the development and results of the DDPR.

Management theory can also contribute to understanding why subject-matter experts tend to protect 'their' topic against change because, they believe, those attempting change do not adequately understand what the experts see as the detailed and complex nature of their expertise. One official explained:

[NATO's nuclear] institutions are not agents for change because they are, in general, staffed by individuals who, because of their background, are not agents for change.

The two bodies where the week-to-week work of NATO's nuclear policy and posture are undertaken, the NPG SG and the HLG, are largely staffed by defense ministry personnel assigned to the 28 national NATO missions in Brussels, and by defense-ministry experts from the 28 capitals, respectively. As the officials quoted above have noted, these are hardly major sources of institutional change. Combined with the control exerted over the HLG agenda by the office of a U.S. Assistant Secretary of Defense, it should be very clear that NATO's nuclear structures are innately and consistently conservative.

'Disarmament by Default' Looms

There have been significant reductions in the deployment of NATO TNW in Europe, well documented elsewhere.²¹ One interviewee pointed out that more recently,

...the NPG has substantially reduced the amount of aircraft dedicated to the mission, thereby adjusting posture, with the most recent posture change coming within the last couple of years which saw

the number of aircraft kept at the highest level of readiness reduced by approximately 45%.

But this does not alter the fact that NATO's nuclear delivery systems in Europe are aging. These now consist entirely of limited-range dual-capable aircraft (DCA), which can carry one or two of NATO's 200-odd remaining B61 gravity bombs.²² One official warned that:

Budgetary pressures are pushing many nations into a 'disarmament by default' mode. Defense budgets are declining across the Alliance and in some cases quite precipitously. Despite claims that the Alliance is spending about 1.5% of GDP on defense, as many as nine nations will likely spend less than 1% of GDP on defense this year. The nuclear posture of the Alliance could be affected if nations such as the Italians and the Dutch conclude that they can't afford the JSF.²³ [.]

Another was more blunt, pointing out that the lack of willingness to grasp the bull by the horns means that the current nuclear sharing arrangements are unsustainable:

Decisions on replacement aircraft should probably have been taken already. Those decisions cannot be postponed for more than a few years before it will become clear that there will be a capability gap.

A third official tied the budget and stability/change issues together by pointing out that in the end it all comes down to money:

There is a need to modernize aircraft and the weapon itself, and with dwindling resources, nations that currently are doing the burden in 'burden-sharing' may be unable to continue to pay this bill, especially as the threat becomes less defined.

It is not just the lack of available resources that put budgets centre-stage in this discussion, but

also the fact that in key cases, it is the one area of nuclear policy over which national parliaments have any kind of direct control. It may be, as one official believes, that the underlying logic and European politics of the situation will eventually play out, and that NATO will agree at some point to reduce or eliminate TNW in Europe:

Europeans do not see a nuclear threat - let's face it, most of them see no threat to them of physical attack (see the latest German White paper). So, provided the answer is fewer weapons in Europe (or even better none!), then they will be keen to agree.

It may yet be a little heroic, though, to assume that such logic will prevail, given the conservative nature of the Alliance structure. They will not give up without a fight, and it may yet be too early to start preparing the obituaries for nuclear burden-sharing in Europe. The current trends towards a nuclear-free Europe (outside of France and the United Kingdom) may not achieve their conclusion:

The allies could decide [against a] drift toward a non-nuclear future. All it will take is political will and the consensus of the member states that maintaining European-based nuclear capabilities is critical... If NATO can make that determination, we may yet see another generation of nuclear burden sharing within the Alliance.²⁴

The Need for U.S.-led Change

There is a widespread perception that the nuclear committee structure at NATO is dysfunctional. Two officials interviewed called the structure 'moribund', with one adding 'it is moribund because politicians are frightened of the political ramifications of the decisions that need to be made to keep NATO Nuclear Policy and Posture relevant'.

As a consequence of this perception, there is broad agreement amongst those interviewed that any real change within NATO must come from a single source, the United States, as the provider of the relevant nuclear and non-nuclear assets and more importantly the underlying guarantor of European security.

If an American Secretary of Defense stood up and proposed to take the B61s out, it would happen. The Turks might grumble, of course. But that would be it.

The problem is that NATO may not be the vehicle the United States would naturally choose to effect change in its nuclear posture. As one interviewee put it 'Does the USA wish to be constrained by European governments when its strategic interests have changed? I don't see it'. NATO's problem is thus that the one state that could lead the transition necessary to ensuring it remains relevant to the 21st century has an ambiguous relationship with the institution, and a resentment towards its Allies that many in Washington see as at least partial free-riders.

The Europeans will not make a decision, then the U.S. will get fed up and then impose its change to suit U.S. policy goals onto European allies who will breathe a sigh of relief that they don't have to sell it to their publics, except as something done to them.

A distinction should be drawn between the potential for change in NATO's nuclear posture (incremental/evolutionary) and its policy (more dramatic/revolutionary), as officials interviewed for this paper agreed:

U.S. conventional force reductions, cutbacks on missile defense, pivot to Asia; all of these and more have made the Allies a bit nervous and they will be more so when Congress starts

complaining that they aren't doing enough for their own defense.

But this regular complaint that the Europeans are free-riding ignores the perspective widely held there that there is no mission for which these capabilities are relevant:

No one dares to speak up now and say 'the remainder [of NATO's TNW force] is preposterous'... they do not deter anything - in large part because there is no threat to Europe.

Try as some parties will to put the TNW/DCA debate behind the Alliance,²⁵ the fact is that the status quo is unsustainable. DCA replacement alone will place German participation in NATO's nuclear sharing program in question within the next few – very few – years, and where the Germans lead, others (especially the Dutch and Belgians) seem likely to follow. As we have noted before:

NATO has a missile defense system due to the contributions of one ally – the United States. Prospects for a smaller, leaner and more agile NATO

conventional force posture rest with one ally – the United States. Similarly, if NATO's nuclear posture and policy are to change in any meaningful way, it will require political will and initiative from one ally – the United States. For the United States to consult its allies is responsible leadership, but to allow those allies to block change to the detriment of the Alliance is negligence.²⁶

It therefore behooves the United States, as NATO's primus inter pares, to take the lead on this sensitive issue before it becomes a complete pawn to European domestic politics and American defense economics. The Alliance is unlikely to survive the strains under which such a further abdication of leadership would place it.

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Endnotes

¹ This paper uses the term 'Theater Nuclear Weapons' in preference to the more common Non-Strategic Nuclear Weapons (NSNW), Sub-Strategic Nuclear Weapons (SSNW) and Tactical Nuclear Weapons because, simply put, a deliberate nuclear explosion must have strategic consequences.

The variations of the B61 nuclear gravity bomb hosted by NATO are intended to be deployed in a military theater of operations; thus they are referred to hereafter as 'Theater Nuclear Weapons', or 'TNW' for short.

² Steve Weber, "Shaping the Postwar Balance of Power: Multilateralism in NATO", *International Organization*, Vol. 46, No. 3 (Summer, 1992), pp. 658-659.

³ See http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_49763.htm and http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_49633.htm.

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- ⁴ M.C. 48 (Final), North Atlantic Military Committee Decision On M.C. 48: A Report By The Military Committee On The Most Effective Pattern Of NATO Military Strength For The Next Few Years, November 22, 1954, accessed via <http://www.nato.int/docu/stratdoc/eng/a541122a.pdf>.
- ⁵ North Atlantic Council Final Ministerial Communiqué, December, 17-18, 1954, accessed via <http://www.nato.int/docu/comm/49-95/c541218a.htm>.
- ⁶ Interviews with NATO officials, representing both national delegations and the NATO International Staff, who wish to remain anonymous; undertaken between October 2012 and March 2013. Excerpts appear throughout this paper.
- ⁷ Jeffrey A. Larsen, “The Future of U.S. Non-Strategic Nuclear Weapons and Implications for NATO: Drifting Toward the Foreseeable Future”, NATO Public Diplomacy Division, October 31, 2006, p. 23.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 23-24.
- ⁹ See http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_50069.htm.
- ¹⁰ See http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_52044.htm.
- ¹¹ See http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_49633.htm.
- ¹² Martin A. Smith, “Reviving the Special Consultative Group: Past Experiences and Future Prospects”, *NATO Watch Briefing Paper No. 11*, July 5, 2010, pp. 1-2.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 2.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.
- ¹⁵ See <http://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/pniglance>.
- ¹⁶ Edmond E. Seay III, “Dissecting the DDPR: NATO’s Deterrence and Defence Posture Review and the Future of Nuclear Sharing”, *ACA/BASIC/IFSH Nuclear Policy Paper No. 10*, July 2012.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- ¹⁸ Oliver Meier, “NATO agrees on new arms control body”, *Arms Control Now*, the Blog of the Arms Control Association, February 26, 2013, accessed via <http://armscontrolnow.org/2013/02/26/nato-agrees-on-new-arms-control-body/>.
- ¹⁹ Larsen *ibid.*, p. xiii.
- ²⁰ Jerry B. Harvey, “The Abilene paradox: The management of agreement”, *Organizational Dynamics*, Volume 17, Issue 1, Summer 1988, Pages 17–43. Accessed via [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/0090-2616\(74\)90005-9](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/0090-2616(74)90005-9).
- ²¹ “The Presidential Nuclear Initiatives (PNIs) on Tactical Nuclear Weapons at a Glance”, *Arms Control Association*, August 2012, accessed via <http://www.armscontrol.org/print/111>.
- ²² Malcolm Chalmers and Simon Lunn, “NATO’s Tactical Nuclear Dilemma”, *Royal United Services Institute Occasional Paper*, March 2010, pp. 2-3.
- ²³ The F-35 Joint Strike Fighter is currently the only potential replacement for NATO’s F-16 and Tornado DCA fleets.
- ²⁴ Larsen *ibid.*, p. xiii.
- ²⁵ Franklin Miller, George Robertson and Kori Schake, “Germany Opens Pandora’s Box”, *Centre For European Reform*, London, February 2010. Accessed via http://mail.gees.org/files/documentation/09032010173635_Documen-07786.pdf.
- ²⁶ Seay *ibid.*, p. 8.