

[SE3-CV-1] NATO and Extended Deterrence

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Full Summary

The panel considered the history, development and institutionalization of NATO, the important role that nuclear weapons have played in the alliance, and in deterring Soviet aggression, the role of consultation within NATO, the purpose of nuclear weapons within NATO today, and NATO's current and future nuclear posture.

Michael Lekson (United States Institute for Peace, moderator) first laid out the history of NATO from its founding to the end of the Cold War, describing “how it came to be”, as well as how it came to develop in the way that it did. He began by noting the uncertainty of a post-World War II world in which it was clear there would not be a global solution to the problem of nuclear weapons; in which Europe had not pulled itself together out of the wreckage of World War II in any meaningful sense, and in which the Soviet Union possessed significant conventional military superiority over Western Europe. This uncertainty was particularly potent after the Soviet Union tested their first nuclear weapon, and after the Communist victory in the Chinese Civil War, and led to the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty. He then described how during the 1950s, NATO started to institutionalize as an organization responsible for Europe's defense. These institutions have grown and strengthened over the years – in parallel with the European institutions that have gradually come to unify Europe. Lekson also laid out the evolution of the role of nuclear weapons to NATO. He argued that nuclear guarantees have always been an important part of the NATO commitment. Nuclear weapons were deployed in Europe in 1954, and were seen as a central part of the NATO war-fighting strategy should a conflict occur: the “massive retaliation” strategy favored by Eisenhower. They were also a way of signaling US seriousness about maintaining the balance of power in Europe given that conventional force targets were generally not met. They were also seen by Eisenhower as a cheaper way of maintaining the US commitment to Europe than conventional alternatives, given his increasing concern about the size of US military budgets, and the role of the military industrial complex more broadly. This role changed somewhat in the 1960s. NATO posture evolved to be better able to provide the “flexible response” favored by the Kennedy administration, which sought a way to fight a conflict with the Soviet Union in Europe without automatically and quickly escalating to an exchange of strategic nuclear weapons. Lekson also outlined the timeline of nuclear missile deployments – with

intermediate-range nuclear missiles deployed in 1958, and intercontinental ballistic missiles deployed in the late 1950s and 1960s. He argued that the 1960s opened the door to an era of arms control (but noted that strategic arms agreements did not address tactical weapons in Europe). He also discussed the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) signed between the US and USSR in 1987 – he argued that this was a traumatic experience for NATO, but that the eventual agreement represented a very important and positive step.

Jennifer Laurendeau (United States Department of State) continued Lekson’s narrative, describing NATO’s progression since the end of the Cold War. She began by noting that the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT) and INF established a downward trend in the number and variety of nuclear weapons, but pointed out that those agreements should nonetheless be seen in the context of a superpower rivalry in which nuclear weapons were seen by both sides as a critical component of effective deterrence against the other. After the collapse of the Warsaw Pact, a sea change in threat perception occurred. Nuclear threats not only included concerns about deliberate use, but also incorporated concern about the security and custody of the vast nuclear arsenal in Europe (on both sides), and the proliferation threat posed by the problems of “loose nukes”, unsecured materials, and by the new states such as the Ukraine who had inherited nuclear weapons from the Soviet Union. Laurendeau also described the Presidential Nuclear Initiatives, announced by President Bush in 1991, which were designed to take account of some of these concerns. The decision was taken to dramatically reduce both the number and variety of nuclear weapons in Europe until only one type of weapon remained (simple gravity or “dumb” bombs). This was combined with a gradual reduction in the readiness of NATO forces: in the later 1990s, the readiness of NATO nuclear forces was significantly reduced from minutes to weeks, and this was further diminished in 2002. NATO also announced for the first time that its nuclear weapons were no longer aimed at a specific threat. In this new environment, however, there remains a key debate within NATO as to precisely what role nuclear weapons can and should play within NATO, and an active review of NATO’s defense and deterrence posture is currently under way.

Elaine Bunn (Distinguished Research Fellow, Institute for National Strategic Studies at the National Defense University) spoke about the nature and significance of consultation within NATO on nuclear issues. Bunn made four key points. First, consultations among NATO members on nuclear issues have occurred constantly, at various levels, and have included both defense and foreign ministries (for example, Ambassador level, Secretary of Defense level, etc), and that the numerous institutional groupings – including the Nuclear Planning Group, the High Level Group, the Special Consultative Group – reflect this. Second, Bunn emphasized that all NATO nations participate in consultations on nuclear weapons, including those without nuclear weapons deployed on their territories. The only exception to this rule is

that France has chosen to exclude itself from NATO deliberations about nuclear weapons as a symbolic demonstration of the independence of the *force de frappe*. Third, the intensity of these consultations have waxed and waned over time (for example, they were particularly active during the late 1970s and 1980s), and made the important point that NATO consultations do not merely serve the purpose of increasing understanding between the governments of NATO regarding their positions on nuclear issues. Rather, consultations also fulfill a very important public diplomacy function, helping governments to demonstrate domestically that US nuclear policy is not being imposed unilaterally upon them, and helping governments communicate to their publics regarding nuclear policy. Fourth, consultations on nuclear issues have expanded over time, and have consequently begun to include consultations on issues relating to missile defense and various non-proliferation endeavors. As one example of this, Bunn noted that the Reagan administration's invitation to NATO members to contribute to research into the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) was initially distributed through the High Level Group.

Peter Schulte (Senior Associate, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace) argued that in the aftermath of the Cold War, NATO has been forced to seriously reconsider the role of nuclear deterrence in its strategy, given the legitimate question of whether "NATO has any rational enemies left?" (Schulte noted in an aside that NATO is constrained from mentioning Iran as a potential reason for maintaining a deterrence posture due to Turkish sensitivities). If NATO does indeed face no rational nuclear-armed adversaries, then Schulte argued that there is a very serious question as to what purpose is served by NATO's nuclear weapons. Schulte argued that there is a growing unwillingness to accept nuclear deterrence merely as a permanent hedge against the emergence of potential future threats, and an increasingly strong belief among many NATO members that NATO should commit itself to displaying leadership and supporting the goal of global nuclear disarmament. While NATO's nuclear posture remains an elite issue with relatively little resonance among mass publics, Schulte argued that this could potentially change very quickly. For example, issues such as modernizing the ageing nuclear bombers currently deployed in Europe could prove to be a trigger for greater public opposition to nuclear weapons in Europe, and may therefore prove politically challenging for the alliance.

Schulte also argued that the role of nuclear weapons may begin to divide countries within NATO, and thus pose increasingly significant political problems for the alliance. More strategically exposed states such as the Balkan states, Poland and Turkey are likely to continue to see a need for a robust deterrence posture, and a concomitant role for nuclear weapons in NATO: Schulte noted that "where you stand depends on who sat on you last". By contrast, more strategically sheltered countries such as Germany tend to be more inclined towards further (and in some cases complete) denuclearization within Europe. A second point

of division relates to the wisdom (or otherwise) of attempting to move from a strategy of deterrence to one of denial through missile defense. A third potential fissure in the alliance relates to changes in the credibility of US security guarantees, and the appropriate response of NATO to such changes – particularly in an age of austerity in which the US may seek to retrench in areas previously considered strategically important. Schulte argued that divisions over these questions may make it increasingly difficult to maintain alliance unity – the current DDPR has to be able to redefine NATO’s posture while maintaining alliance solidarity. Schulte concluded with some lessons that might be of relevance to Asia. The main lesson he drew from the experience of NATO was that military alliances that are united, that have some element of a common culture, that face a credible threat, and are willing to be explicit about who their adversaries are, are better able to communicate credible commitments and sustain them over long periods of time.

The question and answer session ranged over a wide range of topics. The first questioner noted that the Presidential Nuclear Initiatives unilaterally removed US nuclear weapons from Korea, and asked whether a US unilateral decision to remove nuclear weapons from Europe without an agreement for some sort of reciprocity from Russia would be politically feasible. Jennifer Laurendeau answered that the US position was that decisions about NATO’s nuclear posture should be made with NATO allies – and that it would therefore have to be up to NATO to reach a common position on the conditions that would make such a withdrawal possible.

A second questioner asked whether increased US frustration over perceived failures by European nations to sufficiently share the burdens of European defense would increasingly lead to US unilateralism within the alliance, with the answer being given that it was too early to say whether this would or would not occur.

A third question asked whether there was any possibility of a successful deal with Russia providing for limitations (or even greater transparency) on conventional arms in Europe. There was general skepticism on the panel regarding the feasibility of such a “grand bargain”. However, one panelist noted the path dependence of the current trajectory towards lower numbers of nuclear weapons, arguing that once nuclear weapons are removed from a territory it is often politically very difficult to bring them back – the implication being that this trend might make a deal on conventional forces more plausible in the future.

A final question noted that US extended deterrence does not depend on the few nuclear weapons in Europe and asked about the implications of this for the potential removal of US nuclear weapons in Europe. The panel noted that effective extended deterrence is as much about reassuring allies as it is about deterring adversaries, pointing out that nuclear weapons

may play a role in reassuring allies even if they do not play a particularly significant role in deterring adversaries. Elaine Bunn offered a metaphor to illuminate the significance of nuclear weapons even they play a limited role in extended deterrence: nuclear weapons are like a wedding band – they are the symbol of the US commitment rather than the commitment itself. It would be perfectly possible to have a strong US commitment to Europe without nuclear weapons deployed in Europe, just as it would be perfectly possible to have a non-credible commitment with nuclear weapons. Nonetheless, once nuclear weapons are deployed in Europe, the symbol is in place and being used, and consequently, even if it is purely symbolic, one should not underestimate the significance of removing it.

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