



Christos Katsioulis & Christoph Pilger

## Nuclear Weapons in NATO's New Strategic Concept

A Chance to Take Non-Proliferation Seriously

- There is a crisis in the international regime on the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons. The NPT as the center piece of non-proliferation is in danger and the further spread of nuclear weapons is a realistic threat.
- NATO has a responsibility to secure and strengthen the NPT as it provides the best means to stop proliferation.
- The new strategic concept, to be outlined in 2009/2010 is a chance to redefine nuclear sharing and the role of nuclear weapons in the alliance's strategy.
- NATO can make substantial contributions towards a strengthened non-proliferation regime.

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## Introduction

Nuclear arms control and disarmament policies are in a state of transition. Since the end of the East–West conflict, nuclear arsenals have been impressively reduced, and at the Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) in 2000, 13 steps were agreed upon to implement the commitments of Article VI of the Treaty.<sup>1</sup>

Since these indisputable achievements, however, the process of arms control and disarmament has come to a standstill. At the last Review Conference in 2005 there was no consensus on a final statement. As the NPT is the central element of non-proliferation and a center-piece of the global security architecture, this failure is alarming. The tendencies towards nuclear proliferation are strong and have the potential to become extremely serious. India and Pakistan tested nuclear weapons in 1998; North Korea followed in 2006. Israel has been known for years to have up to 200 nuclear warheads, and Iran's nuclear program is of serious concern. The acquisition of nuclear weapons has become less of a taboo and might yet become a serious option for a number of other countries. The Security Strategies of the United States and of the European Union explicitly state that the proliferation of nuclear weapons is one of the most serious current and future threats to global security.

On top of this, the further development of national nuclear strategies, as well as the modernization of nuclear weapons systems represent a dangerous trend. These developments have the potential to further undermine the NPT core bargain and to provide incentives for the continuing proliferation of nuclear weapons. Furthermore, there are still hundreds of tactical nuclear weapons deployed in Europe by the United States and Russia. NATO, as a pivotal organization for security and with three of the five traditional nuclear weapon states among its members, has a special responsibility in this context. NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer has repeatedly called for the Alliance to begin work on a new strategic concept. NATO is believed to be going through the process of agreeing on a new strategic concept, possibly by 2009 or 2010. In the course of this strategic overhaul, the Alliance is conducting an internal debate on the future role of nuclear deterrence.

The still effective Strategic Concept of 1999 was an important milestone in the Alliance's adapta-

tion to the new security environment after the Cold War. It describes the role of NATO's nuclear forces as »political,« aimed at preventing coercion and preserving peace. Moreover, the concept states that the reduced nuclear arsenal contributes to the efforts to prevent the proliferation of WMD, as it deters their use. The developments in Iran, North Korea, Syria, and the network surrounding Abdul Quadeer Khan render this rationale more than questionable, however. Particularly with regard to the NPT Review Conference in 2010, where all parties will try to revive the regime of reciprocal non-proliferation, a new NATO Strategy that includes any kind of deterrence or further violations of the NPT could be counterproductive. Creating more congruency between NATO's strategic concept and the global efforts towards the NPT regime is a major challenge for the Alliance. Two major obstacles stand in the way of this attempt.

## Nuclear Sharing

The Commission on Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD/Blix Commission) notes that over 400 US tactical nuclear weapons are deployed in Europe.<sup>2</sup> Hans M. Kristensen, nuclear weapons expert of the Federation of American Scientists, puts the figure at around 480.<sup>3</sup>

These weapons are deployed in European NATO member states, a number of them under NATO nuclear-sharing arrangements. Under these arrangements, up to 180 of the weapons are assigned for use by non-nuclear NATO countries.<sup>4</sup> Although these weapons remain under US custody during peacetime, they can be released to US allies for delivery in time of war. Germany, Belgium, Italy, Turkey and the Netherlands would then deliver nuclear bombs by their national air forces.

US nuclear weapons in Europe have been deemed necessary not only as a nuclear deterrent to protect NATO states, but also as an important »glue« to keep together the trans-Atlantic relationship. The nuclear-sharing policy was initiated in the 1950s to dissuade US allies from developing indigenous nuclear weapons programs and to persuade them that they were protected under the US nuclear umbrella. Today,

**Christos Katsioulis,**  
International Policy  
Analysis Unit, Fried-  
rich-Ebert-Stiftung,  
Bonn.

**Christoph Pilger,**  
Parliamentarians for  
Nuclear Non-Prolifera-  
tion and Disarmament  
(PNND)

1 In this article, the nuclear states commit to eliminating their existing arsenals as their part of the NPT core bargain. The non-nuclear states in turn agreed to refrain from developing nuclear weapons.

2 WMD Commission Report, *Weapons of Terror: Freeing the World of Nuclear, Biological and Chemical Arms*, p. 96: [http://www.wmdcommission.org/files/Weapons\\_of\\_Terror.pdf](http://www.wmdcommission.org/files/Weapons_of_Terror.pdf).

3 Hans M. Kristensen: *U.S. Tactical Weapons in Europe: A Review of Post-Cold War Policy, Force Levels, and War Planning*, p. 9f: <http://www.nukestrat.com/pubs/EuroBombs.pdf>

4 *Ibid.*

NATO emphasizes the political dimension of nuclear sharing. The 1999 NATO strategic concept states that »nuclear forces based in Europe and committed to NATO provide an essential political and military link between the European and the North American members of the Alliance. The Alliance will therefore maintain adequate nuclear forces in Europe.«<sup>5</sup>

The nuclear-sharing arrangements arguably violate Articles I and II of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), however. These articles establish that nuclear weapon states shall not »transfer to any recipient whatsoever nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices or control over such weapons or explosive devices directly, or indirectly,« and that non-nuclear-weapon states commit »not to receive the transfer from any transferor whatsoever of nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices or of control over such weapons or explosive devices.«<sup>6</sup> NATO's justification that the weapons would be activated only in time of war, at which point the NPT would no longer be legally binding, is not convincing. In a report for the Middle Powers Initiative, John Borroughs comes to the conclusion that »the NPT does not provide that it becomes ineffective in time of war« and that »the United States is *transferring* to non-nuclear weapon states *control* over nuclear weapons *directly or indirectly*«<sup>7</sup> under the nuclear-sharing arrangements. Moreover, this policy contradicts the non-proliferation standards that the US and Europe are trying to apply to other countries, such as Iran and North Korea, and is therefore undermining NATO non-proliferation objectives.

Furthermore, the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons unnecessarily continues a nuclear deterrence relationship with Russia in Europe, giving it an excuse and incentive to keep its own tactical weapons deployed in western Russia. Due to the limited range of tactical weapons and the fact that weapons based in the United States can cover all of the potential targets covered by the bombs in Europe, there is no military need for the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons in Europe. In a report on nuclear weapons proliferation in 2004 the Science and Technology Committee of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly

comes to the corresponding conclusion that these weapons »do not add substantially to the security of Europe.«<sup>8</sup>

Quite the contrary, the deployment of tactical weapons in Europe might even increase insecurity. Tactical weapons pose the most danger of potential theft by terrorists, or use by accident, miscalculation or design. The WMD Commission notes that tactical weapons »would be easier [than strategic weapons] for outsiders to use, such as a terrorist group,« and that »[t]here is a risk of theft or diversion during transport or storage in the field.«<sup>9</sup> Today, the United States is the only nuclear power that continues to deploy nuclear weapons outside its own territory: the 480 tactical weapons in Europe.

A »zero option of tactical nuclear weapons«<sup>10</sup> in Europe would therefore be an essential improvement for European security and the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, not only enhancing security but also alleviating the budgets of the states concerned. The United States and NATO should then use the political leverage from such a move to engage Russia to drastically reduce its arsenal of non-strategic nuclear weapons. The NATO Parliamentary Assembly's Science and Technology Committee, in the statement mentioned above, advises NATO to come up with »a proposal on a phased and verifiable withdrawal of tactical nuclear weapons from Europe.«<sup>11</sup> With the withdrawal of these weapons, the practical aspect of NATO nuclear sharing, which violates the NPT, would become obsolete. A new strategic concept for NATO, codifying a road-map towards the zero-option, could be the catalyst to a more effective and credible NATO disarmament policy.

## The Role of Nuclear Weapons for the Alliance

In the preparations for the strategic debate in NATO a June 2007 Nuclear Planning Group communiqué welcomed discussions on »deterrence requirements

5 NATO 1999 Strategic Concept: <http://www.nato.int/docu/pr/1999/p99-065e.htm>; this position was confirmed in June 2007: Final Communiqué, Ministerial meetings of the Defence Planning Committee and the Nuclear Planning Group: <http://www.nato.int/docu/pr/2007/p07-070e.html>.

6 Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, NPT: <http://disarmament.un.org/wmd/npt/npt%20authenticated%20text-English.pdf>.

7 Middle Powers Initiative: Visible Intent. NATO's Responsibility to Nuclear Disarmament: [http://www.middlepowers.org/pubs/NATO\\_brief\\_2008.pdf](http://www.middlepowers.org/pubs/NATO_brief_2008.pdf).

8 Science and Technology Committee of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, Report on Nuclear Weapons Proliferation in 2004: <http://www.nato-pa.int/Default.asp?SHORTCUT=491>.

9 WMD Commission Report, Weapons of Terror: Freeing the World of Nuclear, Biological and Chemical Arms, p. 97.

10 Rolf Mützenich, The Undiminished Relevance of Disarmament and Arms Control. Ten Theses, International Policy Analysis, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, May 2008, p. 2.

11 Science and Technology Committee of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, Report on Nuclear Weapons Proliferation in 2004.

for the twenty-first century.«<sup>12</sup> So it can be expected that NATO will agree on a new nuclear doctrine. But what will this new doctrine look like and will it jeopardize efforts to reach agreement on the NPT?

In January 2008 five senior NATO military officers and strategists went public with a manifesto called *Towards a Grand Strategy for an Uncertain World*. The manifesto calls for strategic consideration of a NATO pre-emptive nuclear attack to try to halt the »imminent« spread of weapons of mass destruction.<sup>13</sup> This would mean a clear renunciation of classic nuclear deterrence. Embracing nuclear pre-emptive strikes as part of the official strategy would dramatically lower the threshold for use of nuclear weapons and increase proliferation dangers. In posing a threat to other states, this strategy would create an additional incentive for states to secretly develop an indigenous nuclear arsenal to deter NATO. It would also set a dangerous precedent, as any other state could adopt this policy and threaten to attack another state that it suspects of developing WMD with nuclear weapons or other WMD of its own.

The pre-emptive use of nuclear weapons would also fail to address two of the most imminent threats of the »second nuclear age«: nuclear terrorism and the acquisition of nuclear weapons technology through quasi private networks. Dealing with proliferators should, as Michael Rühle suggests, rather follow individual paths<sup>14</sup> than try to apply the blunt threat of a nuclear attack. Package deals promise to be far more successful, combining political, economic and security instruments as carrots and sticks. They do not require the ultimate threat of a nuclear attack because NATO has at its disposal the most developed and powerful conventional force. This is more than sufficient as a stick against potential proliferators.

12 Final Communiqué, Ministerial Meetings of the Defence Planning Committee and the Nuclear Planning Group held in Brussels on Friday, 15 June 2007: <http://www.nato.int/docu/pr/2007/p07-070e.html>.

13 Klaus Naumann et al., *Towards a Grand Strategy for an Uncertain World*: [www.csis.org/media/csis/events/080110\\_grand\\_strategy.pdf](http://www.csis.org/media/csis/events/080110_grand_strategy.pdf).

14 Michael Rühle, *Enlightenment in the Second Nuclear Age*, in: *International Affairs* 83, 3 (2007), p. 520.

NATO should rather take the opportunity to rewrite its strategic concept to abandon its nuclear policy of first use. The Alliance should declare that the sole purpose of its weapons is to deter and, if necessary, to respond to nuclear attacks. This policy correction is especially significant with regard to negative security assurances that the NPT nuclear weapon states will not use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear signatories of the NPT. Given NATO's conventional military strength, which far exceeds that of all potential adversaries, such a step would not diminish NATO's security in any way, but enhance its credibility in pursuing its aims on disarmament and non-proliferation.

## Conclusion

NATO's new strategic concept is a necessary step in further adapting the Alliance to new developments in the global and regional security environments. The attacks of September 11, the invocation of Article V, NATO's mission in Afghanistan, and closer cooperation with the EU – including more balanced burden-sharing in the Balkans – are just a few of the challenges and opportunities to be dealt with in this concept. The field of non-proliferation and disarmament shows an even darker picture: the spread of nuclear weapons technology seems more imminent than ever and non-state actors pose a serious danger. NATO should therefore strengthen the instruments available for preventing the spread of weapons of mass destruction and enhance its capability and credibility in non-proliferation. The mechanism of nuclear sharing and a possible pre-emptive option for the use of nuclear weapons seriously undermine this credibility without adding any substantial new capability. The new strategic concept should therefore, first, include a road-map towards a zero solution for tactical nuclear weapons in Europe; second, the option of a pre-emptive nuclear attack should be categorically excluded. NATO should rather signal with the new strategic concept that the Alliance, which includes three nuclear weapons states, is a strong supporter of a functioning global regime on nuclear non-proliferation.

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Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung  
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