CHAPTER 4

U.S. Sub-Strategic Nuclear Forces and NATO

Maynard W. Glitman

The topic discussed in this chapter has been accorded several labels over the years: theater or tactical nuclear forces or weapons (TNF/TNW), short range nuclear forces (SNF), sub-strategic nuclear forces (SSNF—the wording used in NATO documents to describe these systems), non-strategic nuclear forces (NSNF—used at times by the United States and Russia), and most recently, non-strategic nuclear weapons (NSNW). This suggests the degree to which the subject is hard to pin down and difficult to define. Even when using range as a criterion what appears tactical to one country can be highly strategic to another. In any event, given the important linkage between these forces and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), this chapter uses the Alliance's appellation: SSNF.

Background

U.S. SSNF were first introduced into American and NATO forces in the 1950s. All of the nuclear weapons remained in U.S. hands but several of the Allies joined the United States in providing and operating the fighter aircraft to deliver those weapons. Delivery systems included aircraft, air to ground missiles, surface-to-surface ballistic and cruise missiles, artillery, anti-aircraft missiles, and mines.

The initial military purpose of SSNF was to deter or defeat superior Soviet conventional forces. SSNF would also provide a "bigger bang for the buck" and help compensate for NATO's failure to meet the financial and personnel requirements of the Alliance's conventional force goals.

In addition to this military role, SSNF also had a political purpose. Along with U.S. INF systems in Europe and U.S. SLBMs assigned to the Supreme Allied Commander Europe,

SSNF would link the defense of the Alliance to U.S. strategic nuclear forces, thus reinforcing the deterrent role of sub-strategic forces. SSNF played this dual political/military role throughout the Cold War.

However, as that conflict came to a close, (and with Russia's armed forces no longer posing the threat they had during the Cold War) the military portion of that role wound down. The United States and its allies chose not to modernize their SSNF. The follow-on to Lance missile, a research and development program, was dropped, as was the tactical air to surface missile. Plans for the production of a new 155-millimeter nuclear artillery shell were also canceled. What eventually would remain into the new millennium were gravity bombs delivered by fighter aircraft (primarily NATO's F-16 and Tornado fleets).[1]

The successful conclusion of the bilateral INF (Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces) negotiations in 1987 generated support for negotiations on SSNF, as well, from both the United States and the Soviet Union. The United States and its NATO allies attempted to fashion an SSNF negotiating approach that would take into account the great disparity between the size of American and NATO SSNF and the much larger forces held by the USSR. But finding an acceptable formula, particularly one that provided for effective verification, proved to be a difficult task. After a year of effort, support for SSNF negotiations had not led to significant progress.

President George Bush became concerned over the prospect of large numbers of nuclear weapons remaining in a Soviet Union which was looking increasingly unstable (particularly following the failed August 1991 coup against President Gorbachev). On September 27, 1991, President Bush announced that, along with steps to limit its strategic nuclear forces, the United States would unilaterally and drastically reduce or eliminate most of its sub-strategic nuclear forces. The Soviets were encouraged to follow suit.

On October 5, 1991, President Gorbachev made a parallel announcement. But it contained a noteworthy difference.

President Bush had stated that "we will of course ensure that we preserve an effective air-delivered nuclear capability in Europe. That's essential to NATO's security." President Gorbachev, with a different future in mind for NATO's air-delivered nuclear capability, suggested that "it would also be possible on a reciprocal basis to remove all nuclear munitions (aircraft bombs and air-launched missiles) from combat units of front line (tactical) aviation and store them at centralized storage bases." [2]

In January 1992 President Yeltsin reaffirmed Gorbachev's unilateral reciprocal commitments including the approach regarding air delivered weapons. These were the only American SSNF which would remain deployed on the territory of its European NATO Allies. None of these statements were legally binding; nor have there ever been any provisions for a verification regime. Consequently the United States does not know with confidence whether or to what extent Russia has in fact carried out the announced reductions. The Russians continue to maintain their SSNF infrastructure, and to train, exercise, and evaluate the forces that would use them. Indeed, the *New York Times* reported on January 4, 2001 that "United States Intelligence Agencies have concluded that Russia has moved short-range nuclear weapons onto one of its bases in the Baltics."[3]

By the end of 1993 NATO had reduced the number of its SSNF weapons in Europe by 85%. All nuclear warheads for ground launched SSNF, including surface-to-surface missiles and nuclear artillery, were eliminated, as were nuclear land mines, nuclear submarine warfare depth charges, and nuclear surface-to-air and air-to-surface missiles. The remaining nuclear warheads for these systems are to be eliminated in the near future.[4] Submarine launched nuclear cruise missiles are no longer deployed at sea in peacetime. The number of nuclear storage sites has also been reduced by about 80%, and more survivable and secure storage systems have been installed.[5]

NATO Nuclear Capabilities Today

U.S. SSNF in Europe today consist of only one type of weapon: gravity bombs assigned to U.S. and Allied NATO aircraft. In addition, as a recent NATO press release stated, "In 1995 the readiness posture of dual-capable aircraft was greatly reduced, so that nuclear readiness is now measured in weeks rather than in minutes."[6] A small number of UK *Trident* submarine warheads are also assigned to NATO.

For its part, Russia claims to have eliminated, or safely and securely stored, its SSNF. However, in the absence of any agreed verification procedures it is not possible to be confident of their numbers, (estimated in the thousands by public sources—see the charts in Chapters 1, 9 and 12), or of their location, security, or safety.

Following announcement of the unilateral reciprocal measures in 1991, SSNF disappeared from the public's radar screen. Nor has it been a top priority for policymakers. Nevertheless, history has shown that anything dealing with nuclear weapons, particularly those deployed on the territory of other states, has the potential for attracting attention. The recent public agitation over the use of depleted uranium rounds during the fighting in Kosovo and the Gulf War is a case in point.

Recent Developments

The topic of SSNF was raised during the 1997 Helsinki U.S.-Russian summit where Presidents Clinton and Yeltsin agreed that their "experts will explore as separated issues possible measures relating to long-range sea-launched cruise missiles and tactical nuclear systems to include appropriate confidence building and transparency measures."[7]

Since that time, however, other issues on the U.S. Russian nuclear arms agenda have been given priority, particularly missile defense. There have been only sporadic signs of movement on the topic of SSNF reductions, and very little

commentary. Despite occasional prodding, SSNF can be likened to the proverbial sleeping dog.

To determine whether it is in the United States' or NATO's interest to fully awaken that dog, the various elements which compose the SSNF issue should be examined. While U.S. SSNF policy has wider ramifications beyond NATO (for example, its impact on China), it is most closely identified with the Alliance. Thus, given the history of SSNF and the location of existing U.S. SSNF deployments, the condition and future of America's principle Alliance should be given special attention.

While the SSNF issue has not garnered much attention outside official circles dealing with NATO or arms control, some members of the Alliance are seized with this issue. Nevertheless, recent NATO communiqués continue to mention the central deterrent role for SSNF.[8]

In its April 1999 50th Anniversary Summit Communiqué NATO spoke for the first time of the "reduced salience of nuclear weapons." In light of this, the Alliance would "consider options for confidence and security building measures, verification, non proliferation, and disarmament." It called for a report on this topic at the fall 2000 North Atlantic Council Ministerial meeting.[9]

The "reduced salience" phrase has appeared in several NATO Foreign Ministers' communiqués. That it probably represents a compromise with NATO members who wanted deeper changes in NATO's nuclear posture is suggested by the fact that the phrase was not included in the 1999 Strategic Concept or in communiqués issued by NATO Defense Ministers. In contrast, the Defense Ministers communiqués and the Strategic Concept continue to refer to SSNF in traditional terms, but also adapted and made germane to the post-Cold War environment.

Thus the April 24, 1999 Alliance Strategic Concept states in paragraph 62 that

> the fundamental purpose of the nuclear forces of the Allies is political: to preserve peace and prevent coercion and any kind of war. They will continue to fulfill an essential role by ensuring uncertainty in the mind of any aggressor about the nature of the Allies' response to military aggression. They demonstrate that aggression of any kind is not a rational option. The supreme guarantee of the security of the Allies is provided by the strategic nuclear forces of the Alliance, particularly those provided by the United States.[10]

The 1999 Strategic Concept also refers to SSNF's role linking Europe to U.S. strategic deterrence: "Nuclear forces based in Europe and committed to NATO provide an essential political and military link between the European and North American members of the Alliance. The Alliance will therefore maintain adequate nuclear forces in Europe." The Concept notes that given "NATO's ability to defuse a crisis through diplomatic and other means," or if necessary, via conventional defense, "the circumstances in which any use of nuclear weapons might have to be contemplated…are extremely remote."[11]

The Strategic Concept underscores the vital role played by nuclear weapons in ensuring Alliance security. "To protect peace and prevent war or any kind of coercion, the Alliance will maintain for the foreseeable future an appropriate mix of nuclear and conventional forces based in Europe and kept up to date where necessary." This is necessary because "The Alliance's conventional forces alone cannot ensure credible deterrence. Nuclear weapons make a unique contribution in rendering the risks of aggression against the Alliance incalculable and unacceptable. Thus they remain essential to preserve peace."[12]

Regarding the role played by European forces in the Alliance's nuclear deterrent strategy, the Strategic Concept says that " A credible Alliance nuclear posture and the demonstration of Alliance solidarity and common commitment to war prevention continue to require widespread participation by European Allies. The Alliance will therefore maintain adequate nuclear forces in Europe." Adequate is defined as having "the necessary

characteristics and appropriate flexibility and survivability to be perceived as a credible and effective element of the Allies' strategy in preventing war."[13]

The Alliance Strategic Concept also notes that "by deterring the use of NBC (nuclear, biological, chemical) weapons (NATO's conventional and nuclear forces) contribute to Alliance efforts to prevent proliferation of these weapons and their delivery means."[14] With Russia no longer a threat, and with the Strategic Concept mute on the possible impetus for this statement, one can only speculate on its meaning and the implications for NATO SSNF. In any case, the Strategic Concept makes it very clear that NATO's conventional and nuclear forces are defensive in nature and that the latter play a key role in the deterrence of war or coercion.

But if NATO is adapting SSNF and the doctrine which lies behind it to post-Cold War circumstances, there is still a carry-over problem from SSNF's Cold War connection. The North Atlantic Council's (NAC) spring 2000 ministerial communiqué referred to "the need to reduce uncertainties surrounding sub-strategic arms in Russia," and stated that "reaffirmation and perhaps codification of the 1991-1992 presidential initiatives might be a first, but not exhaustive step in this direction" (i.e. an arms control approach).[15]

Support for an arms control approach was also manifested by five NATO members (Belgium, Germany, Italy, Netherlands and Norway) who circulated a paper supporting various arms control initiatives during the May 2000 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference. They encouraged Russia and the United States to "proceed with SSNF reductions in a transparent and irreversible manner and to include the reduction and ultimate elimination of SSNF in START III."[16]

In contrast, in their spring 2000 communiqué NATO Defense Ministers reaffirmed their belief that "NATO's reduced nuclear force posture" is a "credible and effective element of the Allies' strategy of preventing war." They also renewed their call upon Russia to complete "the reductions in its tactical nuclear

weapons announced in 1991 and 1992 and to review its much larger tactical nuclear weapons stockpile with a view towards making additional reductions."[17]

Arms Control

The NAC reported the results of its consideration of the issues presented to it by the April 1999 NATO Summit Communiqué at the December 15, 2000 NAC Ministerial Meeting. The lengthy, unclassified "Report on Options for Confidence and Security Building Measures (CSBMs), Verification, Non-Proliferation, Arms Control and Disarmament," covers relations with Russia, in particular the lack of clarity concerning Russian SSNF and the extent to which Russia has carried out its unilateral reciprocal Presidential Nuclear Initiatives.[18]

The report suggests a variety of possible options, including confidence and security building measures, exchanges of information on nuclear forces, including readiness status and safety provisions and features, and transparency measures. It recommends data exchanges on U.S. and Russian sub-strategic nuclear forces. The Permanent Joint (NATO-Russia) Council is proposed as the venue for such exchanges. Time will tell how Russia will react to the offer.

Certainly there have been frequent reports in the press that Russia, its conventional forces short of just about everything, is reconsidering its military doctrine to place more reliance on its nuclear forces. What impact this will have on the future of sub-strategic nuclear forces and any SSNF arms control or confidence building measures also remains to be seen.

Another key area of the report deals with the risks to Alliance security posed by weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and their delivery means. It notes that new activities (such as NATO's initiative on weapons of mass destruction (WMD)) are "enhancing existing Allied military readiness to operate in a WMD environment and to counter WMD threats." It also recognizes that "proliferation can occur despite efforts to prevent it and can pose a direct military threat" to Allied nations and

forces. The Strategic Concept notes the "existence of powerful nuclear forces outside the Alliance" which the Alliance needs to take into account. Russia, China, and Pakistan are cited by name. It argues that "the defense posture against WMD risks must continue to be improved to further reduce operational vulnerabilities of NATO military forces while maintaining their flexibility and effectiveness despite the presence, threat, or use of NBC weapons."[19]

The report states that "in the light of overall strategic developments and "reduced salience of nuclear weapons, the Alliance has considered options for confidence building and security building measures, verification, non-proliferation, and arms control and disarmament." The results of the study are a series of specific policy options, summarized above.[20]

The very next paragraph, however, takes a somewhat different tack.

> Notwithstanding positive developments in the strategic environment, the security of the Alliance remains subject to a wide variety of risks, both military and non-military, which are multidirectional and often difficult to predict. As stated in the Strategic Concept of 1999, the existence of powerful nuclear forces outside the Alliance constitutes a significant factor, which the Alliance has to take into account if stability and security in the Euro-Atlantic area are to be maintained.[21]

The paragraph concludes by noting the "radical" extent to which NATO has already reduced its nuclear forces and relaxed their readiness, taking into account the end of the Cold War.

The concluding section of the NAC report sets out NATO's fundamental approach to SSNF in the context of the current security environment:

> There is a clear rationale for a continued, though much reduced, presence of sub-strategic forces in Europe.

> This is consistent with the Alliance's fundamental guiding principle of common commitment, mutual co-operation and collective security. The burden and risks of providing the nuclear element of NATO's deterrent should not be borne by the nuclear powers alone.[22]

Significantly, the report makes no reference to a specific arms control or disarmament approach for SSNF and does not refer to the possibility of codifying the 1991 and 1992 unilateral reciprocal Presidential Nuclear Initiatives, although NATO Ministers have raised the prospect of codification in past communiqués. This omission suggests that the Allies are not ready to embark on what would ineluctably turn into a negotiation on SSNF.

At their December 2000 meeting, NATO's Foreign Ministers recalled "the Alliance's long standing commitment to the goals of arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation" and welcomed "the comprehensive report on options for confidence and security building measures, verification, non-proliferation and arms control and disarmament" called for at the 1999 Washington summit. The North Atlantic Council in Permanent Session was tasked to "pursue vigorously implementation of the recommendations in this report, including with Russia through the Permanent Joint (NATO-Russia) Council."[23] That work is underway. Beyond the scope of this paper, of course, there lies a deeper, and perhaps unanswerable, question for NATO: the extent to which an approach founded on Cold War deterrence theories will remain valid when confronting non-rational and/or zealous leaders armed with nuclear, biological, or chemical weapons.

Future Prospects

NATO's nuclear policy is likely to continue to evolve, moved by the existence of underlying differences among the allies and efforts to resolve them. The communiqués and reports, the considerations which they reflect, and the activities which they

generate provide an insight into the intra-Alliance discussion on SSNF.

It is apparent that the Allies continue to support U.S. SSNF deployments in Europe. Indeed, the Strategic Concept makes clear that the Allies believe that SSNF will continue in the post-Cold War environment to play an important role in deterring war or coercion. The Allies appear to be satisfied with the current nuclear strategy and force posture, seeking neither to significantly improve nor abandon it.

At the same time the Alliance is ready to explore with Russia possible confidence building and transparency measures which would enhance stability by removing some of the uncertainty surrounding Russia's SSNF, while providing Russia with similar information about U.S. SSNF nuclear forces in Europe. But it does not appear that the Alliance is ready to press hard for some form of SSNF arms control negotiations, such as codifying the PNIs.

There appear to be two schools of thought within the Alliance concerning SSNF at this juncture. One side believes SSNF still performs a useful deterrent role against a variety of contingencies in a world made more dangerous by the proliferation of NBC weapons. It transfers the old Cold War verities underlying NATO's nuclear weapons policies and applies them to post-Cold War problems. At its core it sees a continuing need for SSNF. While not specifically articulated, the continuing need for SSNF might lead an observer to conclude that the force would at some point need to be modernized in order to remain "effective" and able—and seen to be able—to carry out its missions.

The other approach places emphasis on "the reduced salience" of nuclear weapons. It carries with it an implication of moving beyond that construct to an examination of CSBMs, transparency measures, and ultimately to arms control and disarmament approaches. Some of these contain at least an implication of further reductions in SSNF and perhaps minimal support for

maintaining an effective force, thus risking the possibility of that force becoming obsolete.

What a "between the lines" reading of these communiqués and other NATO publications reveal is a NATO working hard, with some success, to find a course which will allow it move ahead, slowly, on both tracks. It bears some resemblance to the approach the Allies devised for dealing with the INF issue. As in its 1979 INF dual-track decision, the Alliance may find it desirable to articulate this new dual track policy in a single document. Should that moment arrive the consultative process will have to produce a solid and logically based consensus.

The consultative process is a crucial element in helping ensure that Alliance solidarity will be maintained when considering SSNF. Fortunately, the infrastructure for engaging in full, close, and continual U.S. consultation with the Allies, established when U.S. nuclear weapons were first introduced into the European theater (and greatly expanded during the INF debates during the 1980s, with the establishment of the High Level Group to coordinate the defense and deployment aspects of the issue, and the Special Consultative Group to coordinate the political, diplomatic and arms control elements) is in place and is being well used.

This process is particularly important now. The Alliance is engaged in the delicate task of sorting out the question of cooperation between NATO and the European Union. There are also significant concerns among European NATO members over the impact of a U.S. national missile defense program on the security foundations of the Alliance. Differences have also cropped up in other areas, such as Balkans policy and national positions on the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. Moreover, statements by Russian Foreign Minister Ivanov concerning possible Russian military relations with a European Union Force make it crystal clear that today's Russia, like the Soviet Union, will seek opportunities to split the Alliance.[24]

Nevertheless, NATO is in a good position to achieve an agreed outcome on the future of sub-strategic nuclear forces. The Allies

are more or less comfortable with the SSNF situation, including maintaining current SSNF systems on European territory and approaching Russia to improve transparency.

Conclusion

Despite the potential problems surrounding SSNF in Europe, NATO's 1999 Strategic Concept provided an agreed conceptual basis and the "Report on Options" set out a work program for the future. Thus has the Alliance positioned itself to maintain a strong consensus on the future of sub-strategic nuclear forces, provided that the relative harmony regarding SSNF is not upset by controversy over other issues.

Endnotes

[1] President George Bush, "Address to the Nation on Reducing United States and Soviet Nuclear Weapons," (the 1999 Presidential Nuclear Initiative), September 27, 1991.
[2] President Mikhail Gorbachev, Russian response to U.S. PNI, October 5, 1991.
[3] *New York Times,* January 4, 2001.
[4] "NATO's Nuclear Forces in the New Security Environment," NATO Fact Sheet, June 7, 1999. [Note that despite their value as information sources, NATO Fact Sheets are not formally agreed Alliance documents and therefore do not necessarily represent the official views of individual member governments on all policy issues discussed.]
[5] NATO Fact Sheet, June 7, 1999.
[6] "Numbers and Readiness Levels of Dual-Capable Aircraft," NATO Basic Fact Sheet, June 7, 1999, p. 4.
[7] Joint Statement of the United States and Russia (The Helsinki Agreement), March 21, 1999.
[8] For example, see paragraph 8 of the Final Communiqué of the Defense Planning Group and Nuclear Planning Group, December 5, 2000.
[9] "The Alliance's Strategic Concept," (50th anniversary summit communiqué), April 23-24, 1999.
[10] 1999 Strategic Concept, paragraph 62.
[11] 1999 Strategic Concept, paragraph 63.
[12] 1999 Strategic Concept, paragraph 46.

---

[13] 1999 Strategic Concept, paragraph 63 and 64.
[14] 1999 Strategic Concept, paragraph 41.
[15] Spring 2000 communiqué of the North Atlantic Council.
[16] Presentation by NATO official at Airlie House Conference on Non-Strategic Nuclear Weapons, November 2, 2000.
[17] NATO Defense Ministers spring 2000 communiqué
[18] "Report on Options for Confidence and Security Building measures (CSBMs), Verification, Non-Proliferation, Arms Control and Disarmament," North Atlantic Council, December 15, 2000.
[19] "Report on Options," Section 4.2.2 and paragraphs 78 and 79.
[20] "Report on Options," paragraph 85.
[21] "Report on Options," paragraph 86.
[22] "Report on Options," paragraph 98.
[23] December 2000 communiqué of the North Atlantic Council.
[24] *New York Times*, November 27, 2000, p.22