

## CHAPTER 6

### **Nuclear Weapons and Regional Deterrence**

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For this chapter I have not—thankfully—been asked to try to predict the future with regard to non-strategic nuclear weapons (NSNW), nor to recommend a specific action plan based on the many insights that have emerged from the discussions yesterday and earlier today. Instead, my task is to comment on the major issues that we need to take into account in determining a future course.

Before I address the way ahead I would recommend a brief look back, with the goal of identifying lessons learned from our experiences in the area of short-range or theater nuclear forces. In fact, let me start by saying that my preference is to use the terms short-range nuclear forces (SNF) or theater nuclear forces (TNF) rather than non-strategic.

The line between what we long held to be strategic and tactical has become increasingly blurred, and the convenience and benefits that this artificiality of arms control provided have been undermined by the profound changes that have occurred in the past decade. All nuclear weapons should be considered strategic, despite the problems that this may create for arms control.

#### **Theater Nuclear Forces in Europe**

What can we learn from the past? Two of my first jobs in government in the early and mid 1980s were the nuclear plans officer at our NATO Mission and Director of TNF Policy in the Pentagon. This was a time when we had over 7,000 deployed theater nuclear weapons, spanning a wide range of roles and missions, from atomic demolition munitions (ADMS), to artillery fired atomic projectiles (AFAPS), to short-range missiles such as Lance, to dual-capable aircraft (DCA), to the

longer-range Pershing II and ground launched cruise missile (GLCM) forces that were seen as an essential deterrent capability linking the United States to its European partners.

Many of these systems had their roots in the 1950s, when battlefield nuclear weapons were viewed as a substitute for conventional forces, and specifically, as a means to compensate for our conventional inferiority at an acceptable cost. Yet, even when the Alliance achieved conventional parity or at least near parity, and even though there were constant political pressures to reduce the stockpile, as we did in the context of the 1983 Montebello Decision accompanying the deployment of intermediate-range nuclear forces (INF), there was always a high value placed on nuclear weapons deployed forward — they were considered the most visible component of NATO's deterrent.

Arms control became a significant factor in shaping NATO's TNF posture, particularly in reducing the long-range, theater nuclear threat opposite the Alliance. This was the second track of the two-track INF decision. The outcome — the total and verifiable elimination of SS-20 missiles in exchange for the parallel elimination of the Pershing II and ground-launched cruise missile (GLCM) force — was considered a net gain in our security. While we did conduct a thorough review of the feasibility of follow-on SNF arms control, the findings did not support such an initiative. Not only were there practical obstacles identified — such as insurmountable verification problems — but there was also a sense that the potential benefits of such an approach would be outweighed by the risks.

Understandably, the most profound change in the Alliance TNF posture — as well as the U.S. posture globally — came with the end of the Soviet Union and the deterioration of the Red Army. These events fundamentally changed the political and military requirements for theater forces. As a result, the majority of nuclear roles have been eliminated altogether and the stockpile has been reduced by over 90 percent. Of the two remaining U.S. TNF systems, sea-launched cruise missiles

(SLCM) and dual-capable aircraft (DCA), only the latter are deployed in Europe.

Obviously, Russia is an entirely different story. Although its forward deployed theater forces have been withdrawn from former Warsaw Pact states, there is little if any evidence that the roles or numbers of these weapons have been reduced. In fact, the contrary seems to be the case. And the reasons are clear: as we have become more secure, Russia has felt less secure — in part because of the deterioration of its armed forces and because it has seen many of our policies as directed against it, such as NATO enlargement, and operations in Bosnia and Kosovo.

So, almost in a “back to the future” manner, Russia is today more reliant than ever on its nuclear forces, including its theater nuclear weapons. This is evident in its declaratory policy and defense planning. This is also reflected in its pursuit of new nuclear capabilities. For example, Moscow has announced the intention of developing and producing what it calls new “pin point” tactical nuclear weapons to compensate for its impoverished conventional capabilities. Even if President Putin’s recently reported decision holds to favor conventional forces over the Strategic Rocket Forces in terms of funding, this reliance on nuclear weapons will not be lessened.

### **Does Arms Control Have a Role?**

The question then becomes, so what? Is there a theater nuclear weapons problem that needs to be addressed? If so, is arms control an appropriate tool for working this problem?

Given the large number of these weapons and the general substandard state of Russia’s security apparatus, there is in my view a legitimate safety and security issue related to its theater nuclear forces. If Russian nuclear forces are not adequately safeguarded from accidents or unauthorized use and, especially, if these weapons are not protected from theft, this poses a serious security problem for us. There is cause for

concern and a need for action on our part, but this is a problem best addressed by those types of activities included in the cooperative threat reduction program rather than by arms control negotiations.

Are there other problems associated with theater weapons that arms control can address? In the Cold War, arms control was considered useful in dealing with emerging instabilities stemming from quantitative and qualitative changes in the nuclear force postures of the United States and Soviet Union in the context of our then adversarial relationship. But are there any relevant stability issues today related to TNF? I think not.

In the past, our principal concern, and that of our allies, was Soviet expansion outward. Given the profound political and military changes of the past decade, and the end of the bipolar superpower competition, the possibility of an attack across the Fulda Gap is now a distant memory rather than an act to be deterred. From Moscow's perspective, while it may very well perceive the United States as the greatest external threat to its own security (indeed, it has said so emphatically and frequently in recent years), the threat of a deliberate military conflict is more remote than at any time in the past half century.

Russia's theater nuclear forces, even if modernized, will not give Moscow the capability to alter the strategic landscape. At least at the current overall levels of deployed nuclear weapons, Russia's theater forces are not, as we used to say in the Cold War, destabilizing. If our political relationship deteriorates even further, and if we reduce our own nuclear forces to very low levels, the imbalance in TNF does become potentially significant — but we are a long way from that point and we must work to ensure that we don't get there.

In the past, arms control was also valued for its contribution to our political relationship with the former Soviet Union. This argument was, in my view, always overstated by enthusiasts who asserted that the dialogue on arms reductions had substantial collateral benefits, as, for example, in opening up Soviet society and in promoting mutual understandings and

channels of communications that could be important in crisis and conflict. Whatever its past merit, this political argument has — or at least should have — little relevance for current U.S./Russian relations that, presumably, are not based on an adversarial footing. We can, if we choose, continue to treat each other as adversaries, as we have done for the past eight years in the context in the ABM Treaty negotiations, but this policy has proven a failure.

And the consequences of this approach in the ABM context are clear. Promoting mutual assured destruction as the center of our strategic relationship with Moscow — and that is what lies behind focus group phrases such as “cornerstone of strategic stability” — has only perpetuated suspicions and distrust and served to re-invent the Cold War. It has also served to give much greater value to nuclear weapons as the currency of our relations, especially for a Russia that cannot afford the alternatives. Perhaps this helps explain the failure of the Clinton Administration to achieve any further reductions.

*The Consequences of TNF Arms Control*

It may well be that the greatest potential problems associated with theater nuclear forces are those that could result from pursuing TNF arms control, especially if pursued as an end in itself. Four potential problems stand out.

First, given the inherent monitoring and verification limitations that would be associated with theater forces — from production to destruction — the outcome would not lead to high confidence in compliance. Moreover, Russia has shown no sign of accepting greater transparency in this field. But even if Moscow were to agree to an intrusive regime, this would still not ensure effective verification. So even under optimal circumstances, the agreement would likely lead to mutual accusations and acrimony. We have been there and done that, and we know from experience that a bad agreement is worse than no agreement.

Second, engaging in negotiations may well slow the process of realignment and reductions in Russian forces. This is perhaps

the only weapons category in which Russia holds an advantage. If we enter into negotiations, Moscow is sure to hoard every chip that it may later get paid for in terms of an agreement. As such, attempting to negotiate TNF levels could well be counterproductive.

Third, pursuing TNF arms control may undercut NATO's strategic posture, generating political pressure to withdraw the remaining weapons we have in Europe. Although Russian leaders are becoming increasingly vocal in their calls for the complete removal of U.S. nuclear weapons from Europe, there is little support today for such action. These weapons are seen by our allies as a valuable hedge against future uncertainties. In any negotiation, Moscow will almost certainly focus the spotlight on these weapons and seek their removal. This would be seen as one of the few things that the United States and its allies could give in the negotiations — negotiations in which most of the leverage would be with Russia, given the large disparity in numbers. The problem is that once removed from Europe, there are very few circumstances that would permit the re-introduction of NSNW to the continent.

Fourth, initiating TNF arms control would likely further undercut support for maintaining current TNF capabilities. Many are increasingly questioning the need to retain dual-capable aircraft and SLCMs. Most important, and almost a given, initiating TNF arms control would make problematic the development of new TNF capabilities that may be required to deter and defend against today's threats and, especially, for the deterrence of rogue states armed with weapons of mass destruction.

### **The Role of Nuclear Weapons in Regional Deterrence**

The National Defense University (NDU) has undertaken several studies of deterrence in a regional context involving NBC-armed adversaries. The results suggest that, in fact, our nuclear weapons are a critical component of deterrence in this type of setting. One study examined deterrence of Iraqi use of chemical and biological weapons (CBW) in the Gulf War.

From our work on this real world case study, we have concluded that the Iraqi leadership believed a U.S. nuclear response to their CBW use was credible. This belief contributed to deterrence success. Other factors, such as our perceived advantages in CW passive defenses and the fear of Israeli retaliation, also contributed to deterrence, but U.S. nuclear weapons were central. Nuclear weapons also played a conscious role in U.S. deterrence thinking and helped to shape policy, even though most questioned the “feasibility” of actual employment.

Another effort that has provided insights into regional deterrence is an extensive gaming initiative that NDU has conducted over the past five years involving more than three thousand players. The game is very simple. We have the participants work together as an adversary planning cell, usually in groups of ten to twelve and usually in a Korean or Southwest Asian scenario. The planners are given chemical and biological capabilities similar to those we believe these countries possess, and they are told to develop a plan to achieve specific political or military objectives, such as breaking a coalition or disrupting the flow of US forces into theater.

At the end of the game, we ask the players what factors most influenced their willingness to use chemical and biological weapons and what capabilities on the U.S. side were the most effective deterrent to their use of these weapons. The data collected indicate a range of capabilities that work together to strengthen deterrence. These include: CBW detection and warning, improved protective equipment, superior intelligence, and theater and national missile defenses. But by far, the most important single capability that enhances deterrence of NBC use as cited by the participants is the U.S. nuclear force.

To ensure that we have the capability to meet our deterrent requirements in the future, we must retain a nuclear weapons infrastructure that is sufficiently adaptive to provide new capabilities when required. This will include both new platforms and, most likely, new warheads (for example, greater

penetration capabilities to strike deep underground targets). The United States is in the deterrence business for the long term and we must devote the required resources to develop and deploy the necessary capabilities.

The forces we require for today's deterrence and defense needs are different from those of the Cold War, both in terms of numbers and weapon characteristics. The massive counterforce capability we continue to maintain was clearly not designed for today's threat. Despite the counterproliferation initiative and the attention paid to the threat of weapons of mass destruction, very little thought has been given to the nuclear dimension of countering this threat — to declaratory policies and weapon capabilities tailored to deterring rogue states.

It would be the ultimate irony if the pursuit of TNF arms control impeded us not only from developing the new capabilities we need to deter and defend against contemporary threats, but also from moving away from Cold War force structures and lower levels of nuclear forces.

### **Conclusion**

At least in hindsight, the deterrence dynamics of the Cold War now look simple — never mind that it took decades to develop strategic concepts, force postures and arms control policies that most of us became comfortable with, or at least comfortable enough to think that we generally had it right.

By comparison, the security setting today is extraordinarily complex. We face the prospect of terrorists armed with weapons of mass destruction and the certainty of hostile rogue states acquiring nuclear, chemical and biological weapons, and increasingly longer range ballistic missiles. We are confronted with tremendous strategic uncertainties about the future of Russia and China — uncertainties that will most likely increase in the next ten years.

In this new setting, we no longer have the luxury of a one-size-fits-all deterrent. And Cold War dogma, whether in the context of nuclear deterrence or arms control, is simply unsuited to meet the challenges and opportunities before us. Instead, it is essential to think through our strategy, or more accurately our strategies, taking into account the many dimensions that are involved, such as alliance, proliferation, and resource issues. But most of all, we must ensure that we develop and deploy the offensive and defensive requirements for deterrence and defense against contemporary threats. This was never easy in the past and it will demand even more effort and creativity in the future.

But we must not make this more difficult than it is. Not every element of this complex security environment is complex. In fact, some things are clear. This is the case with TNF, where old arms control notions — perhaps jazzed-up somewhat — represent nothing more than a problem masquerading as a solution.

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### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Ambassador Robert Joseph was on the faculty of the National Defense University at the time this chapter was written. His views do not necessarily represent the official position of the United States government.

