

By Jorge Rivera

Last week, President Obama and his Russian counter-part President Medvedev signed an agreement for further reductions to their nuclear arsenal. It is being labelled as the most significant pact for a generation, and will limit the number of operationally deployed nuclear warheads to 1,550, which is 30% lower than the deployed strategic warhead limit of the 2002 Moscow Treaty. It also limits the number of deployed and non-deployed inter-continental ballistic missile (ICBM) to 800 launchers.

The effects of this pact will take several years to be fully realised but it will put pressure on NATO to re-evaluate its stance on its nuclear capabilities. NATO's nuclear deterrence strategy has evolved significantly since the end of the Cold War as has the Alliance's force posture in order to meet the new security challenges. Changes to the international security environment on the other hand have posed serious obstacles to the nuclear free world that President Obama envisioned in his speech in Prague, Czech Republic 2009. However, the arduous journey towards complete worldwide nuclear disarmament has begun this month, albeit slowly, creating ripples rather waves in this area of policy.

As well as START 2010, the United States' recent nuclear posture review (NPR) is of huge significance, due to its clarification of when, if at all, the U.S. would use a nuclear weapon. It is hoped, that by clarifying when it will be applicable to use this type of force will lead to a move away from nuclear dependence, and towards a stance of transparency; ushering in a new mentality towards addressing new threats. Critics have questioned the usefulness of the NPR in light of the fact that flexibility is needed as an approach to deal with a multitude of threats. As Mackenzie Eaglen, defense analyst at the Heritage Foundation states "While limiting the declared use of nuclear weapons and response options, the strategy rests faith in the United States' ability to deliver devastating conventional attacks against perpetrators." In sum the U.S. is tying one arm behind its back.

START is the second of four events tackling nuclear interests with nuclear security summit in Washington this week and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation treaty review next month. All of these crucial events will have an effect on NATO, especially as it is in the process of evaluating itself. NATO's Strategic Concept, which will be completed later this year, will evidently have to take into account these latest outcomes. The NPR continues to see the relevance of NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements, to quote "security arrangements including NATO will retain a nuclear dimension so long as nuclear threats to the United States and our allies and partners remain." In line with this, the NPR also tackles the tricky issue of the dual-use bomber, committing to the upgrade of the F-35 for use with gravity bombs and also committing to extending the life of the B-61 gravity bomb. These could become weapons systems committed to NATO and thus a weapons system of choice.

The new START agreement is seen as a step in the right direction by many to a "world without

nuclear weapons". However, history may later regard this simply as a token gesture between Russia and the U.S. in order to repair damaged relations. Sceptics of the START agreement already hold this view due to the fact that only a small percentage of the combined weapons held by the signatories will be reduced. There will still be enough nuclear weapons to destroy the World many times over. In light of this, any decision by NATO to abandon completely its nuclear strategy because of last week's events would be out of sync, and catastrophic, spelling the end to the most successful politico-military alliance in history. It is clear that the NPR does not prejudge the size of NATO's nuclear forces, meaning that in theory NATO could reduce this in line with all other agreements. On closer examination the NPR affirms that the United States "will continue to seek to reduce the role and numbers of nuclear weapons in the future." This could make for some small but interesting changes later this year. However, NATO's nuclear doctrine, in comparison to last week's deal, is not a token gesture but an agreement enshrined in its founding documents, created to ensure a bond of security between Europe and the U.S.

NATO's fundamental purpose, as set forth in its founding treaty, remains the same "To safeguard the freedom, common heritage and civilization of our peoples, founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law." The capability for collective defence and for the preservation of peace and security is maintained through a mixture of conventional and nuclear forces. As stated in the 1999 Strategic concept and every subsequent Defence Minister Communiqué on the subject, NATO continues to see the need for nuclear deterrence, for the continuing presence of U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe and the importance of consultation, and burden sharing. Today, NATO employs and deploys what it labels as a minimum nuclear deterrent force. "The fundamental purpose of the nuclear forces of the Allies is political: to preserve peace and prevent coercion and any kind of war. In keeping with this goal, [the Alliance] continue[s] to place great value on the nuclear forces based in Europe, which provides an essential political and military link between the European and North American members of the Alliance."^[1]

Nuclear weapons remain a pillar of NATO's Alliance for political as well as military reasons. NATO believes this is fundamental to its collective security to meet the current and future threats from a position of strength. As former U.S. President Roosevelt stated at the beginning of the last century: "We must always remember that it would be a fatal thing for great, free peoples to reduce themselves to impotence and leave the despots and barbarians armed." There is no case in history where a nation has been secure by pursuing a policy of vulnerability.

Why deterrence?

Nuclear weapons provide something that conventional forces cannot: Incalculable risks. It is, of course, exceedingly difficult to prove a negative, but nuclear deterrence has in part prevented catastrophic great power war for over 50 years, and it continues to be an effective insurance policy for an unstable and unpredictable world. It is the only current weapon capable of destroying an entire society, and raising the cost of aggression to an unthinkably high level. Conventional forces do not have the same effect. They thus serve as a political and psychological tool capable of maintaining the security of the allies.

Deterrence arises from a logical and a moral necessity—as Kenneth Waltz pointed out in his

1954 classic, "Man, the State, and War." Because men are not angels, because states can be malevolent, and because the international system of states is itself a jungle, without an all-powerful world government to enforce order, deterrence is required. States that currently do not adhere to international norms or fulfil their treaty obligations are unpredictable and potentially hostile. Deterrence thus seeks to build security on the firmer foothold of a realistic view of human nature and it is important to note that deterrence is fundamentally defensive, to be distinguished from coercion (or compellence).

Although nuclear weapons play a far smaller role in Alliance strategy than they did during the Cold War, NATO allies reaffirmed the importance of nuclear deterrence by stating that "to protect peace and to prevent war or any kind of coercion, the Alliance will maintain for the foreseeable future an appropriate mix of nuclear and conventional forces." There are a number of reasons why the Alliance continues to believe this to be so.

Firstly, the Alliance must hedge against resurgent nuclear powers, and against the potential for a strategic surprise. The Alliance's conventional forces alone cannot ensure credible deterrence. If NATO's nuclear forces were to disappear the Alliance would be vulnerable, reconstitution of NATO's forces would take time and be costly. As well as this, any replacement strategy could be politically challenging because it could be perceived as a military escalation of some kind.

Secondly, in the evolving and ever changing security landscape, NATO's strategy remains one of war prevention. NATO's nuclear forces contribute to peace and stability by underscoring the irrationality of attacking its members and fulfilling an essential role by ensuring uncertainty in the mind of any aggressor about the nature of the Allies response. So rejecting the idea of no first use, for example, creates uncertainty for any country that might contemplate seeking a political or military advantage through the threat, or use of weapons of mass destruction, this deterrence—defensive—posture contributes to the Alliance's efforts at preventing the proliferation of these weapons. It is clear that the U.S' nuclear posture review attempts to redefine its terms of usage, something NATO will also have to address. Cold war threats have been replaced by fears of WMD terrorism and the possibility of a "dirty bomb." In line with the U.S., NATO will have to follow this approach in order to assist in the non-proliferation path and to ensure credibility as well as to maintain its role as a leader in Global security. However, it must also be clear that with this new attitude there still remain caveats that apply to specific nations such as Iran, North Korea, and any others that fit into that bracket.

Thirdly, NATO's nuclear posture contributes to its non-proliferation goals. The Strategic Concept refers to the political as well as military link nuclear weapons represent within the Alliance. Burden sharing and consultation form the basis of this nuclear pillar. A weapon could not be activated simply by pushing a "red button" based on a whim: it would take careful consideration and planning. An important rationale for the presence of nuclear weapons is so that the nuclear weapon states would consult with the rest of the Alliance before any preparation or employment. This is consistent with the fundamental guiding principle of common commitment, mutual cooperation and collective security for all Alliance members.

NATO's reduced force posture

NATO has taken major steps to reduce its nuclear force levels. Treaties like the Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty, START and SORT have all been helpful in making the security environment less tense. They, along with the end of the Cold War, have allowed for major reductions, including the removal of over 90% of the European based U.S. sub strategic forces, leaving only a few hundred gravity bombs as the only weapon system on the continent. Readiness levels have been lowered from minutes to months and the number of nuclear storage sites has dropped by 80%.[2] But despite these reductions and NATO's continued commitment to positive arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation there is no evidence that such efforts have had a positive impact on non-proliferation. Nor is there evidence that the reductions in nuclear weapon stockpiles on the part of Russia and the United States have had a significant impact on the strategic desires of countries like North Korea or Iran to acquire weapons or mass destruction.

There remain a number of arguments made against the Alliance's nuclear deterrence policy. The argument most heard is that NATO policy is outdated. New and old member states are obliged to follow a nuclear weapons policy they, and their citizens, do not want. However, the importance that these nations have placed on nuclear deterrence should not be discounted, especially those members who have emerged from the oppression of the Soviet Union. Only recently did U.S Defence Secretary Robert Gates comment on how important it was that "NATO is not now nor should it ever be a talk shop...it is a military alliance with real world obligations that have life or death consequences" and NATO must have the means to back up its commitments.

There are also arguments that suggest that the removal of NATO's nuclear weapons would reduce the tension with Russia and provide her with an incentive to disarm its nuclear arsenal. However, there is no historical or empirical evidence on which to support the idea that a unilateral move to disarm by one nation has resulted in a similar response by an adversary. This week's START Treaty signature clearly demonstrates that bilateral negotiations and mutual self-interest are far more likely to yield disarmament than gestures. There is no evidence that the unilateral reduction in UK warheads (arguably on financial as well as moral grounds) has had any impact at all on the aspirations of threshold nuclear nations let alone those with existing arsenals. Modernisation and a re-evaluation of the U.K.'s current system will need to be done in light of START but a complete eradication would be too drastic in today's climate.

This is a climate in which Israel, a strong ally of NATO, still does not confirm to the outside world its nuclear capabilities and where it is reported that President Netanyahu scheduled to attend the nuclear security summit this week has cancelled his appearance in light of rumours that Egypt and more importantly Turkey (a member of NATO) would be calling for Israel to agree to the NPT. This not only damages all aspects of nuclear non-proliferation but also indicates how important nations in the middle-east see their threats in this region.

Russia's military doctrine in 2010 contemplates a continued reliance on nuclear weapons as a logical response to the current inadequacy of her conventional forces. This is based on the idea that nuclear weapons have a greater utility than simply to deter a large-scale nuclear attack. The 2010 document reiterates that Russia sees nuclear weapons as "an important factor in the prevention of nuclear conflicts and military conflicts that use conventional assets (large-scale

and regional wars)."[3]Crucially, the belief that Russia, or any state, would give up a weapon system simply because NATO chooses to do so ignores the reality that states make decisions on national security, based on their perception of threats.

Finally, NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements are fully consistent with the Non-Proliferation Treaty, which is to be discussed next month. NATO member states, all party to the NPT, are in full agreement as to the legality of these arrangements. The arrangement was fully discussed during the negotiations of the NPT and agreement to this arrangement was a condition precedent to the Treaty's approval.

Conclusion

The Alliance was built on various security guarantees, pillars as so often cited including its nuclear assurances. Despite NATO's changing role internationally, as long as it continues to face a multitude of threats, nuclear weapons will be present in NATO's strategy for the foreseeable future. In sum, given the profound dangers of allowing other powers to possess nuclear weapons while it does not, thereby opening itself up to nuclear coercion could be potentially catastrophic; certainly not a recipe for the peaceful, prosperous, free and secure world President Obama envisions. Unfortunately, the weapons invented cannot be un-invented and the knowledge surrounding it cannot be forgotten, so while we have nations with unclear intentions there is a continuing need for caution, perfectly captured by Sun Tzu in his Art of War:

"In peace prepare for war, in war prepare for peace. The art of war is of vital importance to the state. It is matter of life and death, a road either to safety or to ruin. Hence under no circumstances can it be neglected"

[1] NATO Defense Ministers, Final Communiqué, 8 June 2006, pt.6

[2] NATO's Nuclear Fact Sheet, 11-12

[3] http://cns.miis.edu/stories/100205_russian_nuclear_doctrine.htm