BRUSSELS SCHOOL OF GOVERNANCE
CENTRE FOR SECURITY, DIPLOMACY AND STRATEGY

CSDS POLICY BRIEF • 13/2022 • SPECIAL EDITION

Rethinking Nuclear Deterrence: A European Perspective

By Alexander Mattelaer | 23 May 2022

Key Issues

- Nuclear deterrence is again at the forefront of European security. Russia engaged in nuclear signalling whilst waging war on Ukraine. This has reminded European audiences about strategic coercion and escalation risks. Europeans must also confront the consequences of the nuclear multipolarity that is emerging.
- Limiting defence policy discussions to hybrid threats, conventional deterrence, and arms control fuels an inadequate status quo. NATO's collective defence rests on the assumption that nuclear deterrence must hold. Instead of decoupling nuclear policy from other debates, Europeans must reengage with nuclear deterrence.
- NATO's next Strategic Concept provides an opportunity for the heads of state and government to consolidate the nuclear posture of the alliance and provide guidance for its adaptation. This must include tasking a cross-domain deterrence posture review and updating the alliance's nuclear-sharing arrangements.

Introduction

Putin's war against Ukraine has been accompanied by a long nuclear shadow. The blatant Russian attempt to coerce a neighbouring state by means of conventional military power and nuclear threats has brought the logic of deterrence back to the forefront of European security. The mere suggestion that EU member states like Finland or Sweden would contemplate joining NATO was immediately followed by explicit nuclear warnings. European states can hold no illusions: they share a long border with an aggressive neighbour armed with a powerful nuclear arsenal. Without NATO's nuclear deterrence, European states would become largely defenceless against any escalation of hostilities into the nuclear realm. This is the reason why successive NATO summit declarations since 2014 have adopted a more assertive tone in communicating deterrence messages – both nuclear and conventional. Yet despite this change of tone, the nuclear posture of the alliance has so far remained largely unchanged. Now is the time for NATO to take the next step in rebuilding its collective defence.

The next Strategic Concept that allied leaders are set to approve at the Madrid summit will constitute an important milestone in the evolution of NATO's nuclear posture. This policy brief argues that European foreign and defence policy communities would do well to engage themselves in this debate. Rather than passively enduring the nuclear rhetoric coming from Moscow, ignoring nuclear developments elsewhere, and sidestepping controversial issues, the unity of the alliance and the indivisibility

of allied security is best served by rethinking nuclear deterrence. If Europeans are serious about taking their own security more seriously, they cannot ignore the fact that nuclear deterrence underpins the entire defence of the Euro-Atlantic area. Shaping the future deterrence and defence posture of the alliance therefore requires engaging in nuclear policy debates.

The evolving nuclear threat environment

On 19 February 2022, the Russian Federation conducted a strategic deterrence forces exercise in which a variety of nuclear missile systems were tested. Five days later, Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered a "special military operation" to be carried out "to demilitarise and denazify Ukraine". On 27 February, he subsequently instructed Russia's deterrence forces be put "on high combat alert" – presumably with the intent of dissuading external intervention in the war that has just begun. And on the 20th of April, Putin heralded the test of the novel Sarmat intercontinental ballistic missile as "a wakeup call for those who are trying to threaten our country". Rarely have European audiences received such an instructive lesson about the coercive value that a large nuclear arsenal conveys. While these events have highlighted the deteriorating security environment on the European continent, there are nonetheless several factors at play. This section sets out to disentangle the nuclear threat conundrum that European defence planners face.

Russia's vast and extensively modernised nuclear arsenal cannot fail to loom the largest in any European threat assessment. In his 2018 Address to the Federal Assembly, Putin unveiled Russia's next generation of missile systems and more exotic weapons like nuclear-armed torpedoes. The recapitalisation of Russia's nuclear forces – ranging from short-range tactical weapons to intercontinental systems – has proceeded apace and now stands at some 85 percent or more, a fact well-recognised in US and European deterrence communities. Especially worrying from a European point of view is that some of these systems (such as the SSC-8 ground-launched cruise missile) are only of use in a hypothetical regional conflict. Due to their intermediate range, Russia may try to ostentatiously differentiate between targets in Europe and those in the US homeland. In addition to these material capabilities, the Russian concept of strategic deterrence seeks to deliberately manage escalation by contemplating nuclear use early on when facing a conventionally superior adversary. The notion that the multifaceted Russian nuclear arsenal would serve only deterrence purposes therefore amounts to deliberate deception.

The threat of Russian nuclear coercion to European security is real and growing and was made abundantly clear by Russia in the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine. In addition, the choice of having Belarus renounce its non-nuclear status opens the door to the stationing of Russian nuclear weapons along NATO's borders. Together with the heavily militarised Kaliningrad enclave, this would significantly compound the vulnerability of NATO's eastern flank. Any purely conventional defence of the Baltic states – and by extension other allies – thus would yield escalation dominance to Moscow. Finally, Russian rhetoric about the conflict in Ukraine makes clear that its grievances are not just with the government in Kiev, but rather with NATO and the EU. The object of Russia's nuclear coercion is thus not just any individual European government, but rather the entire Euro-Atlantic architecture.

The dramatic expansion of China's nuclear arsenal constitutes a second major risk factor to European security. The People's Republic of China has abandoned its minimum deterrence strategy in favour of a fully fledged nuclear triad. It has high readiness nuclear forces and state of the art command-and-control facilities at its disposal. This is underpinned by a burgeoning defence technological and industrial base. Taken together, China is now becoming the world's third nuclear superpower alongside the US and Russia. Consequently, the US nuclear arsenal – on which European security also depends – must now serve to deter two peer nuclear-capable competitors simultaneously. This situation increases the interdependence between US extended deterrence commitments in the Indo-Pacific region and those in the European theatre. Put simply, US strategic forces – the supreme guarantee of the security of NATO Allies – must now be ready to confront two different adversaries that pose their own challenges. The growth of the Chinese arsenal,

however distant it may seem from European capitals, inevitably complicates and potentially destabilises the deterrence equation vis-à-vis Russia. In addition, it can serve as a tool to intimidate European strategic partners like the Republic of Korea and Japan.

The advent of nuclear multipolarity is not limited to the modernisation and expansion of Russian and Chinese arsenals. The nuclear programme of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea continues to advance. Not only does it increasingly feature long-range systems, but it is also multiplying delivery systems and enabling nuclear brinkmanship. Furthermore, the nuclear balance between India and Pakistan remains fragile and characterised by increasingly diverse and sophisticated delivery systems. Again, this not only poses local risks, but also puts pressure on the non-proliferation of nuclear technologies.

> **Nuclear threats and the logic of deterrence have made a dramatic comeback.**

Finally, the Iranian nuclear programme looms large over strategic stability in the Middle East. The EU's efforts in reviving the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action have yet to bear fruit. The recent expansion of Iran's nuclear activities amplifies concerns that a nuclear breakout remains possible. Such a development would alter the regional balance and invite reactions by those states feeling most threatened by such a development.

Taken together, nuclear threats and the logic of deterrence have made a dramatic comeback. Unlike the Cold War period, today's nuclear threat environment is increasingly multipolar, featuring three nuclear superpowers as well as a larger number of smaller arsenals. Due to this emerging nuclear multipolarity, interdependencies between different regions is on the rise. Most notably, the US extended deterrence commitments to European and Indo-Pacific allies – precisely because they rely on the same set of strategic forces – bind both regions together in their strategic stability. Whilst Russian nuclear sabre-rattling might appear the most threatening to European capitals, it is arguably the expansion of the Chinese nuclear arsenal that is most destabilising in terms of capabilities. Irrespective of the outcome of the war in Ukraine, nuclear deterrence will continue to affect European security in manifold ways.

An inadequate European status quo

Over the past decades, European thinking on deterrence has generated a deeply rooted preference for the status quo. Across different European capitals, this preference is anchored in three common preconceptions, namely an overwhelming concern with hybrid and/or conventional threats, a strong analytical focus on arms control discussions, and a stark compartmentalisation of security policy debates. Yet this status quo is increasingly inadequate for meeting the evolving threat environment. All NATO's operational defence plans using conventional means fundamentally rest on the assumption that nuclear deterrence will hold. This implies that European defence planners must confront the need to rethink the role nuclear deterrence plays in their strategic culture.

Firstly, hybrid threats and conventional deterrence questions loom large in European threat assessments. This pattern applies to security environment reviews pursued by individual nations as well as collective deliberations within NATO and the EU. Whilst nuclear or proliferation risks may get occasionally mentioned, the souring relationship with Russia (and to a lesser extent China) mostly translates into a burgeoning vocabulary on hybrid threats, ranging from cyberthreats and

disinformation efforts to the weaponisation of refugee flows. For NATO's collective defence planning – and for the most exposed allies along the eastern flank in particular – conventional deterrence questions occupy the centre stage. The post-2014 reconstruction of NATO's collective defence – operationalised around the enhanced forward-presence battlegroups and the associated reinforcement strategy – has focused on rebuilding readiness for conventional Article 5 operations. While the nuclear language in NATO summit communiqués has evolved significantly in declaratory terms, material changes to the alliance's deterrence posture have so far remained limited to the conventional domain. This emphasis on hybrid and conventional threats is understandable, yet it correlates with a relative neglect of nuclear escalation risks.

Secondly, the analytical bandwidth that exists within European capitals for nuclear issues is to a large extent devoted to arms control and disarmament (rather than to deterrence questions). Despite all the attention spent on these themes, this has yielded little results. Paradoxically, the erosion of the arms control architecture – as exemplified by the abandonment of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF Treaty) – is often seen as a grave threat in itself, rather than the missiles that such agreements seek to limit. In the public domain the vocal disarmament community typically occupies the lion's share of the discursive bandwidth. The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) is a case in point in pitting disarmament activists against agreed policy. With some exceptions, notably in France and the UK, political leaders in European capitals seldomly articulate the logic of deterrence. Whilst Europeans have invested significant bureaucratic resources in arms control discussions, they struggle to mobilise adequate bandwidth for addressing nuclear issues head-on.

Thirdly, European capitals have gone long ways in compartmentalising security policy debates into stovepipes. This has isolated nuclear policy discussions from broader defence policy discussions. Within ministries of foreign affairs and ministries of defence, NATO and EU desks typically constitute cloistered communities underpinned by more realist vs more normative assumptions respectively. Within the NATO community, nuclear policy discussions are largely locked up within the Nuclear Planning Group and the associated working groups. In individual allied capitals, the nuclear policy community is typically very small and often not at liberty to address deterrence matters in the public domain. Whilst this arguably serves the purpose of strengthening political control over sensitive matters, it has the consequence of decoupling nuclear policy from wider deterrence debates. Such compartmentalisation poses major challenges to the concept of "integrated deterrence" that is emerging within US and UK strategic circles.

Taken together, these three preconceptions sustain a European strategic culture that is inadequate in meeting today's challenges. European defence debates hardly engage with the evolving nuclear threat landscape. As these ideas are present to a greater or lesser extent in different European capitals as well as (consensus-driven) NATO and EU decision-making, they cement a status quo that is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain. As French President Macron stated in his 2020 deterrence speech, "a growing discrepancy (exists) between the level of our military capabilities and the reality of the changing international environment". Firmly rejecting the approach enshrined in the TPNW, he suggested that European policymakers need to engage in nuclear debates to develop a true strategic culture. Inter alia, this entails contextualising nuclear deterrence in a broader political framework. NATO's next Strategic Concept offers an opportunity to do just that.

Policy Implications for NATO's next Strategic Concept

NATO's next Strategic Concept must recodify the principles of nuclear deterrence on which the collective defence of the alliance rests. As the capstone document in the alliance's defence planning efforts, the Strategic Concept serves a critical function in ensuring that the political aims and its military strategy are linked up effectively. In the light of the ongoing war in Ukraine and the growing inadequacy of the status quo, NATO

delegations and planners will have their work cut out. This section provides five proposals for turning this undertaking into a success.

Firstly, the new Strategic Concept must consolidate the nuclear language from recent summit declarations into a coherent declaratory construct. The 2010 Strategic Concept paid only limited attention to nuclear deterrence, relegating detailed language to the 2012 Deterrence and Defence Posture Review. Yet from 2014 onwards, summit declarations have reflected the loss of trust in the NATO-Russia relationship and substantially amplified the emphasis on nuclear deterrence. The 2016 Warsaw Summit Communiqué, for instance, warned that "*any employment of nuclear weapons against NATO would fundamentally alter the nature of a conflict*". Nuclear use thus constitutes a key escalatory threshold that ensures retaliation at the level deemed most appropriate. In addition, it stated that the alliance "*will ensure the broadest possible participation of Allies concerned in their agreed nuclear burden-sharing arrangements*". The latter are fundamental to ensuring that the security of all allies remains indivisible. Similarly, the 2018 Brussels Summit Declaration flagged the "*coherence between conventional and nuclear components of NATO's deterrence and defence posture*" as something to be ensured (which by 2021 had become "greater coherence"). Given this evolution in summit language, the ingredients are readily available for distilling a more detailed enunciation of NATO's nuclear policy at the highest level of political guidance. The new Strategic Concept language must be regarded as a new baseline enabling further adaptation, rather than constituting any definitive conclusion.

Second, the Strategic Concept would do well to task the drafting of a cross-domain deterrence review. Not only would this enable the alliance to integrate the lessons learned during the Ukraine war, it also would provide a mechanism for addressing the problem of deterrence compartmentalisation. The strategic instrumentalisation of economic sanctions, conventional military power and nuclear deterrence currently unfolds in a way that is all too disparate, whereas the logic of deterrence operates along a continuum of means and effects. For NATO as a nuclear alliance, it is imperative to think through the exact relationship between the edges of conventional and nuclear deterrence. This implies mastering the middle rungs of the escalation ladder, especially those in between conventional regional conflict and all-out nuclear war. This is precisely the domain in which the Russian Federation seeks to gain a competitive advantage. This will require NATO committees and military planners to overcome the nuclear vs conventional boundary by means of more synchronised plans and concepts. The objective here is not to decrease political control over nuclear policy, but rather to increase the coherence of NATO's deterrence posture and enable strategic decision-making that is underpinned by a prudent analysis of all foreseeable contingencies and possible response options.

Thirdly, NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements warrant an in-depth update. Today the alliance maintains a nuclear-sharing posture that is based on decisions taken in the framework of the 1967 and 1991 Strategic Concepts. Apart from the nuclear forces of the US, the UK, and France, this amounts to a minimal posture in which a handful of allies participate in nuclear deterrence by means of dual-capable aircraft (i.e., able to deliver B-61 nuclear munitions provided by the US) and a larger number of allies support nuclear operations with conventional air tactics. The transition from F-16 to F-35 aircraft in an increasing number of allies will ensure that these delivery systems remain operationally relevant well into the future. It also provides an opportunity to review and extend the network of supporting airbases. This will allow for more geographically distributed exercises, the rapid dispersal of aircraft in times of crisis, and regular signalling that the security of the alliance is indivisible. The number of allies taking part in nuclear sharing could also grow. Whilst there are good reasons for and against abandoning the 1996 three nuclear no's, a cross-domain deterrence review must ensure that NATO's nuclear posture remains sufficiently agile and adaptive to accommodate the changing circumstances of today. Finally, the alliance must start thinking about future munitions and delivery systems. The B61-12 Life Extension Program has ensured that

the current weapons will remain in service until the early to mid-2040s. Given that any new weapon will require a multiyear development timeframe, this decision-making process must start sooner rather than later.

Fourthly, future decisions will require a significant investment in deterrence education. In European allies, many governments have an unspoken preference for communicating as little as possible about nuclear deterrence – even though they may well fully subscribe to it. However, such silence, Brad Roberts has argued, is counterproductive because it undermines the political foundations underpinning deterrence. Rethinking nuclear deterrence in light of changing circumstances implies engaging with all possible arguments – including in the public arena. Nearly all European allies rely on NATO's nuclear deterrence to reassure their own publics and to offset Russia's escalation dominance that would otherwise exist. The need for such deterrence education is therefore especially acute in European societies, for it constitutes a critical enabler of future strategic decision-making. This requires a sustained effort in communicating the logic of deterrence to different audiences, ranging from parliamentarians over the next generation of policy professionals to the public at large. This must be done not only at the level of the alliance, but also within each individual ally. In this regard, the new Strategic Concept constitutes an important educational tool.

Finally, the next Strategic Concept must not close the door on arms control and continue efforts to bring about reciprocal disarmament. Whilst the outlook on this front may appear rather bleak, it remains imperative for different reasons. Unlike other actors in the world, NATO allies must abide by their own commitments under the Non-Proliferation Treaty to retain the moral high ground. In addition, arms control remains instrumental in curtailing the cost of nuclear arsenals and the modernisation thereof. For this reason, arms control remains one of the few technical avenues for managing rising international tensions. Should states like the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China decline to engage in such discussions, it will be clear why nuclear modernisation may well be imperative. Against this background, arms control efforts can complement – not substitute for – effective deterrence and help support risk reduction.

Conclusion

When the allied heads of state and government meet in Madrid, the stakes in defending European security could hardly be higher. As they have already decided to "significantly strengthen" the longer-term deterrence and defence posture of the alliance, they will review various reset options proposed by NATO military authorities. European leaders would do well to engage head-on with the nuclear dimension thereof, rather than leaving this debate to the three major nuclear powers alone. However uncomfortable the dependencies of extended nuclear deterrence may be, alliance unity is best served by in-depth debate involving all allies. Integrating a coherent declaratory construct into the next Strategic Concept and commissioning a cross-domain deterrence review are key steps to take in this regard. The objective thereof is to ensure that Russia's nuclear intimidation will not succeed, and that the security of all allies remains indivisible. All for one, and one for all.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alexander Mattelaer

Dr Alexander Mattelaer is professor of international security and vice dean for research at the VUB Brussels School of Governance. He is also a senior research fellow at Egmont, the Royal Institute for International Relations, and chair of the Scientific Committee of the Belgian Royal Higher Institute for Defence. He is indebted to Luis Simon and several officials for their comments on an earlier version of this text. The responsibility for any errors lies with the author alone.

alexander.mattelaer@vub.be

The **Centre for Security, Diplomacy and Strategy (CSDS)** seeks to contribute to a better understanding of the key contemporary security and diplomatic challenges of the 21st century – and their impact on Europe – while reaching out to the policy community that will ultimately need to handle such challenges. Our expertise in security studies will seek to establish comprehensive theoretical and policy coverage of strategic competition and its impact on Europe, whilst paying particular attention to the Transatlantic relationship and the wider Indo-Pacific region. Diplomacy as a field of study will be treated broadly and comparatively to encompass traditional statecraft and foreign policy analysis, as well as public, economic and cultural diplomacy.

The **CSDS Policy Brief** offers a peer-reviewed, interdisciplinary platform for critical analysis, information and interaction. In providing concise and to the point information, it serves as a reference point for policy makers in discussing geo-political, geo-economic and security issues of relevance for Europe. Subscribe here. The CSDS Policy Brief is a discussion forum; authors express their own views. If you consider contributing, contact the editor Prof. Michael Reiterer: michael.reiterer@vub.be.

Follow us at:
Twitter @CSDS_Brussels LinkedIn CSDS Brussels Youtube CSDS
http://csds.brussels-school.be

VUB BRUSSELS SCHOOL OF GOVERNANCE

The Brussels School of Governance is an alliance between the Institute for European Studies (Vrije Universiteit Brussel) and Vesalius College.

Visitor's address:
Pleinlaan 5, 1050 Brussels, Belgium
Mailing address:
Pleinlaan 2, 1050 Brussels, Belgium

info_bsog@vub.be

www.brussels-school.be