

# MODERNISE, EXPAND OR COMPLEMENT?

## NATO'S NUCLEAR POSTURE IN THE POST-2022 STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT

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# **CENTRE FOR SECURITY, DIPLOMACY AND STRATEGY**

CSDS IN DEPTH

MARCH 2024



BRUSSELS SCHOOL OF GOVERNANCE

CENTRE FOR SECURITY,  
DIPLOMACY AND STRATEGY

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	5
GEOPOLITICAL SHOCKS: THE EMERGENCE OF A “TWO-PEER” STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT	6
NATO “NON-STRATEGIC NUCLEAR WEAPONS” OPTIONS	11
CONCLUSION	18

## Abstract

Shifts in Russia's and China's nuclear posture introduce a strategic dilemma for the United States and NATO, yet there are no demand signals from European leaders to fundamentally alter NATO's nuclear posture. In this respect, Dual Capable Aircraft continues to be seen by NATO as essential to maintaining a credible deterrent against either conventional or nuclear aggression. This In-Depth Paper assumes that the United States will continue to provide Europe with a "nuclear umbrella" but it offers, against this baseline, three options that face NATO in terms of its own organised and commanded Non-Strategic Nuclear Weapon (NSNW) deterrent force. These options are: 1) modernise and enhance Dual Capable Aircraft within the parameters that have governed the Alliance's policy towards Russia since 1996-1997; 2) revise these policy parameters to allow a geographic expansion eastward of Dual Capable Aircraft to include so-called "new" allies; or 3) augment the strengthening of Dual Capable Aircraft taken under either option 1 or 2 with new US NSNW systems to be placed under NATO command and control. Following an exploration of these three options, the In-Depth Paper shows how NATO can better maintain alliance solidarity by avoiding the divisive introduction of new nuclear systems.

## Introduction

At the height of the Cold War, the United States (US) and its allies in the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) determined that the deterrence of the Soviet Union and the assurance of allies as to the credibility of the US “nuclear shield” required not only the “supreme guarantee” of the US strategic nuclear force based in the US, but also the deployment on eight European allies’ soil of over 7,000 US tactical nuclear weapons. Following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the US in consultation with NATO worked cooperatively with Mikhail Gorbachev and, subsequently, Boris Yeltsin, to achieve a dramatic and rapid reduction in this forward-based arsenal. By 1993, the number of US “Non-Strategic Nuclear Weapons” (NSNW) in Europe had been reduced by over 90%, including all of those that had been land- or sea-based.<sup>1</sup>

The one exception was air-delivered NSNW, though here too dramatic changes were in order. The number of B61 nuclear bombs in Europe was lowered by over 50%, B61 storage sites were cut by 70% and the air-based mission was shifted from “Quick Reaction Alert” (QRA) measured in minutes to a far more flexible status termed “Dual Capable Aircraft” (DCA).<sup>2</sup> Under the new force posture the fighter aircraft provided by a range of allies for delivery of the B61 bombs could normally be assigned to conventional war-fighting roles, including in operations outside NATO’s Area of Responsibility (AOR).

Nonetheless, the fundamental *raison d’être* of DCA remained the same: to provide the option for a “NATO-commanded and NATO-executed” nuclear strike against Russia if ordered by a consensus decision of the North Atlantic Council (NAC), either in response to a Russian first use of nuclear weapons or in a dire situation in which Russian aggression was threatening the fundamental integrity and sovereignty of an ally even though no nuclear use had yet been made. In this context, the threat of a “limited” (and hence arguably more “plausible”) NATO-commanded and NATO-executed air-delivered nuclear strike served the essential function of not only demonstrating the collective solidarity of the allies, but also “linking” the tactical nuclear level in Europe to the far much larger and devastating capability provided by the US strategic “Triad” of bombers, Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBM) and Submarine-launched Ballistic Missiles (SLBM) based in North America.

<sup>1</sup> Bell, R., “NATO Nuclear Burden-Sharing Post-Crimea: What Constitutes ‘Free-Riding’?”, ProQuest LLC, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 2021, p. 45.

<sup>2</sup> Koch, S.J., “*The Presidential Nuclear Initiatives of 1991-1992*”, Case Study 5, Center for the Study of Weapons of Mass Destruction (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press), September 2012, p. 12.

On the assumption that an adversary would have to calculate that this escalatory linkage would in effect be virtually automatic and irreversible, DCA has been seen by NATO as essential to maintaining a credible deterrent against either conventional or nuclear aggression. Accordingly, preserving DCA survived Germany's initiative to terminate it in 2009-2010, and it has remained a key feature of NATO's nuclear posture throughout the decade and a half that followed.<sup>3</sup> In this In-Depth Paper, I assume that the US will continue to provide Europe with a "nuclear umbrella" but I offer, against this baseline, three options that face NATO in terms of its own organised and commanded NSNW deterrent force. Following an exploration of these three options, I show how NATO can better maintain alliance solidarity by avoiding the divisive introduction of new nuclear systems.

## **Geopolitical Shocks: The Emergence of a "Two-Peer" Strategic Environment**

In recent years, debate concerning the adequacy of DCA has been re-engaged by two profoundly consequential geopolitical developments, both in terms of the implications of each development in its own right and in terms of the inter-relationship of the two. The first relates to Russia's decisions during President Vladimir Putin's second term in office (i.e. since he re-assumed the office following the 2008-2012 Medvedev interregnum) to re-prioritise nuclear weapons as a principal means to achieve strategic advantage. The second relates to China's decisions under President Xi Jinping since 2012 to embark on a decades-long initiative to acquire nuclear parity with the US (and Russia) as a key element of his "rejuvenation" goals.

### **Russian Nuclear Re-Prioritisation**

From 1989, when General Secretary Gorbachev and President Ronald Reagan signed the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, to 2011, when Medvedev and Obama signed the New START Treaty, an era of nuclear restraint and reductions generally prevailed, with both nations content to accept rough equivalence in designated categories of weaponry as specified in a progression of bilateral treaties (START I, START II, SORT and New START). By 2014, though, it became unalterably clear to US intelligence that Russia had been secretly developing an illegal INF-range missile, the mobile 9M729 ground-launched cruise missile. Although Putin had been critical of the INF Treaty since his 2007 speech at the Munich Security Conference, the Obama

<sup>3</sup> Bell, R., "NATO Nuclear-Sharing: Options for the New German Coalition", CSDS Policy Brief 20/2021, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, 9 November 2021, p. 1.

Administration's decision in 2014 to include a clear statement regarding the Russian violation in the State Department's annual publicly-available compliance report marked a pivot point in terms of the US' coming to terms with the extent Russia was prepared to stonewall all US efforts to constructively resolve the compliance issues associated with the missile.<sup>4</sup> In time (i.e. by 2019), this led the US, under President Trump and with NATO's unanimous backing, to withdraw from the accord.

Over the last decade, almost all other arms control dominoes fell as Putin increasingly pursued what the US 2022 National Security Strategy (NSS) terms 'an imperialist foreign policy with the goal of overturning key elements of the international order'.<sup>5</sup> Putin has continued to walk away from the strategic stability that Russia had previously accepted both immediately before and for a decade after the end of the Cold War. This has most recently included Russia suspending its compliance with New START, which now seems on course to lapse in just two years. Putin has also overseen the modernisation and expansion of Russia's NSNW force, including the deployment of 9M729 battalions in Russia and, in 2023, moving Russian NSNW systems to storage sites in Belarus; championing the development and deployment since 2018 of four new types of Russian strategic nuclear delivery systems (the *Poseidon* nuclear-powered underwater torpedo, the *Avangard* hypersonic glide vehicle, the *Burevestnik* nuclear-powered cruise missile and the *RS-28 Sarmat* heavy MIRVed ICBM); rejecting any constructive engagement in new strategic stability talks; and conducting very low-yield testing that arguably violates the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. He and other senior Russian officials also pointedly ratcheted up their threatening nuclear rhetoric. Perhaps most concerning, after he ordered the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Putin placed the Strategic Rocket Force in what he called "a special combat mode", directed the partial mobilisation of Russian reserve forces and began placing the Russian economy on a war footing.

In 2023, the US Office of the Director of National Intelligence summarised Russia's nuclear goals in the following terms:

'Throughout its invasion of Ukraine, Moscow has continued to show that it views its nuclear capabilities as necessary for maintaining deterrence and achieving its goals in a potential conflict against the United States and NATO [...] Moscow continues to develop long-range

<sup>4</sup> For a comprehensive assessment of the compliance issues, see: Woolf, A.F., *Russian Compliance with the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty: Background and Issues for Congress*, Congressional Research Service Report, updated 2 August 2019, p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> *National Security Strategy*, The White House, October 2022, p. 25. For a recent insightful academic assessment of Russia's NSNW goals and doctrine, see: Alberque, W. "Russian Military Thought and Doctrine Related to Non-strategic Nuclear Weapons: Change and Continuity", International Institute for Strategic Studies Research Paper, 22 January 2024.

nuclear-capable missiles and underwater delivery systems meant to penetrate or by-pass US missile defenses. Russia is expanding and modernizing its large, diverse, and modern set of non-strategic systems [...] because Moscow believes such systems offer options to deter adversaries, control the escalation of potential hostilities, and counter US and allied conventional forces'.<sup>6</sup>

## China's Strategic Nuclear Build-Up

In October of last year, a senior Pentagon official revealed that the People's Republic of China (PRC) had 'more than doubled' its nuclear arsenal in the last three years and appeared intent on achieving a level of 1,500 warheads by 2035.<sup>7</sup> Another Department of Defense official called the extent and pace of China's nuclear modernisation programme 'nothing short of breath-taking'.<sup>8</sup> The 2023 Annual Threat Assessment (ATA) confirmed that China is building 'hundreds of new ICBM silos' and assessed China's strategic objectives as follows:

'China is reorienting its nuclear posture for strategic rivalry with the United States because its leaders have concluded that their current capabilities are insufficient. Beijing worries that bilateral tension, US nuclear modernization, and the PLA's advancing conventional capabilities have increased the likelihood of a US first strike. Beijing is not interested in agreements that restrict its plans and will not agree to negotiations that lock in US or Russian advantages. Beijing's heightened confidence in its nuclear deterrent is likely to bolster its resolve and intensify conventional conflicts'.<sup>9</sup>

Although recent US intelligence has revealed that China is experiencing major issues with its strategic nuclear programme, including substituting water for propulsion fuel in at least some of its ICBMs, President Xi's prompt removal of four senior-most Strategic Rocket Force commanders and subsequent crackdown on corruption within this force can be assumed to remedy that glaring deficiency.

6 *Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community*, Office of the Director of National Intelligence, February 2023, p. 14.

7 Robertson, N., "China More Than Doubled its Nuclear Arsenal since 2020, Pentagon Says", *Defense News*, 19 October 2023, p. 1.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

9 *ATA op.cit.*, pp. 7-8.



## Russian-Chinese Nuclear Interaction

As noted in the 2022 National Security Strategy, '[b]y the 2030s, the United States for the first time will need to deter two major nuclear powers, each of whom will field modern and diverse global and regional nuclear forces'.<sup>10</sup> Hence, beyond the threat posed by each of these developments in its own right, defence analysts are deeply concerned about their interrelationship in the aggregate. Since the PRC nuclear capability has always been regarded by the US as a "lesser included case", the possibility of a future crisis in which Russia and China coordinated their nuclear forces in confronting the US – though a hypothetical scenario – would constitute an unprecedented strategic challenge. Equally challenging would be a scenario in which Russian and Chinese-directed crises were occurring simultaneously in each region but in an uncoordinated fashion (e.g. the US verifies with high confidence intelligence that points to impending Russian aggression against a NATO ally in the Baltics or Central Europe and a Chinese build-up that appears to presage an imminent assault on Taiwan). In this case, the strategic dilemma for the US would be how to allocate not only its conventional forces between the two regions, but also its deployable strategic and tactical nuclear systems.

In 2022, the previous Commander of the US Strategic Command, Admiral Charles Richards, told a Congressional panel that Russia's nuclear behaviour during the Ukraine War and China's nuclear trajectory meant that we are now facing a 'crisis deterrence dynamic'.<sup>11</sup> In Richards' view, this has created a 'deterrence and assurance gap' that can only be filled by the deployment by the US of a 'low-yield, non-ballistic capability that does not require visible generation'.<sup>12</sup> Here, the Admiral was referring specifically to the nuclear Sea-Launched Cruise Missile (SLCM-N) system proposed by President Trump but opposed by President Biden. A series of former Republican and Democratic senior defence policy officials, from Frank Miller and Eric Edelman to Greg Weaver to John Harvey, have urged that the US warhead count in its deployed strategic inventory be increased in anticipation of a future Russian/Chinese warhead aggregate that could well double that of the US and that a new non-strategic nuclear system such as the SLCM-N be introduced.<sup>13</sup>

Last Fall, a bipartisan Congressionally-mandated commission concluded that 'the United States lacks a comprehensive strategy to address the looming two-nuclear peer threat environment

<sup>10</sup> 2022 NSS *op.cit.*, p. 21.

<sup>11</sup> Harris, B., "US Nuclear Commander Warns of Deterrence 'Crisis' against Russia and China", *Defense News*, 4 May 2022, p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, p. 1.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example: Miller, F.C. and Edelman, E.S., "United States Nuclear Strategy and Policy", Joint Statement before the US Senate Committee on Armed Services, 20 September 2022, p. 8; Weaver, G., "The Urgent Imperative to Maintain NATO's Nuclear Deterrence", *NATO Review*, 29 September 2023, p. 6; Harvey, J.R., "Meeting the Challenge of Deterring Two Nuclear Peers", *Real Clear Defense*, 4 October 2023, p. 6.

and lacks the force structure such a strategy will require'.<sup>14</sup> It recommends supplementing the current plan for the modernised Triad 'to ensure US nuclear strategy remains effective in a two-nuclear peer environment', and modifying the current theatre nuclear posture to 'provide the President a range of militarily-effective nuclear response options to deter or counter Russian or Chinese limited nuclear use in theater'. Although not specifically endorsing the SLCM-N, the Report states that these additional NSNW systems 'will need to be deployable, survivable, and variable in their available yield options'.<sup>15</sup>

The Biden Administration has continued to take a more restrained position on these issues. In addition to continuing to oppose the development of the SLCM-N, in June last year US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan insisted that 'the United States does not need to increase our nuclear forces to outnumber the combined total of our competitors in order to successfully deter them', calling instead for a 'better' (rather than 'more') approach.<sup>16</sup> As elaborated in the 2022 National Security Strategy, the Biden Administration distinguishes between the PRC and the Russian challenges. It describes the PRC as 'America's most consequential geopolitical challenge' and the 'pacing threat', but insists that Russia, while posing 'an immediate and ongoing threat to the regional security order in Europe', nonetheless 'lacks the across the spectrum capabilities of the PRC'.<sup>17</sup> The 2022 National Security Strategy contends that what is required to maintain deterrence responsive to these threats is not a new nuclear arms race but rather 'modernizing the nuclear Triad, nuclear command, control, and communication, and our nuclear weapons infrastructure, as well as strengthening our extended deterrence commitments to our Allies'.<sup>18</sup>

The Biden Administration is not alone in arguing that the prospects of simultaneous and coordinated Russian and Chinese nuclear coercion are exaggerated.<sup>19</sup> Despite Putin and Xi's issuance of a Joint Statement at the Beijing Winter Olympics on 4 February 2022 promising cooperation with "no limits", there is considerable debate concerning the depth, strength and durability of the Russian-Chinese strategic partnership, with some experts on Russia and China contending that while there may currently be an "alignment" in the two countries' geopolitical

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14 "America's Strategic Posture: The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States", October 2023, vii.

15 Ibid. p. 35.

16 "Remarks by National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan for the Arms Control Association (ACA) Annual Forum," The White House, 2 June 2023, p. 6.

17 2022 NSS op.cit., p. 11.

18 Ibid., p. 21.

19 See for example: Glaser, C.L., Acton, J.M., and Fetter, S., "The U.S. Nuclear Arsenal Can Deter Both China and Russia: Why America Doesn't Need More Missiles", *Foreign Affairs*, 5 October 2023.

interests, the prospect of a full-blown Russian/Chinese “alliance” remains less certain.<sup>20</sup> In this context, it should be noted that while the NATO Strategic Concept approved by Heads of State and Government in Madrid in May 2022 described the two nations’ relationship as a ‘deepening strategic partnership’ that includes ‘mutually reinforcing attempts to undercut the rules-based international order’, it also declared that NATO allies ‘remain open to constructive engagement’ with the PRC.<sup>21</sup> In a similar vein, Jake Sullivan recently reiterated that America’s competition with China ‘does not have to lead to a new Cold War’ and that what the Biden Administration is seeking is a ‘new equilibrium’.<sup>22</sup>

## NATO “Non-Strategic Nuclear Weapons” Options

Throughout its history, NATO allies have believed that the US can be trusted to determine what level of independent strategic nuclear forces is needed to continue to ensure “mutual assured destruction” (MAD) in the event of a general nuclear exchange with an adversary and thereby deter any such war in the first place. Accordingly, this In-Depth Paper assumes that as long as it is US policy to remain in NATO and to continue to provide extended nuclear deterrence to its allies, the US strategic nuclear deterrent – whether eventually increased in numbers and types of nuclear weapons *or not* beyond the current Triad modernisation plan – will remain as the “supreme guarantee” of NATO deterrence.

That could, of course, change. There is growing concern in Europe and among many in the US national security policy community concerning the implications for NATO and for Europe’s security should former President Donald Trump be re-elected.<sup>23</sup> Nonetheless, this paper does *not* address the extremely adverse challenges Europe would face in maintaining nuclear deterrence of Russia were the US under a second Trump presidency to renounce the long-standing US nuclear

20 For example, in an October 2023 report from the Center for a New American Security, Kendall-Taylor, A., Kofman, M., Lokker N. and Hautala, H., contend that it is “unlikely” that Russia would “prioritise Chinese concerns in any decision on nuclear use”.

21 NATO 2022 Strategic Concept, adopted by NATO Heads of State and Government, Madrid, 27 July 2022.

22 Sullivan, J., “US/China Relations”, speech to the Council on Foreign Relations, 30 January 2024.

23 These concerns have been significantly heightened by Trump’s statement on the campaign trail in South Carolina on 9 February declaring that under his leadership, the US would not protect any ally that was “delinquent” in meeting its obligation from the 2014 Wales Summit to allocate 2% of its GDP on defence; indeed, he said he would actually “encourage” Russia to invade any ally that was “delinquent”.

guarantee to its allies in Europe.<sup>24</sup> A growing body of analysis is addressing the challenges that the Europe would have to overcome in looking to France's independent nuclear force, perhaps in coordination with UK independent nuclear force, to evolve and be multilateralised in such a fashion as to substitute for the American nuclear shield.<sup>25</sup> For the purposes of this In-Depth Paper, though, it is assumed that the US nuclear umbrella will remain over Europe and hence that both the UK and France will continue to maintain their independent nuclear forces in roughly their *current* levels of capability, which NATO recognises 'contribute to deterrence by complicating the calculations of potential adversaries'.<sup>26</sup>

Against this baseline, what, then, are the options NATO faces in terms of the future of *its own* (i.e. NATO-organised and NATO-commanded) NSNW deterrent force? I would suggest there are three: 1) modernise and enhance DCA within the parameters that have governed the Alliance's policy towards Russia since 1996-1997; 2) revise these policy parameters to allow a geographic expansion eastward of DCA to include so-called "new" allies (i.e. those nations that have joined the Alliance since the end of the Cold War, starting with Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic in 1999); or 3) augment the strengthening of DCA taken under either option 1 or 2 with new US NSNW systems to be placed under NATO command and control – such as was the case with the NATO INF cruise and ballistic missile deployments in the 1980s.

### Option 1: Modernise and Enhance within existing policy parameters

NATO's DCA posture is currently governed by several formal and informal policy parameters:

- Heads of State and Government agreed in the 2022 Strategic Concept that in addition to the US, United Kingdom (UK) and French strategic nuclear forces, 'NATO's nuclear deterrence posture also *relies on* the United States' nuclear weapons forward deployed in Europe and the contributions of Allies concerned (emphasis added)' (i.e. those allies that participate in DCA by providing B61 delivery aircraft and/or storage locations on their soil).<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup> The Trump 2024 presidential campaign website promises that as President, he would "fundamentally re-evaluate NATO's purpose and NATO's mission". While Trump might not withdraw the US formally from the Treaty's integrated military command (as did France in 1967), or renounce the Treaty outright, there is speculation that he would consider shifting the US to a so-called "off-shore balancing" role, placing NATO from a US perspective in a "dormant" status. See, for example: Maitra, S., "Policy Brief: Pivoting the US Away from Europe to a Dormant NATO", The Center for Renewing America, 16 February 2023. It is unclear whether this proposal would include having the US continue to provide extended nuclear deterrence.

<sup>25</sup> See, in particular, numerous articles authored during the last several years by French defence expert Bruno Tertrais, including "The European Dimension of Nuclear Deterrence: French and British Policies and Future Scenarios", (FIIA Working Paper 106). Helsinki: Finnish Institute of International Relations, November 2018.

<sup>26</sup> Vilnius Summit Communique Issued by NATO Heads of State and Government in the Meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Vilnius 11 July 2023, para 44.

<sup>27</sup> 2022 Strategic Concept, *op.cit.*

- At their Vilnius Summit last year, they also reaffirmed ‘the imperative to ensure the *broadest possible participation* by Allies concerned in NATO’s nuclear burden-sharing arrangements to demonstrate Alliance unity and resolve (emphasis added)’.<sup>28</sup> There are, however, several caveats that limit how broad participation could be. First, as a practical matter, for any ally to participate directly in DCA (i.e. by providing aircraft configured and certified for B61 nuclear bomb delivery), its air force must operate modern and highly-capable (i.e. fourth- or fifth-generation) fighter aircraft (e.g. F-16s, F-15Es or F-35s). This rules out, for example, allies such as Iceland and Luxembourg that do not have air forces that operate fighter aircraft. Second, neither the US nor NATO institutionally has ever endeavoured to “force” an ally to participate in the Alliance’s nuclear posture if that ally chose not to do so. Hence, allies such as Denmark and Norway have never allowed any US nuclear weapons to be stationed on their soil and have never participated directly in the NATO nuclear posture.<sup>29</sup> Other allies (e.g. Canada and the UK) that were once direct participants in NATO’s NSNW mission decided after the end of the Cold War to withdraw from the posture and did so without push-back from the Alliance.
- Beyond these carve-outs, NATO pronounced in 1996, and in 1997 made formal in the NATO-Russia Founding Act (NRFA), the so-called “3 no’s”: that NATO has ‘no *intention*, no *plan* and no *reason*’ to deploy NSNW on the soil of any ally that has joined the Alliance since the end of the Cold War. The practical effect of this policy restriction is to exclude 15 allies from direct DCA participation: Albania, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Slovenia, Slovakia and Sweden. The NRFA also prohibits NATO from deploying ‘substantial combat units’ (i.e. brigade-sized or larger) east of this line.

Within these policy parameters, though, NATO is currently engaged in a significant and comprehensive modernisation of its DCA posture:

- The older models B-61 Mod 3 and 4 nuclear gravity bombs are being replaced by the modern B61-Mod 12;
- All DCA aircraft-providing allies (the US, Germany, Belgium, Netherlands and Italy) are replacing their fourth-generation DCA fighters (F-15Es, Tornado and F-16s) with the stealthy fifth-generation F-35;

<sup>28</sup> 2023 Vilnius Summit Communique, *op.cit.*, para 45.

<sup>29</sup> For a comprehensive historical analysis, see: Bell, R. “NATO Nuclear Burden-Sharing”, *op.cit.*, pp. 28-29 and p. 48.

- The DCA-dedicated NATO Nuclear C2 system is being modernised and adapted;
- Allies are placing increased emphasis on DCA survivability, including with regard to force dispersal and protection;
- Allies are also now conducting exercises that focus on NATO's transition in wartime from conventional to nuclear operations, having agreed at Vilnius to 'updating planning to increase flexibility and adaptability of the Alliance's nuclear forces'<sup>30</sup>;
- More non-DCA eligible allies are supporting the nuclear delivery mission through participation in SNOWCAT (Support for Nuclear Operations through Conventional Air Tactics), wherein such supporting roles as suppression of enemy air defences (SEAD), combat air patrol, or air refuelling are provided; and
- NATO's STEADFAST NOON "live fly" annual DCA exercise has now been brought into the public domain, with 13 nations and 60 aircraft participating in last year's exercises from Kleine-Brogel Air Base in Belgium.

Moreover, there are other DCA enhancement steps that NATO allies, collectively or individually, *could take* within *existing* policy parameters, if it or they so choose:

- The number of DCA aircraft assigned at the highest readiness/response levels could be increased;
- The number of B61-Mod12 bombs stored at DCA sites and available for wartime delivery could be increased;
- More storage locations for the B61-Mod 12 bombs could be constructed within the territories of currently DCA-eligible allies<sup>31</sup>; and
- Eligible allies that withdrew from DCA (e.g. Canada and the UK) could rejoin.

## Option 2: Expand DCA to the East

Going beyond the DCA modernisation and enhancement steps outlined in Option 1 would, however, require a fundamental policy decision by the Alliance. Leaders would, unanimously,

<sup>30</sup> Vilnius Summit Communiqué, *op.cit.*, para. 45.

<sup>31</sup> For example, a 25 September 2023 report by the Federation of American Scientists that examined budgetary documents accompanying President Biden's FY2024 defence budget submission to Congress speculated that proposed military construction upgrades at RAF Lakenheath provided evidence that the US was preparing to potential resume B61 storage there once planned US Air Force F-35 deployments begin arriving.

have to agree to renounce the 1997 NRFA and with it the “3 no’s” and the restriction on large combat force basing to the east.<sup>32</sup> Since meeting in Warsaw in September 2014 – only months after Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea and its military intervention in Ukraine’s Donbas region – NATO Heads of State and Government have been in agreement that Russia has been in breach of its commitments under the NRFA. For example, the 2023 Vilnius Summit Communiqué declared that by its illegal and brutal aggression against Ukraine, Russia has “shattered” peace in the Euro-Atlantic region and ‘violated the norms and principles that contributed to a stable and predictable European security order’, thereby making itself ‘the most significant and direct threat to Allies’ security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area’.<sup>33</sup> For these reasons, the Leaders declared that ‘we cannot consider Russia to be our partner’.<sup>34</sup>

In recent months, there appears to be a growing consensus within NATO that the Alliance is facing a genuinely long-term challenge in terms of Russia’s hostility – an adversarial relationship that NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg has referred to as likely “decades-long”.<sup>35</sup> Nonetheless, not all allies have abandoned the hope that Russia might yet at some stage in the future post-Ukrainian War era be re-engaged diplomatically as a partner – or at least as a reluctantly accepted stakeholder in the future European security order. Hence, no decision to renounce either the NFRA or the “3 no’s” has to date been taken, though some former US and/or NATO officials believe such a step is already overdue.<sup>36</sup>

Should continued and/or even more devastating and escalatory Russian aggression against Ukraine in time result in that decision being taken, the most immediate military consequence would likely be Poland’s joining DCA by contributing some of its planned F-35 fleet to the B61 delivery mission. Whether it would also include storing B61-Mod 12 bombs on its soil would, consistent with NATO’s long-standing “neither confirm nor deny” policy, not be formally acknowledged by NATO or its member states. Both Finland and the Czech Republic will in time be operating F-35s, thereby giving them the option in theory to join DCA should they so choose. The main military benefit to DCA of having B61 bombs stored to the East would be to significantly reduce the distance any B61 delivery mission ordered by the NAC in a hypothetical conflict would have to fly from its designated bases, and hence improve the penetration capabilities of such a strike formation.

32 One early option for taking this step would be at the 75<sup>th</sup> NATO anniversary summit in Washington, July 2024.

33 2023 Vilnius Summit Communiqué, paragraph 5.

34 *Ibid.*, para 19.

35 At a 2 February 2024 conference on “New Year, New Europe” hosted in Brussels by the European Council on Foreign Relations, the NATO ASG for Political and Security Policy, Ambassador Boris Ruge, stated during the “on the record” Q&A that he believed the consensus on this perspective extended across all 31 members.

36 See for example: Brzezinski, I. and Vershbow, A., “Memo to NATO Leaders”, published online by the Atlantic Council on the eve of the 2023 Vilnius Summit.

### Option 3: Augment DCA with a NATO SLCM-N Capability

As previously noted, some contend that the effectiveness of DCA remains too problematic in terms of its survivability or ability to penetrate Russia's A2/AD defences to provide a basis on which to base NATO's NSNW deterrence, and hence it must be augmented with another tactical nuclear system, most prominently, the SLCM-N.<sup>37</sup> There are at least six problems, though, with the proposal, assuming that the necessary "assurance" of allies is to be achieved by placing the SLCM-N-armed SSNs under NATO C2:

1. It is excessively dismissive of the "step-change" improvement in DCA's penetration capability that will be occasioned by the introduction of the stealthy F-35 and is overly optimistic (in light of lessons drawn from the war in Ukraine) that cruise missiles will always "get through".<sup>38</sup> Although the US and its NATO allies failed to deter Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, they have, Putin's nuclear threats against any nation that "interfered" with his "special military operation" notwithstanding, deterred Russia ever since from expanding the war to include any NATO ally. Indeed, the US and NATO have held their nerve in the face of such nuclear bluster. NATO's confidence in its deterrent will increase once the F-35 becomes the full backbone of DCA.
2. To be credible, an essential feature of any in-theatre deterrent system is to ensure that it does not rely on strategic warning, such as is the case with the SLCM-N deployed on nuclear attack submarines (SSNs). This criterion assumes, therefore, that US intelligence is not capable of providing strategic warning of Russian aggression, and thereby would not allow NATO leaders time to order the mobilisation of the DCA force. However, this was not the case in the weeks that preceded Russia's 24 February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, where US intelligence proved fully accurate and prescient.

<sup>37</sup> Note: the option of NATO deploying new land-based intermediate-range nuclear-armed ballistic missiles in Europe has been categorically ruled out by Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, reflecting his appraisal of the broad extent to which such a proposal would be opposed within the Alliance. If DCA with F-35s and B61-Mod 12s were deemed "not to suffice", Alexander Mattelaer has suggested another possible alternative or complement to DCA: a multi-nationally-crewed, NATO AWACS-like force, of "regionally-assigned and forward based" bombers armed with the nuclear-tipped Long Range Stand-Off (LRSO) missile. See: <https://YouTube.com/watch?v=EPTFpYh6WC8> (remarks made on 17 August 2023 on Panel 6 at the USSTRATCOM Deterrence Symposium, Omaha, Nebraska). This assumes, of course, that the US would be willing to permanently allocate some portion of its "swing" bomber fleet of B-52s, B-1s, B-2s and, soon, B-21s to NATO C2 at bases in Europe. In these same remarks, he also raised the possibility of equipping the DCA-dedicated F-35s at some stage in the future with the LRSO.

<sup>38</sup> TMD defences deployed by Ukraine in the conflict have been surprisingly effective against "solo" attacks by Russian ballistic and cruise missiles. To ensure targets get hit, Russia has had to resort to mass attacks, wherein a "swarm" of different missile types using different attack tactics arrive nearly simultaneously. Attacking with a "swarm" of nuclear cruise missiles from an offshore SSN would not be a feasible approach were NATO to require an in-theatre nuclear strike in a future conflict with Russia. In contrast, the F-35s carrying B61 bombs in a DCA strike formation would not be arriving over the target unaccompanied; rather, they would be preceded and escorted by a range of supporting aircraft.



3. The proposal assumes that the SLCM-N programme will be completed sometime in the 2030s despite President Biden's strong opposition and the escalating costs of modernising the three strategic Triad legs. The initial authorisation in the FY2024 National Defense Authorization Act, enacted over his objections, directs the US Navy to present a plan for an Initial Operational Capability (IOC) in 2031 (four years sooner than previously projected), but there are no guarantees that is possible, given the current widespread problems with the US nuclear enterprise. As acknowledged in the recently-released DoD National Defense Industrial Strategy, 'the Navy ended Fiscal Year 2022 short 1,200 workers across its four public shipyards' and 'there are only two shipyards capable of servicing nuclear systems -which have no civil counterpart – putting additional pressure on the workforce as they require rare but niche skills in their labor pool'.<sup>39</sup> The SLCM-N R&D programme will also have to compete for funding with the trillion dollar-plus bill for Triad modernisation across a time frame that will span several administrations.
4. Assuming the SLCM-N is developed and produced, the proposal assumes that sufficient nuclear attack submarines will be available to be earmarked for deployment in European waters *in addition to* their deployment to the Indo-Pacific, where US in-theatre nuclear capabilities are currently too meagre due to the non-availability of forward deployed land-based air assets. A recent report by the Congressional Research Service (CRS) warns that the plan under the US/UK/Australian (AUKUS) agreement to sell three to five US Virginia-class SSNs to Australia in the 2030s is already under intense pressure due to the serious deficiencies in the US shipbuilding industry.<sup>40</sup> CRS assesses that to reach its goal of having 66-72 US Navy SSNs deployed within the next 25 years, the Government-operated SSN shipyards will need to build 2.2 Virginia class subs a year (i.e. 11 every 5 years). At present, though, CRS notes that only 1.2 per year can be built, and the Navy does not estimate getting even to the 2.0 per year rate until 2028.
5. The proposal overlooks the fact that NATO previously spent a decade (i.e. during the 1960s) trying to find consensus on the multinational C2 arrangements to govern the proposed sea-based Multilateral Force (MLF), only to conclude that such an agreement

<sup>39</sup> National Defense Industrial Strategy, Department of Defense, released 11 January 2024, p. 28.

<sup>40</sup> O'Rourke, R. "Navy Virginia-Class Submarine Program and AUKUS Submarine Proposal: Background and Issues for Congress", CRS Report, 21 December 2023.

simply could not be reached.<sup>41</sup> This conclusion led NATO to create the NATO Planning Group as an alternative to any additional “hardware-based” nuclear-sharing.

6. Finally, the proposal ignores the hard reality that arms control between the West and Russia is effectively “dead” for the foreseeable future. Every previous NATO nuclear weapons deployment initiative, going back to President Eisenhower’s offer at the 1957 Paris Summit for a NATO “atomic stockpile” and Jupiter intermediate-range ballistic missile deployments, has had to be accompanied by a parallel arms control effort to win Alliance consensus. This “twin-pillars” concept was formalised by NATO in its adoption in 1967 of the “Harmel Report”, and it underpinned the INF “double track” decision in 1979.<sup>42</sup>

## Conclusion

Despite the increased threat raised by Russia’s strategic and theatre nuclear modernisation and deployment programmes, there is simply no “demand signal” coming from political leaders in European governments for new US nuclear deployments for NATO.<sup>43</sup> Put differently, there is no “Helmut Schmidt-like” catalyst pressuring the US to offer NATO such a capability, as did the then-German Chancellor in 1977 in response to the USSR’s deployment of the SS-20 nuclear-armed intermediate-range ballistic missile.<sup>44</sup>

Rather, today’s European political leaders appreciate that any such initiative by the US would be very divisive among allies and extremely controversial within European civil society. Setting aside deepening anxieties concerning the implications for NATO of a second Trump presidency, Europe is in effect, then, “comfortable” with DCA, with its planned modernisation, and with that enhanced posture providing the *one and only* option for a NATO-organised and NATO-executed

41 For a comprehensive history of this decade-long discussion, see Bell, R. “NATO Nuclear Burden-Sharing”, *op.cit.*, pp. 33-39. As summarised by Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara in 1967, the failed efforts included proposals for European-produced Polaris SLBNs (1960), Polaris deployed on submarines and ships with mixed manning (1960), a NATO nuclear force with UK V-bombers and Polaris missiles (1963), and a NATO nuclear force with UK V-bombers and US and UK Polaris submarines (1964).

42 *Ibid*, p. 49.

43 Several retired military leaders have, however, called for the UK, France and Germany to acquire a “trilateral nuclear umbrella” under NATO command. See: Lanxade, J., MacShane, D., Mathiopopoulus, M. and Naumann, K., “Europe Needs A Nuclear Deterrent of its Own”, Atlantic Council, 11 July 2023. Among former political leaders in Europe, ex-German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer has been fairly isolated in calling for the EU to act now to acquire its own nuclear force, though that could change following Trump’s recent pronouncements. See: “Europe Should Arm Itself with its Own Nuclear Weapons in Order to Deter Russia – ex-Head of German Foreign Ministry”, Censor.NET, 3 December 2023.

44 In a speech at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) in London, Schmidt argued that the USSR’s deployment of the SS-20 required a NATO countervailing capability despite the availability of thousands of other NSNW weapons being forward deployed. Transcript published in IISS’s *20 Survival 2* (Jan-Feb 1978), p. 10.

nuclear strike if required. No objection would likely be raised to the US adding a SSN-based SLCM-N capability to its own extended deterrence inventory for deterrence and assurance purposes in the Indo-Pacific, but trying to bring that capability into Europe as a new NATO-organised and NATO-commanded system to augment DCA would fall well short of gaining consensus.

In an insightful essay written in 1960, several analysts at RAND who went on to achieve high standing in the US nuclear policy and arms control communities – Bernard Brodie, Alexander George and Fred Iklé – explained the underlying logic of looking to allies themselves to send signals (or demands) with regard to their prerequisites for assurance, rather than having the US decide what is “required” for them:

‘In the event of additional agreements on nuclear sharing, the political complexion of the allied governments, and in particular their attitudes toward sharing, is likely to influence the cohesion of the alliance more than the agreement itself. For this reason it appears unwise for the United States ever to press an agreement for sharing upon an apathetic or unwilling ally’.<sup>45</sup>

Put differently, Brodie, George and Iklé were arguing that when it comes to the credibility of NATO’s nuclear deterrence, it is more important that the Alliance maintain solidarity around those nuclear systems and policies that it has willingly accepted than to risk that solidarity by reaching for an additional increment of capability, if that increment is likely to prove divisive. This paper concludes that this remains an instructive perspective today, as NATO addresses the many challenges of the post-2022 strategic environment.

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<sup>45</sup> Iklé, F.C., Speier, H., Brodie, B., George, A.L., Hsieh, A.L. and Kramish, A. “The Diffusion of Nuclear Weapons to Additional Countries: The ‘Nth Country Problem,’” U.S. Air Force Project RAND Research Memorandum, RM-2484-RC, February 15, 1960, (authorised for Public Release 35 per OASD Letter Dated 8 November 1995), p. 2.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Dr. Robert Bell joins CSDS after a career that included assignments as President Obama's appointee as the U.S. Defense Advisor at NATO, President Clinton's appointee as a NATO Assistant Secretary General, President Clinton's NSC Senior Director for Defense Policy and Arms Control, and 18 years on Capitol Hill. Dr. Bell has a BS from the U.S. Air Force Academy and a MA and PhD from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. He is currently also a Distinguished Professor of the Practice at Georgia Tech. Robert is fluent in French and speaks conversational Danish.

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.

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(Print ISSN: 2983-4678 / Online ISSN: 2983-4686)



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