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The Nuclear Umbrella Revisited

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Competing Narratives

On 21 September 2020, 56 former leaders of 22 umbrella states published an open letter in support of the 2017 Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW or the Ban Treaty)[1]. The Treaty obliges member states to never, under any circumstance, assist or encourage use, threats of use or possession of nuclear weapons. It enters into force on January 22, 90 days after submission of the 50th instrument of ratification

The P5 explain their failure to live up to their disarmament obligations under Art. VI of the NPT (the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty) in reference to the international security environment. Big power relations are too strained and complex to permit new arms control and disarmament agreements. Old agreements have been terminated and arms racing is picking up. Contrary to their NPT commitments, the leading nuclear weapon states are planning to keep and upgrade their arsenals for the foreseeable future. Moreover, the NPT does not cover four non-NPT nuclear armed states (Israel, Pakistan, India and North Korea).

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[1] The European signatories are from Albania, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Croatia, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Latvia, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain and Turkey. Other signatories are from Canada, Japan and South Korea. Two former Secretaries General of NATO signed: Willy Claes and Javier Solana.

The Ban Treaty builds on a different narrative emphasising the risks of nuclear war, the humanitarian consequences if it happens and the obligations under international humanitarian law. It says no to any use, use in retaliation included. In so doing, it challenges the ingrained belief in nuclear deterrence. The narrative pointedly disassociates itself from the miserable state of the international security affairs. Instead, it calls for elimination of nuclear weapons in its own right as a common global good and as a matter of urgency.

In recommending accession to the Ban Treaty, the 56 leaders noted the growing risks posed by nuclear weapons and called for a reconsideration of policies. In their view, business as usual is a recipe for disaster and therefore no tenable alternative. It only makes a precarious security situation worse:

> By claiming protection from nuclear weapons, we are promoting the dangerous and misguided belief that nuclear weapons enhance security. Rather than enabling progress towards a world free of nuclear weapons, we are impeding it and perpetuating nuclear dangers – all for fear of upsetting our allies who cling to these weapons of mass destruction.

Therefore, they denounced any role for nuclear weapons in the defence of their countries, mainly on humanitarian grounds.

The same conclusion can be drawn from *within* the international security paradigm. For European umbrella countries, the humanitarian approach and the international security paradigm are not competing narratives paradigms, but mutually supporting ones. A key issue is the purported *credibility* of the roles assigned to nuclear weapons. In the history of NATO, which harbours the great majority of umbrella states, this has always been a critical question.

The Link to US Strategic Forces

During the Cold War, nuclear weapons were deployed in Europe to offset a perceived Soviet conventional superiority in the region. The rationale, furthermore, was that the use of forward-based nuclear forces would activate US intercontinental systems, projecting a credible threat of escalation to the strategic level. Often referred to as the nuclear umbrella, this would be the most effective deterrent. However, ever since the Soviet Union achieved a retaliatory capability vis a vis the US, this assumption has been questioned and increasingly so as the Soviets achieved parity on important dimensions of nuclear capability. This led to deployment of new weapon systems to convey a sense of superiority and bolster the credibility of the umbrella, but without escaping the dilemma.

Charles de Gaulle said the US would not sacrifice Chicago for Paris. In his view, only a national finger on the trigger would be credible. In 1979, Henry Kissinger tuned in, cautioning that "the Europeans should not ask for assurances that we cannot possibly give". The Euromissile debate of the 1980s shed ample light on the problem. Cruise and Pershing missiles could hit targets in the Soviet Union with greatly improved accuracy, but if they were used that way, retaliation against the US would follow. The reaction could not be

assumed to depend on the launching point or the physical characteristics of the delivery vehicles.

In the 1980s, the targeting policy was more nuanced depending on the war scenario. Had a war broken out in Europe between NATO and the Warsaw Pact, Western INFs (Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces) could have been used against Soviet and Warsaw Pact targets in Eastern Europe. Had the scenario been one of strategic warfare between the USA and the USSR, the same INFs would have been precious assets for use against Soviet targets because of their accuracy, stealth characteristics (cruise missiles) and short flight times (Pershing). In no case would the US willingly escalate a regional war to the strategic level, exposing the continental USA to nuclear warfare.

In Europe of today, NATO extending to the borders of Russia, there is no place for such a differentiation. New US intermediate-range systems on European soil would be strategic. Should it happen, they would probably be conventionally armed. Conventional weapons are more usable than nuclear ones and could be directed at targets in Russia on the questionable assumption that Russia would not retaliate against the US, at least not with nuclear weapons. Still, the escalation risks would be significant depending on the nature of the conflict and the specifics of the targeting policy.

The logic permeating these issues is unambiguous and its strength is overwhelming: both powers would do their very best to keep their own territories out of a nuclear war in Europe. We do not have to read public statements and war manuals to know that this is so. That commonality of interests works perfectly well by tacit understanding. This is, *nota bene,* not to say that a nuclear war in Europe will actually be so confined, only that the US and Russia will try to confine it. No one can know whether they will succeed: a chaotic battlefield, breakdown of C3 facilities and human behaviour under extreme stress defy prediction. Therefore, as long as the likelihood of escalation to the strategic level is a figure above zero, the coupling argument cannot be totally dismissed. There remains a remnant of credibility to the umbrella, not by design but because events may get out of control. That is small comfort, however.

The Sharing Arrangements

Today, the US keeps of the order of 150 gravity bombs in Europe, down from a peak of 7300 in 1971, spread on six storage sites in five countries (Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, Italy and Turkey). The weapons are B61-3 (yield: 0.3kt – 170 kt) and B61-4 (yield: 0.3kt – 50kt), for delivery by US F-15E and F-16 and NATO F-16 and PA-200 (Tornado). Sharing arrangements still exist, meaning that some weapons may be transferred to the above-mentioned countries and used by their nuclear certified aircraft.

In view of the sea-and air-based US nuclear capabilities that are available for use in European contingencies and that are currently being upgraded, the double key arrangements are of little military significance. Their value is mostly symbolic and political, signalling common belief in the coherence of NATO and the US nuclear umbrella. Visible forward-basing and sharing is assumed to be more effective in this role than US sea- and

air-based systems. The claim is also that the sharing arrangements provide a necessary glue to keep the Alliance together. However, if these arrangements fail on the credibility test—coupling to the strategic level is not supported by logic and reason—is it not time to forget about make-believe politics and drop the physical arrangements that allegedly sustain it? Assertions about the necessary glue likewise: had the integrity of the Alliance depended on such hollow symbols it would have disappeared a long time ago. The reality, however, is quite the opposite: the bonds across the Atlantic are historical, cultural, economic and political and have made NATO the most durable military alliance in modern history.

Still, the rigid commitment to nuclear sharing and forward deployment makes it hard to discuss alternatives. There has been significant public opposition to the presence of nuclear weapons for years and the number of weapons and host countries have gone down, but there is little attention to the broader question of the credibility of the umbrella. In official circles, there is an aversion to discussing it, probably for fear that it would raise severe issues of contention in the Alliance. This is where the 56 former leaders, among them two former Secretaries General of NATO, are breaking ice by openly asking their non-nuclear countries to leave all nuclear arrangements and stake their security on conventional means. The fact that so many leaders were ready to support such a radical departure so shortly after leaving government suggests that they had developed a certain restiveness and discomfort with the state of affairs during their time in office. The open letter was not only a reaction to growing risks of nuclear weapon use, but these were the developments that triggered a dam to burst.

Still, land-based weapons remain in Europe and many more are available from a distance. Nuclear weapons are a regular feature in NATO military exercises. They usually end the same way: what should be defended would be destroyed. In the 1980s there was the distinct fear that Europe would be the prime battlefield and victim and, with the demise of the INF Treaty and the looming prospect of new intermediate-range weapons, those worries have been brought to life again.

This time, the worries go deeper than saying no to new weapons. The global setting poses new risks asking for new solutions, and the Eastern adversary is less imposing and perhaps more amenable to reduction of tensions and political solutions than during previous rounds of arms racing. Russia, which tries to reassert itself as regional big power, is not the Soviet Union after all, its economy being the size of Spain's and its military budget only a fraction of NATOs. Its military shadow is not what it used to be.

To stick to traditional action-reaction thinking in such an environment, known for its in-built security dilemmas, and without comparative analyses of other options, is woefully inadequate. Business as usual is the problem, not the solution.

The US and NATO maintain an option to use nuclear weapons in response to an attack with non-nuclear means, i.e. to be the first to do so. Will the Europeans be ready to sign off on initiating nuclear war on their own soil? Presumably, the threshold for doing so is very high. If it cannot be a shared decision—time pressures may not allow it and disagreements may prevent it—it would be for the Americans to decide. For them the threshold may be lower

but still high, especially if many Europeans are known to oppose it. The credibility and legitimacy of the current posture is therefore wide open to doubt.

Escalate to De-escalate

A scenario often alluded to is one where Russia intrudes on the territory of a state in its "near abroad" and tries to establish a fait accompli by threats of escalation to the nuclear level, resorting to demonstrational use of one or a few weapons to make it credible. The Trump Administration's Nuclear Posture Review assumes that Russia has such an "escalate to de-escalate strategy" and that it may work if there is no suitable capability to deter it. In its immediate neighbourhood, Russian stakes are higher than those of its adversaries, so they may be less risk averse. In response, the US is introducing new weapons suited for nuclear warfighting on the argument that by widening the spectre of deterrence, the risk of war is reduced.

To "escalate in order to de-escalate" is a fanciful construct, and there is no mention of it in Russian nuclear strategy. That apart, there is a certain logic to it, so in the hypothetical case that NATO is confronted with such an aggressive strategy, what would be the best response?

It could use its non-nuclear capabilities to repel the attack and perhaps hit assets inside Russia that have been used in the offensive. Generally, NATOs conventional capabilities are assumed to be superior to the Russian ones, but geographical proximity would be in Russia's favour. If more resources are needed in areas where NATO is at a short-term conventional disadvantage, elimination of forward-based nuclear weapons could cover part of the cost. More important, conventional forces can be used where nuclear weapons cannot because of the indiscriminate nature of the latter or because of the risk of escalation or both. To go for more nuclear warfighting capabilities would be the wrong response, for they make nuclear war more thinkable and therefore more likely to actually happen. If the goal is to reduce the role of nuclear weapons and encourage disarmament, such capabilities are among the ones to be removed as a matter of priority.

Two Narratives; Same Conclusion

The basic premises of NATO's nuclear strategy fail on the credibility test. The international security narrative leads to the same conclusion as the humanitarian approach. The open letter of the 56, which is phrased in humanitarian terms, is corroborated by international security analysis. The narratives are not contradictory, but mutually supportive.

The credibility of the US nuclear umbrella is long gone, and the remaining US weapons in Europe have little or no military meaning. The sharing arrangements, officially heralded as political expressions of a coherent "nuclear Alliance", are empty symbols. It is simply not credible that the Europeans, mindful of the outcome of military exercises, would use nuclear weapons against targets on their own soil. Still, the US might do so in the face of Russian aggression, but on the understanding that they would treat each other's territories as sanctuaries. Europe would be the battleground. In the fog of war, developments may certainly get out of control and escalation follow, but that is small comfort. None of this is entirely new, but it is worth updating and repeating.

In another scenario—war starting as a strategic exchange between the big nuclear powers—the interests of umbrella states are much the same. They may be drawn into the war, directly and certainly indirectly—there can be no guarantee—but if they cut all involvement in nuclear weapon planning, they are less likely to be targeted. By withdrawing from the nuclear segment of the Alliance, they would also send a signal to the nuclear powers that, far from being prestige items, these weapons detract from their standing.

Such a move by umbrella states would put Russia on the political defensive for maintaining large stocks of non-strategic weapons. Moscow could be challenged to reduce the numbers and return the rest to central storage as part of a wider arms control deal including a ban on new land-based INFs and limitations on missile defence. This would be a bonus, but the argument that umbrella states are better served by non-nuclear postures is not premised on it.

The Strength of Argument and the Power of Inertia

To most civil servants and decision-makers in allied ministries of defence and foreign affairs, the Ban Treaty is an alien bird. Drilled in Alliance doctrine and strategy and echoing each other in opposition to the new Treaty, open discussion of established positions is hard to generate.

The humanitarians always emphasised the importance of the NPT, which is the cherished platform of the P5. Rather than letting the leadership of NPT affairs rest with the P5, however, they are claiming agency of their own to better press for implementation of it. The relationship between the camps was not bound to be bitter and hostile. The Ban Treaty challenges the nuclear weapon states—the special status of the P5 in particular; it lists them on the same line as the other four—but there was no reason to portray the Ban as a threat to the NPT. When it nevertheless happened, the human instinct to brandish what is new and threatening accounts for much of it.

The NPT is in miserable shape, betrayed on the disarmament dimension, stuck in the Middle East and mostly irrelevant to the Asian nuclear armed states, but it has proven resilient and lingers on. It will soon be accompanied by the TPNW, which is about to enter into force. Hopefully, the wrangling between the respective treaty supporters will calm down and enable a new consensus on the normative basis for non-proliferation and disarmament consisting of a combination of both treaties. That will not happen overnight, however. There is a long way from mutual recriminations to passive co-existence to bridge-building to exploitation of synergies – if it ever happens.

The dilemma facing the umbrella states is a hard one. On the one hand, it is in their interest not to be defended with nuclear weapons. On the other hand, they deem it important to remain members of NATO. These propositions may or may not be compatible. Some believe they are, emphasising that the Alliance is a conglomerate of nuclear and non-nuclear states; of states that are hosting nuclear weapons and others which do not; and that France left the military part of NATO but remained part of the political cooperation without rocking the

rest. Others claim they are not and note that in the face of big power pressure, small states tend to balk at running the risks involved – especially if they cannot agree to act together.

Business as usual is the problem, not the solution. In view of current trends in international security affairs there can be little disagreement about that. If so, much is achieved, because it encourages reflection and re-examination of established positions. If not, the strength of argument will remain posited against the power of inertia.

The Author

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