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Summary of roundtable discussion on “NATO’s future nuclear posture”

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This paper highlights the main themes arising from a roundtable discussion held on 25th July, 2013 in Washington D.C., which brought a small group of experts together with representatives from a number of NATO member states to discuss the future of NATO’s nuclear posture and engagement with Russia on arms control and nuclear weapons. This discussion built on workshops previously held in Moscow and Brussels in 2012 and 2013.

Daryl Kimball of the Arms Control Association gave an overview of the current U.S. context and its likely impact on the future direction of the nuclear weapons debate. He highlighted that President Obama had already set out his second term arms control agenda, which centered on further negotiated reductions with Russia (by up to one third); a fourth nuclear security summit, and; a renewed push for treaties banning nuclear testing and the production of fissile materials. Experts continued to look for diplomatic and strategic opportunities for engagement with Russia. Obama had made a deliberate decision during his Berlin speech to talk of “bold” reductions in U.S. and Russian tactical nuclear weapons in Europe: but the Administration was still feeling out what this would mean in practice. The forthcoming U.S.–Russian high-level meetings in August and September would start to set the tone.

Congressional wrangling over defense spending and sequestration was throwing into question U.S. plans to invest \$10 billion in modernizing the B61 bombs – 180 of which are stationed in Europe. In April, Senator Feinstein had proposed a less ambitious plan with a significantly lower price tag (\$1.5bln).

Options did exist to make progress, such as Russia taking verifiable steps to show that its tactical weapons are no longer near its western border, and the U.S. beginning the process of withdrawing its tactical bombs from Europe. But there was a pressing need for fresh perspectives and bolder actions.

Dr. Oliver Meier of the German Institute for International and Security Affairs in Berlin outlined a view from Europe. While Obama's Berlin speech was well received in Germany, some NATO partners interpreted it as a signal for a slow and steady approach to tactical nuclear weapon reductions – despite Obama's unspecified call for "bold" actions. Russia officially shows little interest in engaging on tactical nuclear weapons (TNW), but may be interested in greater transparency on some aspects of NATO's nuclear posture, including on the potential for deploying TNW on the territory of new member states. Within NATO, proposals were being considered for confidence building and transparency initiatives with Russia – but progress has been slow due to the bureaucratic complexity and diversity of views within NATO, as well as the eight year gap in engaging on these issues during the G. W. Bush Administration. The lack of any clear milestones for the process means that some allies do not feel any urgency to make progress.

Meier asked whether we could interpret the concept of "reciprocity" broadly. NATO would do well to show leadership by taking the first steps on increasing transparency (such as officially releasing numbers of weapons associated with NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements). NATO should also offer to Russia to engage in a dialogue on safety and security of TNWs and propose a moratorium on the modernization of nuclear weapons deployed in Europe – with a view to stimulating Russian reciprocal steps.

Hans Kristensen of the Federation of American Scientists expressed concern that NATO had boxed itself in by insisting on a consensus and reciprocity-based approach to future reductions. The diversity of views within NATO made consensus a real challenge. And seeking reciprocity with Russia was highly problematic. Kristensen recommended that NATO show leadership by taking its own bold actions, including by incrementally increasing transparency, and avoiding the path of further modernization. NATO and the U.S. would do well to more clearly define what they viewed as "bold initiatives".

Kristensen also expressed concern at the ongoing attention that was being given to the disparity in numbers in the U.S. and Russian nuclear arsenals – while this may have been an issue two decades ago, it was now a distraction from the central issues. Rather, reassurance for NATO allies should be a central focus; while tactical nuclear weapons were often viewed as a means of providing reassurance they are, in practice, unlikely to ever be used. NATO needed to be more precise about what reassurance might look like for European NATO allies, and the U.S. could play a leading role in moving this discussion forward.

Dr. Edward Ifft, adjunct professor at the Security Studies Program at the School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University, highlighted that the U.S. had begun to embrace the concept of putting deployed, non-deployed and tactical weapons together and agreeing on an aggregate goal for reductions. Russia, by contrast, had not. Ifft considered possible ways to move forward on the question of further reductions, including a legally binding treaty (which would entail verification measures), parallel reciprocal measures, and unilateral measures.

Ifft pointed out that Russia had not declined U.S. proposed negotiations - instead they asked for more time. It is hoped that Presidents Obama and Putin will revisit the topic in September.

Russia believes it is in a strategically inferior position and, as such, may have difficulty envisioning any negotiable agreement or set of substantive measures that does not exacerbate that perception.

One way to engage them may be through work on CFE: NATO was potentially shooting itself in the foot by refusing to engage on bringing the Adapted CFE Treaty into force. Another may be to go back to the PNIs of the early 1990's, which dealt with tactical nuclear weapons and may present an appealing precedent for Russia. On transparency, it would be difficult to ask Russia to do something that NATO and the US are not themselves willing to do: NATO and the U.S. needed to be prepared to take the lead.

Subsequent discussion focused around three central issues:

Timing: the 2015 NPT Review Conference was looming large. The lack of progress on issues such as the CTBT and WMD free zone in the Middle East, coupled with slow movement on U.S. and Russian reductions, ongoing discussion of weapons modernization, and an absence of any bold disarmament initiatives, would be troubling for many NPT signatories. Compounding this, President Obama had only a year and half left to make progress before the Presidential political cycle would begin to limit his room to maneuver.

Prospects for progress in Russia: Participants expressed a desire to see Russia show willingness to move forward. But many expressed doubt that this was likely to happen in the current environment. The U.S. decision to cancel Phase IV of the European Phased Adaptive Approach had been interpreted by some in Russia as a postponement, rather than the cancellation that it is. There may be potential for engagement with Russia behind the scenes – but for now, their official line remained that further progress was dependent on greater concessions from NATO. It needed to be made clear what the incentives are for Russia to engage and take action.

Reassurance: Participants discussed the need for ongoing reassurance for NATO partners – particularly those in Eastern Europe. The current attachment to NATO's nuclear weapons was less to do with the military utility of the weapons themselves, and more a tangible political demonstration that the United States remains committed to the collective defense commitments contained in Article V of the NATO treaty. There was some openness to discussing how reassurances could be provided in other ways – predominantly, but not exclusively, through missile defense. How to have the conversation about alternatives to nuclear sharing was a challenge – at present it was a mix of confrontation and collaboration, which needed to be addressed.