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Credible Deterrence for NATO in the XXI Century

Report from the experts' roundtable

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Summary

The roundtable brought together 25 diplomats, experts and officials from ten NATO countries, including seven from Central and Eastern (CEE) Europe. The proceedings were conducted under the Chatham House rule, enabling participants to openly discuss the changing requirements for deterrence in the 21st century. Discussions frequently rested on the balance between NATO's engagement with Russia and the maintenance of adequate defence commitments and Alliance cohesion. While some felt that the end of the Cold War demanded a more significant shift in Alliance priorities, away from the deployment of forward-deployed nuclear weapons in Europe, for example, others were keen to ensure that the challenge from Russia was not underplayed, and required appropriate response. When discussing reassurance and deterrence, however, nuclear systems figured less prominently than more credible non-nuclear capabilities. There appeared to be agreement on the need for NATO to respond to the global nuclear disarmament agenda and to reduce the salience of nuclear weapons in Alliance doctrine, but in doing so it needs to adequately account for the specific security concerns of CEE countries with other means to avoid harming Alliance cohesion, and ensuring that the Alliance remained strong in the future.

Session 1

Deterrence, partnerships and common security in Europe

The first session focused on three problems:

- reinforcing NATO's deterrence function with regard to traditional threats;
- finding new forms of deterrence towards asymmetric and non-military threats; and
- balancing deterrence with engagement vis-à-vis non-NATO states.

Requirements of effective deterrence

The seminar opened with an analysis of the main provisions of the Group of Experts Report on NATO's new Strategic Concept. Some felt the Report was quite vague and conservative. Although it stresses that NATO must reinforce its deterrence function, including the development of new forms of deterrence towards non-military and asymmetric threats, it fails to define concrete means and steps, which NATO should take to achieve this goal. While it opts for a broad conception of deterrence, addressing a full spectrum of threats, it focuses more upon military capabilities to deliver that deterrence. Calling for an Alliance that faced up to new and future threats, it resorted all too often to NATO's existing capabilities.

The expert group, in common with most analysts, regarded the task of deterrence and defence against all possible threats as *the* pivotal NATO commitment. This approach is clearly visible in its Report's introduction of the reassurance concept, with a strong emphasis on strengthening the credibility of the collective defence pledge (mainly by manifesting resolve, readiness and willingness to react promptly and effectively when needed). It clearly reheats the mutual twin-track approach of deterrence and engagement with partners, taking as a role model the 1966 Harmel Report. However, the Harmel Report, issued at the peak of the Cold War when NATO was looking for a balance between assertive deterrence and arms control, was based upon a very different context. The experts' Report does not clearly indicate how this kind of approach is appropriate in a changed security environment (it only mentions that a ballistic missile defence (BMD) system could be a tool for engaging Russia).

It was generally agreed by participants that nuclear and non-nuclear deterrence, and the commitment to collective defence, would remain a priority task for NATO. One participant presented a set of requirements for effective deterrence, stressing in particular two features, *capabilities* and *credibility of response*, rooted in Alliance cohesion. He argued that to guarantee credible deterrence, existing military capabilities should be reinforced, within the framework of mutual commitments set in the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act, by:

- updated contingency plans,
- focused large-scale regular exercises,
- improved force readiness,

- sound command & control and logistics, and
- modest investment in military infrastructure in Central and Eastern Europe.

Current differences in threat perception among the allies were also brought up as a threat to the cohesion and the credibility of deterrence.

Deterring non-traditional threats

Deterring new kinds of threats (such as nuclear terrorism), according to one participant, requires diverse responses tailored to the specific kind of threat in question; traditional capabilities may not be appropriate. He argued that such threats come with their own challenges, such as identifying the foe, attributing responsibility and conducting an adequate and targeted response. The relationship non-traditional threats have to Article Five remains controversial. Deterrence by threat of punishment can often have limited or no utility. Others agreed that so far NATO had failed to develop tools of deterrence for many asymmetric threats, such as disruptive activities in cyberspace, and that the best approach may be to impact an attacker's cost-benefit calculations by reducing vulnerability and further developing 'deterrence by denial'. But implementation of this approach is likely to be extremely costly, and still require members to accept a level of vulnerability.

Different perspectives on NATO-Russia relations

The discussion around balancing deterrence with engagement of non-NATO European states inevitably focused on NATO-Russia relations. Seminar participants represented diverse views. There appear to be grounds for cautious optimism for engagement, on issues such as:

- logistical support to the NATO ISAF mission in Afghanistan;
- building a theatre ballistic missile defence system in Europe; and
- reviving the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) regime.

At the same time, Russian foreign policy remains unpredictable. Its military doctrine perceives NATO as a key threat, the military conducts large-scale exercises aimed at NATO and energy supply is used to exercise influence on neighbouring states, perceived by Russia as a contested zone of influence. For this reason, it was argued by some, NATO needs a dual-track carrot and stick approach (à la Harmel). Visible assurance of allies bordering Russia will be necessary to acquire their agreement to strategies of engagement with Russia, and well as a precondition for their further commitment to NATO's expeditionary requirements.

Others argued that Russia feels insecure because of its military weakness in relation to the Alliance, even in times of peace. Russia therefore needs a special form of assurance from NATO, a credible guarantee that the Alliance will not take any aggressive steps against it. Some speakers called for recognising the concerns of Russia (treating Russia's posture more as a problem than a real threat), and engaging it in the global security dialogue. Current US-Russian arms control negotiations create a strategic opportunity to improve NATO-Russia relations more generally.

Session 2

Cohesion and credible Alliance assurance for members

Cohesion is crucial to the effective functioning of the Alliance (its identity and operations, credibility, and trust among member states). Periods of transformation present particular stresses to cohesion, but avoiding that transformation makes the Alliance brittle and weak. The Alliance exists in a security environment that has undergone particularly rapid change over the last 20 years, and at times it has been painfully resistant to change. Introducing a model of adaptive leadership, one participant introduced the concept of "productive zone of disequilibrium" - in which change in the Alliance structure and approach occurs at sufficient speed that it remains relevant, but slow enough that security is not compromised and all partners remain on board. This does not mean moving at the speed of the slowest – that would be a recipe for inaction, frustration and likely future revolutionary unilateralism from others; neither does it mean adopting all the changes of the outliers. Alliance politics needs a clear vision with realism, focusing upon future common interests, with members showing an empathy for the challenges facing allies rather than simply negotiating on positions. The controversial vision presented by this participant at the beginning of the session involved the long-term objective of a shift from collective towards common security.

Differentiating Baltic and Central European positions on reassurance and deterrence

Geographic location clearly impacts upon perceptions of the appropriate level of assurance required. While there are certainly differences between them, the Baltic states (Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia) share common concerns regarding:

- Russia (reinforced by the conflict in Georgia);
- the importance of the transatlantic link (demonstrated by a letter of Central and Eastern European leaders to President Obama in summer 2009);
- possible divisions among European members of NATO during a crisis involving Russia; as well as
- the scope of Alliance's activities, involving military (Afghanistan, piracy, terrorism) and non-military (social, economic, political stability of states) regional and global challenges.

NATO membership is itself inherently a key instrument of assurance, but these states look for more tangible signs of commitment. First, on the military level, Baltic states desire a stronger NATO presence, involving air policing, exercises and contingency planning. Secondly, on the political level, they look to a renewed commitment to Article Five and the principle of equality of security for all member states. The NATO expert group's Report reflected these expectations.

While the issue of credible reassurance is important also to the Central European countries (Visegrad group members: the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Poland), their perspective on NATO involves also prominently the following elements :

- the central importance of Article Five;
- a recognition of NATO's role in providing security beyond members' borders (unlike other allies, Afghanistan was not controversial during recent election campaigns in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary);
- an interest in missile defence;
- similar understandings of new security threats.

Countries of the Baltic and Central Europe have similar attitudes to other international security organisations. As noted by one of the participants, there is a widespread lack of confidence in the ability of the United Nations Security Council and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) to deliver sufficient security guarantee (in contrast to the European Union and NATO).

The United States is considered indispensable to the security of the region. Russia is perceived as a security challenge, and there is resentment over its influence through its energy supplies. There is, however, a pragmatic approach in central Europe which envisions engaging Moscow as a strategic partner, but on the basis of its respect for the basic values of NATO.

The role of missile defences in providing assurance

The new Obama Phased Adaptive Approach (PAA) to constructing a NATO Missile Defence system in Europe is intended to strengthen extended deterrence, assure allies and improve NATO cohesion. The changes were driven by technical assessments, particularly over the pace and direction of the Iranian missile threat (a stronger focus on short- and medium-range ballistic missiles). The Obama Administration believes the PAA will provide an earlier, more appropriate and proven defence of Europe and is developing the system in close consultation with all NATO allies (this was described as the unprecedented "love-bombing of information and consultation" in Europe and NATO). Poland and the Czech Republic may yet play an important role in the PAA development. However, according to some participants, the announcement of the decision to abandon Bush's 'third site' proposal Poland and the Czech Republic in September 2009 was badly handled and deeply unsatisfactory, the consequence of early leaks within the US Administration to the media. A common interpretation in Central Europe was that the change was driven by a political decision in Washington to appease Russian sabre-rattling, harming US credibility.

In contrast with the Bush administration approach, PAA should be more acceptable to all NATO members as the US national contribution to the Alliance's

Active Layer Theatre BMD (ALTBMD), which is something Central European states appreciate. The US Government hopes that during the November 2010 Lisbon summit, all NATO members will agree in principle to extend the mission of ALTBM from a theatre to a territorial missile defence, and to provide necessary funds for upgrading ALTBM software to conduct such a mission. NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen has put the price tag for this at less than €200m, divided by 28 NATO allies over ten years, but some participants remained unconvinced over the real costs and the willingness of allies to invest in such a system when defence budgets are under severe strain. There was also a concern expressed over NATO being on a glide-path towards strategic confrontation with Iran in developing such a system.

On the question of Russian fears around BMD in Europe, it was said that the SM-3 interceptors will not have any practical capability of intercepting a Russian ICBM, when deployed in Southern Europe. However, some participants pointed out that future capabilities of PAA elements are not currently known and it is very probable that Russian deterrence capabilities could be compromised even more by the third and fourth PAA phases than they would have been by the Bush Administration's 'third site' project.

The workshop returned to the issue of balancing assurance with engagement. One of the participants pointed out that although Russia has been an unpredictable, difficult partner and that NATO could not give it a veto power over its own decisions, cooperation with Russia is strategically critical to dealing with global problems, particularly around global arms control and disarmament. NATO members have a responsibility to consider genuine Russian concerns and to address them in creative and politically acceptable ways, whilst being sufficiently robust about their own interests. One participant pointed out that engagement would be facilitated if NATO had a long-term vision that shifted from collective toward common security including Russia as an ever-closer partner. Such a long-term vision could be similar in nature to President Obama's vision of world free of nuclear weapons. In contrast to that view, some participants believed that by addressing Russia's concerns as perceived by Moscow, NATO could actually embolden Russia to demand in future veto rights in Alliance decision making process. Furthermore, if NATO were to acquiesce to Russia's demands in a 'premature' NATO–Russia rapprochement, such as limiting further Alliance enlargement or translating the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Framework pledges into legally-binding commitments, this would deepen divisions within the Alliance.

Session 3

Reducing the role of nuclear weapons in NATO's deterrence posture

Participants expressed a degree of consensus on three basic issues:

1. NATO will clearly remain a nuclear alliance for the time being, based mainly upon the strategic arsenals of the United States, the United Kingdom and (by implication) France;
2. while there still appears to be political significance attached to the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons in Europe, their military credibility as deterrence or war-fighting tools appears weak or non-existent;
3. NATO needs to openly consider changes to its nuclear doctrine, and agree on reducing the role of nuclear weapons. One of the Central European participants said that changes to NATO's nuclear posture are no longer taboo.

Ways to update NATO's nuclear posture

President Obama's call for a world free of nuclear weapons in Prague on 5th April 2009 was met in Europe with enthusiasm, and many civil and military leaders have expressed their support. New initiatives, such as the European Leadership Network on Multilateral Nuclear Disarmament and Non-Proliferation, have sprung up to sustain the momentum and stimulate debate. NATO will be under pressure to respond to such initiatives, as well as to the 2010 US Nuclear Posture Review, which mapped out a modest reduction in nuclear salience.

This is relevant to the case of the B-61 'tactical' nuclear weapons stationed in Europe, the object of significant attention in the 2010 NPT Review Conference and viewed by many in western Europe as an obstacle to a stronger non-proliferation regime. The aging of the dual-capable aircraft (DCA) used to deliver the B-61s by host European states adds a logistical time limit to sustaining current arrangements without new investment. Whilst unilateral withdrawal of capabilities without consultation with allies might undermine confidence, demands that host states make this investment without adequate strategic justification could be even more damaging for NATO cohesion.

There were differences of view amongst participants regarding the scope and timing of decisions, and over the linkage between NATO's nuclear posture and the policy towards Russia. There was a sense that whilst CEE states understand the need to move on nuclear disarmament, they often feel forced to react to proposals from their Allies in the current NATO nuclear debate. There has, for example, been some surprise that the debate over the future of NATO's tactical nuclear weapons gained such traction so quickly. Their first and 'natural' reaction was opposition - because the countries of the region perceived the deployments to be symbolically and inextricably linked to broader Alliance burden-sharing and to the US "presence" in Europe (which

they valued highly). Several CEE participants called for a balanced approach – reform of nuclear policy introduced alongside a package of Article Five assurances (outlined earlier) that 'compensate' for the political functions of nuclear sharing arrangements.

The PAA BMD project was highlighted as a potential new 'glue' for transatlantic cooperation both in the political-strategic and the military-industrial dimensions. Conventional military technologies are already the backbone of NATO's credible deterrence, and future development could also strengthen this substitution. There was some debate over Prompt Global Strike in this context, with views expressed by some that it could contribute, whilst others viewed its impact on strategic stability with some alarm.

Russia again became a focus for disagreement. Some argued that Russia has to be seen as the strategic partner in the global nuclear disarmament movement, and NATO must take into account its sensitivities and its legitimate interests. Making NATO withdrawal of B-61s from Europe conditional upon similar Russian moves with their own tactical nuclear weapons would unnecessarily delay taking decisions within NATO, and would not be seen in Moscow as equal treatment because of the different value and nature of the deployments.

At the same time, the Alliance cannot ignore the presence of large numbers of the Russian tactical nuclear weapons close to its members' territory. The question over the possible presence of nuclear weapons in the Kaliningrad oblast remains unresolved. There are also concerns over the condition of the warheads, their safety and security, and their role in Russian military doctrine. On the one hand, the current Military Doctrine envisages the use of nuclear weapons only in the most extreme circumstances, leaving little space for their tactical use. On the other, exercises appear to suggest Moscow's planned use of tactical nuclear weapons to 'de-escalate' a conventional conflict.

Tactical nuclear weapons may be included in the next round of bilateral US-Russia arms control negotiations (since the distinction between 'tactical' and 'strategic' is based upon the Cold War context and is irrelevant today). Some are likely to call for such distinctions in arms control to be abandoned. Alternatively, some participants suggested that NATO start a dialogue on tactical nuclear weapons in Europe, with the ultimate goal of removing them from Europe altogether (including the European part of Russia). The first step could be an agreement on transparency measures and discussion of military doctrine, along the lines of the April 2010 Polish-Norwegian proposal. This may require NATO to show more initiative in promoting the conventional arms control agenda in Europe.

Regarding the new (likely shorter) Strategic Concept itself, participants agreed that the text should explicitly state that whilst NATO remains a nuclear alliance, it also supports the goal of a world free of nuclear weapons, and further reduces the roles of nuclear weapons in its doctrine. Participants agreed that the text was unlikely to resolve the dilemma over US deployment of tactical weapons in Europe, so that the summit should consider conducting in 2011 a review of NATO's nuclear policy ("NATO's Nuclear Posture Review").