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Institute for Peace Research
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Report from the roundtable “Improving transparency on TNW: Building blocks for a NATO-Russia dialogue”, held on 17-18 November 2011 in Berlin.

The meeting has been jointly organized by the Arms Control Association (ACA), the British American Security Information Council (BASIC), and the Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg (IFSH). It was funded by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation with support of the German Federal Foreign Office. The roundtable brought together 31 diplomats, experts and officials from seven NATO countries, Sweden and Russia. The proceedings were conducted under the Chatham House rule, enabling participants to openly discuss possible confidence building measures (CBMs) for a NATO-Russia dialogue. The roundtable aimed to evaluate the possible role of the Alliance in arms control and examine ways to break the deadlock on bringing tactical nuclear weapons (TNW) or non-strategic-nuclear weapons (NSNW) onto the nuclear arms control agenda. In summary, there was strong support to tackle TNW within the NATO-Russia Council. Some participants criticized NATO's self-imposed condition of Russian reciprocity as hindering constructive progress. Almost all participants agreed that there is a need to go beyond traditional arms control measures to deal with TNW. Many of the proposals presented at the meeting were based upon old, tested instruments and approaches. There were recurring appeals to civil society to get seriously involved in the discussion around TNW reductions.

Are further NATO contributions to the global nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament contingent on an improvement in the relationship with Russia?

Some Russian participants pointed out that Moscow already withdrew its nuclear weapons from foreign soil and makes American reciprocity in this regard as a precondition for any talks. It was pointed out that the Kremlin links any progress on TNW to solution of a range of other security issues, including ballistic missile defense cooperation and discrepancies in conventional capabilities.

Some participants openly criticized the self-imposed condition of Russian reciprocity in NATO's new Strategic Concept which ties any reductions of TNW assigned to NATO to changes in Russia's TNW posture. Proponents argued that the Alliance needs to reach consensus on any changes to its nuclear posture. Some feared that if NATO were to take unilateral steps on TNW, the topic might fall in oblivion. One participant praised the German government's coalition agreement because of the lack of conditionality placed on a withdrawal of TNW from Germany. Others proposed an open debate with Russia, hoping to involve Moscow in a creative process.

Participants emphasized that the primary task of NATO's new Weapons of Mass Destruction and Disarmament Committee (WDCD) is to define a NATO consensus on possible reciprocal measures aiming to reinforce and increase transparency, mutual trust and confidence on TNW.

Several participants underlined that the Kremlin does currently not appear to be interested in any talks on TNW. It was pointed out that Russia's cautiousness results from the fact that there still is a lobby supporting TNW, for example within the Russian Navy and that Russia's parochial group thinking does not allow any public debate on the issue. Some argued that TNW are a financial and military liability that could be traded for more security, based on a legally-binding agreement.

Do further NATO contributions to the global nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament depend on stronger reassurances to those Central and Eastern European member states concerned about Russian intentions?

It was pointed out that NATO member states' positions on TNW have not fundamentally changed. In the context of NATO's Deterrence and Defence Posture Review (DDPR), reassurance of member states will remain an important goal. The debate on nuclear weapons will be viewed from the perspective of this issue. Missile defenses could offer an alternative kind of reassurance to some NATO members, a few participants argued. However, a strategic missile system remains work in progress. Its real meaning and value as a means of reassuring NATO allies therefore remains uncertain. According to one participant, the reassurance argument is based on illogic assumptions. Since US nuclear weapons deployed in Europe do not credibly deter any potential opponent, they cannot reassure allies. Moreover, Central and Eastern European NATO member states have sometimes voiced their preference for visible and permanent U.S. military presence in Europe, rather than for forward-deployed US nuclear weapons, it was pointed out.

How can arms control play a positive role in strengthening Russia's confidence in its security vis-à-vis NATO, and in strengthening the confidence of central and Eastern European countries in their security vis-à-vis Russia?

Some participants argued that a debate on TNW in Europe could take place within the NATO-Russia Council, once a NATO-position for such talks is developed within the WDCD. CBMs were described as a possible first step to prepare the ground for future arms control discussions between Russia and NATO. Some pointed out that TNW are not the most important issue on the NATO-Russia agenda, but that this topic is a crucial element of the "nuclear debate" between both sides. A legally-binding agreement could provide assurances for both sides and serve as basis for further discussions on nuclear reductions, it was stated.

What are the real political, military, technical reasons for the lack of progress on tactical nuclear weapons, and what options are there for overcoming or by-passing these challenges?

Participants stated that progress on TNW is hampered by both, the lack of unanimity within the Alliance and the lack of incentives for Moscow to engage on this topic. It was argued that NATO needs to have a clear vision of what it expects from Russia. So far, it was stated, the TNW debate has not resulted in political directives that would lead to the design of technical proposals for possible verification measures. Even though non-nuclear weapon states try to contribute to the verification process (for example in the context of the UK-Norwegian initiative on the monitoring of nuclear warhead dismantlement), the NPT poses a legal obstacle to their direct involvement. Some participants underlined that TNW transparency measures may have positive side-effects for other issues. Thus, they may be applicable to the monitoring of compliance with nuclear non-proliferation commitments.

It was argued that with sufficient political will, a verification regime for TNW could be developed. Monitoring the movement of warheads might pose the biggest challenge. A lot of questions were raised during discussions of the political and technical aspects of verification. Which facilities need to be monitored? How can central storage facilities be defined? How can it be ensured that dismantlement facilities will not be misused clandestinely for weapons production? How to monitor dual-use delivery systems? How to prove to Russia that all tactical nuclear weapons have been withdrawn from European territory?

What are the options and prospects for addressing tactical nuclear weapons under a New START follow-on accord?

Some participants maintained that Russia is not yet ready for a New START-follow on accord and wants first to assess New START before entering new arms reduction talks. It was argued that Russia wants to deal first with deployed strategic weapons and that addressing the US non-deployed strategic warheads has become less relevant for Moscow. From a Russian perspective, it was argued, short-range assets do not only have a meaning vis-à-vis NATO, but also in relation to China. It was pointed out that Russia favors transparency aiming at reductions in numbers and equal upper limits for warhead holdings. Based on a review of existing CBM proposals on TNW, it was pointed out that most existing proposals favor introducing transparency first and substantive measures in a second step. There are also regional approaches to tackling TNW, such as the Swedish Defence Research Agency proposal for a regime for arms control and disarmament for NSNWs in the Baltic Sea area.

Are the DDPR and the WCDC significant one-off opportunities or should they be the beginning of a longer process?

The DDPR is clearly seen as a NATO-wide exercise and some participants argued that it should be seen as a first stage in future discussions, rather than the final round of debate on NATO's future nuclear posture. Some predicted that the NATO's May 2012 Chicago Summit would deliver a weak political communiqué, declaring the need for further work, rather than agree on substantive changes of NATO's nuclear policy. Participants pointed to the fact that due to 2012 being an election year in Russia and the United States, there should be no high expectations for political decisions. Some suggested perceiving the ongoing debate from a global perspective, for example taking into consideration NPT disarmament obligations. During the NPT Review Conference in 2015, NATO member states would be expected to demonstrate progress on TNW.

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