



PROCEEDINGS

NATO AT 75: UP TO THE CHALLENGE?

The remarks below were delivered at a symposium on “NATO at 75: Up to the Challenge?” hosted by the National Institute for Public Policy on March 19, 2024. The symposium explored NATO’s future in light of recent developments, including perceptions of the credibility of the U.S. extended nuclear deterrent; the alliance’s resolve to sustain support to Ukraine more than two years after Russia’s full-scale invasion; the effect of expanding NATO’s membership on alliance unity and solidarity; the future of NATO missile defense efforts; and what to expect from the NATO Washington Summit in July.

David J. Trachtenberg

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Next month, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization will celebrate its 75th anniversary. Since its founding in 1949, NATO has grown in membership and its missions have evolved in response to a dynamic security environment. Initially intended to deter a Soviet attack on Western Europe, NATO forces have been engaged repeatedly in out-of-area operations, peacekeeping, cyber security, and other activities. Yet, within the alliance there are suggestions that NATO’s mission needs recalibration, with at least one candidate for the next Secretary General calling on NATO to “change and adapt” to the complexity and unpredictability of the current strategic environment.¹

Now 32 nations strong, most recently with the addition of Sweden, NATO has been called the most successful collective security alliance in history. And Finland’s accession more than doubled NATO’s border with Russia—exactly the opposite of what Vladimir Putin wanted. Indeed, Putin declared last week that Russia will now deploy troops along the Finnish border.² But the alliance is now being buffeted by competing pressures—including a revanchist and aggressive Russia that has eyes on reincorporating some of NATO’s newest members into the Russian empire; reinvigorated concerns in the United States over allied burdensharing and the failure of some NATO states to meet their agreed upon defense spending commitments³; and growing doubts over the credibility of U.S. security assurances and the U.S. extended nuclear deterrent.

Russia’s brazen invasion of Ukraine resulted in a strong display of unity among NATO members and financial, materiel, and logistical support for Kyiv’s defensive efforts. But the

¹ Klaus Iohannis, “Romanian president: A vision for NATO’s future,” Politico, March 12, 2024, available at <https://www.politico.eu/article/romanian-president-a-vision-for-natos-future/>.

² Paul Godfrey, “Putin says he will re-deploy troops along Finland border in response to NATO accession,” UPI, March 13, 2024, available at https://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2024/03/13/Putin-threatens-Finland-border-troop-redeployment/2751710329197/.

³ NATO’s Annual Report, released last week, shows only 11 countries have met the goal of spending at least 2 percent of GDP on defense. See NATO, *The Secretary General’s Annual Report 2023*, March 2024, p. 50, available at https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2024/3/pdf/sgar23-en.pdf.



longer the conflict goes on, the more a sense of fatigue threatens to cause fissures and cracks in NATO's unity. Should Russia succeed in subjugating Ukraine, Poland or the Baltic states may be next on Moscow's menu, and the value of NATO as a collective security arrangement may be undermined.

Some have recently argued that NATO's process of decision-making by consensus needs to be reconsidered in light of a "much more diverse membership" and a willingness on the part of leaders of some member states to abuse the consensus process for political advantage in ways that are seen to benefit Russia. As several former U.S. and UK senior officials have suggested, the time has come to consider introducing "a majority voting procedure," saying, "This would make it impossible for one member state to serve Russia's interests by insisting on the consensus principle, thereby paralyzing the Alliance's ability to defend an ally from Russian aggression."⁴

This July's NATO Summit in Washington may provide an opportunity to discuss adapting the NATO decision-making process in order to avoid a potential situation where the need for consensus may actually stymie the alliance from invoking Article 5 in a serious crisis. And the continued enlargement of the alliance may, in itself, create additional challenges should a member state's policies diverge significantly from the rest of the alliance. For example, concerns over Turkey's policies in the past led to calls for NATO to consider a means to expel a member from the alliance—a virtual impossibility given the lack of any mechanism established by the North Atlantic Treaty to do so and the unlikelihood of a discordant member voting in favor of its own expulsion.⁵

On the nuclear issue, NATO's *2022 Strategic Concept* reiterates that "As long as nuclear weapons exist, NATO will remain a nuclear alliance."⁶ Nevertheless, NATO's nuclear posture is increasingly under strain, as Russian officials continue to make unprecedented coercive nuclear threats against NATO and the risks of possible Russian use of nuclear weapons are seen as increasingly worrisome. Russia's tactical, or non-strategic, nuclear arsenal continues to be modernized and by most unclassified estimates, exceeds NATO's nonstrategic nuclear arsenal by almost ten-to-one.⁷

As the congressional Strategic Posture Commission concluded, "Russia is projected to continue to expand and enhance its nuclear forces, with most of the growth concentrated in theater nuclear forces, thus increasing its decided numerical advantage over U.S. and allied

⁴ Eric S. Edelman, David Manning, and Franklin C. Miller, "NATO's decision process has an Achilles' heel," *Atlantic Council New Atlanticist*, March 12, 2024, available at <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/natos-decision-process-has-an-achilles-heel/>.

⁵ See Michael Rubin, "Turkey Humiliated NATO; If NATO Can't Expel It, Here's Plan B," *Middle East Forum*, January 24, 2024, available at <https://www.meforum.org/65488/turkey-humiliated-nato-if-nato-cant-expel-it-here>. Also see Aurel Sari, "Can Turkey be Expelled from NATO? It's Legally Possible, Whether or Not Politically Prudent," *Just Security*, October 15, 2019, available at <https://www.justsecurity.org/66574/can-turkey-be-expelled-from-nato/>.

⁶ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *NATO 2022 Strategic Concept*, p. 1, available at https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/290622-strategic-concept.pdf.

⁷ For a detailed discussion of Russia's nonstrategic nuclear weapons arsenal and its characteristics, see Mark B. Schneider, *How Many Nuclear Weapons Does Russia Have? The Size and Characteristics of the Russian Nuclear Stockpile*, *Occasional Paper*, Vol. 3, No. 8 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, August 2023), pp. 169-210, available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Vol.-3-No.-8.pdf>.

nuclear forces.”⁸ In addition, Putin himself has declared that Russia’s strategic nuclear Triad “is more modern than any other triad” including that of the United States and stated, “we are, of course, ready” for nuclear war. “Weapons exist in order to use them,” he said.⁹ Perhaps it is time for NATO to consider a more robust approach to missile defense. Indeed, NATO’s Annual Report for 2023, released last week, acknowledges “the crucial importance of air and missile defence.”¹⁰ How the alliance chooses to respond to the challenges posed by Russia will no doubt be an item of considerable interest at the Washington Summit.

Jim Stokes

Jim Stokes is Director of Nuclear Policy at NATO.

Good afternoon, and many thanks to David and the National Institute for Public Policy for the invitation. I am delighted to join this outstanding panel today and mark the 75th anniversary of the Alliance with you.

As the Director for Nuclear Policy at NATO, I help shape the Alliance’s nuclear deterrence policies and posture, which, in the current geostrategic environment, has become ever more important.

I am speaking today in my personal capacity and not for NATO or the U.S. government.

On April 4th, we will celebrate NATO’s 75th anniversary. This will also mark 75 years of NATO as a nuclear Alliance. I want to highlight three aspects of NATO’s nuclear deterrence, which have endured from the past and will into the future.

First, the extended deterrence commitment of the United States to its NATO Allies has helped to preserve peace, prevent coercion and deter aggression. This commitment is vital to all Allies, because nuclear deterrence is the supreme guarantee of their security.

As you know, the independent nuclear forces of the UK and France also have a deterrent role, and contribute significantly to the overall security of the Alliance.

Three Allied nuclear powers, with their separate decision-making centres and independent nuclear forces, complicates an adversary’s decision-making calculus. We believe this maintains a high threshold for adversary employment of nuclear weapons against the Alliance.

Second, let’s discuss the inherently NATO part of the nuclear deterrence mission, often referred to as the “Dual-Capable Aircraft or DCA mission.” This is what we primarily focus

⁸ Madelyn R. Creedon, Jon L. Kyl, et. al., *AMERICA’S STRATEGIC POSTURE: The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States*, October 2023, p. 92, available at <https://www.ida.org/-/media/feature/publications/a/am/americas-strategic-posture/strategic-posture-commission-report.ashx>.

⁹ Guy Faulconbridge and Lidia Kelly, “Putin warns the West: Russia is ready for nuclear war,” *Reuters*, March 13, 2024, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/putin-says-russia-ready-nuclear-war-not-everything-rushing-it-2024-03-13/>.

¹⁰ NATO, *The Secretary General’s Annual Report 2023*, March 2024, op. cit., p. 30.

on at NATO Headquarters and at SHAPE, how we can best prepare NATO's theatre nuclear forces to deter aggression and, if that fails, to restore deterrence.

Today, NATO's theatre nuclear forces include U.S. nuclear gravity bombs forward-deployed in Europe as well as Allied Dual-Capable Aircraft that can employ those nuclear weapons, if authorized to do so.

In the 1950s, the United States began to station its atomic (and then nuclear) weapons in Europe, and certified Allied units to be capable of employing these weapons. These became known as NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements. The United States maintains full custody and control of its weapons in Europe as required by the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT).

In existence prior to the negotiation, and later entry into force of the NPT, NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements have been sustained by Allies for decades to deter Soviet, and now Russian aggression. These arrangements form the core of NATO's nuclear deterrence mission in Europe. They are vital to the credibility of NATO's deterrence posture. They are tangible proof of the trans-atlantic bond between North America and Europe. They are also a clear commitment by European Allies to collective security through nuclear deterrence, by providing aircraft or hosting U.S. weapons.

Additionally, Allies also contribute vital conventional capabilities. The DCA mission requires enabling air capabilities, including air-to-air refuelling, ISR, and suppression of enemy air defences. As SHAPE continues to transform, we will increasingly see a multi-domain approach to support NATO's nuclear mission.

So, the operational aspects of the DCA mission—of NATO's theatre nuclear deterrence mission—feature broad sharing of the nuclear burden across Allies.

Our nuclear posture in Europe is being modernized and strengthened, as the United States transitions to the B61-12 weapons, and Allies transition to the F-35. Several Allies are transitioning to the F-35A as a Dual-Capable Aircraft this year, and others will follow in future years. And many Allies are buying F-35s for conventional roles (a total of over 600), significantly bolstering our overall deterrence and defence (D&D) posture with the introduction of a 5th generation aircraft.

A final point about posture and capabilities: we are in the midst of a massive transformation of NATO's deterrence and defence posture on the conventional side. This is being led by GEN Cavoli, SACEUR, and SHAPE HQ. Allies are investing more and committing forces to SHAPE, which is developing plans and updating C2 structures.

All of this strengthens the Alliance's overall D&D posture, and will directly support the nuclear mission.

This brings me to my third point, about the collective burden shared by Allies for nuclear consultations and decision-making. While effective capabilities are required for successful deterrence, we also need to have the resolve to use them to defend ourselves. This is how we demonstrate credibility in deterrence.

Political unity is our biggest strength as an Alliance. It sends a powerful signal when NATO acts together. If contemplating the use of nuclear weapons in a crisis or conflict, united

action will be key to responding to any adversary—that NATO will not back down and let an adversary achieve its objectives.

All Allies, except France (which has chosen not to participate), share the political responsibility for nuclear policy-making, planning and force posture decisions through participation in NATO’s Nuclear Planning Group (NPG), the senior nuclear decision-making body for the Alliance. Decisions are made by consensus. This ensures Allies maintain full political control over nuclear decision-making, meaning no decisions are pre-delegated to Military Authorities in peacetime, crisis, or in conflict. The NPG must authorize any and all nuclear-related actions.

This is why it is so critical that we focus on building better understanding of nuclear deterrence across Allies. We must:

- Think coherently across the conventional and nuclear aspects of a crisis or conflict, and how NATO should respond.
- Examine adversary doctrine, strategy, and capabilities.
- Better understand escalation dynamics, crisis decision-making, and strategic communications.

All of these activities also support nuclear risk reduction, so we can avoid inadvertent escalation, especially given the security environment Russia has created.

In sum, we need to be clear-eyed in our approach.
