



GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR
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IMPORTANCE OF MAINTAINING AND STRENGTHENING NATO'S NUCLEAR DETERRENCE: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

MEGI BENIA

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EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი
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"A world without nuclear weapons may be a dream but you cannot base a sure defence on dreams. Without far greater trust and confidence between East and West than exists at present, a world without nuclear weapons would be less stable and more dangerous for all of us."

Margaret Thatcher, 1987

Introduction

Nuclear deterrence is a core pillar of NATO's defense and deterrence policy. At the same time, the Alliance, which is not a formal party to any arms control negotiation, has a long-standing commitment to an active policy in arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation. The Alliance has been regularly conducting consultations in different fora - the North Atlantic Council, the Nuclear Planning Group and the Defense Planning Committee – to constantly address the ongoing challenges of the arms control architecture. Currently, NATO successfully maintains the balance between its nuclear deterrence and disarmament aspirations. However, it does not represent an easy task for the organization of 30 member states.

Over the years, NATO has suffered from a serious nuclear identity crisis. Many Allies tried to increase the Alliance's arms-control profile while others gradually opposed any further changes in this direction. The positioning of NATO in this regard has been constantly shaped by significant shifts in the international security environment.

Despite the contested view on maintaining NATO's nuclear deterrence, the Alliance managed to evolve as a nuclear alliance, effectively ensuring peace and security in the Euro-Atlantic area.

Today, European security faces the biggest security challenge since World War II when one state wages an unprovoked and unjustified war against another sovereign and independent state on the doorsteps of NATO, threatening the world with the use of nuclear weapons.

In this unprecedented environment, it is important for NATO to maintain and further strengthen its nuclear deterrence posture to ensure peace and stability for generations to come. Therefore, this article will demonstrate a historical overview of the evolution of NATO as a nuclear alliance and the importance of strengthened nuclear deterrence and conventional defense capabilities.

Evolution of NATO as a Nuclear Alliance

1960s became a turning point in the history of arms control and non-proliferation. With the Cuban Missile Crisis, Soviet technological progress in intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), the Chinese nuclear test in 1964 significantly questioned the credibility of the strategy of massive retaliation adopted during the Eisenhower administration. Therefore, the Kennedy administration decided to put an effort in the development of the arms control architecture. As a result of the series of negotiations, the Limited Test Ban Treaty was signed in 1963 and later negotiations led to an agreement on the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) opened for signature in 1968 (Potter 2018).

Before the 1960s, arms control and disarmament were not among the priorities of the Alliance. However, the changed global security environment forced NATO to adapt to the new reality. In 1966-1968, the first major changes were observed within the Alliance in this regard (Wenger 2004). An important part of this transformation was the Future Tasks of the Alliance report (a well-known Harmel report prepared by the Prime Minister of Belgium, Pierre Harmel). The report redefined the Alliance's goals and from then on NATO started positioning itself with the strategy aiming at providing defense and deterring aggression through a combination of political détente and an adequate military build-up. The document stated that "military security and reducing tensions were not contradictory but complementary" (North Atlantic Council 1967):

"It seems clear that the Alliance should give increasing concern to arms control issues. Problems of arms control and possible security arrangements should be examined with as much continuing care and attention as NATO devotes to force planning, strategy and nuclear questions. The Council has often discussed questions of arms control. Disarmament experts are considering these problems at the technical level during regularly scheduled meetings. These efforts, although valuable, have not proven adequate. The Alliance should establish regular and continuing machinery to examine and evaluate all aspects of proposals or suggestions in this field. This could be accomplished by establishing, under the authority of the Council, a separate, permanent committee, called the Arms Control and Disarmament Committee." (North Atlantic Council 1967)

In addition, it proposed the creation of the new arms control committee inside NATO. Even though the proposed committee has never been created, it was a significant step towards launching the process of arms control within the Alliance.

In 1965, there was another major shift in US foreign policy regarding nuclear weapons. President Johnson decided that nuclear sharing with allies, which was the case since the Eisenhower administration, and the negotiations on non-proliferation with the USSR were not compatible. Consequently, Johnson suggested the establishment of the Nuclear Defense Affairs Committee and the Nuclear Planning Group. These new bodies introduced the process of consultations and planning of the possible use of nuclear weapons and took the physical control of the delivery systems which the Alliance exercised before these changes. Even though it was met with great anxiety, that was the only option and the Allies accepted it (Haftendorn 1996) (Buteux 1983).

In 1977, the Alliance created the High Level Group to address the SALT* I and SALT II negotiations, the modernization of the Alliance's intermediate-range nuclear forces (INF) and the need to develop a common position to respond to the Soviet Union's deployment of a new missile system (NATO, Arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation in NATO 2022).

As a result, NATO adopted a Dual-Track policy on December 12, 1979 "under which NATO would modernize its theatre nuclear weapons with US Cruise Missiles and Pershing II missiles to be based in Europe but would also actively seek to negotiate an arms control agreement with the USSR which, if successful, would make it unnecessary for NATO to deploy those missiles" (SHAPE n.d.).

During the Reagan administration, the process of arms control negotiations was high on the agenda. As a result of the long lasting process, the new arms control architecture was established. In December 1987, the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty was signed, marking the most important step in the history of arms control. The INF aimed at eliminating an entire class of nuclear weapons. The North Atlantic Council expressed its satisfaction and declared it "perfectly compatible" with the Alliance's security (NATO, NATO and the INF Treaty 2019).

* Strategic Arms Limitation Talks.

After the end of the Cold War, the Alliance faced a new reality in which it had to determine its role between putting effort into the further reduction of conventional and strategic weapons and remain committed to arms control or maintaining its nuclear posture. For the first time, these different positions were addressed at the NATO Summit in 1989 during which the Alliance adopted its Comprehensive Concept for Arms Control and Disarmament (NATO, The Alliance's comprehensive concept of arms control and disarmament 1989). The concept aimed at promoting arms control and even though it emphasized the importance of nuclear weapons for Allied defense and security, it clearly favored the reduction of the strategic weapons arsenal:

“The basic goal of the Alliance's arms control policy is to enhance security and stability at the lowest balanced level of forces and armaments consistent with the requirements of the strategy of deterrence. The Allies are committed to achieving continuing progress towards all their arms control objectives. The further development of the Comprehensive Concept is designed to assist this by ensuring an integrated approach covering both defense policy and arms control policy: these are complementary and interactive. This work also requires full consideration of the interrelationship between arms control objectives and defense requirements and how various arms control measures, separately and in conjunction with each other, can strengthen Alliance security. The guiding principles and basic objectives which have so far governed the arms control policy of the Alliance remain valid.” (NATO, The Alliance's comprehensive concept of arms control and disarmament 1989)

The position was further reiterated in the NATO's Strategic Concepts in 1991 and 1999, stating that:

“The Alliance will therefore maintain adequate nuclear forces in Europe. These forces need to have the necessary characteristics and appropriate flexibility and survivability, to be perceived as a credible and effective element of the Allies' strategy in preventing war. They will be maintained at the minimum level sufficient to preserve peace and stability.” (NATO, The Alliance's New Strategic Concept 1991)

In the 21st century, these contested views continued to represent a dilemma for the Alliance with certain member states pushing NATO to fully commit itself to arms control and non-proliferation. The conclusion of the New START Treaty in April 2010 between the US and Russia, the First UN

Nuclear Security Summit in April, 2010 and the Review Conference of the NPT in May 2010 further pressed the Alliance to the reinforcement of its arms control policy. However, the group of experts appointed by Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen to provide guidance on the new Strategic Concept released a report on May 17, 2010 and concluded that (NATO, NATO 2020: Assured Security; Dynamic Engagement 2010):

1. As long as nuclear weapons exist, NATO should continue to maintain secure and reliable nuclear forces, with widely shared responsibility for deployment and operational support, at the minimum level required by the prevailing security environment. Any change in this policy, including in the geographic distribution of NATO nuclear deployments in Europe, should be made, as with other major decisions, by the Alliance as a whole.
2. NATO should invite an ongoing dialogue with Russia on nuclear perceptions, concepts, doctrines, and transparency and should convene a Special Consultative Group in order to inform and coordinate its internal dialogue about nuclear-related issues.

Eventually, NATO adopted its new Strategic Concept in December 2010. According to the document, the Alliance would further strengthen and maintain its nuclear posture as an indispensable part of its defense and deterrence policy. Most importantly and for the first time in history, the document declared NATO as a nuclear Alliance - the term that had never been used before, even during the height of the Cold War:

“Deterrence, based on an appropriate mix of nuclear and conventional capabilities, remains a core element of our overall strategy. The circumstances in which any use of nuclear weapons might have to be contemplated are extremely remote. As long as nuclear weapons exist, NATO will remain a **nuclear alliance**.” (NATO, Strategic Concept 2010 2010)

In 2012 at the Chicago Summit, the Alliance adopted the Deterrence and Defense Posture Review (DDPR) (NATO, Deterrence and Defence Posture Review 2012) which finally identified nuclear deterrence and arms control as core pillars of NATO’s security. Based on the DDPR, the Special Advisory and Consultative Arms Control, Disarmament and Non-Proliferation Committee (ADNC) was established in 2013 to prepare a dialogue on confidence building and transparency measures on tactical weapons with Russia (NATO, Arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation in NATO 2022).

Strengthening NATO's Nuclear Posture

In 1984, Ronald Reagan famously said: "I just happen to believe that we cannot go into another generation with the world living under the threat of those weapons and knowing that some madman can push the button some place." Therefore, arms control and non-proliferation remains an important task of international community as it is the only way to ensure world in peace and stability. However, in this process it is important to have all parties faithfully committed to the idea of the complete elimination of the nuclear weapons. In our reality, with authoritarian adversaries such as Russia, the world without nuclear weapons will remain a dream for generations to come.

Over the years, Russia has been undermining the core pillars of the arms control architecture. It violated the INF Treaty, suspended the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE), non-complied with the obligations of the Vienna Document, repeatedly violated the Open Skies Treaty (causing the US withdrawal from it and later announcing its own departure from it) and deliberately failed to meet its commitments under the Budapest Memorandum.

And while NATO tried its best to accommodate itself with this dangerous reality by constantly calling on Russia to meet its obligations under the various mechanisms of arms control, non-proliferation and disarmament, Russia's position remained unchanged. This made it difficult for the NATO to keep its traditional balance between nuclear deterrence and disarmament aspirations.

Herewith, it is worth mentioning that NATO's opposition to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) is well-justified in this unpredictable environment "as it does not reflect the increasingly challenging international security environment and is at odds with the existing non-proliferation and disarmament architecture" (NATO, North Atlantic Council Statement as the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons Enters Into Force 2020).

Moreover, the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 further showed Russia's unwillingness to ensure peace and stability in Europe based on the principle of cooperative security. The move introduced numerous changes into NATO's defense and deterrence posture. In 2016 at the

Warsaw Summit, the Alliance adopted a communiqué which underlined allied cohesion on the importance of nuclear deterrence.

Considering the devastating security environment in the Euro-Atlantic area, when Russia wages an unprovoked and unjustified war against Ukraine, NATO should demonstrate its firm and bold position on the maintaining and strengthening of its nuclear deterrence posture.

As happened before, it is expected that some NATO member states might insist on refraining from the nuclear and conventional forces arsenal for the sake of arms control and non-proliferation, being ready to make additional concessions vis-à-vis Russia in this regard.

Therefore, in full awareness of the dangers of such an appeasement, NATO allies should act accordingly. And while focusing on the enhanced role of the Alliance as a forum to debate arms control arrangements, NATO must put great emphasis on agreeing on the adequate language that will ensure strengthened nuclear deterrence and conventional defense capabilities for the next decades in the new Strategic Concept to be adopted at the Madrid Summit in June, 2022.

Conclusion

The existing arms control architecture is an important achievement of the international community that is supposed to ensure global peace and stability. Over the years, NATO has emerged as a unique platform for dialogue on arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation. Dozens of allied members exchanged views on the challenges of nuclear related-issues and facilitated consultations on arms control negotiations. The complete elimination of nuclear weapons must remain a core task of the international community; however, this mission requires a broad commitment from all participating states.

However, in today's unpredictable security environment, NATO is directly threatened by Russia's violent and hostile actions. These circumstances require firm and robust response from the Alliance. As experience has shown, despite numerous attempts to fully commit itself to the non-proliferation and disarmament, the changing conditions forced NATO to act in accordance with the existential demands. As a result, it emerged as a nuclear alliance making an unprecedented move in the history of the international relations and global security.

Current security challenges once again call for the Alliance not to abandon its tradition of adaptation and adopt adequate measures for strengthening its nuclear deterrence and conventional defense capabilities.

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