

Closing Argument

Away from a World of Peril

Sam Nunn

I

My first visit to NATO came during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. I was a 24-year-old staff lawyer with the US House of Representatives Armed Services Committee on an Air Force-led trip. During those tense days, President John F. Kennedy imposed a naval quarantine around Cuba – and to the world’s great relief, Premier Nikita Khrushchev ordered all Soviet nuclear missiles removed from the island. During detailed daily classified briefings to our delegation over the course of ten days, I recognised how close the world was to nuclear war. At Ramstein Air Base, our top US Air Force general, with his sensitive communications gear right behind him, explained to our group that he would have to immediately give the order when authorised by the president to launch all of his quick-reaction alert aircraft and their nuclear payloads, or they would be destroyed by a Soviet attack. My deep impression was that nuclear war was barely avoided and the slightest mistake could have sparked a nuclear conflict that neither the United States nor Russia intended. I pledged to myself to try to reduce such dangers if I ever had the chance.

I returned to NATO in 1974 as a newly elected senator from Georgia. At that time, the concept and practice of nuclear deterrence by the United

Sam Nunn is Co-Chairman of the Nuclear Threat Initiative and a former Chairman of the US Senate Armed Services Committee. This essay is adapted from a longer piece that appeared in Steve Andreasen and Isabelle Williams (eds), *Reducing Nuclear Risks in Europe: A Framework for Action* (Washington DC: Nuclear Threat Initiative, 2011), pp. 8–23, http://www.nuclearsecurityproject.org/uploads/File/NTI_Framework_full_report.pdf.

States and NATO, including the deployment of thousands of shorter-range American non-strategic (or 'tactical') nuclear weapons in Europe, played a crucial role in NATO's strategy and defence posture.

During that trip, several important points were evident. NATO's conventional weaknesses combined with the enormous Soviet forward-based tank and artillery forces arrayed against it made front-line American and NATO commanders not only reliant on first use of tactical nuclear weapons, but more dangerously, on early first use, an unspoken but grim reality. At the outset of any serious military conflict, an American president would have been confronted within hours with a request to use such weapons, with the horror of strategic nuclear escalation looming. This early-first-use strategy may have served to deter our adversaries, but it was a very high-risk and dangerous policy for NATO, for all of Europe, and indeed for the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact. It left both alliances reliant, in the event of conflict, on strategies that would destroy the territory they were sworn to defend. Moreover, the lack of conventional warning and decision time inherent in NATO's early-first-use strategy made war, indeed nuclear war, more likely, whether by intent or by accident. And as could be expected, the Soviets responded by deploying thousands of their own tactical nuclear weapons, many of which remain near NATO's borders today.

Another disturbing fact was also clear: the weapons themselves were often not well secured. While touring a NATO nuclear storage base, I had been assured by commanding officers that the weapons were secure. At the end of my tour a sergeant sent me a message that said, 'this is all a bunch of bull, Senator. If you want the real story see me and my buddies at the barracks after you get through with your tour, but don't bring any officers.'

Late that afternoon, Frank Sullivan (an experienced member of the Senate Armed Services Committee staff) and I had an alarming conversation with several of the sergeants in charge of the tactical nuclear weapons at that base. We were told that we did not have good security on site, or credible plans to respond to a terrorist attack in the first few hours. The security forces had drug and alcohol problems, with considerable strain between enlisted personnel and officers (a carryover from Vietnam). It was

clear that a terrorist group of five to ten people could have threatened the weapons at this base, something that would have posed a serious threat to NATO's fragile political consensus. This was the era of the Baader–Meinhof Gang, which was conducting regular attacks on Germans and US military personnel and facilities. When I returned to Washington, I went directly to then Defense Secretary Jim Schlesinger and laid out my concerns. To his great credit, the secretary took action to strengthen security at these facilities.

Those were dangerous times. By the grace of God, deterrence did work, but the risk of a European or even global nuclear holocaust was real. And at crucial times, like the Cuban Missile Crisis, we were very lucky to have avoided what Kennedy referred to as 'the final failure'.

Although relationships in the Euro-Atlantic region have dramatically improved and military forces, including tactical nuclear weapons, have been significantly drawn down on both sides, many of the challenges remain. The United States and Russia still possess thousands of nuclear weapons each (more than 90% of the world's nuclear inventory) and many remain deployed or designed for use within the Euro-Atlantic region. Those include small tactical nuclear weapons, a terrorist's dream, deployed in numerous states. The reduction and elimination of this Cold War nuclear infrastructure and the reorientation of security policies to address today's threats is the largest piece of unfinished business from a bygone era and should be made a policy priority for the United States, NATO and Russia. If we apply a sense of history, common sense, and a cooperative approach, NATO and Russia have a window of opportunity to move, decisively and permanently, away from this world of peril.

II

At the November 2010 NATO Summit in Lisbon, a compromise was reached in the new Strategic Concept on the role of nuclear weapons in NATO security policy. The Strategic Concept embraces two core principles: firstly, NATO is committed to the goal of creating the conditions for a world without nuclear weapons; and secondly, for as long as there are nuclear weapons in the world, NATO will remain a nuclear alliance.

This formula papered over a lingering dispute between Allies on the future direction of NATO nuclear policy, stemming from a diverse spectrum of views regarding the appropriate response to existing and future threats. Recognising that more work needed to be done, NATO tasked a review of its nuclear posture as part of a broader Deterrence and Defence Posture Review. That review is now under way, but it is far from certain that it will provide clear answers to core issues, clear objectives or a strategy for action. Should the review, to be completed in 2012, produce a 'least common denominator' approach, NATO risks forgoing a historic opportunity to make a unique and vital contribution to nuclear threat reduction for all of Europe.

Twenty years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the questions of whether NATO wants Russia to be inside or outside the Euro-Atlantic security arc, and what Russia itself wants in this regard, remain. The erosion of Russia's conventional military capability, Moscow's distrust of NATO enlargement, and concerns as to its other borders, has led it to increase dependency on nuclear weapons, including many more tactical nuclear weapons than the United States deploys in Europe. Many NATO nations see Russian tactical nuclear weapons as a threat and insist on Russian reciprocity as the price for any further changes to NATO's nuclear posture. Steps taken by NATO to reassure Allies can look threatening from Moscow. In the eyes of Russian leaders, these weapons also play a critical role as an equaliser for the weakness of the nation's conventional forces vis-à-vis China.

This is a difficult web to untangle, but we must begin. Building on recent progress in resetting relations between Russia and the United States and NATO, a window of opportunity is now open for a dynamic political and security dialogue on nuclear weapons and Euro-Atlantic security. But that dialogue is complicated by a lingering mistrust, compounded by an extremely difficult menu of security issues: missile defence, conventional forces in Europe, and the thousands of remaining tactical nuclear weapons. A treaty-based approach should not be ruled out, but making it the priority is likely to bog down these issues for years, if not decades.

In the Euro-Atlantic Security Initiative (EASI) I co-chair with former Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov and former German Deputy Foreign Minister Wolfgang Ischinger, we (along with a distinguished group of commissioners representing 13 European nations, including Russia) are working to lay the foundation for an inclusive Euro-Atlantic security system. Generations of leaders have been accustomed to confrontation and distrust for so long they have a hard time matching the rhetoric of partnership with dialogue and practical steps to build trust and make cooperation a reality. The reasons for this failure are rooted in NATO's and Russia's collective inability to address the fundamental question of Russia's status in a region once dominated by two opposing alliances. The goal of EASI is to help our leaders find paths forward toward building a Euro-Atlantic security system that can turn words into deeds, plans into actions, and intentions into meaningful risk reduction.

History suggests that nuclear dangers are not likely to be successfully addressed without considering conventional force deployments and steps that could increase warning and decision time. If no nation fears a conventional attack at short notice or feels the need to deter or defend against such an attack with nuclear weapons, the chances of war (including nuclear war) by accident, miscalculation or false warning could be significantly reduced. As Ivanov, Ischinger and I recently wrote: 'Pursuing arrangements that increase warning and decision-making time for all countries in the Euro-Atlantic region would introduce stability into the NATO-Russia relationship' and 'would constitute a giant step toward ending the relationship's militarized framework'.¹

The stakes associated with missile defence in this regard are high, following the agreement reached at Lisbon in the NATO–Russia Council to pursue missile-defence cooperation. This year will see the Deterrence and Defense Posture Review and the next NATO summit in the United States. Progress in developing a joint approach to missile defence (the subject of an EASI Working Group chaired by former US National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley, former Director of Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service Vyacheslav Trubnikov, and former German Federal Minister of Defense Volker Ruhe), would create a positive dynamic for progress on broader

nuclear issues and conventional arms control. The EASI group recommends pooling and sharing data and information from early-warning radars and satellites in Cooperation Centres staffed by US, NATO and Russian officers working together. This would increase warning and decision time by providing an enhanced threat picture and notification of missile attack.

For decades, the perception of relative weakness in conventional forces has provided the rationale for deploying tactical nuclear weapons in Europe. When I first became involved in these issues in 1962, the United States and NATO believed they were outgunned by Soviet tank divisions in East Germany, and thousands of US tactical nuclear weapons were deployed in Europe; when the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact collapsed, the United States almost immediately withdrew the bulk of its stockpile back to the United States. The Russians also made significant reductions. This helped, but did not solve the problem. Today, Russia looks at NATO's conventional capabilities relative to its own, combined with NATO's geographic advance, and perceives a prospective threat and the need to maintain tactical nuclear weapons as a counterbalance. And some NATO members bordering Russia fear Moscow could deliver a substantial blow, as it did in Georgia in 2008, and see Russian tactical nuclear weapons deployments as threatening.

The Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty is near breakdown and must be repaired or replaced with a dynamic concept and process that deals with both Russian and European perceptions and fears. A sustained dialogue centred on increasing warning and decision time could lead to steps that cumulatively would reduce fears of a conventional attack and address current difficulties relating to CFE. These steps could include measures relating to transparency on force deployments; limits on exercises, particularly near the Russia–NATO border; constraints on reinforcements and manoeuvres in sensitive areas, such as the former CFE flank regions; and understandings on the kinds of armaments that could be deployed forward (that is, defensive rather than offensive).

Finally, dialogue centred broadly on warning and decision time, leading to joint action on missile defence and conventional forces, could

also jump-start the frozen discourse on tactical nuclear weapons. If nations perceive a reduced threat from conventional attack, and increased cooperation in defending against ballistic missiles, tactical nuclear weapons become less relevant. NATO's tactical nuclear force posture reportedly consists of approximately 150–250 air-deliverable nuclear weapons (gravity bombs) at a handful of storage sites in Europe. As NATO dual-capable aircraft are reaching the end of their original service lives, the question of modernisation of capabilities, including costs, will arise in the next few years, and countries that propose to retain on their soil nuclear weapons and the aircraft to deliver them will have to explain the rationale to their parliaments and publics. But there is scant evidence for the military utility of such weapons, no matter what the contingency. According to General James E. Cartwright, at the time the vice-chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, US tactical nuclear bombs in Europe do not serve a military function not already addressed by Allied strategic and conventional forces.² Moreover, the extremely demanding nature of successful strike missions, requiring 'seven consecutive miracles',³ further undercuts their plausible use. And if US tactical nuclear weapons in Europe have virtually no military utility, it is hard to argue they have appreciable value as a deterrent. In an age of tight budgets and competing priorities, where the threats of nuclear proliferation and nuclear terrorism are the greatest threats to NATO, maintaining the nuclear status quo in Europe incurs high costs and high risks.

A terrorist attack against a European NATO nuclear base would shake the Alliance, even if the attack failed. The security of tactical nuclear weapons should therefore be of paramount importance for NATO's current posture and a guiding principle for future change, and the same is true for Russia. Even, or especially if, no progress is made in changing NATO and Russian tactical nuclear deployments, independent security improvements on both sides are essential. If we lose focus on this, NATO or Russia may wake up one morning to a terrorist using one of their own nuclear weapons against them, just as al-Qaeda used our own airplanes to attack the United States on 9/11.

III

The original purpose of US tactical nuclear weapons now deployed in Europe, to deter the massing of Soviet tanks and the threat of an invasion of Western Europe, no longer exists. Today, none of the threats that NATO faces, including those with a possible nuclear component, require the continuing deployment of US tactical nuclear weapons in Europe. Both NATO and Russia have strong incentives to escape Cold War-era paradigms, including the perception of conventional-force imbalances on one side that perpetuates dangerous nuclear deployments on the other. The elephant in the room for Russia is NATO's force deployments near Russian borders. The elephant in the room for a number of NATO countries is Russian forces near NATO's borders.

This provides a strong argument for a dynamic process leading to parallel steps rather than a treaty-centered approach. Such a process is more likely to lead to joint actions that preclude, rather than are preceded by, a disaster. Consultations on definitions, the implementation of data exchanges and confidence-building measures, and more inclusive NATO–Russia threat assessments, could all take place within this framework and would help narrow the gap between Russian and Western security perceptions.

The Deterrence and Defence Posture Review provides an opportunity to forge an Alliance consensus on NATO tactical nuclear weapons, including the appropriate mix of nuclear and conventional capabilities and alternatives to US tactical nuclear weapons now deployed in Europe. Russia, too, must rethink its nuclear policies and posture and forge a new consensus of its own on Euro-Atlantic security. Leadership by the United States and NATO is essential; but without parallel leadership from Moscow, progress will not happen.

Questions relating to sharing nuclear risks and responsibilities, assuring Allies and defining a strategy for engaging Russia are central. NATO should come to a consensus position on these points in time for its next summit in Chicago in May 2012. I suggest that NATO consider ten commitments for the summit (what I call 'ten for 2012').

1. To deepen consultations and dialogue with Russia on missile defense and conventional and nuclear arms, including on steps to increase warning

and decision time for political and military leaders so that no nation fears a conventional attack with short warning, or perceives the need to deter or defend against such an attack with tactical nuclear weapons. Progress on these issues can be made separately, as long as all issues are addressed in parallel and within a common framework. Military-to-military discussions are essential.

2. To affirm that the security of US nuclear weapons deployed in Europe should be, and must remain, the highest priority for NATO and a guiding principle for further changes to that posture.

3. To seek mutual reductions of tactical nuclear weapons, beginning with enhanced transparency and security. NATO and Russian political leaders should jointly state that as long as US tactical nuclear weapons remain deployed in Europe, all of NATO has a stake in their security; all of NATO also has a stake in the security of Russian tactical nuclear arms; and Russia has an equal stake in the security of NATO weapons as well as its own. Reciprocal steps to improve the security of tactical nuclear weapons could include a joint threat and security assessment, a combined recovery exercise, site visits to nuclear storage sites, a shared commitment to separate nuclear weapons from operational units, and data exchanges.

4. To affirm that Russian reciprocity will be measured broadly, taking into account the full range of issues relating to Euro-Atlantic security. This approach will allow the United States and NATO to take meaningful steps in nuclear risk reduction, mindful of the interrelationships with Russia but not rigidly linked to them.

5. To continue to adjust the appropriate mix of conventional and nuclear capabilities necessary for deterrence and defence against twenty-first-century threats so as to strengthen common defence and deterrence and enhance nuclear security and threat reduction.

6. To proceed with further reductions of US tactical nuclear weapons in Europe, with the announced target of completing the consolidation of US tactical nuclear weapons to the United States within five years, with the final timing and pace to be determined by broad political and security developments between NATO and Russia, including but not limited to their tactical nuclear posture.

7. To strengthen extended deterrence and reassurance of European Allies. NATO should seek to adapt existing arrangements relating to nuclear sharing and consultations within the Alliance, so that it will have a safer and more credible extended nuclear deterrent and remain a nuclear alliance for as long as nuclear weapons exist. As the Strategic Concept puts it, 'the supreme guarantee of the security of the Allies is provided by the strategic nuclear forces of the Alliance, particularly those of the United States; the independent strategic nuclear forces of the United Kingdom and France, which have a deterrent role of their own, contribute to the overall deterrence and security of the Allies.'⁴

8. To move to adopt a diverse and robust set of reassurance measures, beyond those relating to adapting existing arrangements for nuclear sharing, that will tangibly enhance confidence in NATO's capabilities to defend against existing and emerging threats (both conventional and nuclear); and institute a process for periodic review and adoption of new measures. Such measures will be more effective if implemented in the context of building a more inclusive Euro-Atlantic security community, including improving NATO–Russia relations.

9. To state that NATO now believes the fundamental purpose of its nuclear weapons is to deter the use of nuclear weapons by others, further underscoring NATO's commitment to lead in transforming nuclear security.

10. To consult with countries in the Asia-Pacific region as it implements this approach.

Even with substantial changes in NATO nuclear policy, NATO will remain a nuclear alliance. America's extended nuclear deterrent will persist as a core element of NATO's overall strategy, but in a form that is safer and more credible.

Notes

- ¹ Sam Nunn, Igor Ivanov and Wolfgang Ischinger, 'A Post-Nuclear Euro-Atlantic Security Order', Project Syndicate, 14 December 2010, <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/nunn1/English>.
- ² 'Nuclear Posture Review', Council on Foreign Relations briefing, 10 April 2010, <http://www.cfr.org/proliferation/nuclear-posture-review/p21861>.
- ³ Karl-Heinz Kamp and Robertus C.N. Remkes, 'Options for NATO Nuclear Sharing Arrangements', in Steve
- Andreasen and Isabelle Williams (eds), *Reducing Nuclear Risks in Europe: A Framework for Action* (Washington DC: Nuclear Threat Initiative, 2011), p. 82, http://www.nuclearsecurityproject.org/uploads/File/NTI_Framework_full_report.pdf.
- ⁴ 'Active Engagement, Modern Defence: Strategic Concept for the Defence and Security of the Members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation', <http://www.nato.int/lisbon2010/strategic-concept-2010-eng.pdf>, p. 4.