



Articulating the logic of nuclear-sharing

Alexander Mattelaer

NATO's nuclear-sharing arrangements often get bad press. This is remarkable given the fact that they have demonstrably contributed to (a) countering the proliferation of nuclear arsenals in Europe, (b) fostering alliance cohesion by giving non-nuclear weapon states a voice on the nuclear posture of the alliance, and (c) making nuclear deterrence more effective militarily by offering a wider array of force options. When the relative merits of extended nuclear deterrence are unknown, public support thereof is likely to suffer. In order to enrich the debate about NATO's nuclear policy, this Security Policy Brief articulates the threefold logic of nuclear-sharing.

INTRODUCTION

Nuclear-sharing plays a critical, though little-understood role in the nuclear posture of the NATO alliance. The forward deployment of US nuclear weapons in Europe, enabled by delivery systems and infrastructure provided by different allies, helps cementing the notion that NATO will remain a nuclear alliance as long as nuclear

weapons exist. By extension, it underwrites the collective security of its members, which is based on a strategy of deterrence and defence. As nuclear-sharing makes for a politically sensitive subject, public discussion thereof has often remained muted. This has resulted in a widening gap between what is official policy and the public understanding thereof. Yet sustaining leadership focus is premised on informing and educating the next generation of leaders with consideration and deliberation.¹ In this sense, the desire to avoid difficult debates with critical publics constitutes perhaps the gravest risk to NATO's deterrence posture today.

The logic of nuclear-sharing revolves around three functions subsumed within the wider framework of NATO's nuclear policy. First comes the non-proliferation function: nuclear-sharing helps maintaining strategic stability by limiting the number of nuclear arsenals in Europe. Second comes the political cohesion function: nuclear-sharing ensures that the benefits, responsibilities and risks that derive from NATO's nuclear posture are shared across different allies. As such it also provides different allies with a voice on nuclear matters that they would otherwise lack. Third comes the military flexibility function: nuclear-sharing enhances the

strategic effectiveness of nuclear deterrence by offering a wider and more credible array of force options. Of course, NATO's nuclear posture relies foremost on the triad of US strategic forces, as well as on the strategic forces of France and the United Kingdom. Not only do these forces provide NATO with the means to impose unacceptable costs on any adversary, they also ensure the ultimate survivability of NATO's own arsenal, especially by continuous at sea deterrence and by the quasi-bottomless 'missile sink' provided by the intercontinental ballistic missile force of the US. Yet in today's environment, in which the arms control architecture is eroding, and Russian nuclear sabre-rattling has made an unwelcome comeback, the different functions performed by NATO's nuclear-sharing arrangement are increasing in salience. This Egmont Security Policy Brief sets out to illuminate these three functions throughout the past, present and potential future timeframes.

THE HISTORICAL CONCEPTION OF NUCLEAR-SHARING

In today's debates about European security it is often forgotten that nuclear-sharing originated in a very different historical context. The late 1950s and early 1960s constituted a timeframe when the nuclear deterrence architecture was up for grabs, and different European allies contemplated the development of nuclear weapons. Nuclear-sharing came into existence primarily as a mechanism to avoid the proliferation of nuclear weapons. In addition, allies gradually came to appreciate the political and military advantages that nuclear-sharing conferred, most notably by bolstering the credibility of the US nuclear umbrella. Also, it provided allied militaries with the needed sense of co-ownership of nuclear capability and risk, in combination with continuous diplomatic consultations for exercising political control.

The sharing of nuclear weapons was originally conceived as a way to limit the proliferation of European nuclear arsenals.² Already in 1952, the UK became the second Western nation achieving nuclear weapon status. Subsequently, under the leadership of president Charles de Gaulle, and following the loss of confidence in US assistance due to the way the Suez crisis unfolded, France also embarked on a nuclear weapons programme. It detonated its first device in 1960 and chose to leave NATO's military command structure in 1966. Ever since it has prided itself on its relative 'strategic autonomy', of which the force de frappe constitutes the very foundation.³ The accession of West Germany to NATO in 1955 and the fraught debate over (West-)German rearmament brought about intensifying reflection on how to curtail the need for NATO allies to autonomously provide for their own nuclear capabilities. The idea of multilateralising the ownership and control of nuclear weapons under US leadership logically came to fill the void. NATO's nuclear-sharing arrangements were fully integrated into the negotiations leading up to the Non-Proliferation Treaty.⁴

The stationing of US nuclear weapons on the territory of its European allies, followed by the inclusion of delivery systems owned by allies and dual-key control mechanisms also served a political purpose in strengthening the credibility of extended deterrence. The Gaullist argument for developing an independent arsenal was premised on doubts whether the US would risk the destruction of its own cities on behalf of the defence of its allies. Yet by hosting US nuclear weapons and by acquiring the means to operate and deliver these, the promise of extended deterrence became materially tangible. While remaining under US control, the allies concerned acquired a palpable degree of influence on how the nuclear posture of the alliance would evolve over time. The creation of the Nuclear Planning

Group in 1966, in parallel to the drafting of the Harmel Report, proved instrumental in this regard: it provided those allies hosting US nuclear weapons with special influence on nuclear planning and release authority.⁵

The involvement of European allies in matters of nuclear strategy also acquired military significance. The rapid growth of both US and Soviet arsenals in terms of the number of weapons and delivery systems paved the way for an escalation ladder starting with battlefield use of nuclear munitions and potentially leading to a full-blown exchange between US and Soviet intercontinental ballistic missile forces. European allies and West Germany in particular developed an appreciation for keeping the escalation ladder short and steep. Their aim was to avoid becoming a nuclear battlefield on which the two superpowers could settle their differences without risking their own territory. Yet the emergence of gaps in the escalation ladder, which conferred military advantage to the Soviet Union by virtue of its geography, paved the way for the granular nuclear architecture of the peak of the Cold War, in which different types of shared systems all played their part.

THE CURRENT RELEVANCE OF NUCLEAR-SHARING

Much of the logic of nuclear-sharing remains relevant today. Nuclear-sharing constitutes the foundational core of alliance cohesion in the nuclear domain: it ties different allies together in way that is altogether unique. Different allies subscribe to facing the responsibilities, risks and burdens that relate to nuclear deterrence together. The NATO Nuclear Planning Group – from which France continues to abstain – has grown into the institutional forum for consultation on the nuclear posture of the alliance and preparing the associated decisions by the North Atlantic Council. The recent evolution

in declaratory posture codified in the NATO summit communiqués from 2014 to 2018 constitutes ample evident thereof.

Perhaps equally noteworthy is the fact that the non-proliferation function of nuclear-sharing, which largely disappeared from view, is beginning to make a comeback. The critical attitude President Trump has espoused towards the NATO alliance has fuelled European concerns about the credibility of the US extended deterrence commitment. While European leaders such as German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron have only noted the need to assume more responsibility for European security, others have already gone further by advocating a French-led European deterrent or even the development of an independent German nuclear arsenal.⁶ While such proposals may fail to gain endorsement for a variety of reasons, the fact remains that increasing doubts over the credibility of US extended deterrence instantaneously translate into renewed debate about the need for nuclear weapons within different European countries.

Critics frequently but erroneously remark that the tactical nuclear weapons delivered by dual capable aircraft have no military utility anymore. While the political cohesion logic may well have been the overriding preoccupation in keeping nuclear-sharing in place during the period in which Russia was seen to be a partner rather than as a competitor, it is equally true that such nuclear-sharing continued to have a latent function of military flexibility, namely that of keeping a minimal level of nuclear capability and expertise alive in different allies, pending further steps towards disarmament. However, as the international security environment has deteriorated substantially since 2014, the military instrumentality of nuclear-sharing has started to increase again, most notably because of the

inherent flexibility dual capable aircraft provide in signalling (visually observable) changes to the nuclear posture of the alliance.

EXPLORING THE FUTURE OF NUCLEAR-SHARING

When it comes to the future, one can only speculate about the ways in which the NATO-Russia relationship may develop, and the implications this may have for NATO's nuclear posture. The progressive abandonment of the arms control regime built around the INF Treaty has triggered NATO deliberations on how to respond to Russia's decision to re-introduce intermediate-range ground-launched cruise missiles.⁷ As stated by Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg: "NATO has no intention of deploying land-based nuclear missiles in Europe. But NATO will always take the necessary steps to provide credible and effective deterrence."⁸ In this context, nuclear-sharing rapidly acquires its traditional role of providing both political cohesion and military flexibility to the alliance without the need for increasing the number of independent nuclear arsenals.

Given that threat perceptions vary considerably amongst the European allies in function of their geographical position on the continent, the need to maintain political cohesion remains paramount. Nuclear-sharing can be expected to play a critical role, precisely because it allows different allies to have a voice and some degree of ownership of the deterrence posture. Any conceivable changes to training, readiness levels, basing, infrastructure etc would serve to signal political messages within the alliance as well as vis-à-vis third parties. In a post-INF world, such modularity in responses and messages may be precisely what is called for if one wants to avoid going back to the tit-for-tat dynamics of the Cold War.

The inherent flexibility of dual capable aircraft serves not only a political function, but in case of extreme need also a military one. In the hypothetical scenario in which the Russian Federation would choose nuclear escalation to de-escalate a conventional conflict in the European theatre, NATO would benefit from having credible and proportional counter-strike options that do not rely on sea-launched or intercontinental ballistic missiles. Dual capable aircraft meet this requirement because they allow for more gradual escalation (e.g. exercises, increased readiness, forward deployment, weapons airborne etc). In turn, having these options available would prevent such a scenario from unfolding in the first place, precisely because it has been planned and provided for, and thereby deterred. However uncomfortable it may appear to contemplate the use of nuclear weapons – even on a limited scale – NATO's nuclear-sharing effectively ensures that all allies who want to have a say in the Nuclear Planning Group get to exercise some degree of influence on employment scenarios and release authority. In the absence of sharing the burden in a multilateral framework, the logical alternative for non-nuclear allies is letting the nuclear powers decide matters on their own.

CONCLUSION

The different functions served by NATO's nuclear-sharing prove to be enduring over time. Paraphrasing the comments of Secretary-General Stoltenberg made about NATO's seventieth anniversary, nuclear-sharing has not lasted so many years because of a sense of nostalgia, but rather because it is in the national interest of every participating ally. This does not mean that everything has to remain locked into an eternal status quo. If anything, the substantial evolution that NATO's nuclear strategy, posture and doctrine has known over the past decades provides ample evidence thereof. What it does

mean, is that any changes and alternative schemes will need to be evaluated against and compared with the existing framework. Any future alternative will need to be as logically compelling – if not more so – not only in terms of alliance cohesion, but also in terms of military-strategic effectiveness.

Prof Dr Alexander Mattelaer is a Senior Research Fellow at Egmont – the Royal Institute for International Relations. He is also the Vice-Dean for research at the Institute for European Studies of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel. He is indebted to several reviewers for commenting on an earlier version of this text. The responsibility for any errors lies with the author alone.

ENDNOTES

¹ Cf. K.P. Chilton, 'Defending the Record on US Nuclear Deterrence', *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, Spring 2018, 12-21.

² For more background, see e.g. A. Wohlstetter, 'Nuclear Sharing: NATO and the N+1 Country', *Foreign Affairs*, 39 (3): 355-387, 1961; W. B. Bader, 'Nuclear Weapons Sharing and the German Problem', *Foreign Affairs*, 44: 693-700, 1966; W. L. Kohl, 'Nuclear Sharing in Nato and the Multilateral Force', *Political Science Quarterly*, 80 (1): 88-109, 1965; Baron Del Marmol, 'Opinions belges sur le « deterrent » nucléaire européen', *Chronique de Politique Étrangère*, 17 (6): 769-775, 1964.

³ Cf. J.L. Samaan and D.C. Gompert, 'French Nuclear Weapons, Euro-Deterrence, and NATO', *Contemporary Security Policy*, 30 (3): 486-504, 2009.

⁴ See W. Alberque, 'The NPT and the Origins of NATO's Nuclear Sharing Arrangements', Paris: Institut français des relations internationales, July 2017, available from:

https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/alberque_npt_origins_nato_nuclear_2017.pdf

⁵ See W. van Eekelen, 'Fifty years of nuclear planning: how it started', *Atlantisch Perspectief*, 41 (6), 2017, available from https://www.atlcom.nl/ap_archive/pdf/AP%202017%20nr.%206/Van%20Eekelen.pdf

⁶ Influential voices such Wolfgang Ischinger, the Chairman of the Munich Security Conference, have spoken out positively about a Europeanisation of the French deterrent. For the public case in favour of a German deterrent, see C. Hacke, 'Eine Nuklearmacht Deutschland stärkt die Sicherheit des Westens', *Die Welt am Sonntag*, 29 July 2018. For a comprehensive overview, see T. Kühn, T. Volpe and B. Thompson, 'Tracking the German Nuclear Debate', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 15 August 2018, available from:

<https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/08/15/tracking-german-nuclear-debate-pub-72884>

⁷ See D. Audenaert, 'The End of the INF-Treaty: Context and Consequences', Brussels: Egmont Institute

(Security Policy Brief 111), July 2019 <http://www.egmontinstitute.be/content/uploads/2019/07/SPB111.pdf>

⁸ J. Stoltenberg, 'NATO: good for Europe and good for America', address to the US Congress, Washington DC, 3 April 2019, available from: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_165210.htm



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