

Bleak prospects for nuclear disarmament

Alexander Mattelaer

On 17 October 2023 the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Belgian Federal Parliament organised a public hearing on the topic of nuclear disarmament. In line with the mandate of the Egmont Institute to inform public opinion about international questions that concern Belgium, Senior Research Fellow dr Alexander Mattelaer provided evidence about the bleak prospects for nuclear disarmament. His presentation analysed recent trends regarding the management of nuclear arsenals, considered the contemporary outlook for arms control, and reflected on the implications thereof for Belgium. The new nuclear age - in which all nuclear-weapon states are modernising and often expanding their arsenals - requires Belgium to re-articulate its role within NATO as a proponent of both strong deterrence and arms control. This Egmont Policy Brief represents a translated version of the presentation, edited for readability, and expanded with references in support of the arguments made.

THE EVOLUTION OF NUCLEAR ARSENALS

Today the Russian Federation fields the most modern and diversified nuclear arsenal in the world. This is the result of the complete modernisation that President Putin presented to the Russian Federal Assembly in 2018, and that has meanwhile been nearly completed.¹ From this position of relative strength, the Russian regime deliberately escalated its war against Ukraine in 2022.² In doing so, it repeatedly used attempts at nuclear intimidation. In September 2022, Putin promised to defend the newly annexed territories “with all the forces

and resources we have.”³ During the same period, growing concern about possible nuclear use prompted the United States and some of its allies to warn the Kremlin that nuclear use in Ukraine would have “catastrophic consequences for Russia.”⁴

The People’s Republic of China is rapidly emerging as new nuclear superpower. Historically, China’s nuclear arsenal had only a minimal size, but in recent years it has been undergoing massive quantitative and qualitative expansion. Hundreds of silos are being added for intercontinental ballistic missiles, strategic bombers are acquiring a nuclear role, and the nuclear missile submarines are developing further. Medium-range missile systems and low-yield warheads are being added to the Chinese inventory. These can only serve to intimidate neighbouring countries and to (try to) deter U.S. intervention in the region. At the current production rate, China’s nuclear stockpile is estimated to reach a size of about 1,500 weapons by 2035.⁵ China is also resisting a moratorium on the production of fissile materials. This indicates that it may be pursuing an even more far-reaching expansion of its arsenal. The emergence of a second (adversarial) nuclear superpower poses a huge challenge to the United States and its allies.⁶

Upon taking office, the Biden Administration sought to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. national security strategy.⁷ Largely as a result of the war in Ukraine, however, the 2022 Nuclear Posture Review maintained a one-to-one modernisation of the U.S. nuclear triad, albeit with the scrapping of the B83-1 warhead (i.e., the most powerful weapon in the U.S. arsenal) and the planned development of a nuclear submarine-

launched cruise missile. Due to the deterioration of the security environment, there is renewed emphasis on U.S. extended deterrence commitments to its allies. In April 2023, for example, a new Nuclear Consultative Group was established to support the U.S. alliance with the Republic of Korea.⁸ Earlier this month, the Strategic Posture Commission - an expert group appointed by the U.S. Congress - released a report issuing bipartisan recommendations.⁹ This report called for a far-reaching readjustment of U.S. strategic deterrence as well as the regional deterrence posture within the European and Indo-Pacific theatres.

Amongst the group of (comparatively) smaller nuclear weapons states, similar developments can be observed. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea has taken advantage of the war in Ukraine to conduct a record number of missile tests.¹⁰ India and Pakistan also continue to develop their arsenals. Closer to home, France and the United Kingdom are considering how to adapt their nuclear policies to the increased threat. Last year's *Revue nationale stratégique* listed '*une dissuasion nucléaire robuste et crédible*' as its top objective.¹¹ While France adheres to its principle of strict sufficiency, it has embarked on a nuclear modernisation cycle that offers the possibility of scaling up the *force de frappe* should the survivability thereof be jeopardized by the increased threat and/or technological developments. Similarly, the UK's Integrated Review Refresh released by the Sunak government earlier this year puts considerable emphasis on upgrading the UK's nuclear enterprise, which by the next decade should produce a new submarine class as well as a new sovereign nuclear warhead.¹²

The overall conclusion is that all nuclear weapons states are currently engaged in the modernisation and/or the expansion of their arsenals. In doing so, the P3 (i.e., the U.S., the UK and France) are by comparison the most reticent to do so, but they too are responding to the fundamental changes we are seeing in the security environment. Finally, the Ukraine war has heralded a sea change in NATO's deterrence posture. This relates not only to the marked increase in nuclear deterrence communication, but also to the 'operationalisation' of

the NATO posture. For example, paragraph §45 of the recent Vilnius Summit Communiqué mandated military authorities to start "*updating planning to increase flexibility and adaptability of the Alliance's nuclear forces.*"¹³

WHAT PROSPECTS FOR ARMS CONTROL

Not surprisingly, the prospects for nuclear disarmament and even arms control are very bleak. The U.S. Strategic Posture Commission report states unequivocally that "*The vision of a world without nuclear weapons, aspirational even in 2009, is more improbable now than ever.*"¹⁴ The erosion of the different nuclear arms control treaties negotiated during and after the Cold War - such as the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty - is well known.¹⁵ Yet three new elements are relevant to today's debate on arms control:

1. The international fora where multilateral disarmament is discussed - most notably the Review Conferences accompanying the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) - have degenerated into a diplomatic battleground. In this context, the People's Republic of China has stepped up its criticism of the West, while it is itself pursuing the most far-reaching nuclear expansion since that of the US and the Soviet Union in the 1960s. In doing so, it openly targets the nuclear umbrella over U.S. allies, symbolized by NATO's nuclear-sharing arrangements. However, the Belgian position has always been in line with the NPT provisions, and those who doubt whether NATO's nuclear sharing complies with the NPT can consult the diplomatic archives (in short: it does).¹⁶
2. While the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) has succeeded in sharply dividing public and parliamentary opinion, it has not brought about any increase in security or any reduction of nuclear risks. Within democratic societies it has sought to stigmatise the right to legitimate self-defence, while it has had no impact whatsoever in autocratic regimes - if only because anti-nuclear activists are often met with outright repression. Whilst democratic societies can tolerate respectful

and legitimate differences of opinion, the question is what Belgium as a country stands to gain from fomenting this polarising discussion.

3. Within NATO countries, the notion of reviving arms control discussions by means of double-track decisions is making headway again. If the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China are not interested in arms control debates today, it is because such frameworks are largely perceived as a proverbial favour to be withheld, and because the ongoing erosion of strategic stability is considered welcome. Instead, a build-up of deterrence capabilities among allies would give Russia and China a material self-interest to re-engage at the diplomatic table - just as NATO's 1979 double-track decision paved the way to the INF Treaty.¹⁷

WHAT IMPLICATIONS FOR BELGIAN SECURITY POLICY

The main issue for Belgium concerns the fulfilment of our Article 5 commitments within NATO. These are being reshaped according to a strategy that is first based on deterrence, and second on a system of common defence should deterrence ever fail. Nuclear deterrence has gained considerable importance since the beginning of 2022: NATO's nuclear deterrence must once again ensure that nuclear escalation always remains the worst possible option available to Vladimir Putin.¹⁸ Within the NATO community, many allies depend existentially on this nuclear umbrella that Belgium takes part in - and which needs urgent strengthening. As stated in the German National Security Strategy: *"As long as nuclear weapons exist, maintaining credible nuclear deterrence is essential for NATO and for European security. Germany will continue to do its part in nuclear sharing and will constantly provide the dual-capable aircraft this requires."*¹⁹ The same applies to Belgium.

A second issue concerns the need to be able to defend against possible conventional or nuclear missile strikes on Belgian targets such as our North Sea port infrastructure. Despite the recent budget increases, the ongoing reconstruction of the Belgian armed forces is relatively the

slowest among all the European allies. The STAR-plan still assumed a security environment in which *"armed conflict between states (in Eastern Europe) is unlikely between now and 2030"*.²⁰ Belgium has made a serious miscalculation in this respect. Additional efforts are therefore needed, and strengthening Belgian air defences against incoming missile and drone attacks is a top priority.²¹ Earlier this month, Minister Ludivine Dedonder has co-signed the European Sky Shield Initiative with nine other European allies: this underscores the urgent need to move ahead.²²

Finally, while the Belgian defence effort is increasing, the financial resources underpinning Belgian diplomacy continue to decline. In the timeframe from 2023 to 2028, the Belgian defence budget is forecast to increase from 5 to 7 billion Euros, whereas the total budget for the foreign affairs ministry (including development cooperation, which consumes the lion's share thereof) is set to decrease some 32 million Euros in purchasing power.²³ This cannot help but negatively impact Belgium's diplomatic prowess in world that has become much more dangerous and volatile. If Belgium want to have a meaningful say in today's strategic discussions - including the new arms control initiatives and the ongoing reconstruction of NATO's deterrence - the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs must be given the resources to do the job.

Prof Dr Alexander Mattelaer is a Senior Research Fellow at Egmont – the Royal Institute for International Relations. He is also an Associate Professor at the VUB Brussels School of Governance and Chair of the Scientific Committee of the Royal Higher Institute for Defence. He is grateful to Wannes Verstraete and several Belgian officials for sharing comments on an earlier version of this text. The responsibility for any errors lies with the author alone.



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