

# EGMONT POLICY BRIEF 332

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## Strengthening the Political Credibility of NATO Extended Nuclear Deterrence

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*Due to Russian nuclear signaling during its war against Ukraine, there is renewed interest in strengthening nuclear deterrence in a Euro-Atlantic context. The changes in the agreed language in the new North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) Strategic Concept, adopted on 29 June 2022 at the summit in Madrid, and the Vilnius Summit Communiqué from 11 June 2023, are examples of this interest.<sup>1</sup> Subsequently, this policy brief focuses on one aspect of strengthening NATO's extended nuclear deterrence (END), namely how can NATO adapt its nuclear policy and posture to mitigate the uncertainties related to the political credibility challenge of extended nuclear deterrence? Questions regarding the political will to use nuclear weapons by the guarantor to protect and reassure allies in an END relationship is a well-known evergreen that reappears from time to time. Therefore, the author argues that NATO should address this political credibility challenge by strengthening the role of European allies in the nuclear strategy of the Alliance.*

### NATO AS A NUCLEAR ALLIANCE

NATO as a nuclear alliance consists of three nuclear-weapon states, namely the United States, the United Kingdom and France. The combined strength of the three nuclear-weapon states – and especially the strategic arsenal of the US – provides the foundation of NATO's nuclear deterrence. Besides the vast nuclear arsenal of the US, the UK and France have smaller but also modern nuclear forces. Both states made declarations regarding their role in NATO's nuclear deterrence, however, the

UK is more explicit regarding its nuclear deterrence commitment to the Alliance than France.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, French President Macron said during his speech on the defense and deterrence strategy in 2020 that “France's vital interests now have a European dimension”.<sup>3</sup>

The nuclear sharing arrangements are besides these three national nuclear forces the most important element of the NATO nuclear deterrence architecture. This part of END – or nuclear umbrella – is provided by the US. It consists, according to open-source information, of “sharing” US nuclear bombs with its certain NATO allies, also known as the Dual Capable Aircraft (DCA) allies. As the name suggests, these DCA allies can carry US nuclear bombs if required.<sup>4</sup> According to Mattelaer, these nuclear-sharing arrangements have three functions: “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”.<sup>5</sup> Seven other allies provide ‘Conventional Support to Nuclear Operations’ (CSNO), formerly known as ‘Support of Nuclear Operations With Conventional Air Tactics’ (SNOWCAT).<sup>6</sup>

Besides this, every member of the Alliance (excl. France) is participating in the Nuclear Planning Group (NPG). While the North Atlantic Council (NAC) remains the “ultimate authority within NATO”, the NPG is the “senior body on nuclear matters”. The NPG is supported by a “senior advisory body to the NPG on nuclear policy and planning issues”, called the NPG High Level Group (HLG). This body is permanently chaired by the US and consists of the national nuclear policy directors. In addition to

the NPG HLG, the NPG Staff Group supports the NPG by preparing “detailed work on behalf of NPG Permanent Representatives (or Ambassadors) at the head of national delegations”.<sup>7</sup>

## POLITICAL CREDIBILITY AND EXTENDED NUCLEAR DETERRENCE

Besides external reasons that could be used as arguments to rethink the role of European allies in NATO’s nuclear strategy – such as Russia’s nuclear threats, the advancing nuclear programmes of Iran and North Korea, and the expansion and modernisation of the Chinese nuclear arsenal which puts pressure on the US arsenal because soon it should be able to deter potentially two peer nuclear powers in two different theatres – this paper focuses on an intra-alliance issue, namely the challenges concerning political credibility and reliability of US END. Bell points, for instance, to the “unilateral and unpredictable nature of U.S. decision-making under both Trump and Biden”.<sup>8</sup>

However, questions regarding political credibility are a well-known evergreen. It is a discussion within NATO that keeps surfacing from time to time, especially during periods of tension. Already during the Cold War, there was uncertainty around the question of whether the US would trade “Boston for Bonn”.<sup>9</sup> Denis Healey, the UK minister for defence from 1964-1970, made the following observation regarding this assurance issue, called the Healey Theorem: “It takes only five per cent credibility of American retaliation to deter the Russians, but ninety-five per cent credibility to reassure the Europeans”.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, after the end of the Cold War, new Central and Eastern European allies joined and Shifrinson claims that “no amount of reassurance can make the promise to trade Toledo for Tallinn credible today—the stakes of the game are too low”.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, questions concerning political credibility create uncertainties that could undermine NATO’s nuclear strategy.

## OPTIONS TO STRENGTHEN THE ROLE OF EUROPEAN ALLIES IN END

### 1. *Reconsidering historical options*

During the Cold War, alternatives to the current system were proposed. The first idea is linked to enhancing the trilateral cooperation between the three NATO nuclear-weapon states. Former French President de Gaulle envisioned a tripartite Atlantic Alliance Directorate that included the US, the UK and France.<sup>12</sup> However, because of the exclusion of the non-nuclear allies, it is hard to see how a similar idea such as a tripartite Atlantic Alliance Directorate would mitigate questions regarding political credibility.

A second historical alternative was the FIG plan on nuclear cooperation between France, Italy and Germany from 1957-1958.<sup>13</sup> The goal of these FIG agreements was to establish a “European strategic entity”.<sup>14</sup> Again, because of the exclusion of other non-nuclear allies, it is difficult to see how a type of Eurobomb that does not include all European allies would alleviate the credibility challenge that is connected to END. The closer geographical proximity of nuclear guarantors can perhaps lead to a more credible nuclear umbrella, but even then, the stakes can still be too low.

A third historical option that did include all the European NATO allies was the nuclear multilateral force (MLF) discussed during the 1960s that proposed a “European nuclear pillar”.<sup>15</sup> In this plan, European allies would create a common nuclear deterrent under the NATO flag, but most importantly as Trachtenberg says, the “use would not be subject to an American veto. The NATO force (...) would be effectively controlled by the NATO commander, who might not be an American officer”.<sup>16</sup> A European-led MLF could potentially be a more credible deterrent because of the inclusion and participation of all the allies and the sharing of responsibilities and risks. Nevertheless, while former President Eisenhower was a proponent of the MLF, the subsequent Kennedy administration did not want to lose US control (veto) over the use of nuclear force.<sup>17</sup> Similar considerations could still be applicable today.

## 2. *Strengthening the NATO nuclear sharing arrangements*

Another option is strengthening the existing nuclear sharing arrangements. Mattelaer, for instance, argues in this regard that “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”.<sup>18</sup> Subsequently, potential changes to the current system are, first, the enlargement (inclusion of more allies) and the strengthening of CSNO. Second, hosting frequent nuclear exercises on the Eastern flank. Third, the stationing of the US nuclear bombs further east.<sup>19</sup> However, some say this change would be provocative and go against the three no’s-statement made by the US Secretary of State Warren Christopher on 10 December 1996, stating that “NATO has no intention, no plan, and no need to station nuclear weapons on the territory of any new members”.<sup>20</sup> Others, such as Mitchell, state however that because of the Russian nuclear threats and the placement of nuclear weapons in Belarus, the three no’s statement is no longer valid. This creates possibilities, such as including Poland in the nuclear sharing arrangements.<sup>21</sup> The Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki has also recently repeated the Polish request for joining the nuclear sharing arrangements.<sup>22</sup> An alternative would be flying dual-capable aircraft and training for nuclear missions by countries further to the East but without the stationing of nuclear weapons. Fourth, Oberholtzer states that “Adopting a more defensive posture could enable the Atlantic Alliance to reduce its vulnerability to nuclear weapons considerably”.<sup>23</sup> Consequently, the designation and adaptation of NATO airbases to host nuclear-armed aircraft during times of war can make them more survivable against a counter-force attack and more unpredictable because of the dispersion of these aircraft in wartime.

In addition to a more credible posture military, these changes could mitigate questions concerning political credibility because of the greater participation and sharing of responsibilities and risks between the allies. The new Strategic Concept says the following on some of these options: “NATO will take all necessary steps to

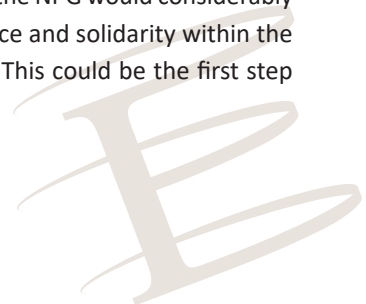
ensure the credibility, effectiveness, safety and security of the nuclear deterrent mission. [...] NATO will continue to maintain credible deterrence, strengthen its strategic communications, enhance the effectiveness of its exercises and reduce strategic risks.”<sup>24</sup> The Vilnius Summit Communiqué specified this further: “This includes continuing to modernise NATO’s nuclear capability and updating planning to increase flexibility and adaptability of the Alliance’s nuclear forces”.<sup>25</sup>

Besides changes in support, planning, basing, stationing, posture and training, European NATO allies could also play a more active role regarding declaratory policy. Mattelaer argues in this regard that Belgium, but by extension all DCA allies, “are no longer mere recipients, but also co-providers of extended deterrence.”<sup>26</sup> Consequently, a strong political declaration by DCA allies could reaffirm their important role in maintaining NATO’s nuclear deterrence and could also be seen as a sign of solidarity with the Central and Eastern NATO allies.

## 3. *A European dialogue on nuclear strategy*

The last alternative options to mitigate the political credibility challenge are expanding information sharing, planning and consultations on nuclear weapons issues within NATO (especially in the NPG), but also creating a separate European dialogue on nuclear strategy (in or outside of NATO). French President Macron said in 2020: “I would like strategic dialogue to develop with our European partners, which are ready for it, on the role played by France’s nuclear deterrence in our collective security”.<sup>27</sup>

Comparably, such a dialogue could also be situated within NATO. European member states that are part of the NPG could, for instance, informally discuss nuclear strategy issues that are related to the European theatre. The major problem with this idea is of course that France does not participate in the NPG and stated that it will remain outside of the NPG in the future. Nevertheless, a possible French accession to the NPG would considerably strengthen the European voice and solidarity within the Alliance on nuclear matters. This could be the first step



toward a European nuclear pillar within NATO and could also mitigate the political credibility issue because all the European allies would engage (formally) on equal footing in a dialogue on nuclear deterrence regarding their own region.

## CONCLUSION

As a result of the deteriorating security environment, NATO needs to maintain a credible nuclear strategy. As arises from the discussion of the alternatives, the following elements are key to mitigating the political credibility challenge related to extended nuclear deterrence. The sharing of responsibilities and risks between nuclear and non-nuclear allies is a crucial element in this regard. For instance, increased participation and national contributions by non-nuclear allies regarding CSNO would result in greater trust amongst the allies – crucial for reassurance – given they would play a more active role in the successful execution of the nuclear mission. Subsequently, the importance of communication was also mentioned. Concerning external communication, the capitals of non-nuclear allies should pursue a more active declaratory policy that reinforces the nuclear messaging for the Alliance. Regarding internal communication, increased information sharing, planning, consultation, and dialogue between European allies would facilitate the creation of a shared threat perception regarding the nuclear landscape in the region. Due to the more dangerous future ahead, NATO should thus proactively address uncertainties that could harm the credibility of the Alliance’s nuclear strategy by strengthening the role of European allies.

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