For a strategy of minimal deterrence

Nuclear weapons don't have to be stationed in Germany to keep Europe safe. A minimal stockpile is all that NATO needs

Read this article in German.

In light of the deterioration of the Nuclear Arms Control regimes (INF, uncertain future of New START) and increased pressure on the nuclear non-proliferation regime , the role of nuclear weapons in European security is now firmly back on the agenda. The fact that, earlier this year, the head of the SPD parliamentary group in the Bundestag, Rolf Mützenich argued for the withdrawal of American nuclear warheads from Germany, serves as a timely reminder that the country is an active player, not just a bystander, in questions of nuclear disarmament and nuclear policy.

In her recent second keynote speech in Hamburg on 19 November, German Defence Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer had shone the spotlight on the Federal Republic's nuclear sharing – and somewhat transformed the question of Germany's continuing technical participation in NATO's nuclear sharing into a question of allegiance to the alliance itself. That the stationing of some twenty, outdated nuclear 'battlefield weapons' in Germany has been jazzed up as a hallmark of NATO alliance cohesion itself, shows the extent to which the actual military and political purpose of the warheads is now of secondary concern. But how did we get here?

Fundamentally, there are two contrasting perspectives at the heart of this matter. For some, the unguided tactical-to-intermediate-yield B61 nuclear warheads stationed in Germany by the US are outmoded and militarily all but useless, having originally been intended to hold up columns of Soviet armour surging through the Fulda Gap. These times, so runs the argument, are now long passed. For others, however, changing times question this view: seen from the Baltic states, for instance, Russia's military threat both in conventional and nuclear terms remain high and Germany is often criticised as either consciously delusional about Russian antagonistic role or – even worse – naïve in their underestimation of

NATO's nuclear doctrine needs reform

While there certainly are valid arguments for this perceived level of threat, it remains unclear how precisely some outdated sub-strategic nuclear weapons, stationed in Germany, are the answer to any of this. One thing everyone can hopefully agree on, after all, is that the challenges posed by Russia in today's strategic theatre are wholly different to those of the Cold War. One possible explanation can be summarised in the old saying 'never change a winning system' –inasmuch as many fear that a debate about the future of nuclear sharing and thereby NATO's nuclear deterrence and defence posture could end up achieving little beyond sowing unnecessary discord within the alliance and playing into Russia's hands. Taking this logic at face value, however, there should have been no controversy around nuclear weapons during the Cold War; and yet there was plenty.

As such, there is a good case for reforming NATO's nuclear strategy towards minimum nuclear deterrence. Minimum nuclear deterrence is a strategy that acknowledges and embraces the logic of nuclear deterrence while advocating that for deterrence to be credible, not many nuclear weapons are needed or – in other words – can be reduced to the absolute minimum. The minimum nuclear deterrence approach convincingly argues that the real value of nuclear weapons is that they reduce complexity for military planners and civilian decision makers. Complicated calculations of military balance are replaced by one simple equation – an equation in which, given the sheer destructive power of nuclear weapons, the actual number of warheads is irrelevant. So in order to deter, anything beyond a small arsenal of strategic nuclear weapons can be considered unnecessary, and, by extension, the sub-strategic weapons stored in Germany (i.e. battlefield ordinance) obsolete.

In a strategy of minimal nuclear deterrence, however, the sub-strategic nuclear weapons stationed in Germany and other participants of NATO's nuclear sharing (Belgium, Italy, Netherlands, Turkey) would be

This is essentially the approach pursued by both the United Kingdom and France with respect to their national nuclear deterrence postures. Both countries have comparatively small atomic arsenals of between approximately 200 (UK) and 300 (France) warheads where the USA has a stockpile totalling 6,185 and Russia around 6,500. So why did NATO not adopt a strategy of minimum nuclear deterrence in the first place?

redundant and dispensable.

As a collective, NATO at first pursued a stated policy of 'massive retaliation', a doctrine which came to be known as 'mutually assured destruction'. Later, it switched to a 'flexible response' doctrine, incorporating the potential use of nuclear battlefield weapons in view of the Warsaw Pact's superiority in conventional forces. It was this latter approach which led to the increasingly absurd numbers of warheads in the nuclear arsenals of the Cold War, and the weapons, currently stationed in Germany, are a relic of the strategic planning of that age.

How minimal deterrence would look like

In a strategy of minimal nuclear deterrence, however, the sub-strategic nuclear weapons stationed in Germany and other participants of NATO's nuclear sharing (Belgium, Italy, Netherlands, Turkey) would be redundant and dispensable. In keeping with the Reagan/Gorbachev mantra that a nuclear war cannot be won, the arsenal would be reduced to a far smaller number of intercontinental-range weapons. This would, in turn, remodel overall NATO's nuclear deterrence strategy far more closely to the security environment of 2020, in which NATO has – for the best part of decades already – no longer been trying to deter the Soviet Union, but rather a Russian Federation devoid of its Warsaw Pact allies and in lack of conventional military superiority over NATO.

This is not, of course, to downplay the obvious destructive potential of Russian foreign policy. Yet in these scenarios that military planners are especially concerned with (cyber-attacks, disinformation, other types of asynchronous warfare), nuclear weapons are not only useless, but pose an additional security risk, e,g., nuclear security threats posed by potential sabotage or unauthorised access to nuclear command structures or of unauthorised physical access to the warheads.

As such, there are at least three substantial arguments in favour of a NATO nuclear strategy recalibrated towards the minimum arsenal needed for credible deterrence. Firstly, this is a simple costs-benefits-analysis: if it is possible to reach the political and military objective of deterrence with fewer warheads and thus lower costs, there is no reason not to do so. Moreover, this isn't just a simple financial costs-cutting imperative (although nuclear weapons are expensive), but one derived from strategic costs, too: the more nuclear weapons in existence, the greater the risk of accidents or hijacking (i.e. by terrorists or organised criminals). Further, an adoption of a minimum deterrence approach has also implications for burden-sharing within the alliance: In view of the

fact that the lion's share of NATO nuclear deterrence is shouldered by the US, a minimal deterrence strategy would make for a more equitable sharing of the defence burden between America and its European allies.

Secondly, there is European security. Maintaining sub-strategic nuclear weapons in Germany is predicated on the assumption that military stability in Europe is dependent on the number of battlefield nuclear weapons NATO possesses and fields on the continent. In contrast, a strategy of minimal nuclear deterrence posits that, beyond a certain point, all talk of 'balances of nuclear forces' and such like is about as coherent as the ravings of Dr Strangelove. The technical details of annihilation are essentially unimportant when the destructive power of just one intercontinental ballistic missile armed with a strategic payload is such that just one exchange of ten warheads targeted at ten cities would represent a catastrophe beyond anything yet to occur in human history. Given that political decision-makers are aware of the scale of this potential Armageddon, the balance of terror is not in need of careful fine-tuning.

The debate on nuclear sharing and Germany's participation should step up its game: Representatives from both sides should seek a constructive middle ground by actively engaging with each other's arguments.

The third, and most important reason to adopt a strategy of minimum nuclear deterrence for NATO is that this would restore the role of nuclear weapons to their essential political value: the nuclear bomb was developed in order to prevent the kind of large scale inter-state war between nations which had previously become an all too often occurrence in the twentieth century. What nuclear weapons do not provide for, however, is an answer to the new hybrid conflicts of our time, fought without official declarations of war unmarked combatants and/or by irregular and paramilitary units.

What should Berlin do?

Considering this, NATO's nuclear strategy and planning are in urgent need of an revision. European nations – not least of them Germany – need a NATO which is up to the challenges of today's security environment, and for that reason, Germany should take a leading role in rethinking NATO's nuclear deterrence. A revamped nuclear strategy would ensure the alliance's enduring security while creating more auspicious conditions for nuclear disarmament and arms controls.

The debate on nuclear sharing and Germany's participation should step

up its game: Representatives from both sides should seek a constructive middle ground by actively engaging with each other's arguments. Those in favour of nuclear disarmament would have to explain how a reduction of the nuclear weapons in Germany would lead to reciprocal measures, tangible trust-building measures, and/or support for the nuclear non-proliferation regime.. There are already some concrete proposals, and those in the security establishment who currently favour upholding the status quo would do well, for their part, giving the proposals due and genuine consideration. In the future debate, it is important not just to stress the costs of reform, but to remember the opportunity costs represented by the status quo.

The most important element, however, would be a shift in the overall mentality: How can NATO achieve the enduring effectiveness of its nuclear deterrence in the short-term while creating an environment for nuclear disarmament in the long-term? The strategy of nuclear deterrence seems a valid starting point. Minimal nuclear deterrence is not a hippie's pipe dream, but rather the product of political-military strategy.

Beyond this military logic, however, the step would serve Germany's broader foreign policy goals. Currently, the NATO Nuclear Weapons Sharing Program in which the Federal Republic participates puts it in a difficult position vis-à-vis the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons entering into force in early 2021. Driven by a broad, progressive, international coalition – from which Germany is notably absent – the treaty lets Berlin, that likes to think of itself as one of the motors behind multilateralism, looking rather sheepish.

Furthermore, the existing Non-Proliferation Treaty, of which Germany is a signatory, leaves the Federal Republic facing justified questions with respect to inconsistencies in its position, e.g. how can one expect to keep countries without nuclear weapons convinced of the virtues of this status when one is oneself unwilling to relinquish joint control of outdated and obsolete nuclear weapons stationed on one's own territory? As such, with a view to overall nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation, a conceptual rethink of NATO deterrence doctrine would not only revitalise NATO's own nuclear strategy, but represent a powerful political signal beyond its borders.

René Schlee

Sarajevo

René Schlee heads the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's Regional Office Dialogue Southeast Europe in Sarajevo. Before that, he was responsible for the offices in Northern Macedonia and Kosovo.

-