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# The challenge of Russian dual-capable missiles

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## Executive summary

North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) leaders meeting at their July Summit in Washington DC have faced a wide range of issues, including global and regional threats, the ongoing Russian aggression in Ukraine, Putin's nuclear threats, a worsening economic climate, and an almost total absence of dialogue and negotiations on arms control. Given the persistence of Russian aggression in Ukraine and hostility to NATO at many levels, their attention focussed primarily on the need to ensure the continuing credibility of NATO's strategy of deterrence and defence.

A key challenge to the credibility of NATO's posture lies in the deployment by Russia of substantial numbers of dual-capable medium and short-range missiles, which, in the absence of the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) limits, could be perceived as giving Russia a decisive advantage at critical stages of any crisis or conflict. Russia's superiority in dual-capable missiles poses a threat to both the nuclear and conventional levels of NATO's strategy. Ahead of NATO's next summit in the Netherlands in 2025, NATO leaders should what measures are necessary to counter the resulting vulnerabilities and ensure the Alliance's strategy remains credible. A first step has already been made. The United States will begin episodic deployments of the long-range conventional missile capabilities in Germany in 2026, as part of planning for enduring stationing of these capabilities in the future. This brief examines the dual nature of the Russian missiles and the threat they pose to NATO's strategy. It discusses this threat in the context of Putin's menacing references to Russia's nuclear weapons and the influence it is suggested these have exerted on Alliance policymaking - a situation exacerbated by the uncertainty inherent in dual capability. Acknowledging the relationship between the nuclear and conventional dimensions, it looks at the impact on NATO strategy at both levels, recognising the overall synergy in times of crisis and war but noting the inevitable blurring of intent and consequence caused by dual capability.

For conventional forces, the missile threat has particular consequences for NATO's strategy of reinforcement, highlighting the importance of missile defence, but also the possible need for NATO ground-launched capabilities with sufficient precision and fire-power to offset Russian capabilities. At the nuclear level, the brief discusses whether the asymmetry in non-strategic nuclear forces could be perceived as a vulnerability in NATO's nuclear posture and could revive traditional European fears of being decoupled from United States nuclear protection. However, it recognises that discussions of NATO's nuclear policy now take place in an Alliance of 32 members, many of whom may not share the anxieties of the past but bring their own contemporary concerns and priorities. Evidently, the Alliance's strategy will continue to require a balanced mix of deterrence and reassurance.

It assesses the potential reaction of alliance members to a new focus on strengthening NATO's nuclear posture as the key element in deterring Russian use of its non-strategic nuclear weapons. It also examines the planned improvements to NATO's Dual Capable Aircraft (DCA) mission, which is designed to make NATO's

nuclear posture more robust, representing a substantial enhancement in capability. The priority in discussions on the Alliance's strategy will be inevitably on military measures of deterrence and defence. However, despite the inherent difficulties in this field, the potential contribution of arms control must not be forgotten. European security will not be served if the numbers of non-strategic dual-capable forces are left to run free.

## Introduction

In view of the current threat environment, Russian hostility to NATO at all levels and its ongoing aggression in Ukraine, NATO leaders will be looking primarily to ensure and enhance the continuing credibility of the Alliance's strategy of deterrence and defence. But NATO suffers from a significant vulnerability. The existence of substantial numbers of Russian dual-capable short and medium range missiles<sup>1</sup>, unconstrained by the now defunct INF Treaty, poses a threat to both the nuclear and conventional levels of Alliance strategy. Russian superiority in this field, it is suggested, might give Russia a decisive advantage during any stage of a crisis or conflict.<sup>2</sup>

In view of this situation, Alliance leaders must examine what further steps are needed beyond the ongoing modernisation of its nuclear posture to close this gap in capability. They should direct the High Level Group (HLG), created in 1977 specifically to examine the status of NATO's nuclear posture, to assess how the Alliance should respond to the Russian missile threat to ensure deterrence and reassure allies; such an assessment should include the potential contribution of arms control in limiting any decision on modernisation.

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<sup>1</sup> The number of Russian non-strategic nuclear weapons is estimated to be approximately 1,600. See Hans M. Kristensen et al., "Nuclear Notebook: Russian nuclear weapons, 2024", 06.03.2024, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/figure/10.1080/00963402.2024.2314437?scroll=top&needAccess=true>. These include the 9K720 Iskandar-M short-range ballistic missile, and the 9M728 Southpaw ground-launched cruise missile.

<sup>2</sup> Known in the jargon as "escalation dominance".

## Dual capability

Dual capability, that is the capacity of delivery vehicles to carry either nuclear or conventional payloads, blurs the assessment of threat and risk. Dual capability masks intent and creates uncertainty for the defence. It is extremely difficult to distinguish whether the purpose of a delivery system is nuclear or conventional. At a time of NATO-Russia tension or crisis, the more understanding each side has as to the other's nuclear capabilities, the less scope there would be for miscalculation or misjudgement.

Technically, there may be indications during crisis or conflict from the configuration of the platform of the intent to use a nuclear warhead – although, in the case of dual-capable aircraft, much of the electronics needed to integrate a nuclear weapon is not visible. Modern surveillance should also provide indications of intent from the movement, unusual storage activities and exercises associated with the preparation for possible use of nuclear warheads. Furthermore, in view of the “taboo” it is commonly assumed surrounds, and hopefully constrains, any use of nuclear weapons, the primary threat of dual-capable delivery vehicles will normally be assessed as conventional. However, in a crisis or conflict, the defence can never be sure and will need to prepare for and assume the worst. Uncertainty of payload will lead to miscalculation – especially when Russian rhetoric about the use of nuclear weapons is so threatening. This is of particular concern to NATO as the deployment of these systems is moving closer to the NATO-Russia border.

It is important to note that the utility of dual-capable systems extends beyond their actual capabilities in times of war but also lies in their frequent use or deployment by both sides to signal displeasure, caution, and even danger in times of crisis. The escalation potential inherent in their very deployment is not easily ignored. The nature of dual-capability and the breadth of dual-capable systems deployed by both sides means that the deployment of any dual-capable platform can be seen as threatening and with an intent to intimidate. As an example of the unintended consequences of dual capability, the Russian Foreign Ministry recently warned that the F16's deployed to Ukraine would be treated as nuclear capable and seen as a provocative step by the United States and NATO<sup>3</sup>.

It is also worth noting that, in the war in Ukraine, Russia has used conventionally armed dual capable missiles with devastating consequence. However, as there has been as yet no sign of nuclear warhead movement, the Ukrainians have not been constrained by fear of nuclear weapons in their defence plans and operations. This suggests that the nuclear threat of dual capability is more prevalent before and during a crisis than during the operational phase of a conflict when armed forces have already engaged.

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<sup>3</sup> The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, “Foreign Ministry statement on the Russian Armed Forces’ exercises held to practice for the use of non-strategic nuclear weapons”, 06.05.2024, [https://mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/1948486/?TSPD\\_101\\_R0=08765fb817ab2000561447b4280d7224eef639a7b6bc38dabd6a9b7ac2fa2526e9483804e93db6a608c14436361430007c55e78c96b073a3b160611eee0d40926c364e689a8664b40c50313b35e04a91c43fef120e833e1a28b59f4f57674d0a#:~:text=The%20US%2Dmade%20F%2D16,both%20conventional%20and%20nuclear%20weapons..](https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1948486/?TSPD_101_R0=08765fb817ab2000561447b4280d7224eef639a7b6bc38dabd6a9b7ac2fa2526e9483804e93db6a608c14436361430007c55e78c96b073a3b160611eee0d40926c364e689a8664b40c50313b35e04a91c43fef120e833e1a28b59f4f57674d0a#:~:text=The%20US%2Dmade%20F%2D16,both%20conventional%20and%20nuclear%20weapons..) It is worth noting that the same F16's are also used in the Baltic Air Policing Mission.

An assessment of the Russian missile threat to NATO is inevitably complicated by the asymmetry in the capabilities of both sides – Russia has significantly more than NATO. NATO is not without assets; the US, UK, and France all have long-range conventional strike systems, but Russia has the monopoly on dual capable ground-launched systems. Discussion is also complicated by the dual nature of the systems. As previously discussed, the nuclear and conventional capacity of the delivery systems blurs assessments of the operational readiness and consequences of their use, introducing a dangerous degree of uncertainty. It also inevitably complicates efforts to limit their deployment through arms control – when and if such efforts come to pass and are the subject of discussion later in this brief. In short, Russia’s monopoly of ground-launched dual-capable missile systems in Europe is not a capability that NATO can safely ignore.

A first step has already been made. On the margins of NATO’s Washington Summit in 2024, the US and German Governments announced that the US will begin episodic deployments of long-range conventional missile capabilities in Germany in 2026 as part of planning for the long-term stationing of these capabilities in the future. However, this measure does not seem to have been coordinated with other allies or to be a part of a wider and coherent strategy. The form and content of its announcement is devoid of all strategic context.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Joint Statement from United States and Germany on Long-Range Fires Deployment in Germany, July 10 2024, The White House, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/07/10/joint-statement-from-united-states-and-germany-on-long-range-fires-deployment-in-germany/>

## Putin's nuclear threats: rhetoric or intent?

Putin's persistently menacing references to potential nuclear use has highlighted the inherent nuclear threat posed by Russia's dual capable missile systems, which have been used extensively in conventional mode during the Ukraine war. This threat has been intensified by the movement of Russian nuclear warheads to Belarus<sup>5</sup>, which implies serious planning for potential nuclear use. This supposition is confirmed by the recent conduct by Russian forces of a multi-phase exercise near Ukraine meant to prepare them for using non-strategic nuclear weapons (NSNWs)<sup>6</sup>. Evidently, the pervasive presence of dual capable systems heightens Western sensitivity because they are the systems that would be used, particularly if the use was for so called limited or "tactical" nuclear purposes. Putin's nuclear warnings have led to much debate concerning the degree of seriousness with which they should be treated. Have Western nations, as some would suggest, unwittingly allowed themselves to be bluffed into inaction over the war in Ukraine?<sup>7</sup> In fact, the risks of escalation, intended or otherwise, have been inherent since the outbreak of the war. But what has become much more widely evident since is that Russia has the nuclear warheads and the short-range dual-capable delivery systems needed in order to fulfil Putin's threats.

Recognition of the unacceptable costs associated with the use of a nuclear weapon has undoubtedly constrained and profoundly influenced Western policy choices. Risk aversion has a particular resonance when nuclear weapons are involved. This is presumably true for both sides. Given the catastrophic consequences of making the wrong choice, it would seem reasonable to assume that responsible leadership, certainly in the case of Western policy makers, will inevitably err on the side of caution. But as explained above, Putin's nuclear rhetoric, however, has signalled that he would err on the side of recklessness if any of his self-defined and elastic red lines were breached. In effect, he has deterred NATO from getting involved directly in the Ukraine war and constrained NATO's support to a hesitant gradualism.

Whether or not this apprehension is mutual or one-sided, Western analysts continue to emphasise that Putin's threats are reinforced by what they interpret as a higher reliance by Russia on its nuclear component in its exercises and military doctrine<sup>8</sup>. Western anxiety has been further fuelled by the bellicose remarks of two Russian analysts, Sergei Karganov and Dmitri Trenin, both known in the academic community and seen by some as previously moderate and relatively reasonable voices. They have both recommended tactical nuclear strikes by Russia as a means of "reminding" the West what risks they are facing should they seek to confront Russia in Ukraine

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<sup>5</sup>See Katia Glod and Oliver Meier, "Be careful what you wish for: Russia wants to share nuclear weapons with Belarus", The European Leadership Network 06.04.2024, <https://europeanleadershipnetwork.org/commentary/be-careful-what-you-wish-for-russia-wants-to-share-nuclear-weapons-with-belarus/>

<sup>6</sup>Simon Saradzhyan, "Russian Wargame Practicing Tactical Nukes Use Is Warning to West", Belfer Centre Blog Post, 22.05.2024, <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/russian-wargame-practicing-tactical-nukes-use-warning-west>

<sup>7</sup>See Peter Dickenson, "Bowing to Putin's nuclear blackmail will make nuclear war more likely", The Atlantic Council, 29.02.2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/bowing-to-putins-nuclear-blackmail-will-make-nuclear-war-more-likely/>

<sup>8</sup>See William Alberque, "Russian military thought and doctrine related to non-strategic nuclear weapons, IISS, London, February 2024, [https://www.iiss.org/globalassets/media-library---content--migration/files/research-papers/2024/01/iiss\\_russian-military-thought-and-doctrine-related-to-non-strategic-nuclear-weapons\\_012024.pdf](https://www.iiss.org/globalassets/media-library---content--migration/files/research-papers/2024/01/iiss_russian-military-thought-and-doctrine-related-to-non-strategic-nuclear-weapons_012024.pdf)



directly<sup>9</sup>. Was this a part of a general and concerted signal for the West to back off? Or was the NATO's principal adversary really contemplating the use of a nuclear weapon in a way previously considered unthinkable? In any case it would seem from much of the ensuing discussion that while the West's fear of nuclear war has undoubtedly constrained its behaviour, the casual references to - and, too frequently, casual Western dismissals of - the use of so-called tactical nuclear weapons suggests that that the Cold War fear of the unique destructiveness and after-effects associated with the use of nuclear weapons has been too easily forgotten.

However, awareness of the consequences of nuclear war has not, unfortunately, inhibited Russian officials from continuing to advocate their use for the purposes of coercion and deterrence.

As a result of Putin's nuclear warnings, debate continues over Russian attitudes<sup>10</sup> towards the actual use of its non-strategic nuclear forces and whether they might be used in a calculated attempt to prevent a humiliating defeat in the field or whether their potential employment rather reflects what appears to be the more restrictive official Military Doctrine of 2020<sup>11</sup>. Irrespective of official doctrine or endless speculation among experts, the fact remains that only Putin knows which red line would provoke crossing the nuclear threshold.

This debate was sharpened by the revelation that during the crisis of 2022 the United States detected worrying signs of nuclear "activity" by the Russians, causing concern on the part of President Biden that Putin's threat to use a nuclear weapon might be turning into an operational plan<sup>12</sup>. These concerns were given further fuel by the announcement by the Russian Ministry of Defence that President Putin had ordered military drills to practice for the preparation and deployment of non-strategic nuclear weapons. The timing and form of the announcement was interpreted by many observers as a reaction to suggestions from Alliance leaders that NATO forces may become more closely involved in Ukraine<sup>13</sup>; a deliberate signal of the risks such a move may incur.

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<sup>9</sup> For discussion of the meeting between Putin and Karaganov in St Petersburg in June 7 2024, during which Karaganov advocated a pre-emptive nuclear strike against Western targets, see Maxim Trudolyubov, "Facing Stalemate, Putin Talks Up Nuclear Weapons Use and Supporting Foes of the West", The Russia File, Kennan Institute, 11.06.2024, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/facing-stalemate-putin-talks-nuclear-weapons-use-and-supporting-foes-west>.

<sup>10</sup> For a thorough discussion see Kristin Van Bruusgard, "The myth of Russian lowered nuclear threshold", War on the Rocks, 22.09.2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/09/the-myth-of-russias-lowered-nuclear-threshold/>.

<sup>11</sup> See the Basic Principles of State Policy of the Russian Federation on Nuclear Deterrence (2020), [https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/international\\_safety/1434131/](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/international_safety/1434131/). Russia "reserves the right to use nuclear weapons in response to the use of nuclear and other types of weapons of mass destruction against it and/or its allies, as well as in the event of aggression against the Russian Federation with the use of conventional weapons when the very existence of the state is in jeopardy".

<sup>12</sup> David Sanger, "Biden's Armageddon Moment: When Nuclear Detonation Seemed Possible in Ukraine:", New York Times, 09.03.2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/03/09/us/politics/biden-nuclear-russia-ukraine.html#:~:text=Russia's%20Motorcycle%20Units,Biden's%20Armageddon%20Moment%3A%20When%20Nuclear%20Detonation%20Seemed%20Possible%20in%20Ukraine,like%20a%20terrifying%20new%20era>, Biden continued, "we may have a direct threat of the use of a nuclear weapon if we continue down the path".

<sup>13</sup> Private conversation with Russian experts. See also the statement by the Russian Foreign Ministry, "Statement on the Russian Armed Forces' exercises held to practice for the use of non-strategic nuclear weapons", of 06.05.2024, [https://mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/1948486/?TSPD\\_101\\_R0=08765fb817ab2000ad3b264483a38b4b2cdfaa74badc59cf2b2f1fe17b7e29b538de2018525ad3a0080d73fb7614300082711b36d0e69549f43911f6becda0067be566f24c64729c7ba54c88986316d9426dbe9a644c0f496ea0bee067d242ff](https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1948486/?TSPD_101_R0=08765fb817ab2000ad3b264483a38b4b2cdfaa74badc59cf2b2f1fe17b7e29b538de2018525ad3a0080d73fb7614300082711b36d0e69549f43911f6becda0067be566f24c64729c7ba54c88986316d9426dbe9a644c0f496ea0bee067d242ff).

## Russian missile threat NATO defence plans

Russian short and medium range missiles, because of their dual capability, pose a threat to NATO at both the nuclear and conventional levels of any crisis or conflict. The two levels are linked. The role of nuclear forces is a function of the adequacy of conventional forces. The NATO Cold War strategy of Flexible Response specifically foresaw the deliberate use of nuclear weapons – first use, if necessary, to “restore deterrence” in the event of a Warsaw Pact conventional attack. The exact timing of their potential use was the subject of conflicting views and interests and best summarised as “as soon as necessary and as late as possible”<sup>14</sup>.

Today, the situation at the level of conventional forces is more fluid than the rigid situation of the Cold War. In fact, the balance of conventional forces in terms of quantity and, judging by the initial Russian military performance in the war in Ukraine, also quality, has been reversed in NATO’s favour. However, static numbers and force ratios can only tell half of the picture concerning conflict outcomes. The number of forces that Russia could bring to bear and the resulting force ratios would depend on the time and place of any aggression. In response to this uncertain and unpredictable situation, NATO has put in place regional plans, which are a mix of “in place” multinational forces with a reliance on enhanced readiness, reinforcement and host preparations and basing<sup>15</sup>.

The impact in the conventional stage of any conflict of the Russian advantage in short and medium range missiles in Europe, all of which are dual capable, lies in the complications it can cause NATO’s plans for reinforcement for the region, as a consequence of Russia’s anti-access/area denial (A2/AD strategy)<sup>16</sup>. In effect, this strategy seeks to pre-emptively deny access to NATO forces and reinforcements to defend allies’ own territory. It represents a serious undermining of NATO’s defence guarantee. Among competing priorities this dimension argues for an emphasis on defence against ballistic and cruise missiles and the need to learn from Ukraine’s experience in coping with Russian missiles. The defence requirement against the Russian missile threat is well understood. The larger question is whether NATO needs more options, for example in terms of ground launched long-range precision strike missiles, for counter offensives?

As noted above, Russia has a monopoly in Europe of dual-capable ground-launched missile systems. In the field of conventional forces, NATO relies on air and sea-launched missiles. This asymmetry has led to calls for NATO to consider the

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<sup>14</sup> See Simon Lunn, “The modernization of NATO’s long-range theatre nuclear forces: report”, Library of Congress, Foreign Affairs and National Defense Division, United States Congress, House, Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Europe and the Middle East, 1981, p. 113.

<sup>15</sup> See Nicholas Williams and Simon Lunn, “NATO’s revival of collective defence and the challenge of national commitments”, The European Leadership Network, 09.07.2024, <https://europeanleadershipnetwork.org/policy-brief/natos-revival-of-collective-defence-and-the-challenge-of-national-commitments/>.

<sup>16</sup> See Luis Simón and Alexander Lanzka, “The Post-INF European Missile Balance: Thinking About NATO’s Deterrence Strategy”, Texas National Security Review Volume 3, Issue 3, Summer 2020, <https://tnsr.org/2020/05/the-post-inf-european-missile-balance-thinking-about-natos-deterrence-strategy/>.

deployment of conventional ground-launched systems<sup>17</sup>. The NATO Secretary General in 2019 downplayed suggestions that NATO might consider deploying ground-launched nuclear missiles in Europe”<sup>18</sup>. His specific reference to nuclear missiles does not rule out the possibility of a conventional variant. However, it probably conveys his sense that there is currently no appetite in the Alliance for new missiles of either variety.

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<sup>17</sup> For a thorough discussion of the advantages of ground-launched missiles and current US projects, see Brennan Deveraux, “Why intermediate range missiles are a focal point”, War on the Rocks 28.01.2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/01/why-intermediate-range-missiles-are-a-focal-point-in-the-ukraine-crisis/>.

<sup>18</sup> “And we [NATO] have no intention to deploy new land-based nuclear missiles in Europe” ” NATO press conference in Brussels on 02.08.2019, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions\\_168183.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_168183.htm). Any deployment of this nature would also be in contradiction of the 3 No’s of the Russia NATO Founding Act, to the degree that these are seen as having any relevance in the current environment.

## For NATO, nuclear forces have a central but unspecified role

NATO's conventional forces support the nuclear posture which has also adapted to the new post-Cold War environment, adopting language which confirms the central role of nuclear forces but providing no specificity on how and when they would be used. It merely defines the circumstances under which NATO might have to use nuclear weapons as "extremely remote" and emphasises that the use of nuclear weapons against NATO would fundamentally alter the nature of a conflict, imposing unacceptable costs.<sup>19</sup> According to former NATO Deputy Secretary General Alexander Vershbow, this language was expressly designed to counter Russia's so-called and alleged "escalate to de-escalate" strategy<sup>20</sup> - a strategy that is interpreted as using nuclear weapons early in a conflict to shock the adversary into submission.

The threat to NATO posed by Russian medium and short-range nuclear missiles could resurrect old European fears of "decoupling" – the fear that Russia might perceive that it could attack Europe without the risk of retaliation by the United States and hence leave Europe open to Soviet pressure and even blackmail.<sup>21</sup> In principle, US strategic assets cover all contingencies, as US officials have frequently emphasised. Nevertheless, the US responded to European concerns first by the allocation of strategic assets specifically for the defence of Europe<sup>22</sup> and eventually by the deployment in 1983 of European based systems capable of threatening the Russian homeland. This was the thrust of the 1979 modernisation decision to deploy cruise and Pershing ballistic missiles as a counter to Soviet medium range systems and to fill what was seen as an exploitable gap in Alliance strategy.

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<sup>19</sup> NATO Strategic Concept 2022, [https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/290622-strategic-concept.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/290622-strategic-concept.pdf).

<sup>20</sup> See Alexander Vershbow, "Reflections on NATO Deterrence in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Texas National Security Review, Volume 4, Issue 4, Fall 2021, <https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/95e4a736-60f6-419a-a9a5-04334ed0d845/content>.

<sup>21</sup> This was a principle concern of Chancellor Helmut Schmidt and underpinned his support for NATO's 1979 initial modernisation decision although he always insisted on a role for arms control. The Chancellor's concern was also related to his lack of confidence in President Carter – which represents a further element in "decoupling". The sense that the United States no longer sees European security concerns as a priority.

<sup>22</sup> This blurring of strategic and regional assets first occurred when, in the 1960s, the United States assigned 64 Polaris SLBMs to SACEUR. The US also deployed F-111 nuclear strike aircraft to the UK for the same purpose. See the 1981 report to Congress page11 *ibid*

## A gap in NATO's force posture?

Today, Russian superiority in the field of short and medium range missiles, all of which are dual capable, could be perceived as highlighting a gap in NATO's force posture that Russia could exploit in a crisis. This perception could generate discussions in NATO similar to those of 1979, as discussed above when fears of "US decoupling from Europe" were at their height owing to the deployment of Soviet medium-range systems directed at Europe but excluded from the bilateral negotiations on strategic nuclear forces between the United States and the Soviet Union. European fears of the risk of being decoupled from American protection may well resurface in the event that Donald Trump is elected President of the United States.

In looking at the asymmetries in the non-strategic nuclear forces of Russia and NATO the only comparable European based capability that NATO deploys is the small number of dual capable aircraft (DCA) provided by NATO members carrying warheads provided by, and under the control of, the US. It is worth emphasising that the US has more than enough strategic assets to counter Russian capabilities, but they are not "Eurospheric" in the sense that they are not designed to counter Russian strikes against Europe, hence leaving open European fears of exploitable gaps.

NATO's Dual Capable Aircraft (DCA) is a highly visible force which is conceived as contributing to NATO's deterrence against Russia. Russia will certainly have taken NATO's nuclear capability into account in its own defence and military planning. However, its operational effectiveness has been questioned as requiring "7 consecutive miracles"<sup>23</sup> for its implementation. This scepticism is outweighed by the political significance attached to the current arrangements in terms of demonstrating Alliance solidarity in the sharing of the collective deterrence and defence burden.

The question is whether the DCA force constitutes enough of a deterrent to Russian non-strategic nuclear weapons? As is discussed later the existing force will be modernised and reinforced. But is this sole European based capability a sufficient deterrent? Are other capabilities needed?<sup>24</sup> Despite the comments of the NATO Secretary General, denying the necessity for additional ground-based nuclear capabilities in Europe, some members may seek the development of deep strike conventional ground-based capabilities. The local or regional situation in conventional forces can never be predicted with certainty and the need for maximum reassurance from NATO's nuclear posture in terms of a guaranteed response and therefore effective deterrence will always be present. In other words, the combination of Russian nuclear threats and its missile superiority represents a

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<sup>23</sup> See Karl-Heinz Kamp and Robertus Rekmes, "Options for NATO Nuclear Sharing Arrangements", in: *Reducing Nuclear Risks in Europe: A Framework for Action*, Steve Andreasen and Isabelle Williams, eds., NTI, 2011. The miracles include doubts over the political authorisation needed and the penetration of Russian air defences.

<sup>24</sup> In a further blurring of the strategic and theatre levels of action the US has plans for a new nuclear sea launched cruise missile with low-yield warhead: low yield for presumably more "limited" operational application.

challenge for the Alliance to respond in a fashion that both deters Russia and reassures its members.

# Russia's nuclear threats will lead to a strengthened NATO deterrent posture

It is against this background that Alliance leaders must consider how to further strengthen NATO's nuclear deterrence posture. The Communiqué of the Vilnius Summit was a response to the concerns of eastern flank members by calling for improvements in the nuclear posture with a focus on flexibility and adaptability<sup>25</sup>. Some of these measures are already underway.

The United States is modernising the infrastructure that supports its nuclear sharing mission in Europe and is preparing to deploy its new B61-12 gravity bombs to European air bases (as yet exact dates unknown) for delivery by US and allied aircraft<sup>26</sup>. Together with the introduction of the F35 this will substantially enhance the operational effectiveness of the DCA mission in the air forces of several members<sup>27</sup> and will represent a considerable advance in capability. Little has been said in the public domain concerning this significant upgrading of NATO's nuclear posture, although NATO does appear to be more open to discussing its nuclear posture and related exercises than in the past. But this strengthening of the nuclear posture has certainly been noticed by Russia and in the absence of any arms control constraints represents the prospect of a further ratcheting up of the competition in this field.

Six additional NATO members—the Czech Republic, Denmark, Hungary, Poland, and two unknown countries—play a supporting role in NATO's nuclear posture through the Conventional Support to Nuclear Operations mission (such as air, protective or enabling support), alongside the DCA-contributing countries<sup>28</sup>. The current sharing arrangements could be expanded to include more allies. Poland has expressed the wish to join the NATO nuclear club. However, there is so far no clarity as to what Poland is proposing. Joining the group of DCA members whose aircraft deliver nuclear warheads presumably would need endorsement by other members and would raise questions concerning the location of warheads on both political and logistical grounds. Poland could also choose to continue to limit itself to participation in nuclear exercises such as the conventional support to nuclear operations mission or the command and table-top exercises practising procedures for nuclear decision making.

In view of Russian nuclear warnings and the prominent role for nuclear weapons in Russian doctrine some Alliance members may seek to go beyond simple evolutionary improvements now in train by adopting a more robust nuclear posture<sup>29</sup>. Some countries would like NATO to have a more reactive and assertive

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<sup>25</sup> NATO Vilnius Summit Communiqué, 11.07.2023, para. 45 [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_217320.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_217320.htm).

<sup>26</sup> Hans M. Kristensen et al., "Nuclear weapons sharing, 2023", Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, 08.11.2023, <https://thebulletin.org/premium/2023-11/nuclear-weapons-sharing-2023/>.

<sup>27</sup> The European DCA countries: Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, Italy, Turkey, and Greece with a different status of certification. See "Nuclear Weapons sharing" *ibid*.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>29</sup> See the proposal for a counter intimidation strategy in Jacek Duralek, "NATO strategy to counter nuclear intimidation", in: Recalibrating the NATO Nuclear Policy, Andrea Gilli, ed., NDC research paper No. 10, June 2020. ,

nuclear policy that pushes back against Russia's use of its own nuclear assets for signalling and coercive purposes. They may also seek greater clarity on the integration of NATO's nuclear forces with the conventional component and more specific guidance for their employment.<sup>30</sup> However, it remains unlikely that a more assertive and open approach to the nuclear posture would find support of all NATO members. Traditionally, given the sensitivity attached to the term nuclear, NATO members have preferred to keep discussion of nuclear policy at a low profile and highly classified. Given the public sensitivity surrounding the term nuclear, governments preferred to keep nuclear policy under wraps on close hold. Discussions were limited to a relatively small group of officials, analysts and researchers dedicated to the arcane world of nuclear policy, and rarely surfaced at the governmental level.

But times and NATO have changed - radically. NATO has more than doubled in size. Will the same nuclear reticence still prevail? It is difficult to predict what the balance of NATO nuclear discussions will be with 32 members, as opposed to the 15 who were involved in the intense debates in 1979 leading to the deployment of US intermediate nuclear forces in Western Europe in 1983. Many central and eastern European allies are acutely conscious that in 1997 NATO agreed with Russia, before they were members, that NATO would not station or store nuclear weapons on new member's territory<sup>31</sup>. To this day, NATO holds to that agreement with Russia, implying, in the view of some new members who began to join from 1999, that they are of secondary status in deterrence terms.

Even after Russia decided to store nuclear weapons in Belarus, NATO appears still to have no intention to store or deploy nuclear forces other than in the longstanding locations. Nor does it appear to have any plan to deploy dual capable weapon systems nearer to Russia. This restraint, though unreciprocated, is a sign that NATO is keen not to further destabilise an already unpredictable nuclear situation on its borders.

Will ancient nuclear modernisation concerns and fears dominate current Alliance discussions? Undoubtedly the more recent members will bring new perspectives and concerns. The Baltic States and Poland, seeing how Russia's nuclear threats have been effective in forcing NATO caution in relation to Ukraine, will no doubt want to strengthen nuclear deterrence. Others, including some western European allies, will hesitate before engaging once more in nuclear competition with Russia. However, the principles and the psychology of extended deterrence do not change - nor it would appear does the nature of the adversary<sup>32</sup>. So, Alliance discussions may be a repetition of the past, or the vast superiority which Russia has in dual capable missiles may well swing the balance of the debate from nuclear hesitation to nuclear acceptance in a number of key exposed and vulnerable allies. Whatever the outcome after almost 30 years of nuclear silence in the West, the nuclear debate has restarted.

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<sup>30</sup> The High level Group (HLG), created in 1977 precisely to ensure the attention of senior officials to key nuclear developments, would appear to be the appropriate forum for such discussions.

<sup>31</sup> Nicholas Williams, "NATO-Russia: is there a future?", CERIS, 21.05.2024, <https://www.ceris.be/blog/nato-russia-is-there-a-future/>.

<sup>32</sup> What might change however is the attitude of the United States – the nuclear protector. As noted earlier the return of the Trump Administration could see a revival of the Cold War decoupling concerns.



## The need for arms control

The modernisation of NATO's nuclear posture is in progress. It will certainly attract public attention. How much will vary from country to country. Despite radical changes since the Cold War, there are lessons still to be drawn from the distant past. Experience indicates that public acceptance is more likely if nuclear modernisation is accompanied by a parallel effort to regulate non-strategic nuclear weapons (NSNW's) through the limitations and constraints associated with arms control. In effect, arms control should reinforce deterrence.<sup>33</sup> To be effective and politically acceptable to a broad range of public and political opinion in the West, a regulated situation must be achieved through negotiation, or at least a sincere effort must be made to achieve one. However, relations with Russia are at rock bottom and NATO's attention is focussed on military requirements with little apparent consideration of the implications for arms control. Moreover, negotiating constraints in this field is replete with problems, complications, both technical and political, and above all, secrecy – in short, an arms controller's nightmare<sup>34</sup>.

Nevertheless, the need for a more regulated regime for non-strategic nuclear forces has long been recognised<sup>35</sup>. Putin in May 2019 proposed a moratorium, reflecting also a concern with potential deployments in Asia. His proposal has since been withdrawn which, if maintained, together with his suspension of New START and his action on the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty, does not bode well for prospective negotiations between Russia and the United States on their NSNW's anytime soon. Yet arms control has traditionally been the standard bearer of relations between Russia and the United States even during the most difficult and tense periods. So perhaps it can be called on to bear the burden again.

Whatever the difficulties, arms control in this crucial area must not be forgotten. Alliance nuclear modernisation without consideration of the limits and constraints imposed by arms control will be a recipe for further instability. The problem of medium and short range missiles is an issue Summit leaders must confront. They should instruct the HLG to assess how the Alliance should respond to the Russian missile threat in order to ensure deterrence and reassure allies. Such an assessment should include the potential contribution of arms control in limiting any decision on modernisation. Considerations of modernisation must be accompanied by a declared willingness to engage in constraints through reciprocal negotiations, however difficult or remote that seems today.

European security will not be served if the numbers of non-strategic dual capable forces are left to run free.

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<sup>33</sup> In this context it is worth recalling that the 1979 decision to couple modernisation with arms control was precisely meant to gain public acceptance, albeit that the development of the arms control component followed somewhat belatedly behind the initial decision to modernise.

<sup>34</sup> For an exhaustive review of the problems see Miles A. Pomper et al., "OP55: Everything Counts: Building a Control Regime for Nonstrategic Nuclear Warheads in Europe", The James Martin Centre for Non Proliferation Studies, Monterey, 10.05.2022, <https://nonproliferation.org/op55-everything-counts-building-a-control-regime-for-nonstrategic-nuclear-warheads-in-europe/>.

<sup>35</sup> See Oliver Meier and Simon Lunn, "Trapped: NATO, Russia, and the Problem of Tactical Nuclear Weapons", Arms Control Today, November 2011, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2014-01/trapped-nato-russia-and-problem-tactical-nuclear-weapons>.



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