Analysis

Nuclear weapons are back again

Willem van Eekelen

Nuclear weapons are back in the news and with them the debate on deterrence and arms control. North Korea’s leader talks about hitting the US, apparently not realizing that it would mean the end of his country. President Putin of Russia threatens NATO with the use of tactical nuclear weapons in Europe. It takes us back more than fifty years, but the positions have changed. Then we were worried about the conventional superiority of the Soviet Union against which nuclear weapons were deemed to be the only possible deterrent and defense. Today Russia, greatly diminished in size and influence, but still America’s greatest opponent, seems psychologically entrapped in an image of encirclement by a hostile world. President Putin won much of his domestic support by claiming — like Trump would do a decade later — to make his country great again! Unfortunately for him, respect for Russia did not grow, as the country remained economically stagnant, the price of oil collapsed, and only his weapons continued to be first class.

Old worries

In the West some of the old worries are coming back. Will the US risk a nuclear exchange if Russia completes a quick grab of land in the Baltic countries? Trump has a point in accusing the European allies of doing too little for their own security, but his tweets about NATO being obsolete were hardly encouraging. Moreover, American leadership was lost, due to his unpredictable behavior. His slogan of ‘America First’ is hardly compatible with leadership of the West and is in great contradiction to previous policies of ‘enlightened self-interest’ for which the Marshall Plan continues to stand out as the best example.

In the early sixties we had similar concerns. Russia had its own nuclear weapons, Laika was circling the earth, and Sputnik implied coming American vulnerability. How could we link European security with American deterrence? Washington developed several possibilities to involve the Europeans. For example, as SACEUR general Norstad in 1957 wanted to replace the strategy of massive retaliation against cities by a ‘shield’ of conventional forces, strong enough to create a ‘pause’ in the escalation process, and a ‘spear’ of Intermediate Range Ballistic Missiles (IRBM) able to strike deep into Soviet territory. The most progressive idea was the Multilateral Force (MLF) with nuclear weapons on Polaris submarines and mixed manning of surface ships. That proposal drafted by Robert Bowie was supported by the State Department, largely to avoid fragmentation of the Alliance into nuclear and non-nuclear powers and to avoid discrimination of Germany, but got stranded by the realization that in the end the control over the weapons would rest with the US President: why spend more if the US already had sufficient weapons at sea?

Flexible response

At that time, there was agreement on abandoning the strategy of massive retaliation, but there was a lively debate on its replacement by what became known as flexible response. In
his 1962 Athens speech, Secretary of Defense McNamara foresaw great dangers in escalation, particularly in escalation over the nuclear threshold by using tactical nuclear weapons in response to conventional aggression. Instead, he wanted NATO to be strong enough conventionally so that the enemy would have to make the decision to go nuclear, with all the blame that would entail.

The other version of flexible response, explicitly supported by German defense minister Von Hassel and others, and finally adopted by NATO, held that the strongest deterrent laid in the capability of NATO’s threat to escalate. If this threat was not credible, the Warsaw Pact might calculate that the consequences of limited aggression would be acceptable. Thus, NATO should be visibly prepared to cross the nuclear threshold relatively early in an engagement.¹

The Athens Guidelines of 1962 and the decision to create a Nuclear Planning Group in 1967 replaced the efforts at a ‘hardware solution’ by a ‘planning solution’ and to a large extent restored confidence in the American guarantees. The French withdrawal from the NATO military integration focused the other Allies on the need for US guarantees, while French resistance to the strategy of flexible response (even in its stronger version) no longer mattered.

**Détente**

Following up the Harmel Report of 1968, NATO started a second focus of détente through political dialogue in addition to defense. The US and the Soviet Union started the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks in Helsinki in November 1969, which led to the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty signed by Brezhnev and Nixon in 1972 and in force till 2002, when the US withdrew. SALT I was an interim agreement freezing the number of strategic missile launchers at existing levels and limiting the number of land-based ICBMs capable of reaching the other side. The US would limit the number of SLBM capable submarines to 50 with an overall maximum of 800 launchers, which would also apply to future arsenals of the Soviet Union. SALT II was negotiated from 1972 to 1979, banning new missile programs. The US was able to keep Trident along with its cruise missiles.

SALT was succeeded by START in 1991, focusing on arms reduction instead of limitation, barring both countries from deploying more than 6,000 nuclear warheads on a total of 1,600 ICBMs, which resulted in its final implementation in 2001 in the removal of about 80% of the strategic nuclear weapons then in existence. The treaty expired in 2009 and was replaced the next year by New START, signed by Obama and Medvedev in Prague and ratified by the US Senate in 2010 (supported by all 56 Democratic and 13 Republican Senators, including Richard Lugar from Indiana) and valid till 2021.²

Under New START the number of nuclear missile launchers was reduced by half, and it limited deployed strategic nuclear warheads to 1,155 (i.e. two-thirds from the original START and 10% lower than the 2002 SORT), but allowing some margin as per bomber only one warhead would be counted. It did not place limits on tactical systems, such as the F-35, which was likely to replace the F-16 in the tactical nuclear delivery role.
Most effective NATO action

Next to the strategic discussions came the negotiations on the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) signed by Gorbachev and Reagan in December 1987, and of direct interest to Europe by eliminating all nuclear and conventional missiles and launchers with ranges between 500 and 5,500 kilometers, but not covering sea-launched missiles. Formal talks had started in 1981 by Reagan and Brezhnev. Russian interest was enhanced by NATO’s response to what it considered the ‘aggravated situation’ resulting from SS-20 deployment featuring ‘significant improvements over previous systems in providing accuracy, more mobility, and greater range, as well as having multiple warheads’. The ‘double–track’ decision of December 1979 gave Russia two options: one option would be that the US would withdraw 1,000 theater nuclear warheads out of currently 7,400, and pursue bilateral negotiations with the Soviet Union intended to limit theater nuclear forces. Should these negotiations fail, NATO would modernize its own long-range and intermediate-range nuclear forces, by replacing US Pershing Ia missiles with Pershing II launchers in West Germany and deploying 464 Ground Launched Cruise Missiles (GLCMs) to Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands and the UK, beginning in December 1983. In negotiations the US would follow the principles that any limits placed on its INF capabilities, both in terms of ‘ceilings’ and ‘rights’ must be reciprocated with limits on Soviet systems, and that a sufficient verification regime be in place.

That ‘double–track decision’ was probably the most effective NATO action ever. It was clear, combined decisiveness with a willingness to negotiate, and made an impact before it had to be fully implemented. It came at a difficult time, for nuclear matters were not popular in many countries, including the Netherlands. Some criticism, especially French, was directed at leaving untouched weapons with a range below 500 km, which in early phases of a conflict were likely to be used on the territory of NATO partners.

Shortly before the talks Reagan formulated his ‘double-zero’ proposal, calling for a hold on US deployment of GLCM and Pershing II systems, reciprocated by the Soviet elimination of its SS-4, SS-5 and SS-20 missiles. Several models were discussed and Paul Nitze, the US negotiator in Geneva, had his ‘walk in the woods’ with his Soviet colleague Kvitsinsky about a possible package. In November 1983, after the first Pershing II arrived in West Germany, the Soviets stuck to their earlier warning and walked out of the negotiations. It would take till 1986 — and some brokering by Margaret Thatcher — for the negotiations to resume, but now in a wider context, covering separate talks on START I and space issues. In January Gorbachev proposed to ban all nuclear weapons by the year 2000, including the INF missiles in Europe. The US countered with a phased reduction of INF launchers in Europe and Asia reaching zero by 1989, with no constraints on the British and French nuclear forces. Further talks culminated in the Reykjavik summit in October, where the two leaders agreed in principle to remove INF systems from Europe and to keep equal global limits of 100 INF missile warheads in storage. The treaty was signed on December 8, 1987 and ratified the following May in a 93-5 vote by the US Senate.

Will the INF treaty survive?

Over the years both sides raised complaints about implementation, but in the beginning things went well. By June 1999 the US had destroyed 846 weapons and the Russians 1,846.
The first hitch came in December 2001 when George W. Bush gave 6-month notice of US intent to withdraw from the ABM Treaty in order to be free to commence its National Missile Defense program. More directly related to INF was Putin’s declaration in February 2007 that this treaty no longer served Russia’s interests, followed by his Chief of General Staff saying that a decision to pull out would depend on US actions with its proposed Ground-Based Midcourse Defense missile system, parts of which it planned to deploy on Eastern European NATO members’ territory. In return, throughout 2014-2017 the State Department repeated the claim that Russia was in violation of the INF Treaty, in particular by developing an as yet mysterious new ground-launched cruise missile. Details of the weapon were not made public in order to protect the vulnerability of intelligence used, except the US statement in 2017 that Russia knew what they had in mind. Secretary of Defense Mattis kept his calm by saying that the violation would not give Russia ‘a significant advantage’ and that returning to compliance would be in its best interest. Congress, however, was more excited. The House called for a ‘program of record’ to develop a new GLCM within INF-range, which it managed to include in the conference report with the Senate. Clearly, this should be avoided and European allies should argue against it. Fortunately, in January 2018 the US ambassador in Moscow was reported as saying that Washington wanted to stick to the INF Treaty.

In December 2017 the Congressional Research Service (CRS) published a thorough 39 page report on Russian Compliance, which also dealt fairly with Russian concerns. Since 2014 these concerns were seen in connection with three US programs: the use of IRBM’s as targets during tests of missile defense systems; the use of drones as weapons delivery vehicles; and the planned deployment of missile defense interceptors on land in the Navy’s MK-41 missile launchers. The report managed to refute most of these concerns, but started by recognizing that Russia had been uncomfortable with the limits of the INF Treaty for a decade, limits which only applied to Russia and the US. In 2007 Russia had proposed, unsuccessfully, that the UN would convert it into a multilateral treaty that could be signed by all states possessing IRBM’s (and thus cover China as well).

One day after the CRS report the Harvard Kennedy School published its own report which went further into the New York Times’ accusation that Russia had converted the ship-launched Kalibir missile to ground-launch. The author, Kevin Ryan, advocated a new arms control regime focusing on warheads instead of the INF method of counting launchers: by storing he warheads separately from the launchers adequate warning time of their impending use would be gained. He had to admit, however, that neither country had been willing to focus on warheads, especially not on non-strategic warheads.

**US strategy and nuclear forces**

The Trump administration published its first Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) in February 2018 (it was leaked in January by The Huffington Post). It wants more nuclear weapons, though not the tenfold increase the president had referred to earlier. The document claims that Russia is developing at least two new ICBM’s, a hypersonic glide missile and a new autonomous intercontinental torpedo. On arms control it repeats the violation of the INF Treaty, but still does not describe the mysterious missile. The NPR claims that Russia had rebuffed US efforts to follow New START with another round of negotiated reductions and to pursue reductions of non-strategic weapons. The US had already met the limits of New
START and would continue to implement the treaty, even though other nuclear-armed states had not followed its lead. Likewise, the US remained committed to preserving the treaty, albeit with the somewhat professorial addition that its value would depend on all parties remaining in compliance: concluding further agreements with a state in multiple violation “would indicate a lack of consequences for non-compliance and thereby undermine arms control broadly”.

The 2018 National Defense Strategy states three priorities: build a more lethal force; strengthen alliances and attract new partners; reform the Department for greater performance and affordability. In doing so, great power competition, with Russia and China, became the primary focus of US security. More specifically, this means priority for readiness for war and the modernization of key capabilities, “including developing options to counter competitor’s coercive strategies, predicated on the threatened use of nuclear or strategic non-nuclear attacks”. One way to do so would be to lower the yield of nuclear weapons in submarines to give them more flexibility than an “all-or nothing” response. Apparently, this option related to the news that the Russians had developed a nuclear underwater drone. What raised most eyebrows, however, was the sentence that nuclear weapons could be employed after a significant non-nuclear attack, which means that the US could be the first to go nuclear.

In October 2017 the Netherlands Advisory Council on International Questions published report No.106 on “The future of NATO and the security of Europe”, containing many views and recommendations. It regarded the Dutch position on nuclear weapons as a special one, aiming at a bridge-building role in arms control. That’s why the Netherlands participated with 131 other countries, but as the only NATO member, in the UN talks about interdiction of nuclear weapons. Ultimately, the new government voted against the outcome for several reasons: it was incompatible with NATO membership, it would be hard to verify, and it risked affecting existing agreements and standards. It wanted to maintain its nuclear task as long as NATO was a nuclear alliance.5

The Advisory Council followed up with the question whether the nuclear strategy and capabilities of NATO, particularly concerning sub-strategic ‘tactical’ nuclear weapons, are still adequate, and recommended (No. 13) NATO to evaluate its nuclear strategy. Several of my former colleagues wondered whether that would be desirable and possible in a time of unreliable American leadership and a hasty Congress. Looking back, we concluded that without nuclear weapons we probably would have seen war in Europe, but at the same time we have come to see their main deterrent function in being able to deliver a ‘second strike’ after a first strike by the enemy, and therefore having to be survivable and sufficiently strong to be able to retaliate.

Willem van Eekelen is a former Minister of Defense of the Netherlands.

Would you like to react?
Mail the editor: redactie@atlcom.nl.

In the meantime there had been negotiations on START II, signed but not ratified, and unsuccessful negotiations on a START III. In 2002 George W. Bush and Vladimir Putin negotiated the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT), limiting operationally deployed warheads to 1,700 and 2,200 warheads each. It was ratified but superseded by New START.

