

What is NATO Doing in the Face of New Russian Assertiveness?

by Nurşin ATEŞOĞLU GÜNEY

NATO, following the Ukrainian crisis, witnessed new signs of an assertive Russia moving closer to its borders, firstly in the northern flank. As a result, it has become necessary to review the Alliance's defense position. The first steps to counter the Russian assertion were taken at NATO's 2015 Wales Summit. From NATO's perspective there have been two basic aims: Initially, there was an urgent need to send a clear message to Russia to ensure that Moscow would by no means dare to launch a hybrid war in the Baltics or in Central-Eastern Europe. NATO's second concern was associated with Russia's new plans whereby Russia would introduce and add prospective de-escalatory nuclear strikes within its overall measures against NATO's forces in Europe. Currently, Russia's new assertiveness along NATO's Northern and Southern flanks is making the Alliance members nervous and as a result forcing the Alliance to take action to reassure its member states. NATO's Deputy Secretary General Alexander Vershbow, at the latest Munich Security Conference, made a reference to the important issue of how the Alliance should be making efforts to deter possible Russian aggression towards its allies. One can find signs as to how NATO aims to balance its security pri-



orities¹ in due course in Vershbow's speech at the conference.² As stated by Vershbow, NATO, since the Wales Summit, has devoted its utmost attention to dealing with the rising Russian assertiveness around the Alliance's Northern and Central-Eastern vicinity. While implementing reassurance measures on behalf of its Northern and Eastern members, NATO has attached great importance to avoiding action that would provoke Moscow. Alliance officials, for example Vershbow, have asserted that these measures are in full compliance with the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act, hence defensive in character only. What is more important, according to NATO of-

¹ The main argument present in NATO has so far centered on how the Alliance should give priority to the arising security threats before the Northern and Southern flanks of NATO.

² Matthew Bodner, "NATO Deputy SecGen: Russia's Anti-Access/Area Denial Build-up is the Biggest Worry", *Defense News*, February 14, 2016, <http://www.defensenews.com/story/defense/policy-budget/leaders/interviews/2016/02/13/nato-deputy-secgen-russias-anti-accessarea-denial-build-up-biggest-worry/80343130/>, (Last visited: February 20, 2016).

ficials, is that these newly introduced procurements and deployments of both manpower and equipment fall short when it comes to providing the Alliance with the means to launch a surprise attack against Russia.

The current debate about rising security threats against NATO do stem from the allies' geographical locations; either in the North-East or South of the map of Europe. Vershbov identifies that the present problem of defining the immanency of threats to NATO members is the result of identity problems, where one member feels more associated with either the old or new Allies³. The old NATO countries consider the resurgent Russia as the most immediate threat that the Alliance has been facing since the outbreak of the Ukrainian crisis and they expect to retaliate accordingly. On the other hand, the southern members of NATO are naturally very concerned about the refugee issue which has connections with the expanding threat of ISIS beyond the Levant region. Though the Munich Security conference identified that the problems of NATO, whether stemming from the north-east or south, are all serious and need to be dealt with in unison, insofar as that the Alliance has been more focused on meeting the threats to the North-East flank and less attention has been paid to the concerns of the South. NATO's Southern initiative is of no less importance, but when one looks at the balance sheet of NATO's reassurance initiatives, the Alliance seems to be favoring those allies in the North-East over those in the South. This analysis will attempt to investigate the main reasons as to why NATO has made its first security priority dealing with the rise of the re-

³ *Ibid.*

surgent Russia on the northern flank within the framework of its extended deterrence mechanism. With this problem in mind, this analysis will try to seek answers to the question of where the Alliance currently stands in relation to Russia's policies of nuclear and conventional deterrence.

Is Russia a Potential Threat to NATO?

Since the outbreak of the Ukrainian crisis and the annexation of Crimea in 2014, NATO has been focusing on Russia and its current war capabilities in parallel with its already declared Wales Summit communique. The conclusion reached is thought-provoking and that is why NATO has lately felt the need to re-visit and re-assess its stand towards Moscow. Some IR experts believe that NATO's post-Cold war stand in the face of the newly developing Russian 2000-2014 military and security documents is in need of some revision and that the future road map for the Alliance should be revised accordingly at the July 2016 NATO Warsaw Summit. Matthew Kroening, for example, warns the international community that the risk of nuclear war between NATO and Russia may be higher today than any time since the 1980s.⁴ Examining the issued 2000 Russian nuclear position alongside the news on the Russian President's willingness to threaten the West with its limited nuclear action after the Ukrainian crisis, Kroening has come to the conclusion that the situation from NATO's perspective was irritating. The reality

⁴ Matthew Kroening, "The Renewed Russian Nuclear Threat and NATO Nuclear Deterrence Posture", February 3, 2016, *Atlantic Council: Brent Scowcroft Center on International Relation Security*, http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/images/publications/Russian_Nuclear_Threat_0203_web.pdf, (Last visited: February 12, 2016).

on the ground supports Kroening's thinking: it is no secret that Moscow, since 2000, has retreated from its *no first use of nuclear weapons* position due to Russia's inferiority to the NATO/West's preponderance in conventional weapons. Since the end of the Cold War, Russia has modernized its nuclear forces to compensate for its inferiority to the NATO conventional arsenal. The importance of nuclear forces in the Russian military strategy became quite clear and observable. The Russian military doctrines and documents being issued since 2000 have all promoted a new concept called *de-escalatory nuclear strikes*. These caused grave concern among Western strategists that are dealing with NATO's nuclear deterrence policies. In line with this new Russian approach, the Kremlin was making explicit Moscow's readiness to escalate to de-escalate, and to employ the threat, or even carry out limited nuclear strikes in a conventional conflict to force its opponent to capitulate to its terms of peace when threatened.⁵ The Russian military doctrine of 2000 first stated that limited nuclear strikes might be conducted in any situation that is critical to the national security of the Russian Federation.⁶ The definition of a limited use of nuclear weapons was obscure and the later 2010 doctrine tightened the definition, making it clearer under which conditions Russians might consider employing these weapons. In this latest military doctrine, the Kremlin has explicitly

made it clear that the threat and use of limited nuclear weapons would be operational in situations where the Kremlin held that the very existence of the state was under threat.⁷ The 2010 doctrine then goes on to define the threats to be looked upon as critical to its survival, such as when the use of a nuclear or other weapons of mass destruction are being used against Russia or (its allies) or again when the use of conventional weapons has the capacity to threaten the existence of the Russian state.⁸

It is true that when the Cold war ended, the value of nuclear weapons played a decreased political role in the US/NATO and Russia security relationship. This situation lasted at least until the end of the 1990s. Russia, however, after it observed the effectiveness and the success of NATO's high precision conventional weapons capability during the times of Gulf War of 1990 and 1991 and finally at Kosovo War, changed its future procurement plans accordingly. These new efforts in Russian military procurement and defense gave rise to the 2000 military doctrine that gave the green light to the use of limited nuclear weapons. However, by the time this new de-escalatory use of nuclear weapons was referred to in the Russian military doctrines, Western circles considered them to be defensive measures but in reality Moscow had developed them as *stop gap* measure against overwhelming potential of the US/NATO precision guided conventional forces. Hence, since the end of the 1990s, Russians have decided to rely on a limited use of nuclear weapons in their military position until Moscow could develop a more modern

5 Nikolai N. Sokov, "Why Russia Calls a Limited Nuclear Strike 'De-Escalation'", *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, March 13, 2014, <http://thebulletin.org/why-russia-calls-limited-nuclear-strike-de-escalation>, (Last visited: February 25, 2016).

6 Nikolai Shokov, "Russia's 2000 Military Doctrine", *NTI*, October 1, 1999, <http://www.nti.org/analysis/articles/russias-2000-military-doctrine/>, (Last visited: February 11, 2016).

7 Nikolai Shokov, "Why Russia Calls a...", *ibid.*

8 Mathew Kroening, "Facing Reality: Getting...", *op. cit.*

conventional strike capability similar to that of the United States of America.

Where Does NATO Stand in the Nuclear Deterrence Today?

NATO was able to begin reducing (not eliminating though) its reliance on nuclear weapons due to its dominance in conventional military power in the post-Cold War Era. Especially after the 2008 Prague speech delivered by US President Obama, where he promised to see a world free of nuclear weapons, the debate relevant to NATO was whether the Alliance should reduce the deployment of tactical forces in several NATO countries in Europe. In fact, the Alliance by issuing its 2012 Defense and Deterrence Posture made it clear that the Alliance is ready to move along the path of Obama's zero nuclear policy. However, it was the 2014 Ukrainian crisis and its aftermath that had an alarming impact on the Alliance and the members of the organization have since been contemplating what to do about the rising assertive Russian behavior. NATO members, before the Wales's summit in fact had recognized the fact that the Alliance needed to bolster its Collective Defense requirements in parallel with the security requirements of its members on the Northern Flank. NATO had emphasized prior to the Ukrainian crisis the Alliance's two other missions: (i) collective security and (ii) crisis management. However, having witnessed Russian's threatened use of a hybrid war together with the use of (A2/AD) capabilities to meet their overall goals beyond their borders, Western security experts became deeply concerned. When these security experts evaluated new assertive Russian stand, which is supported with its nuclear capacity, they felt the

need to reassure their member's from the NATO's northern flank and address their immediate security concerns vis-à-vis the collective security mission of the Alliance. As a result, after the Wales Summit, some immediate conventional re-assurance measures were introduced in this regard. What is more interesting today is that the debate taking place in NATO has radically changed and it is no longer about whether the Alliance should do away with its tactical nuclear capabilities, but rather about whether NATO's nuclear policy and capabilities should be augmented. These new and passionate scenarios are currently based on the forecasts on the future response of NATO in the aftermath of Russia's use of limited sub-strategic nuclear forces in Europe. According to one viewpoint⁹, NATO's likely response to Russian use of limited tactical nuclear weapons would be limited to a devastating conventional response. Those in favor of a conventional retaliation have asserted that this response would ensure and restore the taboo on nuclear use, which would reinforce the West's longstanding goal to demonstrate reduced reliance on nuclear weapons. On the other hand, others have claimed that NATO's likely response will naturally depend upon how devastating the Russians nuclear attack would be. There is also a third view in favor of a nuclear NATO's retaliation to any use of even a limited Russian nuclear response. According to these analysts, nuclear retaliation remains one of the major and unavoidable prerequisite ways to restore and hence guarantee NATO's nuclear deterrence credibility. The supporters of this viewpoint are of the opinion that NATO would resort to the use of nuclear weapons in the case of Russian

⁹ Mathew Kroening, "The Renewed Russian...", *op. cit.*

limited nuclear power guaranteeing in advance that Moscow would be severely punished if it dares to resort to the use of these weapons.

Some military experts contend that Russia's current situation more or else resemble the US policy in the 1960s when it advocated the use of limited tactical nuclear weapons against Russia's overwhelming conventional forces in the heart of Europe¹⁰. Today some experts still accept as true that Moscow can be expected to abandon its military and defense policy based on the threat or use of de-escalatory use of nuclear weapons once Russia can overcome its conventional forces inferiority against the West. It is of course now up to NATO allies in the coming Warsaw Summit to decide how to respond to Russia's new assertive stand both in the northern and southern flanks, and most importantly regarding Moscow's declared limited threat and use of nuclear weapons. The jury is still out on which view will

prevail concerning the Alliance's overall nuclear policy after Warsaw Summit. The final decision will be reached at NATO's Warsaw Summit as to how the Alliance will deter Russia's de-escalatory nuclear policy and this will surely have a significant impact on the Alliance's challenging job of reassuring its members on both the northern and southern flanks. This decision is also expected to affect Moscow's future nuclear stand and it is therefore going to be a pivotal moment in the overall issue of Russian deterrence.

10 Thomas C. Schelling, "The Strategy of Conflict with a New Preface by the Author", *Harvard Publishers*, 1980, pp.257-267.

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About Author

Nurşin Ateşoğlu Güney is professor of international relations and head of international relations department at Yildiz Technical University in Istanbul. Prof. Güney is security and nuclear energy senior fellow at the Wise Men Center for Strategic Studies (BILGESAM). She has extensively published on Middle East, security studies, American foreign and security policies, EU, NATO and arms control and disarmament issues. Some of her latest publications include; 'Turkish Nuclear Security after Iranian Nuclearization', Contemporary Security Policy and 'The current Stalamate on the Iranian Nuclear Crisis: Is there a way out of this Impasse?', Ortadoğu Analiz Dergisi.