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# Basics of a New Nuclear Strategy for NATO

## Lessons from the Cold War

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The debate on NATO's nuclear deterrent has so far focused on two questions. First, whether the Alliance's nuclear capabilities are still sufficient in view of the threat posed by Russia. Second, how credible the American nuclear umbrella has remained since Donald Trump took office. However, a third key question remains unanswered: what political and strategic basis should apply in the extreme case of nuclear weapons being used, and how can such a strategy be developed?

– During the Cold War, after several years of discussion, NATO agreed on a detailed nuclear strategy that included political guidelines for the possible use of nuclear weapons, rules for consultation within the Alliance, and common ideas on nuclear targeting.

– These principles and procedures can serve as a basis for the long-overdue debate on a future nuclear strategy, provided they are adapted to the current security policy framework.

– Nine key insights derived from the Cold War nuclear strategy should be incorporated into future strategy development.

The discussion about NATO's nuclear deterrence that has arisen in the wake of Russia's attack on Ukraine has so far focused on **two questions**.

The **first** one was whether the Alliance's nuclear posture – i.e., its existing nuclear weapons and delivery systems – still meets the requirements of the new strategic situation in which an aggressive and revanchist Russia has become an acute political and military threat. Do the American nuclear bombs stationed in Europe need to be replaced by modern nuclear standoff weapons or cruise missiles?

The **second** question came up after US President Donald Trump's inauguration in January 2025 when the discussion focused on the future reliability of the United States and the credibility of American extended nuclear deterrence within the framework of NATO. What would happen if Washington closed the nuclear umbrella over Europe and Europe's deterrence were based solely on British and French nuclear weapons?

A **third crucial question** though, namely that of a nuclear strategy, has so far been largely ignored. What political and military principles should apply to the possible use of nuclear weapons by NATO, what targets would be eligible for such use, and what procedures should apply to the approval of such an extreme case within the Alliance? In short, what should NATO's nuclear strategic consensus be?

During the Cold War, NATO had such a nuclear strategy. It initially referred to American nuclear weapons stationed in Europe and to the strategic systems of the United States that were "assigned" to the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), i.e., available to his nuclear planning. Secondarily, there were British nuclear weapons, which were also integrated into SACEUR's plans but were ultimately under British control. France's nuclear weapons made their own contribution to NATO's overall deterrence but were not part of NATO's planning process. NATO's nuclear strategy ranged from nuclear targeting to guidelines for nuclear consultations within the Alliance, and to political principles for possible first and follow-on nuclear strikes.

## THE NEED FOR A NEW NUCLEAR STRATEGY

With the end of the East-West conflict and the belief in a lasting partnership with Russia, the American and British nuclear weapons assigned to NATO – the so-called sub-strategic forces – were reduced to a minimum in Europe. Existing strategic plans and concepts were also rendered obsolete. In NATO's 1999 Strategic Concept, the Alliance officially announced "the termination of standing nuclear peacetime plans."[1] In the meantime, these sophisticated and painstakingly developed plans and concepts have largely been forgotten.

As a result, NATO currently has no nuclear strategy that has been agreed upon by the Alliance, even though it faces an adversary in Russia that has repeatedly and explicitly threatened to use nuclear weapons in connection with its war against Ukraine. The Alliance's most recent public document on nuclear issues, the Deterrence and Defence Posture Review (DDPR) adopted at the NATO summit in Chicago in 2012 is not only outdated but also was never a nuclear strategy. It contains no statements on the political or military purpose of using nuclear weapons, possible criteria for such a step, or rules for consultations among the Alliance partners in such an extreme situation. Instead, it was primarily a declaration on the necessity of nuclear weapons as part of NATO's deterrence.

Even after concrete signs of a possible use of Russian nuclear weapons in the war on Ukraine emerged in autumn 2022,[2] NATO did not seriously consider how it would respond strategically to such an extreme case. The United States merely threatened Moscow with "catastrophic consequences" and hinted that it would respond to a Russian nuclear employment with conventional retaliation against high value targets like Moscow's Black Sea Fleet.[3] The decision taken at the NATO summit in Vilnius in 2023 "to modernise NATO's nuclear capability and update planning to increase the flexibility and adaptability of the Alliance's nuclear forces, while exercising strong political control at all times"[4] also referred primarily to military planning and not to the advancement of a political-military strategy.

1 NATO, "The Alliance's Strategic Concept (1999), Approved by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Washington D.C.," April 24, 1999, Para. 64: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_27433.htm (accessed October 28, 2025).

2 Shannon Bugos, "Russian Officials Talk Nuclear War, U.S. Intelligence Says," *Arms Control Today*, December 2022: https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2022-12/news/russian-officials-talk-nuclear-war-us-intelligence-says (accessed October 28, 2025).

3 David E. Sanger and Jim Tankersley, "U.S. Warns Russia of 'Catastrophic Consequences' if It Uses Nuclear Weapons," *New York Times*, September 25, 2025: https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/25/us/politics/us-russia-nuclear.html (accessed October 28, 2025).

4 NATO, "Vilnius Summit Communiqué, Issued by NATO Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Vilnius 11 July 2023," Para. 45: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_217320.htm (accessed October 28, 2025).

The development of nuclear strategic principles is therefore long overdue. Credible nuclear deterrence is based not only on existing weapons and delivery systems but also on a recognizable capability and willingness to use them in extreme cases. This raises **three key questions** for the strategic debate that will be necessary within the Alliance in the future:

- What nuclear strategic concepts and doctrines existed during the Cold War?
- How does today's nuclear threat environment differ from the situation during the East-West conflict?
- Which of these former rules and procedures can be incorporated into a future NATO nuclear strategy?

## NATO'S NUCLEAR STRATEGY IN THE COLD WAR

Since the dawn of the nuclear age and NATO's initial armament with American and later British nuclear weapons, the question of how these should be used in an emergency was pertinent. While the sole decision-making authority of the American President and later the British Prime Minister over their use was never seriously questioned, the non-nuclear member states increasingly insisted that their security interests be heard and taken into account in the event of a nuclear escalation. This essentially concerned **three areas**:

- The political purpose of using nuclear weapons
- The selection of possible targets
- The question of consultations within the Alliance, i.e., a procedure for involving as many member states as possible without unnecessarily delaying the decision-making process

A discussion about the political purpose of nuclear weapons use was essential because, although there were strict military rules governing the requests for and authorization of nuclear weapons use, there was largely no political framework. Should the use of nuclear weapons change the military situation on the battlefield, as the majority of the American military envisaged, or should it primarily influence the attacker's risk calculation, which was the opinion of most Europeans? Should nuclear weapons be used symbolically and without causing significant damage as a sign of determination, or should a first strike be aimed directly at Soviet territory, with the risk of immediate nuclear retaliation against NATO territory? Should nuclear weapons be used early on – i.e., right after an enemy attack – to persuade the aggressor to back down, or later in the course of the conflict?

Since these questions had different implications for the security and ultimately the survival interests of NATO members, it took a long time to agree on a political framework for the use of nuclear weapons. In November 1969, the first "Provisional Political Guidelines" were adopted that referred to the political principles of a nuclear first use.[5] However, this did not solve all strategic problems as the question remained: what happens if the enemy continues its attack, unimpressed by the nuclear first strike, instead of ceasing hostilities?

If it was difficult enough to reach a political consensus on the initial use of nuclear weapons, the problems became even greater when it came to possible follow-up use. What if the initial use did not lead to the desired goal of ending the hostilities? Should nuclear weapons be used again, and how could this process be prevented from escalating into a full-scale nuclear war? Given the sensitivity of this issue and the multitude of individual problems associated with it, it took until the mid-1980s to arrive at the so-called General Political Guidelines for the Employment of Nuclear Weapons in the Defence of NATO.[6] These guidelines primarily reflected the European preference for using nuclear weapons as a political signal rather than, as preferred by the American military, in large numbers as a means of nuclear warfighting.

Closely related to the question of the strategic purpose of nuclear weapons was the second aspect of nuclear strategy, namely the question of nuclear targeting. Here, too, the contrast between the concept of nuclear warfare with large numbers of nuclear weapons on the one hand and a more political nuclear strategy on the other, which relied on more symbolic deployments to persuade the attacker to back down, was evident.

5 For Provisional Political Guidelines for the Initial Defensive Tactical Use of Nuclear Weapons by NATO, see: J. Michael Legge, *Theatre Nuclear Weapons and the NATO Strategy of Flexible Response*, Rand Corporation (Santa Monica, 1983), p. 21: https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/reports/2007/R2964.pdf (accessed October 28, 2025).

6 William M. Arkin et al., *Implications of the INF Treaty*, Natural Resources Defense Council (New York, 1987), p. 57: https://nuke.fas.org/cochran/nuc_87120101a_78.pdf (retrieved October 28, 2025).

While targeting was carried out exclusively by the United States and the United Kingdom until the mid-1960s, the establishment of the Nuclear Planning Group (NPG) in 1967 allowed non-nuclear NATO countries to contribute their own ideas and concerns. Here, too, differing interests became apparent: the United States preferred targets in Europe – in the Warsaw Pact but also in NATO countries – and tried to avoid Soviet territory for as long as possible to escape direct retaliation. The Europeans, on the other hand, advocated strikes against the Soviet Union itself to prevent the two superpowers from fighting their conflict solely on European soil and emerging largely unscathed. In the years that followed, the United States gradually responded to European concerns and agreed that potential nuclear targets should be discussed regularly at the so-called Nuclear Targeting Coordination Conference with all NATO partners (except France, which was not a member of the NPG).

This leads to the third element of a nuclear strategy: the question of consultations between nuclear weapon states and their non-nuclear allies in the event of the use of these weapons. NATO's dilemma was that the decision to use nuclear weapons rested solely with the American President or the British Prime Minister, and neither of them wanted to share this power with other NATO allies. The ideas of majority voting or vetoes expressed by some Europeans were therefore doomed to failure from the outset. At the same time, the Europeans – led by West Germany – would have suffered the most from the catastrophic consequences of nuclear explosions and therefore had a strong interest in gaining influence over the type, scale, and timing of nuclear weapons use. They also wanted to be consulted before any possible nuclear strike or, as Canadian Foreign Minister Lester Pearson put it in a speech back in 1954: "No annihilation without consultation."[7]

The United States was fundamentally willing to engage in such consultations, but it feared that they could delay, if not prevent, the decision to use nuclear weapons. Given the threat scenarios at the time, with Warsaw Pact forces rapidly advancing into NATO territory, such concerns were entirely justified. At the NATO ministerial meeting in Athens in 1962, the United States agreed to consult the North Atlantic Council (NAC) before using nuclear weapons "if time permitted"[8] – in other words, if time and circumstances allowed such discussions. However, the exact nature of such consultations remained open.

Given such vague statements, it is not surprising that the non-nuclear NATO members continued to press for their interests to be taken into account – either in bilateral agreements with the United States or within NATO as a whole. A consensus gradually emerged that the views of those countries most likely to be affected by the use of nuclear weapons should be given special consideration. This applied above all to countries that stored American nuclear weapons on their soil; that would provide their own personnel or delivery systems; or that, like West Germany, would be the major battlefield of a military conflict due to their geographical location. At the conclusion of the 1986 "General Political Guidelines," procedures were established for conducting consultations on the possible use of nuclear weapons.[9]

By the mid-1980s, after two decades of intense debate, NATO had largely developed a nuclear strategy with generally accepted political guidelines, an exchange on nuclear targeting, and rules and procedures for consultations between nuclear and non-nuclear states. A few years later, with the fall of the Berlin Wall, this hard-won consensus largely lost its significance.

Even though this strategy was developed under the specific conditions of the East-West conflict, it still addresses many core issues that are also relevant to NATO's nuclear deterrence today: how should NATO respond if Russia were to use nuclear weapons against Ukraine or even against a NATO member? When should NATO escalate to nuclear weapons, and what targets should such an escalation be directed against? How could the broadest possible consensus on NATO's use of nuclear weapons be achieved, and what form should the exchange of information between nuclear and non-nuclear members take? Parts of the Cold War consensus can thus serve as a guideline for future strategy debates when placed in the context of current and future security threats.

7 University of Toronto Libraries, "15 March 1954: Pearson Speech on 'Canada in the World Today,'": https://exhibits.library.utoronto.ca/exhibits/show/canada-and-the-new-look/15-march-1954-----canada-in-th (accessed October 28, 2025).

8 National Security Archive, "Memorandum of Conversation, 'Briefing of Joint Committee on Atomic Energy Staff on Defence Issues at NATO Athens Meeting,' 10 May 1962, Secret": https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/28572-document-34-memorandum-conversation-briefing-joint-committee-atomic-energy-staff (accessed October 28, 2025).

9 Jeffrey H. Michaels, "No Annihilation Without Representation: NATO Nuclear Use Decision-Making During the Cold War," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, May 2022, p. 30: https://repositori-api.upf.edu/api/core/bitstreams/e931eac7-ba4c-47c9-9f8a-1283f373bc2c/content (accessed October 28, 2025).

## THE NEW STRATEGIC SETTING

Although Russia has once again become a military and political danger to NATO, the threat situation is fundamentally different from that of the Cold War. Russia is no longer – as the Soviet Union once was – militarily superior to NATO and has also lost its former alliance system, the Warsaw Pact. This means that rapid, expansive military advances by Russia from east to west, with which the Soviet Union once sought to reach the Atlantic in a matter of weeks to create a military fait accompli before comprehensive American reinforcements could reach Europe, are no longer to be expected.

At best, limited military advances would be possible today, for example in the Baltic states where Russia could occupy parts of Estonia or Latvia under the pretext of protecting their Russian-speaking population. The aim of such measures could be to test NATO's cohesion.

In addition, Russian air operations or massive drone attacks against NATO members would be conceivable. However, this would raise the question of political rationality. The exception would be for testing NATO's resolve since air strikes or drone swarms can destroy targets but cannot occupy or permanently hold territory.

Regarding NATO's nuclear deterrent, this means that American or British nuclear strikes on NATO territory, as once anticipated against advancing Soviet forces, are hardly imaginable today. Nor is it necessary to make quick decisions about nuclear escalation before the attacker can create a fait accompli. Moreover, the aforementioned "Baltic scenario" would not require a nuclear response from NATO either. Instead, the militarily superior NATO could fight and liberate the territory occupied by Russia, cut off supplies by conventionally destroying bases and airports in the Russian hinterland, or occupy Russian territory in return – whether Kaliningrad or elsewhere.

However, the use of Russian nuclear weapons on NATO territory cannot be ruled out. In a major military conflict on NATO's eastern borders, Russia would attempt to prevent both NATO troop movements from west to east and the landing of American reinforcements in Europe by launching attacks on ports or transport hubs that could potentially be nuclear.

At the same time, the nuclear commitment of the United States within NATO has become more ambivalent. On the one hand, it has strengthened its nuclear arsenal in Europe by deploying B61-12 nuclear bombs to the British air base at Lakenheath. This has made the UK a nuclear deployment country once again (alongside Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Turkey), after the United States withdrew all its nuclear weapons from there in 2008.[10] On the other hand, President Trump has repeatedly expressed doubts about his commitment to the American nuclear umbrella over Europe, unsettling European allies.

## NINE LESSONS FOR A CONTEMPORARY NUCLEAR STRATEGY

Looking at the lessons learned and experiences gained from the nuclear debates of the Cold War with regard to the future requirements for credible nuclear deterrence, at least nine insights can be gained for the upcoming development of a NATO nuclear strategy:

1. **This strategy must be directed primarily against Russia.** Regardless of China's rise in power politics on the world stage, a direct attack by China on NATO is highly unlikely. At worst, China plays an indirect role as the United States, as a global power, must deter both Russia and China and, in the event of a military crisis in the Indo-Pacific, could relocate nuclear weapons from Europe to this region. This, in turn, would influence SACEUR's nuclear plans for Europe.

2. **There is no longer any need for NATO to escalate to nuclear weapons at the earliest possible stage.** This is due to the existing military balance of power, which is likely to develop further to Russia's disadvantage as a result of its war against Ukraine. As was evident from the US response to a potential Russian nuclear strike against Ukraine in autumn 2022, NATO would probably respond to Russian military aggression with conventional means for as long as possible, destroying major military capabilities on Russian soil. Nuclear escalation would probably only be considered if Russia had used nuclear weapons against NATO or was about to do so.

10 Artur Kacprzyk, "The United Kingdom Returns to Nuclear Sharing with the U.S.," *PISM Bulletin*, No. 88, August 11, 2025: https://pism.pl/publications/the-united-kingdom-returns-to-nuclear-sharing-with-the-us (accessed October 28, 2025).

3. **The long-standing dispute over whether the use of nuclear weapons should primarily serve military requirements or whether its purpose is primarily political has largely been resolved.** A nuclear escalation by NATO would first and foremost serve the political goal of demonstrating a willingness to defend itself against the attacker and persuading it to cease hostilities. However, this does not mean that nuclear weapons should be used purely symbolically, for example over uninhabited areas, as this could be misinterpreted as a lack of determination. As already stated in the discussions on the General Political Guidelines, the use of nuclear weapons must also cause damage to the attacker to be taken seriously as a warning.

4. **This means that future nuclear targeting must be directed primarily against Russian territory.** To a limited extent, targets in Belarus, which makes its territory available for Russian nuclear weapons and delivery systems, could also be considered. Such targeting would also have to be discussed again among NATO countries and coordinated with the plans of the United Kingdom – and possibly with France, if Paris continues to also move closer to NATO in nuclear terms.

5. **The nuclear consultation mechanisms that NATO developed in the past could essentially be retained.** Consultations would therefore primarily involve the states most affected, i.e., those that host American nuclear weapons on their territory, provide delivery systems, or offer other forms of support.[11] Since there is no longer any fear of rapid, large-scale operations by Russia from east to west, there should be sufficient time for such consultations. Although France is not represented in the NPG, it should be included in such processes. However, the ultimate decision-making authority still lies solely with the nuclear powers of NATO. Majority decisions or vetoes by individual member states remain inconceivable.

6. **Even if early use of nuclear weapons by NATO is highly unlikely, the Alliance should not deviate from its still valid "First-Use" principle**. This principle dictates that nuclear escalation can be considered even before an enemy has used nuclear weapons. So-called No First Use declarations, such as those made by India and China, are politically motivated statements of intent that have no binding effect in an emergency. By not ruling out nuclear first use in principle, NATO makes any military aggression subject to the threat of nuclear retaliation, thereby increasing the risk for the attacker. NATO's nuclear deterrence can thus prevent not only nuclear war but also conventional attacks.

7. **The procedures laid down in a future nuclear strategy must be practiced regularly in appropriate exercises.** In the past, there were biennial WINTEX (Winter Exercise) drills in which civil-military coordination in the event of a crisis and the political procedures relating to the use of nuclear weapons were rehearsed. These were discontinued at the end of the 1980s. Today, NATO's "Steadfast Noon" nuclear exercises only address the military-technical aspects of nuclear weapons deployment, such as handling bombs or loading aircraft. The political-strategic aspect is completely missing and should be reintroduced in future exercises that are similar to WINTEX.

8. **Nuclear planning must once again be given higher priority within NATO's command structure.** During the East-West conflict, the Chief Nuclear Planning Officer at NATO's military headquarters – the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) – was always a general and was only demoted to the rank of colonel in the 1990s. Restoring the rank of general would not only enhance the importance of nuclear deterrence within NATO but also send a message of determination to Russia in the context of nuclear signaling.

9. **Finally, the necessity of nuclear deterrence and the associated strategies and concepts must be communicated openly.** Only through a transparent and comprehensible presentation of defence policy necessities can public approval be obtained for the concept of deterrence, which is not easy to communicate politically.

11 Under the acronym CSNO (Conventional Support for Nuclear Operations), a number of NATO countries would provide conventional support for possible nuclear weapons deployments by providing air-to-air refueling or combating enemy air defenses.

## CONCLUSION

With Russia's war against Ukraine and Moscow's aggressive actions against individual NATO members, there is now a much greater general understanding of the need for credible defence. The significant increase in defence spending in most NATO countries, the continued support for Ukraine, and the tightening of sanctions against Moscow have met with broad public support. NATO should use this general security sensitivity to also develop a convincing strategy in the area of nuclear deterrence. Important insights from past strategic debates can form the basis for a future consensus on nuclear strategy – not as a return to old recipes but as a foundation for a new, realistic nuclear strategy. Germany, which played a decisive role in shaping the nuclear strategy debates of the Cold War, continues to bear a special responsibility in view of its political weight and geostrategic location.

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