

POSITION PAPER FOR A ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION ABOUT THE FUTURE OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS, HELD AT THE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES OF THE NETHERLANDS, ON 26 JUNE 2019

Michal Onderco*

Nuclear weapons today appear to be an artefact of a bygone era. Their development originated on the tails of the Second World War, the technology underlying their destructiveness is many decades old, and they were originally destined for a type of conflict – a major land war – which appeared impossible until recently. And yet, their possessors are currently embarking on major modernization or refurbishment projects, and countries continue to show interest in the development of such weapons.¹ The AIV report on the future of nuclear weapons calls for the development of new arms control measures, especially in the light of potentially destabilizing steps related to the development of new types of weapons in other countries, as well as changes related to nuclear doctrine.²

Both Russia and the United States recently introduced changes to their nuclear doctrines that may decrease crisis stability in case of future conflicts. In Russia's case, it is the so-called doctrine of "escalate to de-escalate".³ The doctrine basically aims at using a presumably small non-strategic nuclear weapon in a conventional conflict with the goal of deterring the opponent (presumably the West) and forcing it into de-escalation (i.e. backing down). This doctrine runs counter to the conventional logic of nuclear strategy, because detonation of a nuclear weapon should under normal circumstances be seen as an escalatory step, but it exploits the desire to avoid an all-consuming conflict which would bring the whole world into a nuclear ruin. The United States has recently announced its decision to produce low-yield nuclear weapons. Such weapons could be used in a conflict to deliver targeted strikes, and presumably be used to avoid triggering massive response. One of the problems with this strategy, however, is that the opponent (presumably Russia, but potentially also others) is not likely to wait and carefully assess the yield and damage before responding to the attack. In fact, it is not inconceivable that the nuclear response would be launched even before the detonation of the original strike.

A worrying sign is that what was supposed to prevent leaders from resorting to the use of nuclear weapons – the so-called 'nuclear taboo' is either weakening or has not been there to start with.⁴ It is difficult to think about a taboo when people prepare for, strategize, and analyze doing a certain action. The taboo is also not represented in the public opinion – if anything, existing research shows that the general public is quite willing to support using nuclear weapons, even against non-nuclear adversaries.⁵ We know that the population in the West is quite willing to support the use of nuclear weapons. As no

* Erasmus School of Social and Behavioural Sciences, Burgemeester Oudlaan 50, 3000DR Rotterdam. E-mail: onderco@essb.eur.nl

¹ SIPRI, *SIPRI Yearbook 2019: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2019). See, for example, Iran as a country interested in pursuit of nuclear weapons, Aaron Arnold et al., 'The Iran Nuclear Archive' (Cambridge, MA: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, 2019)

² Advisory Council on International Affairs, 'Nuclear Weapons in a New Geopolitical Reality. An Urgent Need for New Arms Control Initiatives', <<https://aiv-advice.nl/9w9>>

³ Jüri Luik and Tomas Jermalavičius, 'A Plausible Scenario of Nuclear War in Europe, and How to Deter It: A Perspective from Estonia', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 73/4 (2017), 233-39; Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review* (Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2018).

⁴ See Nina Tannenwald, *The Nuclear Taboo the United States and the Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons since 1945* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007). For a critical voice, see T. V. Paul, *The Tradition of Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009). For an alarmist voice, see Rebecca Davis Gibbons and Keir Lieber, 'How Durable Is the Nuclear Weapons Taboo?', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 42/1 (2019), 29-54.

⁵ Scott D. Sagan and Benjamin A. Valentino, 'Revisiting Hiroshima in Iran: What Americans Really Think About Using Nuclear Weapons and Killing Noncombatants', *International Security*, 42/1 (2017), 41-79; Janina Dill, Scott D. Sagan and Benjamin A. Valentino. "Public Opinion on the Use of Nuclear Weapons in the US, UK, France, and Israel' (Stanford, CA: Center for International Security and Cooperation, Stanford University, unpublished manuscript)

research has been done on the public attitudes towards the use of nuclear weapons in countries such as Russia, China, North Korea or Pakistan, we do not know whether such views are mirrored there, too. However, it is also important to note that the political leadership in such countries is much less constrained by what the population thinks.

In the face of such risks, it is therefore only reasonable that there are efforts to decrease nuclear risks. Especially among the activists, the recent Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons is a source of high hopes, of which draft was supported by the majority of UN members (of which, however, none of the countries actually possess nuclear weapons) but which is yet to enter into force. Even if the ban treaty, as it is known, was to enter into force, it is highly unlikely to force countries possessing such weapons into nuclear disarmament.⁶ Yet not all is lost, and a well-placed country such as the Netherlands can also use its weight to support and strengthen existing arms control mechanisms.

The AIV report outlined some options related to the support for confidence-building measures, and support for global commission. Yet, there is an even lower hanging fruit which the Netherlands could seize in this respect. There are existing international agreements which have not yet entered into force and been universalized and which could make a significant contribution towards a world free of nuclear weapons. One of these agreements is the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, which bans nuclear explosive testing. The Netherlands has a special connection to this treaty – the Dutch Ambassador Jaap Ramaker chaired the ‘endgame’ negotiations in 1996. As shown by the very recent controversy related to the accusations that Russia conducted small nuclear tests in the remote area of Novaya Zemlya, there is a lot that can be done among the countries possessing nuclear weapons to clarify what testing actually means, as well as transparency measures related to possible test sites.

At the same time, options remain for acting in favor of new arms control measures. It appears that the INF treaty will lapse in August, given that neither of the two parties is really interested in its maintenance. Even placing sanctions on Russia is not likely to help. If Russia considers intermediate-range missiles as fundamental to its security, it is very unlikely to give them up. As the Russian reaction to the EU sanctions after the seizure of Crimea demonstrates, there is a limit to the sanctions’ ability to influence Russia’s policy choices where it sees its national interests at play.

It might be relevant for Europe to start preparing for a post-INF setting. Cooperation within NATO is necessary, but as the AIV report correctly notes, Europe should bolster its self-reliance in this area as well. This could involve supporting the development of a conventional deterrent, which would involve conventional precision-strike capabilities able to strike core Russian capabilities. The upside of this option is that Europeans might actually build capabilities which Russians might want to limit, which could give Europeans a bargaining chip for future negotiations on intermediate-range missiles. European countries could also engage more in cross-domain deterrence.⁷ Possible options are multiple. One option is a development of deterrent tools in the cyber space which could significantly deter Russia from even contemplating the use of intermediate-range missiles. Of course, it remains questionable whether such tools could persuasively signal Europe’s willingness to use them, but offensive cyber weapons provide an option for Europe.⁸ The development of deterrent capabilities could help foster the development of European self-reliance as well as the improvement of the European capacity to influence global arms control debates.

⁶ For an article-length treatment of this subject, please see my earlier work: Michal Onderco, ‘Why Nuclear Weapon Ban Treaty Is Unlikely to Fulfil Its Promise’, *Global Affairs*, 3/4-5 (2017), 391-404.

⁷ Erik Gartzke and James M. Lindsay (eds.), *Cross-Domain Deterrence: Strategy in an Era of Complexity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

⁸ For a similar recommendation, see Christian Mölling and Heinrich Brauß, ‘Abschreckung Und Rüstungskontrolle. Europas Sicherheit Ohne Inf-Vertrag: Politische Und Strategische Handlungsoptionen Für Deutschland Und Die Nato’, *DGAPkompakt 1* <<https://dgap.org/de/article/getFullPDF/31901>>. See also Max Smeets and Herbert Lin, ‘Offensive Cyber Capabilities: To What Ends?’, in T. Minárik, R. Jakschis, and L Lindström (eds.), *10th International Conference on Cyber Conflict CyCon X: Maximising Effects* (Tallin: NATO CCD COE Publications, 2018), <https://ccdcoe.org/uploads/2018/10/Art-03-Offensive-Cyber-Capabilities.-To-What-Ends.pdf>.