

ASPECTS OF NATO

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Nuclear Planning

The important role assumed by nuclear weapons in NATO's strategy, and the ever-increasing complexity of political and technical problems raised by the availability of nuclear weapons, led to a need for non-nuclear members of NATO to be associated with Allied nuclear planning. This in turn led to the formation of the Nuclear Defence Affairs Committee (NDAC) and the Nuclear Planning Group (NPG) in 1967.

Membership of the Nuclear Defence Affairs Committee is open to any interested NATO country. The task of the Committee is to make proposals to the Council or the Defence Planning Committee on general policy concerning the nuclear affairs of the Alliance, whenever this is deemed necessary.

Nuclear Planning Group

The Nuclear Planning Group meets regularly twice a year at the level of Defence Ministers, and more frequently at the level of Permanent Representatives. Its task is to undertake the detailed work required as a basis for the preparation of policy and to formulate policy proposals. The Nuclear Planning Group's activities span the full range of the various uses of nuclear weapons, and associated problems. In this connection, at their various meetings, the Ministers of the thirteen countries which are members of the NPG receive briefings by the United States Secretary of Defence on the global balance of nuclear forces and hold discussions on specific aspects of current or prospective developments.

In keeping with the objectives of enhancing the participation of all members, including the non-nuclear countries, in the nuclear defence affairs of the Alliance, the major part of the NPG effort has been carried out directly by ministries in national capitals and national delegations in Brussels. To support this work, and to assist the Secretary General in arranging for meetings of Ministers and Permanent Representatives, and in managing decision-making on nuclear policy in NATO, a small Nuclear Planning Directorate was created in the International Staff in 1966, under the supervision of the Assistant Secretary General for Defence Planning and Policy.

One of the first accomplishments of the NPG was the elaboration, in collaboration with the Military Committee, of recommendations for the improvement of national participation in military operational nuclear planning at the levels of the Military Committee, the Major NATO Commands and subordinate Allied Commands. At about the same time, the NPG agreed that existing circumstances did not warrant the deployment of anti-ballistic missiles in NATO Europe.

During this introductory phase (1967–1970), the NPG generated four basic nuclear policy documents, which were endorsed by the NDAC and approved by the DPC, and which were issued as policy guidance for national initiatives and directives to the NATO Military Authorities. These concerned the initial defensive tactical use of nuclear weapons, general guidelines for a procedure to be followed during consultations on an actual use, a concept for the role of theatre nuclear strike forces, and special political guidance concerning the possible use of Atomic Demolition Munitions (ADMs).¹ All these guidelines emphasise the political role of nuclear weapons within NATO's strategic concept, the purpose of which is to convince any potential aggressor miscalculating NATO's resolve to defend the integrity of its territory and forces, that NATO is prepared to escalate to levels of conflict unacceptable to the aggressor.

In the ensuing years NPG work was aimed at further conceptual and factual implementation of NATO strategy as far as nuclear weapons were concerned. The NATO policy and strategy designed to deter aggression and to prevent war is based on the capabilities of its conventional and nuclear forces and the evident intent and expertise on the part of Alliance political decision-makers and military leaders to use them, as necessary, in a timely and flexible fashion, should deterrence fail. This leads to the maintenance of a strong, diverse and flexible nuclear posture. Furthermore, to enhance the credibility of the deterrent, the member countries of NATO must share all risks of escalation. NATO's basic doctrine and related posture is designed to convince potential enemy leaders at any time that the risks involved in initiating war against NATO would be out of all proportion to any conceivable gains.

At its core, NATO's concept is that nuclear weapons serve a fundamental political purpose in peace, in time of crisis and during hostilities. The use of nuclear weapons in defence of NATO would mark a basic qualitative change from conventional warfare. It is a fundamental principle of the Alliance, therefore, that political control over the use of nuclear weapons must always be maintained. Any use of force, including nuclear weapons, would be intended to maintain the integrity of NATO territory and forces at the lowest possible level of violence. NATO's doctrine focuses therefore on how nuclear weapons could deny victory to an aggressor in a broad range of situations. NATO theatre nuclear weapons, in this context, provide a link to strategic weapons, the ultimate deterrent. All these principles are fundamental to the defensive nature of the Alliance.

Any use of nuclear weapons by NATO would be undertaken after the fullest possible consultation within the Alliance. Consultation would permit the rapid expression of views of member governments on any request or proposal for the use of nuclear weapons in defence of NATO and indicate the solidarity of the whole Alliance in any decisions taken. The ultimate decision to release any nuclear weapon for employment remains, of course, with the nuclear power owning it.

¹ Nuclear systems designed to create obstacles such as craters and to destroy physical structures such as bridges.

The nuclear force posture, in line with NATO's basic policies and these general employment principles, needs to provide a range of options including short-range, medium and longer range theatre nuclear weapons, maritime systems, and ultimately, systems at the strategic level. To maintain the credibility of the deterrent, modernisation of certain of NATO's nuclear forces has been required from time to time. Examinations in the Nuclear Planning Group during the late 1970s led to the parallel and complementary NATO decisions of 1979 on theatre nuclear force modernisation and arms control.² At a special meeting of Foreign and Defence Ministers on 12th December, 1979, it was decided to modernise NATO's long-range theatre nuclear forces by the deployment in Europe of 572 United States ground-launched missiles, all with single warheads; to seek limitations on United States and Soviet land-based long-range theatre nuclear missile systems; to withdraw 1,000 United States nuclear warheads, thereby reducing the overall warhead level in Europe³; and to accommodate the deployment of the 572 new systems within the reduced level.

² This withdrawal was completed in 1980.

