

THE RENUCLEARIZATION OF EUROPE AND THE LIMITS OF HISTORY

As NATO calibrates its response to increased Russian reliance on nuclear weapons for regional deterrence, references to the 1979 Dual Track decision as a blueprint for policies today have become in vogue. However, calls to compete to negotiate do not fully appreciate the risks of such a strategy for alliance cohesion. They also fail to acknowledge crucial factors that helped bring about the INF Treaty and that are absent today. A closer look at the origins of the INF Treaty reveals the important role of then-U.S. President Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, who seized an opportunity to push through their ambitious arms control agendas even against considerable resistance in Moscow as well as Washington and NATO capitals. Expectations that U.S. President Biden would have the political capital and Russian President Putin the willingness to conclude a similar agreement today are misplaced. Moreover, in the history of the Cold War, weapons deployments meant to counter adversary capabilities have more often remained unchecked than they were negotiated away. Rather than trying to match Russia's non-strategic capabilities or limited nuclear options, NATO should seek to focus on its conventional deterrence and defense in ways that minimize firststrike incentives and hedge against uncertainties about America's commitment to Europe after the 2024 elections.

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against the backdrop of Russia's war against Ukraine, the military balance in Europe is shifting in NATO's favor. Russia is dedicating much of its conventional forces to the fighting in Ukraine. Analysts have observed that Moscow faces significant obstacles to rapidly rebuilding its military.¹ Meanwhile, NATO is reinforcing its conventional posture along its eastern flank. Finland has joined the alliance, and Sweden is poised to follow suit. As a result, the NATO-Russia border has more than doubled, and operations in the Baltic Sea will become much more complicated for Russia.

Russia's relative weakness should be good news for NATO. However, Moscow will likely seek to compensate for its conventional inferiority by putting even more emphasis on its nuclear forces. Even though estimates suggest that Russia has almost 2,000 warheads for nonstrategic nuclear weapons—compared to roughly 100 such U.S. arms deployed on European soil—the Russian military has already put greater emphasis on these kinds of weapons in recent years.² Even before the war, Russia had deployed nuclear-capable short-range missiles to Kaliningrad and had upgraded a nuclear weapons storage facility there.³ To shield its Ukraine invasion from possible NATO interference, Russian President Vladimir Putin and his confidants issued thinly veiled nuclear threats on a regular basis.⁴ Putin's recent announcement that he is preparing to deploy tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus is another step toward raising the profile of Russia's nuclear forces in Europe.

Confronted with Moscow's renewed emphasis on nonstrategic nuclear weapons for regional deterrence, the United States may soon face pressure to reassure European allies who are unnerved by Putin's nuclear saber-rattling. As anxieties heighten, we can expect increasing calls by NATO members for additional nuclear options. Some

1) Office of the Director of National Intelligence, "2023 Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community," Office of the Director of National Intelligence (6 February 2023): p. 14, <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/newsroom/reports-publications/reports-publications-2023/item/2363-2023-annual-threat-assessment-of-the-u-s-intelligence-community>

2) Hans M. Kristensen and Matt Korda, "United States Nuclear Weapons, 2023," *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 79, No. 1 (January 2023): p. 43, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2022.2156686>; Hans M. Kristensen, Matt Korda, and Eliana Reynolds, "Russian Nuclear Weapons, 2023," *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 79, No. 3 (May 2023): p. 174-99, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2023.2202542>. Back in 2000, with Russia's military in dire shape, Russian military doctrine lowered the threshold for the use of nonstrategic nuclear weapons; see Nikolai Sokov, "Russia's 2000 Military Doctrine," Nuclear Threat Initiative (30 September 1999), <https://www.nti.org/analysis/articles/russias-2000-military-doctrine/>. Subsequent policy documents raised the threshold again following military reform (among other factors).

3) Reuters Staff, "Russia Deploys Iskander Nuclear-Capable Missiles to Kaliningrad: RIA," Reuters (5 February 2018), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-nato-missiles/russia-deploys-iskander-nuclear-capable-missiles-to-kaliningrad-ria-idUSKBN1FP21Y>; Hans Kristensen, "Russia Upgrades Nuclear Weapons Storage Site in Kaliningrad," Federation of American Scientists (18 June 2018), <https://fas.org/blogs/security/2018/06/kaliningrad/>

4) Liviu Horovitz and Anna Clara Arndt, "One Year of Nuclear Rhetoric and Escalation Management in Russia's War against Ukraine: An Updated Chronology," SWP Working Paper (February 2023), https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/arbeitspapiere/Arndt_and_Horovitz_-_Nuclear_Chronologie_21022023.pdf

analysts and scholars have already drawn parallels to the Cold War “Euromissiles” crisis, suggesting that NATO build up nuclear arsenals in order to negotiate them away in an arms control arrangement eventually. This historical reference is deeply misleading, though. Today’s world is not the world of the 1980s, and there is no silver bullet to achieve arms control. Instead, more creative thinking is needed to strengthen NATO’s conventional deterrence and defense posture.

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The Dual Track Revisited?

To understand the historical reference to “Euromissiles,” it is necessary to recall the military balance in Europe in the mid-1970s, when the Soviet Union began deploying new SS-20 missiles, which threatened targets across Western Europe. Then German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt feared that as a consequence of a purported imbalance in terms of theater-range nuclear forces and Soviet conventional superiority, European NATO allies could become hostage to Soviet nuclear blackmail. In response, NATO foreign and defense ministers adopted the Dual Track Decision in 1979, which consisted of a defense and an arms control track. Under the defense track, the alliance would deploy intermediate-range ballistic and cruise missiles in Europe. Under the arms control track, the United States would offer to limit the new missiles if Moscow were to reciprocate.

Today, analysts see certain parallels unfolding.⁵ Accordingly, some argue that a possible deployment of new U.S. theater-range missiles would give NATO the leverage it needs to bring Russia to the negotiating table.⁶ Another option that has

5) Susan Colbourn, “Arms Control and Deterrence: The Euromissiles, Then and Now,” The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies (6 March 2023). <https://hcss.nl/report/arms-control-and-deterrence-the-euromissiles-then-and-now/>

6) John D. Maurer, “Future European Contributions to Arms Control: Compete to Negotiate,” The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies (27 February 2023), <https://hcss.nl/report/future-european-contributions-to-arms-control-compete-to-negotiate/>. Luís Simón and Alexander Lanoszka, “The Post-INF European Missile Balance,” *Texas National Security*

been put forward is the possible deployment of nuclear weapons in NATO's eastern frontline states. In fact, Polish President Andrzej Duda has already suggested that Poland could host U.S. nuclear arms under NATO nuclear sharing, i.e., the alliance's arrangement of integrating U.S. nuclear bombs into the air forces of a select number of European allies.⁷

The overarching rationale seems logical at first: build up to build down. This strategy seems to have borne fruit in the past: As a result of the Dual Track Decision, Moscow agreed to eliminate all of its ground-launched short-range and medium-range missiles under the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty with the United States, thereby easing East-West relations and ultimately contributing to the end of the Cold War. What worked once should work again.

However, such a simplistic historical comparison fails to do justice to the fortunate conditions that had to align for arms control to kick in at the end of the Cold War. It obscures the extent to which the success of INF negotiations was the product of a series of unlikely circumstances. It also ignores how close NATO came to being split over the contested missile deployment issue. Historical references to Cold War experiences are only helpful as long as their complex genesis and unique circumstances are well understood.

Personalities Matter

Chief among these Cold War circumstances was U.S. President Ronald Reagan, who, in an unlikely combination, was as much a fervent anticommunist as he was a nuclear abolitionist.⁸ This combination enabled Reagan to strike a bargain with the Soviets and to secure ratification in the U.S. Senate. His rejection of détente as a presidential candidate and the massive increase in defense spending during his first term lent him credibility among hawkish Republican senators. At the same time, Reagan eschewed much of the traditional arms control thinking and even came close to agreeing on complete nuclear abolition at the 1986 Reykjavik summit.⁹

Review, Vol. 3, No. 3 (Autumn 2020), p. 18, <http://dx.doi.org/10.26153/tsw/10224>; William Courtney, "NATO Could Consider a Nuclear Deployment of Its Own to Counter Russia," *The Hill* (19 April 2023), <https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/3958536-nato-should-consider-a-nuclear-deployment-of-its-own-to-counter-russia/>

7) Daniel Tilles, "Poland Has Discussed Hosting Nuclear Weapons with US, Says President," *Notes from Poland* (5 October 2022), <https://notesfrompoland.com/2022/10/05/poland-has-discussed-hosting-nuclear-weapons-with-us-says-president/>

8) Ronald J. Granieri, "It's Only Easy in Retrospect," in Philipp Gassert, Tim Geiger, and Hermann Wentker (eds.), *The INF Treaty of 1987: A Reappraisal* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2021): p. 57–63.

9) Svetlana Savranskaya and Thomas Blanton, "The Nuclear Abolition Package of 1986 and the Soviet Road to INF," in Philipp Gassert, Tim Geiger, and Hermann Wentker (2021): p. 71–87; Susan Colburn (2022), p. 226; Michael Krepon, *Winning and Losing the Nuclear Peace: The Rise, Demise, and Revival of Nuclear Arms Control* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021): p. 246–7.

Even though Reagan's views on nuclear arms control were inconsistent, he was able to follow through on INF talks, supported by a few close advisors and a strong public demand for arms control in a number of allied nations.¹⁰ Finally, in his Soviet counterpart Mikhail Gorbachev, Reagan found a partner who likewise had a highly ambitious arms control agenda and who was just as open to doing away with the nuclear orthodoxy. For economic reasons, the Soviet leader was intent on halting the arms race and did not shy away from sidelining the old nomenclature in order to secure an agreement.¹¹

Even if we were to witness the (unlikely) return of a conservative “Reagan 2.0” figure in U.S. politics today, Washington would still lack an ambitious partner in Moscow. Vladimir Putin has established a reputation as a destroyer of arms control. Failing to address Western concerns about Russian treaty violations adequately, he allowed the demise of the INF Treaty. In addition, Putin suspended Russia's participation in the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty in 2007 and triggered the procedure to withdraw from the agreement in May 2023 formally.

“All this suggests that Moscow has abandoned the Cold War practice of arms control as a form of limited cooperation among adversaries in pursuit of shared interests. With a partner in arms control nowhere in sight, it is unlikely that the strategy of building up arms in order to negotiate them away eventually will have any chance of success in today's competition with Russia.”

Following the same playbook, Russia suspended the implementation of the New START agreement in February 2023. All this suggests that Moscow has abandoned the Cold War practice of arms control as a form of limited cooperation among adversaries in pursuit of shared interests. With a partner in arms control nowhere in sight, it is unlikely that the strategy of building up arms in order to negotiate them away eventually will have any chance of success in today's competition with Russia.

10) Susan Colburn (2022): p. 231–35.

11) Svetlana Savranskaya and Thomas Blanton (2021): p. 83–6.

Bargaining Chips Matter

Even with the right personalities in place, building up to build down is never a foregone conclusion. In retrospect, American “Euromissiles” served as precisely the right incentive for the Soviet Union’s elimination of its SS-20s. As bargaining chips, they were cashed in when Reagan and Gorbachev signed the INF Treaty. In other historical instances, however, negotiators failed to design arms control packages that addressed asymmetric arsenals and were mutually perceived as equitable and fair.

In the early 1970s, for example, the United States began to equip its missiles with multiple warheads in an attempt to neutralize the Soviet numerical advantage in missile launchers. The Soviets soon adopted the very same technology, however, leading to an overall expansion of nuclear warheads by an order of magnitude.¹² Similarly, the Carter administration developed the air-, sea-, and ground-launched cruise missiles in order to counter Soviet intermediate-range missiles and bombers.¹³ Whereas the INF Treaty later banned the ground-launched variant, air- and sea-launched cruise missiles were never subject to any limitations. Once acquired, the technology remained a fixture for military planners and continues to plague arms control consultations to this very day.¹⁴

INF talks also succeeded because NATO had reached a consensus on the Soviet systems of concern. No such consensus is apparent today. Advocates of new INF-type missiles or of strengthening NATO capabilities to conduct “limited nuclear options” have cited, inter alia, possible Russian nuclear weapons deployments to Belarus, Russian Iskander short-range ballistic missiles, Russian intermediate-range SSC-8 cruise missiles, and Moscow’s general superiority in terms of nonstrategic nuclear weapons.¹⁵ Similarly, there is no consensus on whether Russia would have to fulfill specific preconditions, such as withdrawing from Ukraine, before arms control talks could start.

12) Robert Jervis, “The Many Faces of SALT,” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (Fall 2022): p. 198–214, https://doi.org/10.1162/jcws_a_01105

13) Richard K. Betts, “Cruise Missiles: Technology, Strategy, Politics,” *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (July 1981): p. 76.

14) Andrey A. Baklitskiy, “Solving the Strategic Equation: Integrating Missile Defense and Conventional Weapons in U.S.-Russian Arms Control,” *Journal of International Analytics*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (2020): p. 39–55.

15) William Courtney (2023); Luis Simón and Alexander Lanoszka (2020); Lydia Wachs, “Limited Nuclear Options and Extended Deterrence: Adapting to the Changing Strategic Context,” in Andrea Gilli and Pierre de Dreuzy (eds.), *Nuclear Strategy in the 21st Century: Continuity or Change?* (Rome: NATO Defense College, 2022), p. 25–32. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep47020.10>

Cohesion Matters

Beyond these enabling factors, strategists should also consider how close the alliance came to a breaking point in the early 1980s. Among NATO members, the deployment of American missiles was highly contested. Back then, several allies flatly rejected the deployment of nuclear-armed missiles on their territories, and those leaders who ultimately offered to host the missiles faced fierce opposition in their cabinets, parliaments, and on the streets. While allies stood together and weathered the storm for the deployment of new U.S. missiles in 1983, among other issues they failed to reach a common position on new short-range nuclear missiles.

Whether an alliance with thirty-two members would show unity regarding similar proposals today remains a matter of speculation. The negative experiences of alliance disunity prior to the Ukraine War do not bode well in this regard. NATO cohesion may well be brought into question should America once again elect a President with little regard for alliances and a strictly transactional approach to international security in 2024. Rather than respecting the principle of allied consensus, a potential “America First” incumbent could simply bypass NATO decision-making and deploy nuclear arms under a strictly bilateral arrangement, conditional on, for instance, an ally’s defense spending or its government’s political orientation. Such a transactional approach would clearly undermine alliance cohesion and invite Russia to exploit NATO disunity further.

In addition, NATO allies have quite diverse preferences when it comes to nuclear arms. While some allies, particularly along the central frontline with Russia, would like to see a greater emphasis on nuclear weapons, other allies continue to seek a world with fewer nuclear arms. In 2022, NATO allies Germany, the Netherlands, and Norway sent observing delegations to the First Meeting of States Parties to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons—raising eyebrows in Washington and other NATO capitals. Likewise, Sweden—slated to join NATO after Finland—attended the disarmament gathering. Dialing up the alliance’s nuclear posture against these diverging interests could become a serious gamble in terms of NATO cohesion.

An Alternative Path Forward

From today's perspective, the conclusion of the INF Treaty looks more like a historical anomaly and less like a promising blueprint for increasing European security. Instead, managing today's nuclear risks requires a more consequential rethinking of the tools necessary to enhance deterrence and enable arms control. To begin with, member states along the eastern flank are right to demand support and reassurance from the alliance in light of Russia's threats. However, new missiles or more warheads would not necessarily enable a stable cold peace. Indeed, they could create first-strike incentives for Moscow and usher in a dangerous tit-for-tat cycle with no immediate end in sight. Trying to replay the "Euromissiles" playbook could risk making a dire situation worse.

NATO must not be paralyzed by Moscow's nuclear intimidation attempts. As a matter of fact, both NATO and Russia have been uneasily constrained through mutual deterrence in the war in Ukraine.¹⁶ Concerns that Russia may be tempted to exploit a gap in NATO's escalatory options fail to appreciate that Russia's purported escalation dominance has not enabled it to prevent Western weapons supplies to Ukraine. The fact that Russia was indeed able to influence the scale and scope of weapons supplies is simply a result of nuclear deterrence that works both ways. It should be accepted as an uncomfortable reality of the nuclear age.

To reassure Central and Eastern European allies, NATO should instead strengthen conventional deterrence and defense in ways that minimize first-strike incentives and hedge against uncertainties about America's commitment to Europe after the 2024 elections.¹⁷ To that end, the alliance should rely on a confidence-building defense (C-BD) approach, the goal of which is to increase confidence in allies' ability to defend themselves. Accordingly, European allies should deploy a network of dispersed infantry units along the eastern flank, equipped with light modern weaponry such as anti-tank rockets, portable drones, and towed artillery platforms, which have already proved valuable in thwarting Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Within this network, mobile combined-arms armored units could move to strike and halt advancing enemy forces. Crucially, these units would be large enough to halt a Russian offensive without conducting offensive operations on Russian territory. Furthermore, the network and the mobile units would be structured according to the "no target principle," i.e., avoiding, as far as possible, troop concentrations that

16) Jeffrey Lewis and Aaron Stein, "Who Is Deterring Whom? The Place of Nuclear Weapons in Modern War," *War on the Rocks* (16 June 2022), <https://warontherocks.com/2022/06/who-is-deterring-whom-the-place-of-nuclear-weapons-in-modern-war/>

17) Lukas Mengelkamp, Alexander Graef, and Ulrich Kühn, "A Confidence-Building Defense for NATO," *War on the Rocks* (27 June 2022), <https://warontherocks.com/2022/06/a-confidence-building-defense-for-nato/>

could present lucrative targets for early nuclear strikes.

This so-called “spider in the web” posture would aim to deny Russian forces the ability to quickly succeed in a hypothetical invasion of NATO territory and would buy allies enough time for the arrival of reinforcements. At the same time, it would allow European NATO members to take on a greater role in defending the alliance’s eastern front. Compared to enhanced nuclear options, it could also be more acceptable to allied populations, thus mitigating the risk of displaying open disunity within the alliance. Given its inherently defensive approach, C-BD might even open up avenues for arms control with Russia down the road.

Rather than risking NATO cohesion, betting on a new Reagan-Gorbachev moment, and hoping for an equitable arms cuts deal, allies should abstain from aiding Russia’s game of renuclearizing Europe. An alternative approach was recently advocated by former Head of the Munich Security Conference Wolfgang Ischinger, who suggested that NATO could offer to reaffirm its long-standing policy of refraining from deploying nuclear weapons in eastern member states in return for Russian reciprocity vis-à-vis Belarus.¹⁸ As Europe is entering a new age of insecurity, NATO leaders must act prudently and recognize the limits of history.

18) Wolfgang Ischinger, “Noch ist es möglich, mit Putin über nukleare Abrüstung zu verhandeln [It is still possible to negotiate nuclear disarmament with Putin],” *Handelsblatt* (21 April 2023), <https://www.handelsblatt.com/meinung/kolumnen/geoeconomics-noch-ist-es-moeglich-mit-putin-ueber-nukleare-abruestung-zu-verhandeln/29100078.html>