

THE END OF NUCLEAR ARMS CONTROL?

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE NORDIC REGION

Tapio Juntunen

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The current discussion on the possible repercussions of the INF crisis have largely concentrated either on great power relations or on the level of NATO–Russia relations and the future of the transatlantic ties. This Working Paper aims to broaden the present discussion by reflecting on the potential implications of the negative trends in nuclear weapons politics and arms control from the perspective of the Nordic region.

One of the key concerns for the Nordic countries in this regard is Russia's significant arsenal of non-strategic nuclear weapons in the immediate vicinity of the region. The prospect of a looming nuclear weapons buildup in the North Sea areas and around its key locations is also something that the Nordic countries should be concerned about together with their allies and key partners. The Nordic countries should also aim to increase their agency in relation to the stalling nuclear arms control agenda. In addition to supporting the efforts to open up different possibilities to salvage the INF Treaty, the Nordic countries also have self-interest when it comes to integrating other categories of non-strategic nuclear weapons into these discussions.



TAPIO JUNTUNEN

*University instructor
Tampere University*

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INTRODUCTION

During the three decades that followed the Cold War era, the discussion on nuclear threats has concentrated on issues such as nuclear terrorism and the rise of regional nuclear powers. Now, amid the crumbling US–Russian nuclear arms control architecture – a legacy for the most part of the Cold War era – nuclear weapons politics and arms control issues have also returned to centre stage in discussions concerning the future of great power politics and the European security order.

Both the US and Russia have formally announced their intention to withdraw from the landmark Intermediate–Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. This will most likely happen in early September 2019 when the six months’ notice period on withdrawal is due to end.

The significance of the INF Treaty, signed between Mikhail Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan in 1987, cannot be overestimated, especially from the European perspective. The treaty was not just the nuclear era’s first arms control agreement that also involved significant disarmament commitments, but also the first of many rapid steps taken in the process that eventually ended the Cold War. Thus, it is worth remembering that the origins of this process were tied to the urgent need to resolve a specifically European security dilemma that was caused by the almost uncontrolled development of non–strategic nuclear weapon systems from the mid–1970s onwards.¹

The current discussion on the possible repercussions of the INF crisis has largely concentrated either on great power relations (the ‘strategic triangle’ between the US, Russia and China) or on the level of NATO–Russia relations and the future of transatlantic relations. This Working Paper broadens this discussion by reflecting on the potential implications of the aforementioned negative trends in nuclear weapons politics and arms control from the perspective of the Nordic region. The underlying idea here is to point out that regional security concerns are easily (though not always intentionally) disregarded when the focus is

pronouncedly on strategic issues and stability between the leading nuclear weapon states.

The paper starts by elaborating on recent trends in Russia’s nuclear posture, especially its non–strategic nuclear weapon systems in the immediate vicinity of the Nordic region. How Russia’s declared nuclear doctrine should be interpreted will also be elaborated in this context. From there the discussion moves on to recent changes in the US nuclear posture, again with the aim of reflecting on the possible unintended consequences that these changes might have in Northern Europe. The Working Paper concludes with an estimation of the significance of some of the key proposals put forward to resolve the INF crisis.

RUSSIA’S NUCLEAR WEAPONS BUILDUP AROUND THE NORDIC REGION

Understood in both the geostrategic and the political sense, the Nordic countries belong to a broader Nordic–Baltic region. The states within the region are tied together by several overlapping platforms of foreign and security policy cooperation and partnership structures.² Moreover, the Nordic countries are traditionally presented as a security community, despite the differences in their security policy orientations and strategic cultures.³ Furthermore, in the context of nuclear weapons politics, Russia’s strategic capabilities in the vicinity of the Nordic region make it fruitful to approach it as a relatively discernible geostrategic area nestled inside the wider European and global security constellations.

Russia has significant geoeconomic and strategic ambitions in the High North. The aforementioned dynamics in nuclear weapons politics will most likely increase Russia’s ongoing efforts to reinforce its military presence and protective forces around its key naval bases in the Kola Peninsula – the mainstay of

1 See Holloway 2015.

2 Iso–Markku et al. 2018.

3 Juntunen & Pesu 2018, 130. A security community is a group of people or political units that is integrated through practical, social and identity–based ties to an extent that the members of the community are habitually assured that they will not use political violence against each other in order to resolve disputes (see Adler & Barnett 1998, 6).

its nuclear submarine forces close to the Finnish and Norwegian borders.⁴ Indeed, there are already increasing signs of political tensions and examples of hostile signalling in the northern parts of the region, evident especially during military exercises.⁵

Although we have only started to witness the first commercial cargo and tanker ships moving between Europe and Asia via the Northern Sea Route without an icebreaker escort, the military buildup in the region is already well underway.⁶ In addition to the considerable Russian efforts to strengthen its old Cold War bases in the North, other states within the region have also increased the number of military exercises (such as the Trident Juncture) and rotational marine forces in the area.

One of the key concerns for the Nordic countries in this regard is Russia's significant arsenal of non-strategic nuclear weapons. Russia's leadership reasons that it needs its non-strategic nuclear weapons to offset NATO's superiority in conventional capabilities as well as the rising challenge posed by China in the Far East. Russia is estimated to have almost 2,000 non-strategic nuclear warheads that can be deployed by planes, ships and ground forces – delivery options that Russia is continuously modernizing and improving.⁷

Much of the public discussion on Russia's non-strategic nuclear capabilities has focused on ground-launched dual-capable short-range missile systems, such as the SS-26 (Iskander-M) short-range ballistic missiles and the alleged INF Treaty-violating dual-capable SSC-8 (9M729) cruise missile. The focus on these capabilities conceals the fact that the navy actually has the biggest non-strategic nuclear weapon inventory in the Russian military.⁸

Indeed, unlike the US, France and the UK, Russia has several development projects that aim to introduce new sea-based non-strategic capabilities into its arsenal in the near future. These development programmes, such as the new high-precision Kalibr-M land-attack cruise missile, point towards increasing concern over the stability of sea-based deterrence.⁹ These developments have the potential to deepen the

reciprocal cycle of mistrust and increase pressure to respond to the Russian missile threat in a tit-for-tat manner, both on land and at sea. This would mean increasing tensions and a further buildup of conventional forces near the borders of the Baltic states, Finland, and Norway.

The developments in the northern maritime areas also 'radiate' towards the Baltic Sea area. The simultaneous activities of Russia's Northern Fleet during the ZAPAD 2017 exercise, for example, indicate that Russia perceives Western Military District and Northern Fleet Joint Strategic Command as tightly coupled.¹⁰ Indeed, there are reasonable grounds to assume that in addition to the military buildup in the north, Russia is upgrading its storage sites for non-strategic dual-capable weapon systems in the Kaliningrad oblast near the Polish border.¹¹

DEBATING RUSSIA'S DECLARED NUCLEAR DOCTRINE

The prospect of a nuclear arms buildup without the existing arms control agreements will most likely also increase Russia's assertiveness in relation to its tactical nuclear weapons and dual-capable short-range missile deployments around the Baltic Sea area and Kola Peninsula. This, in turn, will also probably lead to an increase in permanent protective ground forces within the region.

The increasing significance of non-strategic nuclear weapons is also visible in the development of nuclear doctrinal thinking. One of the most worrisome recent developments in this regard has been the revival of strategic conceptions emphasizing theatre-level escalation control capabilities.¹² This is evident in the discussion on the need to lower the threshold for limited nuclear strikes. The development of more 'discriminate' and increasingly accurate nuclear weapons blurs the (moral, political and technological) division between nuclear and conventional weapons – a discussion that is in many ways reminiscent of the debates in the 1970s and 1980s on how to limit the chances of uncontrolled escalation with flexible and selective counterforce strike options.¹³

4 Kristensen & Kondra 2019, 78–79.

5 BBC: "Russia suspected of jamming GPS signal in Finland", 12 November 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-46178940>.

6 Mikkola 2019, 5. See also *the Guardian*: "Melting Arctic ice opens new route from Europe to east Asia", 28 September 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/sep/28/melting-arctic-ice-opens-new-route-from-europe-to-east-asia>.

7 Kristensen & Kondra 2019, 79–80.

8 *Ibid.*

9 Episkopos 2019. The missile might also be deployable on land should the INF Treaty cease to exist.

10 Staalesen 2017.

11 Kristensen 2018.

12 See Larsen & Kartchner 2014.

13 See Freedman 2003, 360–391.

Moreover, the increasing accuracy of nuclear delivery systems and rapid developments in remote sensing systems are making nuclear forces more vulnerable to decapitating first strikes, especially in the case of regional nuclear powers with moderate-sized nuclear forces. These developments might not only undermine nuclear deterrence, but also increase the ‘attractiveness’ of counterforce nuclear first strikes as a coercive, even preemptive military option.¹⁴

These are concerns and dynamics that the Nordic and Baltic countries should also take into consideration. Russia has particularly emphasized the flexibility of its nuclear strike options in order to enhance deterrence against NATO’s ability to project conventional power in and around Europe. Russia’s nuclear posture is in many ways a mirror image of NATO’s doctrine of flexible response during the Cold War.

That said, there is a vibrant ongoing debate on the true nature and extent of Russia’s so called ‘de-escalation’ doctrine – a debate that can be summed up in three broad interpretations.¹⁵ The first interpretation still regards the threshold of actual first-use of nuclear weapons as extremely high. But exactly because of the magnitude of this threshold, together with Russia’s state-of-the-art non-strategic nuclear forces (including low-yield nuclear warheads), this line of reasoning considers that it gives Russia a certain political, military and psychological incentive for risk-taking at a conventional level, including the grey area of various hybrid interference methods.

The second interpretation is the most alarmist or offensive. It assumes that Russia is ready to conduct a limited surprise nuclear attack at an early stage of a larger military campaign against the West in order to demoralize and paralyze the opponent. This interpretation considers that Russia is not building its posture merely to deter NATO’s conventional superiority, but in order to change the status quo with the help of its non-strategic nuclear weapons. The third interpretation, on the other hand, sees Russia’s de-escalation doctrine and related capabilities as defensive in nature. Here Russia is merely understood as reinforcing its nuclear options so that it can deter large-scale Western aggression that could jeopardize the existence of the current political regime.

Despite Russia’s increasingly assertive language on nuclear threats, there seems to be grounds for rejecting

the most alarming interpretations of Russia’s de-escalation doctrine.¹⁶ This also points to the need to maintain a certain level of strategic restraint when considering an accurate response to the perceived Russian threat in this context. That said, this does not alter the fact that Russia is already in the second half of a decades-long process of modernizing its strategic and non-strategic nuclear forces.

CHANGES IN US NUCLEAR STRATEGY AND POSTURE

When it comes to the allies and key partners of the Nordic countries, one of the main concerns is the visibly unambitious approach to arms control shown by the Donald Trump administration. This has already led to intra-alliance tensions within NATO, although the Western alliance managed to reproach Russia’s INF Treaty violations in a concerted manner. As pointed out by one eminent expert recently: ‘to best ensure [that] NATO cohesion and solidarity is maintained, the United States needs to stay in the nuclear arms control game proactively and lead global efforts with a genuine sense of urgency and priority’.¹⁷ This ambition is definitely something that the non-NATO member Nordic countries should also share.

Moreover, in addition to acting as arms control advocates, the Nordic countries should not shy away from discussing the possible effects of the recent changes in US nuclear doctrine and posture. Although experts generally agree that there is a high level of continuity from the nuclear strategic thinking of the previous administrations, the Trump administration’s decision to reverse the long-standing US policy of reducing reliance on nuclear weapons implies a major shift in US nuclear weapons policy.¹⁸

The underlying rationale of the new capabilities introduced in the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR 2018)¹⁹ is to respond to Russia’s and China’s perceived ‘deterrence gap’, especially in non-strategic capabilities, by adding more ‘tailored’ and ‘flexible’ options to the US arsenal. The first step in this process has been the development of a new submarine-launched low-yield nuclear warhead (W76-2) that is planned to be

14 Lieber & Press 2017.

15 See also ven Bruusgaard 2017; Kroenig 2018.

16 Tétrais 2018.

17 Bell 2018, 13.

18 Péczeli 2018.

19 Office of the Secretary of Defence 2018.

delivered by the Navy's Trident ballistic missiles.²⁰ The NPR 2018 also introduced a development programme for a new nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missile.²¹

The decision to develop a new low-yield nuclear warhead has initiated a lively debate on the future of the US nuclear strategy and posture. Critics of the decision have challenged the W76-2 project as potentially destabilizing and redundant. They have pointed out that the US already possesses tactical nuclear capabilities and highly sophisticated conventional forces for the task. This line of reasoning also implies that the offensive nature of Russia's 'escalate to de-escalate' nuclear doctrine has been somewhat exaggerated in the NPR 2018.

Critics have also pointed out that the deployment of the W76-2 warhead could cause a 'discrimination problem'. The idea here is that the adversary – namely Russia – would not be able to distinguish what kind of warhead the launched SLBM would carry. Although a very unlikely scenario as such, the launch of a W76-2 trident missile would increase the risk of unintended escalation and miscalculated launch-on-warning responses.²² Given the geostrategic location of the Nordic region and its proximity both to Russia's nuclear weapon deployments and the North Atlantic, the states within the region should aim towards a shared understanding of the wider military-political repercussions of this dilemma.²³

Another point of criticism towards the NPR 2018 has been its more 'permissive' declaratory language on the use of nuclear weapons.²⁴ It should also be remembered that NATO relies on a nuclear 'first use' policy (although this scenario is described as an 'extremely remote' possibility). Moreover, in addition to US extended deterrence commitments within NATO, the alliance has also recently stated that its nuclear deterrence posture relies on US forward-deployed nuclear weapons in Europe.²⁵

Despite the aforementioned critique, the US response in the NPR 2018 can be considered a rather moderate one, especially if compared to Russia's long ongoing modernization project for its nuclear forces

(both strategic and non-strategic). That said, the combination of new weapon systems *and* the perceived need to lower the threshold of nuclear first use in order to enhance deterrence makes even moderate changes in the strategic balance more worrying. Although the *tradition* of nuclear non-use will most likely not falter overnight,²⁶ together with the intensifying great power rivalry the aforementioned trends might further erode the psychological and military separation of nuclear and conventional weapons.

Moreover, the rhetoric on the use of nuclear weapons has toughened. Although recent empirical studies indicate that nuclear weapons are relatively inefficient tools for coercive diplomacy,²⁷ coercive language and loose talk on the use of nuclear weapons is also on the rise. A spate of recent examples from Donald Trump's loose talk about 'nukes' and Russia's sabre-rattling during the Ukraine crisis to North Korea's blatant nuclear signalling testifies that world leaders increasingly consider nuclear weapons from the vantage point of their immediate political value.

All of these trends can also have indirect negative consequences in Northern Europe. The introduction of new non-strategic capabilities as a response to similar capabilities deployed within or in the vicinity of the Nordic region (namely Russia's significant arsenal of tactical nuclear weapons and dual-capable short-range options) is likely to deepen the sense of the wider post-Ukraine 2014 security dilemma in and around the region. Although some of the potential regional repercussions stemming from the present arms control crisis and the concomitant reinforcement of nuclear deterrence might be unintentional in nature, the consequences remain real.

FILLING THE INF VACUUM – IS THERE A WAY FORWARD?

It is well known that the security-political orientations of the Nordic countries are not symmetrical and that they are tightly networked with their allies and partners in the West. In relation to nuclear weapons and arms control, however, the states share some key common denominators. The tradition of peacetime nuclear restraint exercised by NATO members Norway and Denmark aligns with the historical interest in nuclear

20 In June 2019, the future of the W76-2 warhead seemed doubtful after the House Armed Services Committee, controlled by the Democrats, prohibited funds for its deployment (Gould 2019).

21 Mehta 2019.

22 Narang 2018.

23 For an excellent summary of the W76-2 debate, see Woolf 2019.

24 See Krepon 2018.

25 Bell 2018, 6.

26 See Paul 2009.

27 Sechser & Fuhrmann 2017.

nonproliferation and arms control diplomacy exercised by Finland and Sweden.

As already implied above, the Nordic countries have a shared interest in including all categories of non-strategic nuclear weapons on the arms control agenda. The idea of limiting the presence of tactical nuclear weapons in Europe is by no means new. To give just one example, in 2010 Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt and Polish Foreign Minister Radek Sikorski suggested that Russia and the US should commit to substantial reductions and geographical deployment limitations on their tactical nuclear weapon systems in and around Europe.

Finnish Foreign Minister Timo Soini made a similar proposition during NATO's disarmament conference in Helsinki in 2017. Soini suggested that a clearer division between nuclear and conventional weapons should be pursued both at the level of military doctrines and exercises through increasing confidence-building measures between the nuclear weapon states.²⁸

When it comes to the INF debacle, one possible way forward for the Nordic countries (and European states more generally) could be to further elaborate the proposals to limit the geographical scope of the INF treaty to Europe only. In order to achieve this, the INF Treaty would have to cease to exist as an agreement with global reach and Russia should move its INF missiles (back) to the Asian side of the Urals.²⁹ Nordic leaders have already referred to similar ideas. Finnish President Sauli Niinistö, for example, brought up a similar solution during the Munich Security Conference in February 2019.³⁰

In theory, the European INF Treaty would resolve the concern shared by the US and Russia on the need to address Chinese INF capabilities. That said, several caveats need to be taken into account. The proposal would *de facto* require Russia to admit that it has been in material breach of the Treaty – a violation that the US, NATO and individual NATO countries (France and the Netherlands) have already confirmed. Thus, the US and NATO are not likely to accept any regional arrangements without Russia doing something to its treaty-violating road-mobile 9M729 cruise missile battalions west of the Urals. It should also be remembered that Putin's Russia has been openly critical of treaties and arrangements (such as the CFE Treaty) that

constrain its sovereign right to deploy forces within its own territory.³¹

Moreover, China must be included in the equation as the European INF Treaty could increase tensions between Russia, China and the US in the Far East, a prospect that Russia particularly wants to avoid. US allies in the Far East would also most likely oppose the idea of increasing the presence of Russian intermediate-range missiles within the region. These tensions could also 'radiate' to the European North given the increasing strategic importance of the Northern Sea Route for China as well.

Despite its evolving and expanding geoeconomic aspirations, China considers itself first and foremost a land power, especially when it comes to nuclear weapons.³² Indeed, China's regional deterrence relies heavily on intermediate-range ground-launched missile capabilities. As long as Russia and the US maintain a significant lead in strategic nuclear weapons capabilities, and as long as the INF negotiations do not include India (and Pakistan, and so forth) in order to take China's regional concerns into account, it will remain very reluctant to participate in serious discussions on a multilateral INF agreement. Lastly, any serious verification measures for this kind of multilateral agreement would be extremely challenging to develop and implement.

Despite these caveats, the Nordic countries could also use the proposal as a platform for asserting the specific regional security concerns together with their allies. Sico van de Meer and Michal Onderco have even proposed that an informally agreed INF moratorium could be achieved between the European Union and Russia. Here Russia would pledge not to target INF missiles at Europe in exchange for a pledge by EU countries not to deploy similar weapons on their territories.³³

Despite the obvious shortcomings of the aforementioned proposals, the Nordic countries have self-interest in highlighting the often-neglected sub-strategic repercussions of nuclear weapons politics. They also have a favourable strategic culture to act proactively. Huge obstacles will remain, from the lack of political will to the lack of expertise in the technical aspects of arms control agreements, but in the present climate even tentative dialogue ignited by new proposals seems like a positive step forward.

28 Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2017.

29 Kühn 2019.

30 Munich Security Conference 2019.

31 The author is indebted to Leo Michel for this observation.

32 See Zhao 2019.

33 van der Meer & Onderco 2019.

CONCLUSION

The deterioration of the nuclear arms control architecture and the increasing emphasis placed on nuclear deterrence is arguably a symptom of more profound fluctuations in great power politics. The old bilateral solutions and mindset seem to be incompatible when it comes to facing the dynamics stemming from the increasingly multipolar competition and technological change. The Nordic and Baltic regions would probably be among the first to face the consequences if the ongoing development towards more assertive nuclear posturing and doctrinal formulations leads to more serious confrontations.

The recent shift towards more permissive language and technologies enhancing the ‘usability’ of nuclear weapons is a matter of concern that the Nordic countries should also discuss with their allies and partners. Even if justified as a tailored and necessary effort to enhance deterrence against Russia’s ability and assumed

willingness to use tactical nuclear weapons as coercive tools during crises, these efforts might also increase the risk of misperceptions. The prospect of an intensifying nuclear weapons buildup, especially in the context of the North Sea areas, is something that should concern the Nordic countries.

Although the prospect of replacing the INF Treaty with a specific European solution seems distant, the Nordic countries should nevertheless actively engage in and promote discussions to resolve the present deadlock. This would also give them a chance to reiterate their concern about Russia’s tactical weapons and sea-based non-strategic nuclear weapons in the vicinity of the region. Moreover, from the European and Nordic perspective in particular, it is also important to pay attention to the potential unintended regional repercussions of the nuclear politics, whether developments in capabilities and postures, declared doctrines, or in the efforts to maintain a strategic balance through new openings in arms control.

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