THE ROYAL SWEDISH
ACADEMY OF WAR SCIENCES
Proceedings and Journal

Appendix

The Tug of War

NATO's Conventional Forces in the Shadow of Russian Nuclear Brinkmanship

by Dennis Gyllensporre

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Resumé

NATO faces major challenges to urgently increase military capabilities in Europe. It is urgent to understand and continuously reassess the constraints imposed to avoid a Russian nuclear escalation. By combining theoretical perspectives and practical examples, the article aims to provide a deeper understanding of the topic. The study identifies the need for an analytical framework to better support decision-makers in their strategic considerations. The paper identifies three areas for strengthening conventional capabilities: enhancing the credibility of NATO's nuclear deterrent, making more proactive use of conventional forces, and incorporating self-imposed limitations into comprehensive risk analyses. Each area has unique leadership requirements to enable the necessary changes.

IMAGINE A WORLD devoid of nuclear weapons.[2] How might NATO have responded to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 in such a scenario? Furthermore, how would deterrence in the Baltic Sea region be arranged? This counterfactual reasoning can be readily dismissed, as a world without nuclear weapons will not materialise in the foreseeable future, if at all. Even if it did, Russia would act differently, accounting for its strategic imposition. Although the hypothetical scenario strays from reality, it remains a valuable intellectual exercise to shed light on the constraints that nuclear threats impose on employing conventional forces. It is reasonable to assume that, without the nuclear threats, NATO might have adopted a more assertive posture in this fictitious reality. The underlying evaluations of acceptable risks in a nuclear threat scenario are based more on political and military judgments than facts, emphasising that strategic decision-making is more of an art than a science.

As such, the boundaries of acceptable action may shift over time. A recent statement by President Emmanuel Macron about deploying forces to Ukraine and deliberations on a possible sea blockade in the Baltic Sea by the Estonian Defense Forces Commander, General Martin Herem, testify of this ongoing evolution.[3]

The perennial question for military capabilities—"how much is enough?"[4]— has an often overlooked but crucial supporting sub-question: "to what extent should conventional forces be limited to prevent an all-out nuclear war?" With significant strides in strengthening its conventional forces, NATO has experienced a shift since the 2023 Vilnius Summit. The 2% Defence Investment Pledge has transformed from an aspirational goal into a baseline requirement. As NATO member nations hike their defence budgets,

other significant constraints on enhancing military power are becoming more apparent, including manpower shortages, industrial capacity limitations, bureaucratic hurdles, and insufficient infrastructure. While these 'production factors' are vital, another critical element remains underappreciated: the deliberately engineered constraints on available capabilities. These caveats, designed to avert nuclear escalation, significantly shape the effectiveness of conventional forces. Consider this: if a country refrains from mobilising its forces to avoid provoking a nuclear attack, the actual defence spending—whether 2% or 4% of GDP—becomes largely irrelevant. Of course, nations intend to deploy their conventional forces for defence if needed, but not without constraints hindering their efficiency. Fortunately, some of these limitations can be swiftly and cost-effectively reversed. Given the current dire security situation, this often-neglected area demands urgent attention. The potential consequences of nuclear war and the associated threats should not paralyse this discussion. Instead, it is increasingly crucial to balance mitigating the risk of nuclear conflict with ensuring that conventional forces can effectively deter and defend. This article aims to contribute to this essential dialogue by illuminating the interplay between nuclear weapons and conventional forces, and by examining the theoretical and practical insights on the subject that can inform decision-makers. Notably, because a considerable portion of assessments and relevant information lies beyond the purview of public scrutiny, the contribution can only be modest.

Nuclear policy in theory and practice in NATO

There is a striking resemblance between the early theories on nuclear weapons and NATO's current nuclear policy. Thomas Schelling, a leading theorist in the field and Nobel laureate, applied game theory and economic modelling to make the case that nuclear weapons alter the strategic landscape by attaching steep costs to conflict. This, he argued, deters wars by emphasising the threat of their use rather than their actual employment. Schelling concluded that nuclear arms promote strategic stability by preventing large-scale wars through the threat of mutual destruction.[5]

Analogously, the Alliance's current policy stipulates that its arsenal serves as a mechanism for conflict prevention: "NATO's nuclear capability is to preserve peace, prevent coercion and deter aggression."[6] Public communication does not elaborate on the possible use of nuclear weapons during a conflict, except as a last resort. This was not always the case. During the Cold War, NATO faced a disadvantage in conventional forces, and nuclear weapons served as more than just a deterrent. They compensated for the lack of conventional strength. NATO adopted a policy of 'massive retaliation,' threatening to use nuclear weapons in response to any Soviet aggression. The policy aimed to deter a Soviet conventional attack by ensuring that any conflict, even a limited one, could escalate to nuclear war, thereby making the costs of aggression prohibitively high.

By the late 1960s, the Alliance transitioned to a 'flexible response' strategy. The policy aimed to provide NATO with various options, including conventional and nuclear responses, to counter any level of aggression. The idea was to control escalation and avoid the automatic use of nuclear weapons, thereby increasing the credibility of its deterrence. After the Cold War, NATO significantly reduced its reliance on nuclear weapons. The strategic environment of reduced Russian threat led to the withdrawal

of tactical nuclear weapons from Europe, although some remained as part of its continued deterrence strategy. The focus shifted towards non-proliferation and arms control, aligning with broader global efforts towards reducing nuclear arsenals. Recent years have seen a renewed emphasis on nuclear deterrence in response to perceived and direct threats from Russia.[7]

Contemporary discussions within NATO involve balancing deterrence needs with disarmament goals, reflecting differing views among member states about the role of nuclear weapons in collective security. Some members advocate for further reductions or even the removal of nuclear weapons from Europe, while others stress the importance of maintaining credible deterrence against potential adversaries.[8] Additionally, in the realm of policy, perceptions regarding the utility of nuclear weapons have shifted, also including in the US, where the strategic culture surrounding nuclear options is most pronounced. Fred Kaplan provides a detailed exploration of a 2016 wargaming exercise conducted by the Obama administration. During this simulation, the National Security Council (NSC) Deputies meeting participants grappled with a scenario where a Baltic nation was invaded. As NATO intervened, Russia escalated the conflict by launching nuclear strikes on NATO forces or a base in Germany. This provoked intense debate, leading to a decision favouring conventional military action coupled with diplomatic initiatives.

Subsequently, the NSC Principal's Meeting re-examined the same scenario, sparking vivid deliberations about imposing sanctions before ultimately choosing a nuclear retaliation. In deciding on targets, the idea of striking Kaliningrad was discarded since it is Russian soil. Similarly, targeting Russian forces in the Baltic state was avoided to protect allied civilians. The final decision was a strike on Belarus, despite its non-involvement in the conflict. Hence, the action would not impact the military situation.[9] In recent testimony, William Perry, former Secretary of Defense during the Clinton administration and a key architect of the US deterrence policy still largely in effect, expressed a similar sentiment. He opposes the use of nuclear weapons in retaliation to a nuclear attack, arguing that such a response would almost certainly escalate into a full-scale nuclear war.[10] Similarly, investigative journalist Annie Jacobsen contributes to the debate by drawing on interviews with U.S. military and civilian experts and decision-makers. Her work infers that even a limited nuclear exchange is likely to escalate into a full-scale nuclear war, resulting in catastrophic global destruction.[11]

As if their conclusions were not grave enough, one might surmise that reluctance to fully accept the necessary existential consequences of nuclear balance could embolden Russia in its expansionist pursuits, utilizing both nuclear weapons and conventional forces.

Nuclear policy in theory and practice in the Soviet Union/ Russia

When the Soviet Union developed nuclear capabilities in 1949, the policy focused on achieving and maintaining parity with the US and counterbalancing its strategic advantage. During the 1960s - 1970s, the Soviet Union embraced the doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD). Nuclear weapons were seen as deterrence tools to prevent any direct military confrontation. As tensions heightened in the late Cold War, Soviet nuclear strategy included the potential for

flexible use of nuclear weapons, not just as deterrents but as strategic tools in escalating conflicts to secure advantageous positions or de-escalate conflicts on favourable terms.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia inherited most of the Soviet nuclear arsenals. The early post-Soviet era under President Boris Yeltsin marked significant nuclear arms reduction initiatives and a declared reduction in the reliance on nuclear weapons for its military strategy. During the pre-Putin Era, Russia continued to reduce its tactical nuclear weapons arsenal, although concerns about NATO expansion led to discussions within Russia about potentially reversing these reductions. Nuclear weapons remained central to Russia's security doctrine, but there was an increased emphasis on their political rather than military use.[12]

The Alliance's out-of-area operations led Moscow to reinterpret the organisation from a defensive enterprise to an offensive military force. The NATO air campaign in Kosovo in 1999 was perceived as an attack against fellow Slavic people and a demonstration of Western arrogance.[13] At the same, Russia's conventional military inferiority was exposed.[14] The earlier no-first-use pledge was rejected early in President Vladimir Putin's tenure due to its perceived conventional inferiority. The 2000 Military Strategy acknowledged that nuclear weapons could be employed in response to "large-scale aggression utilizing conventional weapons in situations critical to the national security of the Russian Federation."[15]

Russia's 'escalation for de-escalation' strategy has evolved since 2000, shifting from its original focus on protecting Russia from experiences similar to Serbia's fate in 1999. Although Russian policy documents offer some insights, they intentionally keep the specific conditions for the intentional use of nuclear weapons ambiguous. Military posturing and strategic communications add further opacity. Since 2010, the Russian Military Doctrine has sought to link the use of nuclear weapons with the survival of the state. Should a conventional conflict threaten the existence of a state, possessing nuclear weapons might escalate the situation from a conventional to a nuclear conflict. What constitutes an existential threat can be construed differently in Russia and within the Alliance.[16]

Increased self-confidence based on progress on the military reform and the incursions in Ukraine allowed for a change in the 2014 Military Doctrine. The introduction of conventional deterrence as a part of the policy has at least in theory heightened the nuclear threshold and opened the possibility that conflicts of the same nature could be initiated and resolved without the need for nuclear weapons. Still, the 2018 U.S. Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) evaluated that Moscow might adopt a policy of first-use of nuclear weapons to de-escalate a conflict on terms advantageous to Russia.[17] Although the policy on nuclear doctrine issued in 2020 maintains that Russia "considers nuclear weapons exclusively as a means of deterrence."[18] Notwithstanding, numerous threats of nuclear retaliation have been issued toward Allies and prospect members since February 2022.

Strategic interactions

After a period of détente, the strategic competition has made continued efforts for nuclear arms control more difficult. In 2018, the US, the dominant nuclear power in the Alliance, withdrew from the INF (Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces) Treaty after allegations of Russian violations of the accord. With significant difficulties, the new START agreement from 2011 was extended, but only

for another five years in 2021, setting up measures to limit strategic offensive nuclear arms.[19] These circumstances constitute an uncertain and unpredictable substrate for considering how nuclear deterrence impacts NATO's conventional forces.

It is noteworthy how NATO and Russia have adopted different strategic options, creating an asymmetry in their interactions. Schelling construed coercion as an overarching concept encompassing deterrence and compellence as strategies that involve the threat or limited use of force alongside other tools to enhance the credibility of these threats.[20] Deterrence aims to dissuade an opponent from taking an undesirable action. Schelling argued that deterrence requires less effort than compellence, as it involves maintaining the status quo rather than changing it. In contrast to deterrence, compellence seeks to change the status quo by compelling an opponent to take a specific action. This requires the opponent to undertake an action they would not have done otherwise. Consequently, they differ in how they use nuclear weapons in bargaining. While NATO applies a strict deterrence policy, Russia leverages its nuclear power by pursuing deterrence and compellence in tandem.

Aware of the messaging by its nuclear member states (France, the UK and the USA), NATO conducts its nuclear signalling primarily through the Strategic Concepts, Deterrence and Defence Posture Reviews (DDPR) and its summit declarations.[21] Communication on nuclear ambitions is infrequent, cautious, and concise. Conversely, Russia's communication is frequent, ambiguous, and lavish. The asymmetry can partly be explained by the fundamental difference between a multilateral institution with 32 members that needs consensus and an autocratic state with centralised leadership.

Russia's strategy goes beyond mere deterrence, actively employing compellence through a method known as Reflexive Control, a concept refined since the Cold War. This approach is crucial to Russia, focusing on manipulating adversaries' perceptions and decisions to achieve its goals. Reflexive Control is deeply integrated into military and political strategies, underlining its significance in understanding Russian manoeuvres. By strategically disseminating selected information, Reflexive Control guides adversaries to make voluntary decisions that ultimately counter their interests.[22] Another related factor is the ambiguity of Russian intentions. The occasionally high-pitched rhetoric can never be safely disregarded. Russia's nuclear strategy hinges on Schelling's concept of "a threat that leaves something to chance."[23]

Russia's compellence contributed to preventing Ukraine from becoming an ally.[24] At the 2008 Bucharest Summit, NATO declared that Ukraine and Georgia "will become members of NATO."[25] However, Russia has consistently opposed NATO's expansion eastwards, perceiving it as a direct threat to its sphere of influence and national security, raising concerns that it might respond with nuclear escalation. Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov stated that "Russia would do its utmost not to allow Georgia and Ukraine into NATO."[26] This stance was underscored by Russia's military incursion in Georgia later that year. The Bucharest Summit's decision tested the limits of Russia's tolerance, leading Moscow to fear that the membership prospects for Georgia and Ukraine could gain unstoppable momentum.[27] Some NATO members, including Germany and France, were cautious about provoking Russia further and the accession process was never initiated.[28]

NATO has taken steps to enhance its assertiveness. In 2019, the Military Committee approved a new NATO Military Strategy (MC400/4). This was followed by the approval of a concept for Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area (DDA) by defence ministers in 2020, discussed below. The result is a markedly strengthened deterrence posture characterised by forward-deployed rotational troops, enhanced reaction forces, and follow-on forces.[29] Despite these measures, Russia has repeatedly threatened the use of nuclear weapons. When Finland and Sweden applied for NATO membership, Russian officials issued statements on a nuclear build-up in the Baltic Sea area.[30] In March 2023, Putin announced the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus, marking the first time since the Soviet era that Russia had stationed nuclear weapons outside its borders. This move was seen as a significant escalation in nuclear posturing towards NATO and a response to the arms supply by NATO allies to Ukraine.[31]

More recently, in May 2024, Putin announced a tactical nuclear weapons exercise in response to what Moscow said were threats from the allied nuclear states.[32] The Russian leadership aims to pressure the allies to reduce their support for Ukraine.[33] The *modus operandi* fits well with Reflexive Control. The impact on NATO and its allies is difficult to assess. Arguably, the signalling has slowed Western decision-making. While sometimes making veiled threats, they also participated in international efforts and made statements that seemingly aimed to reduce the rhetoric of nuclear escalation.[34]

At this juncture, it is prudent to review the interplay between conventional and nuclear capabilities in both theory and practice to better understand the principles that could govern decisions within the Alliance on limiting conventional forces to avoid nuclear escalation.

The interplay between conventional and nuclear capabilities in theory

Theories on the interplay between conventional and nuclear military capabilities are divided into two primary perspectives. One regards conventional forces as integral to nuclear deterrence, while the other views them as a backup if nuclear deterrence fails. Schelling argued that nuclear weapons primarily deter wars by highlighting the threat of their use, not their actual employment. He emphasised the psychological and strategic advantages of nuclear capabilities, which facilitate complex forms of deterrence and compellence that manage risk and uncertainty, influencing the broader dynamics of international conflicts. Schelling suggested that conventional forces gain importance in bargaining and deterrence roles in a stable nuclear environment.[35]

Conversely, Edward Luttwak, another prominent strategist, offered a pragmatic critique of the heavy reliance on nuclear deterrence, viewing it as potentially destabilising. He championed robust conventional capabilities to ensure effective military responses that avoid escalating to nuclear confrontations. Luttwak argued that excessive focus on nuclear deterrence might lead to the neglect of conventional forces, which is essential for managing lower-intensity conflicts and regional disputes. He advocated for a balanced military strategy that effectively integrates nuclear and conventional forces, cautioning against the strategic risks of prioritising nuclear capabilities at the expense of conventional strength.[36]

Building on these foundational concepts, it is notable that surprisingly few theories

explore how nuclear threats influence a defender's conventional forces, a critical area of consideration for decision-makers. A general overview is provided that takes NATO's doctrinal definition of fighting power as the point of departure, comprising three components. In essence, fighting power includes a component harbouring the physical component that generates the means to fight, a conceptual idea of how to fight, and a moral component that defines the ability to muster the motivation to fight.[37] The discussion focuses primarily on the first two components.

In the *physical domain*, classic deterrence theory posits that defenders with nuclear capabilities might allocate fewer resources to conventional forces, relying on the security guarantee of nuclear weapons.[38] The concept is supported by the principle of assured destruction, as outlined by Herman Kahn, which suggests that the potential for mutual nuclear annihilation reduces the necessity for large conventional armies.[39] Further developing Luttwak's conceptions, the Stability-Instability Paradox, introduced by Robert Jervis, indicates that while nuclear weapons deter major wars, they may provoke more minor conflicts and skirmishes.[40] This paradox impacts the utilisation of conventional forces, which may be structured more for rapid deployment and specialised tasks than large-scale conventional warfare.

Similarly, the theory of Extended Deterrence, as explored by Paul Huth and Bruce Russett, suggests that nuclear protection extended to allies allows these nations to maintain smaller, more specialised conventional forces.[41] This protection effectively enables allies to focus on niche capabilities, knowing that their nuclear ally provides a security backstop against existential threats. Moreover, states under a nuclear umbrella tend to adapt their military strategies accordingly. George Snyder notes that such states often prioritise mobility and rapid deployment capabilities over heavy armour or extensive artillery systems.[42] This shift reflects a strategic emphasis on flexibility and responsiveness suited to managing the types of lower-intensity conflicts and regional disputes that nuclear weapons are less suited to addressing. Lawrence Freedman further elaborates that these states might concentrate on developing specialised conventional capabilities, as the overarching nuclear guarantee mitigates the need for a comprehensive range of conventional forces.[43]

Regarding the *conceptual domain*, Manpreet Sethi professes that the potential for nuclear escalation influences how conventional wars are fought, leading to more cautious engagements.[44] More profoundly, Barry Posen maintains that nuclear weapons have fundamentally altered the nature of warfare.[45] His theory argues that nuclear weapons' strategic dominance has reshaped how states consider and deploy their conventional forces, leading to significant shifts in military strategy and structure. In an era where nuclear capabilities overshadow traditional combat strategies, the interplay between nuclear and conventional forces becomes a critical area of defence planning. Building on this idea, some nations strategically leverage their nuclear capabilities to attract support from more powerful allies, according to Scott Sagan.[46] These states adjust their conventional force postures based on the anticipated strategic backing, effectively using their nuclear status as a bargaining chip to enhance their conventional military support and security guarantees. James Fearon's research further elaborates on the dynamics of risk-taking in conventional conflicts, indicating that the presence of nuclear weapons can embolden states to undertake more aggressive actions with their conventional forces—actions they might typically

avoid in a non-nuclear setting.[47] This emboldening stems from the perceived security that nuclear weapons provide, allowing states to push conventional boundaries with greater confidence. In addition to influencing risk-taking behaviour, nuclear capabilities also encourage the development of asymmetric warfare strategies, as described by Ivan Arreguín-Toft.[48]

Nuclear-capable states may adopt unconventional tactics that are particularly effective against technologically superior enemies, emphasising guerrilla tactics, cyber warfare, and other forms of irregular warfare that can level the playing field against more conventionally powerful adversaries. Moreover, Keir Lieber's work highlights the impact of nuclear deterrence on conventional force postures, specifically the need for survivability and resilience.[49] The ability to withstand a nuclear first strike and still manage an effective retaliation necessitates that conventional forces be dispersed, hardened, and capable of operating independently from centralised command structures, ensuring they remain functional under nuclear threat. Lastly, Paul Bracken's concept of escalation dominance emphasises the ability of a state to manage and dominate at various levels of conflict escalation, including both conventional and nuclear realms.[50] Nuclear capabilities compel adversaries to carefully consider the risks of escalation, as escalating beyond conventional warfare into nuclear exchange introduces catastrophic risks.

The interplay between conventional and nuclear capabilities in practice

In the *physical domain*, the performance of conventional weapons systems and permanent basing are areas where restraint is exercised. NATO's approach to missile defence systems has been cautiously managed, not overtly, to undermine Russia's nuclear retaliatory capabilities. This includes limitations on the technical reach and capabilities of missile defence systems deployed in Europe, aiming to maintain strategic stability while pursuing regional defence objectives. The restraint shown here seeks to avoid actions that could be seen as destabilising the nuclear balance or inciting a technological arms race.[51]

The development and deployment of advanced reconnaissance-strike systems by NATO are carefully measured to prevent provoking Russia. This includes limiting the visibility and assertiveness of such systems in exercises and deployments near Russian borders. The technological performance of these systems is often kept at a level deemed sufficient for deterrence but not aggressive enough to be seen as a direct challenge to Russian security.[52] Another aspect in the physical domain is permanent basing. One significant restraint is the agreement not to station permanent combat forces in the new Eastern European member states, a commitment to reassure Russia during their accession to the alliance.

NATO has been bound by the NATO-Russia Founding Act, a commitment made in 1997 to execute collective defence through "interoperability, integration, and capability for reinforcement" rather than "by the additional stationing of substantial combat forces" on the territory of post-Cold War NATO allies.[53] Although this has changed somewhat following Russian actions in Ukraine in 2014, NATO continues to balance between deterrence and provocation, ensuring that its military posture is defensive in nature and aimed at preventing escalation.[54]

This balancing act has prompted a pragmatic approach in the *conceptual domain* to the forces temporarily deployed in bor-

dering countries to Russia, i.e. forward deployments. Until 2019, the NATO-Russia Founding Act also limited temporary deployments of large forces within the former Soviet sphere, respecting an implicit boundary.[55] Additionally, NATO has implemented several self-imposed constraints to avoid escalating tensions in the Arctic, recognising the sensitive geopolitical landscape and the region's unique environmental challenges.

The military capabilities remain moderate in areas of the High North, particularly the Euro-Arctic region adjacent to the North Atlantic. This restraint includes the scale and manner of military exercises and the development of military infrastructure, which are kept deliberately restrained to prevent any perceptions of aggressive militarization.[56] The Alliance has generally avoided deploying large-scale, high-profile military assets in the High North. This restraint is part of a broader strategy to not provoke Russia by demonstrating aggressive postures. NATO has sometimes adapted its military exercises to be less provocative, focusing on defensive rather than offensive capabilities, which is meant to reassure rather than threaten Russia.[57] However, the exercises are increasingly used to flex the Alliance's muscles.

Since Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea, NATO has focused on strengthening its deterrence and defence posture without resorting to measures such as engaging in hybrid warfare tactics similar to those used by Russia.[58] NATO's military strategy emphasises a defensive rather than an offensive posture, aiming to deter aggression without provoking further escalation or instability in the region—limited deep operations. Adjustments to the Readiness Action Plan (RAP) have also been made, enhancing the readiness and capabilities of NATO forces while carefully calibrating to avoid crossing thresholds that could be perceived as escalatory or excessively provocative. In response to increased Russian military activity, NATO has often opted for a restrained and measured response, prioritising political dialogue over military escalation.[59] The Alliance has increased its focus on strategic communication and transparency to dispel misunderstandings and manage perceptions. It also serves as self-restraint by clarifying intentions and reducing misinterpretations that could lead to escalation.[60]

The concept of Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area (DDA) is arguably the most innovative and influential framework in this context. It offers a comprehensive intellectual framework for peacetime deterrence, crisis response, and wartime defence operations. DDA emphasizes preparedness through 'vigilance activities,' which include forward presence missions in the east, increased intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance activities, and multinational exercises. Additionally, it grants Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) the authority to deploy elements of the NATO Response Force (NRF) in peacetime without the approval of the North Atlantic Council (NAC). On the defence front, DDA ensures the development of credible strategic, operational, and domain-specific plans. The three new regional defence plans—covering northern, central, and southern Europe—were formally approved at the 2023 Vilnius Summit. Furthermore, it influences other critical documents, such as the NATO Warfare Capstone Concept, which focuses on long-term capability development. DDA also addresses hybrid warfare threats through peacetime operations. The Alliance has established multi-domain vigilance activities across various geographic areas, conducted in a deliberate rhythm to communicate political will and demonstrate the capability to defend all Allies. This emphasis on peacetime

activities is the core innovation of the DDA. While the concept is robust, its implementation is hindered by limited military power.[61]

Operational planning and the NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP) are fundamentally driven by political guidance and saturated with risk assessments across multiple military levels. However, there is a glaring absence of a comprehensive methodology to evaluate the constraints on conventional forces to prevent nuclear escalation; the public domain reveals scant evidence of such a framework. Additionally, the self-imposed limitations of member states are crucial for accurately assessing the overall impact. Unfortunately, this article's review of theoretical knowledge and practical experience in the public domain exposes a similarly troubling situation. Essentially, decision-makers confronting this issue will find minimal support in their assessments.

The solutions to this problem do not lie within the physical or conceptual domains discussed. Instead, they are found in the moral domain, where effective leadership plays a prominent role.

Moving forward by seizing the high ground in the moral domain

Examining the theory and practice of the interplay between conventional and nuclear capabilities indicates that many factors in the physical and conceptual domains of military power are involved in tailoring the Allied conventional fighting power. The linkage to the *moral domain* is more elusive. To the extent that limitations in the physical and conceptual domains are perceived as operational constraints, they may indirectly affect motivation. Moreover, the reactive character of deterrence can potentially translate into dissonance with the military doctrine, and its aspiration to promote an offensive spirit and determination not to cede the initiative.[62]

While the Alliance and its member states have taken significant steps to re-evaluate their conventional posture and relax some constraints, Russian nuclear rhetoric is ascending. The overuse of nuclear response threats might suggest that they effectively influence the Allies' decision-making. Alternatively, it could be an escalating reaction to a more robust conventional deterrence, overlooking other strategic considerations. Both possibilities indicate the need for ongoing reassessment and highlight the importance of adaptability. Effective leadership at all levels, a critical aspect of the moral component, is essential to maintain this agility and cater for motivation. Considerations related to the moral domain are necessary to navigate into the future.

Use it or lose it

NATO's nuclear deterrence relies on its credibility, which is founded on the ability and readiness to make decisions regarding the use of nuclear weapons. Indecision or paralysis among Western leaders presents a significant risk. While nuclear-armed NATO members can make independent decisions, this is typically discouraged to maintain unity. Without seriously considering responses in kind after a nuclear strike, effective nuclear deterrence cannot be maintained. Accepting the notion that a nuclear response is unjustified because it would destroy the world also means accepting that brutal authoritarian rulers will dominate, and democracy and freedom will inevitably vanish. Instead of succumbing to defeatism, leaders must be skilled at making critical decisions, especially when facing existential threats. For example, if Russia were to threaten Sweden with nuclear strikes to

prevent the reinforcement of military presence on Gotland, NATO's missile defence and other deterrence measures would still leave some uncertainties.

Public support adds another layer of complexity, as seen in current discussions about the war in Ukraine, where proposals for significant concessions to Russia to achieve peace are debated. Building public trust through proactive information dissemination and protective measures is crucial for supporting onerous political decisions. In the debate regarding nuclear weapons political leaders must inform the public of its utility. Reducing nuclear considerations to whether nuclear weapons for the use of alliance deterrence and defence should be allowed in the country is not a sign of moral grandeur but strategic myopia. Furthermore, the credibility of deterrence is reinforced when military units are adequately equipped and trained to operate in environments threatened by tactical nuclear weapons. Allied leaders must more visibly demonstrate their resilience to nuclear threats.[63]

A credible nuclear deterrence allows conventional forces to be utilised more effectively. Conversely, the less effective the nuclear deterrence becomes, the more assertive Russia will be, leading to further restrictions on conventional forces to avoid provocations. Nuclear anxiety and hesitation are likely to contribute to strategic risks and inefficient use of conventional forces. Importantly, this reasoning does not suggest that nuclear retaliation must occur; however, Russia must always consider it a plausible response.

Crossing the Rubicon

If nuclear deterrence is credible, it shifts focus to conventional forces as a conduit for deterrence. As noted, NATO is making good progress in adopting a more proactive posture. However, the DDA's ambitions are not met with the necessary capabilities. Reviewing constraints put in place could potentially allow more 'vigilant activities.' However, more audacious leadership should be considered.

Deterrence is a reactive strategy to preserve the status quo. As such it faces significant challenges. First, the Alliance lacks the agility of authoritarian regimes, whose decision-making processes are often quicker and more decisive than those of a consensus-driven organisation like NATO. To counter this, NATO must adopt proactive measures to bridge this gap in decision-making speed. Second, while deterrence can stave off conflict escalation by raising the costs of aggression, it fails to address the root causes of conflict or change adversaries' underlying behaviours, acting merely as a temporary ceasefire and leaving the door open for future conflicts. Conventional military compellence measures are necessary to shape Russian behaviour effectively.[64] The Cold War-era Follow-On Forces Attack (FOFA) concept,[65] which focused on deep strikes beyond NATO territory, showcases this type of assertive action. Deep operations are currently not a prominent feature among European Allies, neither in the conceptual nor physical domain.[66] If this situation is reversed, other conventional options can be contemplated. The intent is not to speculate on specific defence plans but to deliberate ways to introduce additional uncertainty for Russian decision-makers and showcase responses that could impose higher costs on aggressive actions towards allies. If NATO is attacked, the conventional forces should ideally have the capability to pursue the military objectives beyond its borders, if deemed appropriate. The Baltic borders would be the last line of defence, not the first. The strategic communication would be that if attacked, NATO will defend itself on enemy territory. To transform fight-

ing power, both political and military inertia must be overcome. Visionary and audacious senior leaders, like General Bernard Rogers, who, as SACEUR, spearheaded the FOFA concept,[67] are crucial. Their selection and mandate are paramount for success.

Dare and win

A more proactive conventional deterrence that defends NATO allies on enemy territory is underpinned by another crucial argument from the *moral domain;* the obligation to take all measures to prevent such unlawful and inhumane treatment of populations in allied nations. However, many likely perceive this option as too provocative and dangerous. Without valuing these instincts, they are likely not the result of a deliberate assessment process.

Authoritarian leaders can easily depart from conventional logical reasoning, and their countermoves can lead unintendedly to nuclear escalation. Russian motivations and perceptions must be better understood. Their strategy aims to exploit weaknesses by instilling fear and uncertainty. They prioritise military power and intimidation. Seeking compromises and accommodating their priorities may yield, at best, short-term gains. Success requires NATO to project additional hard power, including military strength, to instill fear. While this logic may seem outdated and primitive in post-modern Europe, it resonates with the strategic culture in Russia.

The absence of an analytical framework that considers strategic risks, including nuclear escalation and the self-imposed limitations on conventional fighting power, complicates the process of identifying viable options and balancing their consequences. Additionally, this article has revealed a significant gap in theoretical knowledge and conceptual practices that could populate such a framework and ultimately support reflections and decision-making. Deliberations on constraints for conventional forces need to assess the risks of nuclear escalation and simultaneously furnish a rapid and comprehensive build-up of capabilities.[68] Moreover, the self-imposed limitations on the conventional forces are multifaceted and compounded by different layers of safeguards. This article only touches on a few aspects, largely disregarding national constraints. The efficiency of conventional forces must be seen through this lens. A transparent analysis of these limitations would allow for continuous recalibration of measures. A robust analytical framework, combined with sound risk management, determination, and willpower, can significantly enhance NATO's conventional capabilities.

Closing remarks

The article starts by exploring a scenario without nuclear weapons, shedding light on the self-imposed constraints on conventional forces. Conversely, it ends with an appeal to plan and prepare as if nuclear weapons will be utilised. By examining these extremes, the alliance and its members will be empowered to optimise the effectiveness of conventional forces in the shadow of Russian nuclear brinkmanship.

The Author is Lieutenant General, Dr and vice president of RSAWS.

Noter

1. The text is part of Project SV-A-R, Sweden in the EU and NATO – Deterrence and Resilience, The Royal Swedish Academy of War Sciences 2023–2025.
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Full year subscription 2024:
SEK 900 (Sweden) SEK 1.300 (Europe)
SEK 1.400 (outside Europe)
Single issue: SEK 250 incl VAT excl postage
ISSN 0023-5369
Graphic production: Marie Brunnberg AB, Norrtälje
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