



BULLETIN

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Impact of U.S. Nuclear Reductions on European Security

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As part of plans to reduce U.S. nuclear forces during the second term of President Barack Obama, his administration will attempt to engage Russia. It is unlikely that a new arms control treaty will be signed. Washington will be interested in reaching a series of primarily political understandings involving missile defence, strategic and non-strategic nuclear weapons. Regarding the last topic, Poland can assume a leading role in preparing the NATO position on confidence-building and transparency measures that may be proposed to Russia in parallel with the bilateral U.S.–Russian track.

The United States is contemplating further reductions of its nuclear forces, below the levels agreed with Russia under the 2011 New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (1,550 deployed strategic warheads and 700 deployed delivery vehicles by 2018).

Last year, the U.S. administration conducted an evaluation of the targeting requirements for its nuclear forces, which would allow the president to determine the optimal strength of the arsenal. While the details will remain classified, it is assumed that this so-called Nuclear Posture Review Implementation Study can be a basis for the U.S. to set the level of deployed strategic nuclear weapons at 1,000–1,100 warheads. It should also allow for a reduction in the number of nuclear warheads kept in reserve as a hedge in case the strategic situation deteriorates.

During his second term in office, President Barack Obama will be advancing the nuclear arms control agenda while simultaneously working to reverse nuclear proliferation (Iran, North Korea). It is less likely that the president would formulate a new ambitious program of action comparable with the Prague speech of 2009, but he remains convinced that the security of the United States and its allies can be guaranteed with a lower level of nuclear weapons than what is currently held.

Exploring major reductions in the numbers of U.S. nuclear weapons and delivery systems becomes increasingly important in the context of the cuts in defence spending by the United States. This “homework” is also necessary in order to engage Russia in the next round of arms control talks, as the United States would not be willing to reduce its stockpile unilaterally. The conclusion of the process of re-formulating U.S. nuclear policy (which started with the Prague speech and the Nuclear Posture Review) may be presented at the end of President Obama’s second term as part of his national security legacy.

Importance of U.S. Decisions for Europe. From the point of view of European allies of the United States, the process under way in the U.S. is important for two main reasons.

First, the value attached to the conclusion of an arms reduction deal with Russia by the Obama administration could determine its stance towards Moscow on issues such as the future of a European missile defence system, NATO–Russia policy, or political developments in Russia. On the one hand, the United States can seek to prepare the groundwork for negotiations by attempting to remove some of the obstacles (primarily, missile defence) and generally refraining from taking actions that aggravate Moscow. On the other hand, Washington will not be ready to compromise on its core security policy interests just for the sake of achieving reductions of nuclear forces. U.S. choices in this area will determine relations with Russia during the next four years.

Secondly, U.S. reductions can have an impact on the extended nuclear deterrence provided to the allies in Europe. While the attention in Washington is focused mainly on the strategic systems, there are signals of willingness to enter into talks with Russia on non-strategic nuclear weapons. That discussion also will include the future of the approximately 200 U.S. B-61 nuclear bombs currently deployed in Europe in support of NATO. With an overall reduction in strategic forces, a claim may be made that the numbers of B-61 bombs should go down as well. The same political–military rationale for trimming strategic forces (fewer targets, availability of conventional options) can be applied to the non-strategic section of the stockpile. It will not automatically lead the way to a withdrawal of nuclear weapons to U.S. soil, but it may impact future U.S. decisions about the size and geographical distribution of the force in Europe.

Currently, the debate in the United States centres on the soaring costs of the B-61 Life Extension Program (which would consolidate different versions of the bomb and prolong the life of the weapons). Proponents of the program point out that the upgraded B-61 can be carried not only by fighter aircraft (as in Europe), but also by B-2 strategic bombers. Both deployment options give the U.S. more flexibility in planning nuclear missions, especially in regional contingencies. The argument that these weapons are important specifically for the defence of U.S. allies is also used to justify their retention in the U.S. arsenal.

The Way Forward. The stated goal of the administration is the negotiation of a legally binding agreement encompassing all types of nuclear weapons (strategic and non-strategic, deployed and non-deployed). In practice, however, even assuming Russia maintains an open attitude, such negotiations might be lengthy and difficult as the two sides would need to agree to an unprecedented degree on verification of treaty compliance. The Obama administration is also aware of the difficulties connected with gaining a two-thirds majority in the Senate for the ratification of any new arms control treaty. Therefore, the U.S. would most probably aim to reach a series of political understandings with Russia on a range of security issues rather than one all-encompassing legal arrangement.

On missile defence, a revised set of proposals on information-sharing and cooperation will be offered. On strategic nuclear warhead numbers, the administration will be ready to either reach a political accord with Moscow announcing reduced levels of strategic weapons, or conclude an executive agreement with Russia that does not require two-thirds of the U.S. Senate to agree. Finally, on non-strategic nuclear weapons, the U.S. would most probably settle for an understanding with Russia that these weapons would be subject to transparency and confidence-building measures and intensified expert dialogue, as a way to prepare the groundwork for future negotiations.

The main condition for success of the administration's approach is the Russian authorities' willingness to engage. Russia may see little direct benefits of cooperation with the U.S., and on the contrary Washington may find such cooperation would require Moscow to step back from its harsh rhetoric on missile defence or from its insistence on legally binding agreements. However, starting an arms reduction dialogue with the U.S. could guarantee Russia a position as an important partner for the rest of President Obama's term in office.

Consequences for Poland. The U.S. strategy of mixing weapons reductions goals and opening to Russia may be questioned as another attempt to “reset” the relationship. The main challenge for Poland would be to ensure that U.S. engagement with Russia does not come at the expense of the transatlantic relationship in the security domain, primarily missile defence plans for Europe. That requires frequent consultations and information-sharing by the U.S. on the state of its interactions with Russia.

The U.S. approach to non-strategic nuclear weapons can bring opportunities for Poland. NATO policy adopted in 2010 and confirmed in 2012 highlights the importance of internal consensus and the need to engage Russia as a prerequisite for taking decisions about the future of NATO nuclear policy. There is an expectation from Washington that such engagement will be done through the NATO–Russia Council, in parallel with the bilateral U.S.–Russia discussions. Poland can therefore assume one of the leading roles in preparing the NATO position on the scope and sequencing of the confidence-building and transparency measures. Warsaw should cooperate with its Central European partners and also with the northern European NATO countries that host U.S. nuclear weapons to develop realistic options for exchanging information and preparing visits to inactive and active nuclear bases. The newly created arms control committee at NATO should be the primary forum for fielding such proposals.