

Is NATO Losing the Strategic Communication Campaign to Remain a Nuclear Alliance?

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<i>Contributing Author</i>	Dr Michal Smetana, Researcher and Lecturer at Charles University, Coordinator of the Peace Research Center Prague (PRCP), Head Researcher at the Experimental Lab for International Security Studies (ELISS)
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by emailing us at:

Oke.Thorngren@act.nato.int

Georgios.Kotas@act.nato.int

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Executive summary

Strategic communication has emerged as one of the key challenges for NATO in general and its nuclear policy in particular. The aim of this paper is to offer a critical perspective on NATO's efforts to communicate its stated need to remain a "nuclear alliance". To this end, I review the recent changes in NATO's nuclear posture and discuss the key challenges that NATO's strategic communication currently needs to deal with. These include the disconnect between the member states' policies and public views, counternarratives of strategic competitors, and the normative contestation of the legitimacy of nuclear deterrence, which strikes at the heart of justifications for continued existence of nuclear weapons in NATO's approach to collective security.

My policy recommendations to address these developments and improve the effectiveness of NATO's strategic communication include proposals on how to revise the existing narrative and craft a persuasive message. I primarily recommend:

- reclaiming the concept of strategic arms control as a coherent frame at the center of NATO's nuclear policy
- enlarging the deterrence narrative and specifying the important yet narrow role of nuclear weapons
- revisiting the language on the "nuclear ban treaty" to address the concerns of more disarmament-minded allies
- making the moral case when justifying nuclear policies, as opposed to self-referencing and technical jargon that dominates the current discourse

The second part of my recommendations further elaborates on how to get the message through to relevant audiences. They include:

- reaching out to the public in allied countries
- enhancing the transparency of nuclear posture
- making the strategic communication more resilient vis-à-vis disinformation and counternarratives
- improving the capability to evaluate the impact of the message

The paper concludes with a note that NATO has not yet lost its strategic communication campaign to remain a nuclear alliance – but it certainly needs to compete much more effectively.

“In today's information age, success is the result not merely of whose army wins but also of whose story wins.”¹



¹ Nye, J. S. (2009). Get Smart: Combining Hard and Soft Power. *Foreign Affairs*, 88(4), 162–163.

Introduction

At the 2021 NATO Summit in Brussels, representatives of thirty allied countries reaffirmed that “as long as nuclear weapons exist, NATO will remain a nuclear alliance,” while underlining that “given the deteriorating security environment in Europe, a credible and united nuclear Alliance is essential.”² The language of the joint communiqué highlights the agreement among member states that the possession of nuclear weapons is an important aspect of NATO’s current functioning and will likely remain so for the foreseeable future.

However, there have been growing concerns that the Alliance is struggling to build a coherent story behind the recent developments in its nuclear policy, and to communicate it persuasively towards relevant stakeholders. A recent report prepared for NATO’s Secretary General concluded that “NATO should reinforce and accelerate the transformation of its strategic communications to enable the Alliance to compete more effectively,”³ and urged it to “better communicate on the key role of its nuclear deterrence policy in ensuring the security of Allies and their populations.”⁴ Indeed, effective strategic communication has emerged as one of the main challenges for NATO in general and its nuclear policy in particular.

The aim of this paper is to offer a critical perspective on NATO’s strategic communication⁵ in the nuclear domain and provide recommendations for its improvement. I conceptually depart from the definition of strategic communication as “the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission,”⁶ or more restrictively “all communication that is substantial for the survival and sustained success of an entity.”⁷ As such, strategic communication should go beyond mere informing – it should also provide an adequate framing to and justification for individual policies, in order to shape the perceptions of target audiences and thereby achieve specific strategic objectives. More broadly, it ought to construct and promote impactful strategic narratives, complex stories about the meaning of who we are, what we do, why we do it, and how that all fits with what is happening in the world around us.⁸

As a military alliance, NATO has always been concerned with strategic communication as a form of signaling directed towards adversaries, conveying the threats at the core of its deterrence strategy. While this continues to be a relevant concern for NATO, the focus of this paper is primarily on *intra*-alliance messaging. To this end, NATO’s strategic communication should be able to reach out to the public in allied states, both from the perspective of democratic accountability as a key value in the transatlantic space, but also as a pragmatic step to avoid

² NATO. (2021, June 14). Brussels Summit Communiqué. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_185000.htm

³ NATO. (2020). NATO 2030: United for a new era, 48.

⁴ Ibid, 38.

⁵ NATO defines strategic communication as “coordinated and appropriate use of NATO communications activities and capabilities [...] in support of alliance policies, operations and activities, and in order to advance NATO’s aims.” NATO. (2010a). NATO Military Concept for Strategic Communications, 1.

⁶ Hallahan, K., Holtzhausen, D., van Ruler, B., Verčič, D., & Sriramesh, K. (2007). Defining Strategic Communication. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 1(1), 3.

⁷ Zerfass, A., Verčič, D., Nothhaft, H., & Werder, K. P. (2018). Strategic Communication: Defining the Field and its Contribution to Research and Practice. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 12(4), 493.

⁸ Miskimmon, A., O’Loughlin, B., & Roselle, L. (2014). *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order*.

domestic backlash against its decisions. At the same time, member states as such should stand behind the message and, to a reasonable extent, see that it reflects their own specific views, preferences, and concerns. Given geopolitical, historical, cultural, and ideological differences between NATO countries, a certain degree of discord is inevitable. Still, NATO's cohesion in principled matters remains one of the key aspects of its effective functioning as a military alliance, whereas threats to unity represent one of the major challenges.

The paper is structured as follows. First, I briefly discuss the development of NATO's post-Cold War nuclear posture as a necessary context for understanding the renewed emphasis on nuclear deterrence in the recent years. Second, I review the emerging challenges for NATO's strategic communication, including the gaps in attitudes between the public and the governments in some allied states, counternarratives and (dis)information campaigns, and the normative contestation of the legitimacy of nuclear deterrence, which strikes at the heart of justifications for continued existence of nuclear weapons in NATO's approach to collective security. Third, I outline the key principles for NATO's strategic communication and lay out policy recommendations for revising the nuclear narrative and transmitting it effectively.

Changes in NATO's nuclear posture

NATO's renewed emphasis on nuclear deterrence needs to be understood in the broader context of the development of its nuclear posture after the end of the Cold War. The transformation of the decades-long conflict between the East and the West resulted in a significant reduction of the two superpower's nuclear arsenals, including those deployed on their allies' territories. The number of U.S. non-strategic nuclear weapons available under NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements in Europe has gradually declined from its Cold War peak of several thousands to an estimated one hundred today,⁹ stored under U.S. control at bases in Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Turkey, and deliverable by allied dual-capable aircraft.¹⁰

The size, composition, and deployment patterns of U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe have since become informed chiefly by political factors rather than operational aspects.¹¹ Alongside quantitative reductions, NATO has relaxed its alert posture and operational readiness, and signaled a reduced role for nuclear weapons in its strategy. Moreover, despite being regularly mentioned in strategic documents, nuclear weapons ceased to be a salient topic for NATO debates. The overall narrative centered around the process of progressive reductions, avoiding debates over the logic of and rationale for nuclear deterrence.¹² In other words, "in the two

⁹ Kristensen, H. M., & Korda, M. (2021). United States nuclear weapons, 2021. *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 77(1), 43–63.

¹⁰ Besides U.S. nuclear forces, there are also the United Kingdom and France as NATO members with nuclear arsenals of their own. The United States and the United Kingdom consult on nuclear-related matters with NATO allies through the Nuclear Planning Group (NPG). France has opted for a posture completely independent of NATO structures and is the only NATO member that does not participate in the NPG.

¹¹ Nunn, S. (2018). NATO Nuclear Sharing: Operational Factors and Procedures. In *Building a Safe, Secure, and Credible NATO Nuclear Posture*.

¹² An exception was the 1999 initiative of German foreign minister Fischer, whose proposals for the adoption of a no-first-use policy met with fierce opposition and closed off any such debates for the decade to come. I thank Harald Müller for this and other useful comments on this section.

decades following the end of the Cold War the Alliance found itself increasingly unwilling to rely on, or at least openly discuss, its nuclear deterrent.”¹³

The end of the first decade of the 21st century saw the gradual return of nuclear issues to intra-alliance debates, in what has been called NATO’s “nuclear identity crisis.”¹⁴ The stage was set by Barack Obama’s Prague speech on nuclear disarmament, which seemingly opened a window of opportunity for a major change in NATO’s nuclear sharing arrangements. In fact, “many experts and government officials [...] interpreted the Prague speech to imply that the Obama administration would withdraw the remaining US nuclear weapons in Europe at an early moment.”¹⁵ Against this backdrop, the foreign ministers of Germany, the Benelux countries, and Norway sent a letter to the NATO Secretary General calling for a comprehensive discussion on steps towards nuclear disarmament, including nuclear weapons deployed in Europe.

Many other NATO members, however, saw little reason for a change in the status quo, particularly given the growing concerns over Russia’s assertive behavior. The resulting strategic documents provided a temporary compromise, which “served to mask the conflicting nuclear interests within NATO.”¹⁶ On one hand, the 2010 Strategic Concept pledged to “seek to create the conditions for further reductions”¹⁷ and the 2012 Deterrence and Defence Posture Review (DDPR) even explicitly mentioned the possibility of NATO deciding “to reduce its reliance on non-strategic nuclear weapons based in Europe.”¹⁸ On the other hand, both documents contained, for the first time, an explicit statement that NATO was a “nuclear alliance” and it would continue to remain so “as long as there are nuclear weapons in the world.”¹⁹ Given that such statements are essentially political, with no legal implications for the functioning of the organization itself, they should be understood primarily as symbolic attempts to communicate the continued relevance of nuclear weapons for (some) member states.

The intra-alliance debate over the future of nuclear weapons received another impetus after the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea. This came as a shock to NATO capitals, and subsequently strengthened the voice of those allies who saw further nuclear reductions as unwise, calling instead for renewed attention to both conventional and nuclear deterrence. While the 2014 Wales Summit took place too early to make any visible shift in NATO’s nuclear narrative, the 2016 Warsaw Summit signaled a profound change in its strategic thinking. The joint communiqué directly condemned Russian behavior, including its nuclear dimension, and stated that “renewed emphasis has been placed on deterrence and collective defence”, that “nuclear weapons are unique”, and “the fundamental purpose of NATO’s nuclear capability is to preserve peace, prevent coercion, and deter aggression.”²⁰ While the communiqué also mentioned disarmament obligations, it simultaneously added that “progress on arms control and

¹³ Larsen, J. A. (2019). NATO nuclear adaptation since 2014: the return of deterrence and renewed Alliance discomfort. *Journal of Transatlantic Studies*, 17(2), 177.

¹⁴ Durkalec, J. (2018). The 2018 U.S. Nuclear Posture Review, NATO’s Brussels Summit and Beyond, 7.

¹⁵ Roberts, B. (2015). *The Case for U.S. Nuclear Weapons in the 21st Century*, 185.

¹⁶ Kamp, K. (2015). *The Agenda of the NATO Summit in Warsaw*, 5.

¹⁷ NATO. (2010). Active Engagement, Modern Defence, 24.

¹⁸ NATO. (2012). Deterrence and Defence Posture Review.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ NATO. (2016, July 9). Warsaw Summit Communiqué.

disarmament must take into account the prevailing international security environment [...] the conditions for achieving disarmament are not favourable today.”²¹ Unsurprisingly, many observers saw this as the strongest and most explicit language on nuclear deterrence since the end of the Cold War.²²

The joint declarations at the 2018 and 2021 Summits in Brussels followed a similar “package deal” logic, where the language on arms control and disarmament was offset by strengthening the language of deterrence.²³ Reflecting on the nuclear modernization, the documents mention that “following changes in the security environment, NATO has taken steps to ensure its nuclear deterrent capabilities remain safe, secure, and effective,”²⁴ while the “Allies’ goal is to continue to bolster deterrence.”²⁵ They also sharpened the language on nuclear sharing, stressing that “NATO’s nuclear deterrence posture also relies on United States’ nuclear weapons forward-deployed in Europe and the capabilities and infrastructure provided by Allies concerned.” Finally, the declarations spelled out a resolute opposition to the recently adopted Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), noting that it is “inconsistent with the Alliance’s nuclear deterrence policy, is at odds with the existing non-proliferation and disarmament architecture, risks undermining the NPT, and does not take into account the current security environment.”²⁶

Challenges for NATO’s strategic communication

The aforementioned developments have not just led to NATO’s renewed emphasis on nuclear deterrence, but also to attempts to communicate this emphasis to relevant stakeholders. In effect, the outflow of information on this subject from the NATO Public Diplomacy Division (PDD) has somewhat grown in quantity. There are, however, significant shortcomings in the coherence and persuasiveness of the overall message, as well as the effectiveness of getting the message across.²⁷

One area of NATO’s nuclear policy where the strategic communication shows its limits is the question of nuclear sharing arrangements in Europe, a practice that has always been a bone of contention among NATO allies – and between allies and their respective populations. As the current dual-capable aircraft (DCA) is approaching the end of service life, the governments in

²¹ Ibid.

²² Andreasen, S., Williams, I., Rose, B., Kristensen, H. M., & Lunn, S. (2018). *Building a Safe, Secure, and Credible NATO Nuclear Posture*, 13; Gilli, A. (2020). *Recalibrating NATO Nuclear Policy*, 8; Durkalec, Jacek. (2017). NATO nuclear adaptation at the Warsaw summit. In *NATO and Collective Defence in the 21st Century: An Assessment of the Warsaw Summit..*

²³ Bell, R. (2018). *The Challenges of NATO Nuclear Policy: Alliance Management under the Trump Administration*, 6.

²⁴ NATO. (2018, July 11). Brussels Summit Declaration.

²⁵ NATO. (2021, June 14). Brussels Summit Communiqué.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ As an illustration, see the recent NATO video on nuclear deterrence (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-EkTDxuSCEk&t=38s&ab_channel=NATO), praised elsewhere as a “good step” in the direction of “widespread public communications debate” (Ruhl, C., Gans, J., & Horowitz, M. C. (2021). Introduction: Emerging Challenges to Trans-Atlantic Nuclear Deterrence. In *The Future of Trans-Atlantic Nuclear Deterrence*. Austin: University of Texas in Austin, 5.) The video has less than 2,500 views and just one comment seven months after it was posted on NATO’s YouTube channel – clearly a negligible public outreach for a channel with 121,000 subscribers.

host countries have been expected to decide on the procurement of new fighter jets suitable for the delivery of U.S. nuclear bombs. Facing these substantive investments, some politicians have, once again, started to question the rationale for continued involvement in this arrangement.

Two venues at the forefront of these debates have been the parliaments in Germany and the Netherlands.²⁸ Sometimes, the divides even cut through political parties: for example, within the German Social Democratic party, which is currently leading the new government in Berlin, the prominent representatives clashed in 2020 over the wisdom of keeping U.S. nuclear weapons on German soil. The uncertainty over the new German government's approach even led the NATO Secretary General to make an unprecedentedly strong statement that should Germany withdraw from the arrangement, "the nuclear arms may easily end up in other European countries, including these to the east of Germany."²⁹

A 2020 survey in the German *Bundestag* demonstrates this divergence. It found that only 57% of parliamentarians believed that U.S. nuclear weapons in Germany deter nuclear attacks against NATO and less than half (40%) that they deter non-nuclear attacks. A narrow majority (53%) agreed that participation in the sharing arrangement elevates the country's status within NATO. A third (32%) of parliamentarians agreed with withdrawal of U.S. nuclear weapons without preconditions, and a slight majority (55%) would endorse it as a part of arms control initiatives.³⁰

While this hardly portrays a picture of enthusiastic support for nuclear sharing among German politicians, the voters are even more skeptical. In a public opinion poll, the belief in the deterrent effect of U.S. nuclear weapons dropped to 34% for nuclear attacks and 38% for non-nuclear attacks. Only 37% of respondents believed in the political purpose of these weapons. 41% would accept their unconditional withdrawal (only 32% opposed it), and 49% supported withdrawal as a part of an arms control agreement (only 24% disagreeing). A significant number of respondents (averaging 26% throughout the survey) selected an "I don't know" option.³¹ Such low public support for nuclear deterrence and, conversely, high support for the weapons' withdrawal is in line with other recent polls in NATO countries. For example, a poll commissioned by the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) found high support for withdrawal in Germany (70% agree, 16% disagree, 14% don't know), as well as in Belgium (57%-21%-22%), the Netherlands (56%-25%-19%), and Italy (65%-18%-18%).³²

²⁸ Smetana, M., Onderco, M., & Etienne, T. (2021). Do Germany and the Netherlands want to say goodbye to US nuclear weapons? *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 77(4), 215–221.

²⁹ Stoltenberg, J. (2021, November 19). US nuclear arms could be deployed in Eastern Europe, - Stoltenberg. *112 Ukraine*, <https://112.international/politics/us-nuclear-arms-could-be-deployed-in-eastern-europe-stoltenberg-66993.html>

³⁰ Onderco, M., & Smetana, M. (2021). German views on US nuclear weapons in Europe: public and elite perspectives. *European Security*, 30(4), 630–648.

³¹ Ibid.

³² ICAN. (2018). One Year On: European Attitudes toward the Treaty on The Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. https://www.icanw.org/new_poll_europeans_reject_us_nuclear_weapons_on_own_soil

Another public opinion survey even found that 66% of Germans favored a complete abandonment of nuclear deterrence.³³

These gaps between the official positions of the host countries' governments and the attitudes of their constituencies correspond to the fact that despite NATO PDD's efforts to improve strategic communication in nuclear matters, there are few European politicians who engage in national conversations over the role of nuclear weapons in their security policies. According to a recent analysis, in 26 out of 28 EU countries, there is virtually no debate on a European nuclear deterrent within the government (in the two remaining countries, there is some limited debate but with mostly negative attitudes towards nuclear deterrence).³⁴

Admittedly, it is generally difficult to make a case for nuclear weapons, given that campaigns for nuclear deterrence do not have a natural political constituency; the issue is complex, with a steep learning curve based on mostly counterintuitive (some would say obscure) academic theories.³⁵ Moreover, in traditionally anti-nuclear Western Europe, there is little political gain to be made through accentuating these policies. It is, therefore, unsurprising that most NATO governments have opted for a "letting sleeping dogs lie" approach.³⁶ Today, this approach may have backfired. The reluctance to discuss nuclear weapons has contributed to the widespread perception that nuclear deterrence is a Cold War relic, while the long-held position that the purpose of nuclear weapons in Europe is exclusively political makes efforts to justify their modernization and their military value (if there is any) in the conflict with Russia difficult. This also left Moscow with a barely contested discursive space for their own narratives that is now difficult to fill.³⁷

Fighting in the "battle of narratives" is today becoming particularly difficult given Russian (dis)information campaigns, amplified through social media in Western countries.³⁸ Moreover, the approach of the Trump administration rendered transatlantic cooperation increasingly unpopular in many European countries and intensified debates over European strategic autonomy.³⁹ Finally, the new right-wing populism in Europe, with its anti-globalist and anti-NATO stance (e.g., the Five Star Movement in Italy) has provided a novel type of domestic opposition to NATO's nuclear policy, in addition to the traditionally anti-nuclear left-leaning parties.

³³ Bunde, T., Hartmann, L., Stärk, F., Carr, R., Erber, C., Hammelehle, J., & Kabus, J. (2020). *Zeitenwende Wendezeiten: Special Edition of the Munich Security Report on German Foreign and Security Policy*.

³⁴ ECFR. (2018). Eyes tight shut: European attitudes towards nuclear deterrence.

https://ecfr.eu/special/eyes_tight_shut_european_attitudes_towards_nuclear_deterrence/

³⁵ Freedman, L. (2004). *Deterrence*, 25; Roberts, B. (2021). On 'Campaigning' for Nuclear Deterrence (forthcoming).

³⁶ Bunde, T. (2021). Germany and the Future of NATO Nuclear Sharing. *War on the Rocks*.

<https://warontherocks.com/2021/08/the-risks-of-an-incremental-german-exit-from-natos-nuclear-sharing-arrangement/>

³⁷ Durkalec, J. (2018). The 2018 U.S. Nuclear Posture Review, NATO's Brussels Summit and Beyond, 9.

³⁸ According to some accounts, there has been up 300% increase in media interest in NATO since 2014, with a parallel increase of false stories and internet trolls' activity. Maronkova, B. (2021). NATO Amidst Hybrid Warfare Threats: Effective Strategic Communications as a Tool Against Disinformation and Propaganda. In *Disinformation and Fake News*, 122.

³⁹ McCrisken, T., & Downman, M. (2019). 'Peace through strength': Europe and NATO deterrence beyond the US Nuclear Posture Review. *International Affairs*, 95(2), 277–295.

The new German government eventually decided to continue participating in the nuclear sharing arrangement and pledged to procure a DCA replacement. However, “the gap between NATO policies and NATO publics represents a challenge for the trans-Atlantic relationship and trans-Atlantic strategy.”⁴⁰ If the public attitudes do not change (or they shift further towards disapproval), the question mark over nuclear sharing arrangements will likely resurface. Some scholars even suggest that the lack of credible military utility makes the case for maintaining these weapons in Europe unattainable.⁴¹

The more general pushback against nuclear deterrence is also reinforced by another trend that has permeated nuclear politics: the normative push of the Humanitarian Initiative (HI), culminating in the adoption of the TPNW. Spearheaded by civil society and non-nuclear-weapon states, the HI has gained strength in the early 2010s, using the narrative that centers the issue around the security of individuals, international humanitarian law, and the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any nuclear use. The TPNW, negotiated by non-nuclear-weapon states under the mandate of the United Nations General Assembly, prohibits all aspects of nuclear weapons policy, including development, testing, production, stockpiling, stationing, transfer, use, and even the threat of use, essentially banning the possibility of actively engaging in nuclear deterrence strategies for its signatories. As of late 2021, the TPNW has attracted 86 signatures and 56 ratifications.

As noted by one scholar, the TPNW “capture[s] a contemporary sentiment among many non-nuclear NATO member states: that nuclear deterrence is unfashionable, untenable, and out of date.”⁴² Several NATO members previously attended the HI events and Norway even hosted the 2013 conference on humanitarian impacts of nuclear weapons in Oslo. However, a strongly worded letter from Washington addressed to all NATO capitals urged all member states to boycott the treaty negotiations (the only NATO country participating in these negotiations was the Netherlands, which later voted against the adoption of the treaty).⁴³ Since then, NATO has been resolute in its opposition against the TPNW. The joint NATO statement bluntly claimed that the treaty “will not result in the elimination of a single nuclear weapon,” “risks undermining the global non-proliferation and disarmament architecture,” and “will not change the legal obligations of our countries with respect to nuclear weapons.”⁴⁴

Some scholars suggest that the narrative trope of NATO as a “nuclear alliance” is often used as a rhetorical device to delegitimize the humanitarian narrative, solidify the joint position of the Alliance, and prevent members from breaking ranks and engaging with the TPNW

⁴⁰ Ruhl, C., Gans, J., & Horowitz, M. C. (2021). Introduction: Emerging Challenges to Trans-Atlantic Nuclear Deterrence. In *The Future of Trans-Atlantic Nuclear Deterrence*, 5.

⁴¹ Müller, H., & Wunderlich, C. (2020). Nuclear Disarmament without the Nuclear-Weapon States: The Nuclear Weapon Ban Treaty. *Daedalus*, 149(2), 181.

⁴² Ven Bruusgaard, K. (2021). Anti-Nuclear Sentiment and the Continuing Relevance of Nuclear Deterrence. In *The Future of Trans-Atlantic Nuclear Deterrence*. Austin: University of Texas, 40.

⁴³ Shirobokova, E. (2018). The Netherlands and the prohibition of nuclear weapons. *Nonproliferation Review*, 25(1–2), 37–49.

⁴⁴ NATO. (2020, December 15). North Atlantic Council Statement as the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.

community.⁴⁵ The categorical language, however, opens the pathway for states to be seen as breaking the orthodoxy through even a modest deviation from the common position. Given the heterogeneity of positions on nuclear weapons within the Alliance, such a development should have been expected. In addition to Norway, which had previously invested its political capital into HI, there are states with strong anti-nuclear traditions, including Germany and the Netherlands, whose non-participation in a multilateral agreement aimed at reducing nuclear dangers is seen as extremely problematic by civil society and other relevant domestic actors.

While France, the United Kingdom, and eastbound NATO members (with heightened sensitivity to the Russian threat) continue to see the TPNW as a black and white issue, and promote the strongly dismissive language, representatives of Canada and Norway have already expressed their uneasiness with this approach during the latest high-level NATO meetings.⁴⁶ The problem of maintaining a coherent NATO narrative has now been further exacerbated by the commitment of the new governments in Oslo and Berlin to attend the first meeting of the TPNW state parties in 2022 as observers. While the attendance is not *de jure* incompatible with any NATO obligation, it logically stands against the current NATO discourse, which sees the treaty as essentially illegitimate and counterproductive. So far, NATO has not been able to provide a meaningful response to these developments.

Policy recommendations

Strategic communication of NATO's nuclear policy should draw on a coherent and persuasive strategic narrative that is reproduced in strategic documents, as well as the day-to-day communications of the Alliance and its member states. In today's strategic environment, it needs to be tied to the broader Western metanarrative of great power competition, explaining the linkage between NATO's nuclear posture and conflict with Moscow, and addressing the logic behind nuclear sharing arrangements and other aspects of NATO's deterrence posture. To prevent damaging alliance cohesion, it needs to carefully balance deterrence and defense with détente and dialogue.

NATO's strategic communication also needs to be in line with several additional principles. The liberal democratic nature of NATO member states requires the nuclear narrative to follow core democratic values, legal obligations under international law, and shared norms of international order. The narrative should not undermine NATO's other goals, particularly the broader deterrence and defense strategy, in which nuclear weapons continue to play a distinct role. The message should be in line with concrete actions and practices of the Alliance, closing the "say-do" gap.⁴⁷ Finally, given that strategic communication is an essentially competitive sport, the narrative should be reasonably resilient vis-à-vis the counternarratives of NATO's strategic competitors.

⁴⁵ Egeland, K. (2020). Spreading the Burden: How NATO Became a 'Nuclear' Alliance. *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 31(1), 143–167.

⁴⁶ This claim is based on confidential interviews conducted for this paper.

⁴⁷ NATO. (2017). NATO Strategic Communication Handbook, 6.

What follows is a set of more specific policy recommendations for NATO's strategic communication, which draw on these principles. The recommendations include ideas on how to revise the existing narrative and craft the message, how to get the message through, and how to evaluate the message's impact.

Reclaiming arms control

Attempts to improve the strategic messaging about NATO's nuclear policy would have little impact without providing a good story about why the Alliance does what it does. The current attempts to balance language on deterrence (in the context of the Russian threat) and disarmament (in the context of normative aspirations) appear hard to follow, contradictory, and/or essentially irreconcilable. The oft-repeated expression of "nuclear-alliance-as-long-as-nuclear-weapons-exist" is a good example of a trope that elicits feelings of circular reasoning, incoherence, and evasion. The self-referencing language and jargon of strategic documents hardly help to make the non-expert audience more engaged and understanding of NATO's aims.

There is, however, an old yet still promising narrative line that can provide a coherent basis for NATO's strategic communication in the nuclear domain. In the 1967 Harmel report, NATO subscribed to jointly pursuing both deterrence and *détente*, with *arms control* being a central concept underpinning both these pillars. Recently, the concepts of arms control and deterrence have ended up decoupled in Western strategic discourse, with deterrence often indicating a tough stance, whereas arms control presents as a conciliatory policy that should only be pursued when a mutual relationship improves, or as a reward for compliant behavior.

This stands, however, in stark contrast to the original conceptualization in the 1960s that saw arms control as a pragmatic tool pursued in the context of the broader military strategy, *reinforcing* deterrence through some level of institutionalized transparency and predictability.⁴⁸ In this view, arms control is not a goal by itself but rather a means to achieve strategic stability between nuclear-armed actors – and thereby increasing security for each of them.

Importantly, arms control not only provides a conceptual basis for the *stability* of adversarial relationships, but also for their effective *transformation* – just under a reverse logic than is commonly postulated. Arms control initiatives can reduce the risk of miscalculation and inadvertent escalation even when the mutual relationships are low, but the process of negotiation, adoption, and implementation helps to build mutual trust and understanding to move them towards a more harmonious state of affairs.

Rejecting the false deterrence-arms control dichotomy and reclaiming arms control in NATO's nuclear narrative provides the Alliance with numerous advantages, by linking near-term deterrence requirements to long-term disarmament objectives through medium-term risk-reduction goals.⁴⁹ The strategic logic behind arms control is consistently tied to the meta-narrative of competition between great powers, but provides a constructive and pragmatic outlook by simultaneously rejecting an uncontrollable arms race and any notion of *unilateral*

⁴⁸ Schelling, T. C., & Halperin, M. H. (1961). *Strategy and Arms Control*.

⁴⁹ Roberts, B. (2021). On 'Campaigning' for Nuclear Deterrence (forthcoming), 6.

disarmament. At the same time, it provides a stable basis for further reductions of nuclear arsenals, as well as attempts to substantially transform the security environment, thereby directly addressing the problem that is usually presented as the main obstacle towards more tangible progress in nuclear disarmament.

Strategic communication centered around arms control should highlight specific proposals, directed towards Moscow, that would accompany NATO's attempts at strengthening its deterrence posture. While NATO itself cannot be a signatory of any formal arms control agreement, its officials mostly agree that NATO "serves as a unique forum for Allied consultations on arms control"⁵⁰ and it "should play an enhanced role as a forum to debate challenges to existing arms control mechanisms and consult on any future arrangements."⁵¹ The result of such debates could be an elaboration of a new NATO approach to arms control based on a long-held NATO aspiration of reducing Russian nuclear threat to Europe. With respect to NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements, a strategic narrative with arms control at its center naturally connects these U.S. deployments with Russian preponderance in non-strategic weapons and the danger they pose to European security. It reframes the open-ended nature of these deployments, stresses their potentially transformative nature with respect to European security, and thereby reconceptualizes them as a means to an end. Survey findings discussed in the previous section suggest that aligning the future of nuclear weapons in Europe with arms control negotiations with Moscow could find wide support in host countries. This approach also provides an alternative to clumsy and less than convincing attempts to justify the sharing arrangements by referring to the military or political value of these weapons alone.

Overall, arms control logic helps to make a convincing case for the continuation of nuclear sharing in the current strategic environment, while simultaneously preparing the discursive ground for the possibility that the decision is taken (whether by one host state, more than one, or the Alliance as a whole) to reconsider this practice. From the perspective of strategic communication, the potential withdrawal of weapons from Europe is less of a problem than the manner in which the weapons would be withdrawn and the strategic narrative that explains and justifies this withdrawal. In other words, it matters whether such withdrawal would be framed as a coordinated effort linked to a common strategic goal, or a chaotic, uncontrolled domino dynamic that would give an appearance of weakness and lack of cohesion within the Alliance.

Enlarging the deterrence narrative

Some experts have observed that publicly available NATO documents rarely make an impression of a coherent deterrence posture. For example, Durkalec notes that "while the U.S. has a clear narrative about the role of each element of the strategic nuclear triad in deterring attack against the United States, there is no similar narrative about the contribution of different capabilities to regional deterrence."⁵² NATO should also enlarge the overall deterrence narrative, in which nuclear deterrence is merely one aspect of the overarching deterrence

⁵⁰ Geoană (2021). Foreword. In *NATO and the future of arms control*, 7.

⁵¹ NATO. (2020). *NATO 2030: United for a new era*, 13.

⁵² Durkalec, J. (2018). *The 2018 U.S. Nuclear Posture Review, NATO's Brussels Summit and Beyond*, 20.

strategy. This requires systematically connecting the strategic environment with threat assessment and the resulting deterrence posture, while being clear about the important yet narrow role of nuclear weapons. Such a complex deterrence narrative demands an elaboration of the mix of existing and future capabilities and their respective contribution: from conventional forces and strategic nuclear weapons to DCAs, missile defenses, and new strategic weapons such as hypersonic missiles.

Revisiting the broader deterrence narrative goes hand in hand with attempts to be more transparent and clearer in its strategic communication, as well as at crafting an effective and comprehensive response to the Russian threat. In the context of arms control, it allows the possibility of updating the posture through meaningful capability trade-offs that will result in an improved security position for the allied states. Overall, it improves the coherence of NATO's strategic communication by situating the messaging about activities such as nuclear drills into a more general narrative, where each element of deterrence plays a clearly defined role. To communicate the message clearly, it may be useful to issue a separate report on deterrence as in the 2012 DDPR.

Revisiting the language on ban treaty

The push to revisit NATO's dismissive language on the treaty will likely be a part of intra-alliance deliberations sooner rather than later. With Norway and Germany deciding to participate in the first meeting of TPNW state parties as an observer, NATO can hardly stick its head in the sand and pretend that its present strategic narrative captures these developments.

That does not mean that NATO should dramatically reverse its position. Instead, it should find a way to reduce polarization without compromising the ground that NATO's nuclear narrative stands on.⁵³ As recently proposed by Müller and Wunderlich, “[t]he key is to overcome the emotionalized polarization that sees the opponent as an incarnation of evil, and to realize that values, fears, and desires inscribed into the NPT preamble are still embraced by both sides.”⁵⁴

A constructive strategic communication would acknowledge that the TPNW and NATO, in fact, share a common goal. However, they differ in their views on how best to achieve it – mainly due to a different evaluation of the strategic environment that NATO countries find themselves in. The (factually problematic and unnecessarily divisive) claims that the TPNW “is at odds with the existing non-proliferation and disarmament architecture”⁵⁵ should be generally avoided as they do little to effectively advance any NATO goals and only contribute to widening the cracks in alliance cohesion.

⁵³ Meier, O., & Vieluf, M. (2021). From Division to Constructive Engagement: Europe and the TPNW. *Arms Control Today*. <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2021-12/features/division-constructive-engagement-europe-tpnw>

⁵⁴ Müller, H., & Wunderlich, C. (2020). Nuclear Disarmament without the Nuclear-Weapon States: The Nuclear Weapon Ban Treaty. *Dædalus*, 149(2), 182.

⁵⁵ NATO. (2020, December 15). North Atlantic Council Statement as the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.

Rather than admitting that the new position of Oslo and Berlin presents a challenge to NATO, it would be wiser to engage in proactive strategic communication that would turn their decision into a win for the Alliance. NATO could acknowledge that some of its members will participate at the TPNW meetings as observers, which is instrumental for understanding new developments in disarmament politics, as well as for explaining the specific NATO position. The participation will also allow NATO to present its progress in arms control and risk reduction, which can serve as a demonstration of good faith attempts to address and possibly transform the current security environment that stands in the way of more ambitious disarmament efforts.

There is little ground to claim that such a shift in the tone and approach towards the ban treaty validates the path to disarmament promoted by the TPNW parties. The TPNW cannot become a customary law without the participation of nuclear-armed states. A constructive engagement from the NATO side will not change this situation, since the treaty does not reflect a customary practice in international politics in these states' absence, and it is therefore only binding to its signatories (particularly when countries representing more than half of the world's population reject signing it and object to its provisions).⁵⁶ The willingness to constructively engage the other side would be beneficial for NATO's image of a responsible actor, even if such engagement does not immediately result in changing anyone's position.

Making the moral case

NATO's nuclear discourse, being full of jargon, bureaucratic repetition, and self-referencing claims, can hardly elicit deeper affective responses in the target audiences. Also part of the problem is an artificial distinction between deterrence as a strategic approach that lacks a moral charge, and disarmament as a moral stance with little strategic underpinning. There is no inherent reason to treat nuclear strategy and morality separately. Quinlan and Williams, for example, provide a complex ethical discussion of deterrence, arms control, and disarmament as aspects of NATO's posture that need to work in concert to morally justify possession of nuclear weapons.⁵⁷ Such a perspective allows for a more meaningful debate about the difficult moral tradeoffs connected with nuclear policy.

From the strategic communication perspective, the moral case has the potential to connect with the audience on an emotional level, in line with research in social psychology that shows the importance of moral (re-)framing as a prerequisite for political persuasion.⁵⁸ It would, however, be a mistake to see the moral discourse only as a pragmatic strategy to elicit emotional reactions. Moral argumentation should be, in principle, a prerequisite for legitimizing the existence of NATO as a "nuclear alliance", which is hardly self-explanatory given the risks connected with nuclear weapons' existence and the consequences of deliberate or accidental use. NATO's strategic communication should involve a serious attempt to make a persuasive moral case for

⁵⁶ Müller, H., & Wunderlich, C. (2020). Nuclear Disarmament without the Nuclear-Weapon States: The Nuclear Weapon Ban Treaty. *Dædalus*, 149(2), 179.

⁵⁷ Quinlan, M. (1987). The Ethics of Nuclear Deterrence: A Critical Comment on the Pastoral Letter of the U.S. Catholic Bishops. *Theological Studies*, 48(1), 3–24; Williams, H. (2016). Why a Nuclear Weapons Ban is Unethical (For Now): NATO and the Humanitarian Impacts of Nuclear Weapons Initiative. *RUSI*, 161(2), 38–47.

⁵⁸ Feinberg, M., & Willer, R. (2015). From Gulf to Bridge: When Do Moral Arguments Facilitate Political Influence? *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 41(12), 1665–1681.

the nuclear policies of the Alliance to convince the audiences that its approach is legitimate from an ethical standpoint, highlighting the conditional need for nuclear deterrence that goes hand in hand with serious attempts at arms control and credible commitment to abolition. If NATO and its members fail to make such a case, they can hardly be surprised if the public does not support the idea that U.S. nuclear weapons should remain in Europe.

Getting the message through

A recent report solicited by NATO's Secretary General has explicitly called on its allies to "take additional proactive steps to inform their citizens about and build support for Alliance policies, operations, and activities, and in order to advance NATO's aims"⁵⁹ Indeed, NATO bureaucracy can only do this much. Over the years, it has primarily been the allied governments who lag behind in informing the public about the Alliance's nuclear policy, to the detriment of NATO's current communication efforts. To reverse this trend, NATO's PDD might consider preparing a comprehensive strategic communication strategy for national governments, which would identify the key audiences as the recipients of tailored and focused messaging based on NATO's strategic narrative. As noted by Roberts, "there are many stakeholders in nuclear deterrence policy and the political discourse is well served by engaging broadly with them. These include the general public, general public policy experts in universities and think tanks, nuclear policy experts, nuclear policy advocacy groups and journalists."⁶⁰

While nuclear issues are sometimes mentioned at press conferences, they are hardly ever picked by journalists in national reporting. It appears that if nuclear weapons are ever discussed in the Western media, the coverage is usually driven by controversial (and emotionally more powerful) statements from Moscow rather than plain, ritualistic, and often self-referencing comments from Brussels. Clear, focused, and emotionally-charged content is the key to good PR strategy, as it is in good media relations; to this end, special press events, closed meetings for selected journalists, and off-the-record background information could facilitate the spillover of relevant topics to national debates. These initiatives should go hand-in-hand with governmental statements, press releases, and occasional op-eds from high-profile members of the respective administrations.

Importantly, honesty and greater transparency should be an indispensable component of effective strategic communication and the best way to make the narrative robust vis-à-vis misinformation and disinformation.⁶¹ An unnecessary level of non-transparency is currently particularly visible with regard to U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe. In contrast to the relatively detailed information about the U.S. strategic arsenal, there is no official information regarding the numbers, locations, alert posture, and costs of forward-deployed weapons in host countries, which is something that makes an informed public discussion difficult. To hedge against wild

⁵⁹ NATO Reflection Group. (2020). *NATO 2030: United for a new era*, 49.

⁶⁰ Roberts, B. (2021). *On 'Campaigning' for Nuclear Deterrence* (forthcoming), 3.

⁶¹ Williams, J. (2017). Weaponised honesty: communication strategy and NATO values. *Defence Strategic Communications*, 2(1), 203–213.

interpretations and scandalizing clickbaits, any increase in transparency will require consent, coordination, and high-level of engagement of the host countries.

In today's information environment, however, NATO's communication strategy also needs to improve its ability to be able to detect and react to the spread of disinformation and counternarratives that hinder its efforts. There are fairly well-established counternarratives frequently promoted by Moscow, such as the illegality of NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements, but also some wilder pieces of disinformation, such as alleged NATO plans to relocate nuclear weapons to Romania. Understanding the content of these counternarratives can be useful in preparing a reasonably resilient pro-active strategic communication that is aware of the weak points in NATO's narrative and addresses claims that do not have a factual basis, but are, nonetheless, widely shared across social media.

Evaluating the impact

Finally, the key to successful strategic communication is to be able to measure its impact and learn from it for future efforts. This requires the use of regular cross-national surveys and the organization of focus groups to collect empirical data on message effectiveness. Moreover, elaborated survey experiments can improve understanding of causal factors behind individuals' attitudes and attitudinal change. For many such endeavors, NATO can rely on its affiliated institutions, such as the NATO StratCom Center of Excellence in Riga, and deepen its cooperation with European think-tanks and academia.

Conclusions

The aim of this research paper was to offer a critical perspective on NATO's strategic communication campaign to remain a "nuclear alliance" and provide recommendations for its improvement. Given the space constraints, these recommendations are formulated primarily as guiding principles rather than proposals for concrete language. To craft a coherent and persuasive story to relevant stakeholders, NATO members will need to unpack the individual threads of the overarching strategic narrative in the forthcoming NATO debates. The elaboration of this narrative should also have a prominent place during the development of the new strategic concept, which should be, in NATO's own view, "seen as an opportunity to establish clear priorities [and] solidify cohesion by leading the Alliance to confront new strategic realities."⁶² NATO has not yet lost its strategic communication campaign in nuclear domain – but it certainly needs to compete much more effectively.

⁶² NATO. (2020). NATO 2030: United for a new era, 23.

About the author

Michal Smetana is Researcher and Lecturer at Charles University, Coordinator of the Peace Research Center Prague (PRCP), and Head Researcher at the Experimental Lab for International Security Studies (ELISS). He holds a Ph.D. in International Relations from Charles University, and was previously Fulbright Scholar at Stanford University, and Visiting Research Fellow at the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) and Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (PRIF). His research interests lie at the intersection of security studies, international relations, and political psychology, with a focus on nuclear weapons, arms control and disarmament, deterrence theory, and international norms. His articles have been published in *International Affairs*, *Journal of Peace Research*, *International Studies Review*, *Survival*, *Contemporary Security Policy*, and many other academic and policy journals. He is the author of *Nuclear Deviance: Stigma Politics and the Rules of the Nonproliferation Game*.

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