

DOCUMENTI

IAI

**JOINT NUCLEAR USE CONTROL:
NATO'S EXPERIENCE AND ITS (IN)APPLICABILITY
TO FORMER SOVIET NUCLEAR WEAPONS**

by Marco Carnovale

IAI9206

ISTITUTO AFFARI INTERNAZIONALI

JOINT NUCLEAR USE CONTROL: NATO'S EXPERIENCE AND ITS (IN)APPLICABILITY TO FORMER SOVIET NUCLEAR WEAPONS

by Marco Carnovale

Premise

The collapse of the USSR has given several of the former constituent republics some degree of *de facto* joint control over ex-Soviet nuclear weapons based on their territories. Operational positive control (i.e. the capability to launch a weapon) has remained in the hands of the chain of command of the forces of the new Community of Independent States (CIS). This, for all practical purposes, is completely russified to the extent that it will be the backbone of the new Russian armed forces.

However, the physical location of weapons, which are widely dispersed throughout the former Soviet Union, has provided host republics with some leverage, at least in the sense of negative control (i.e. the capability to *prevent* a launch). All weapons are to return to Russia and/or be destroyed, but this process will take years. This paper deals with interim options for joint control until this transfer is completed.

A series of agreements among the new independent states provides that Russia must receive *the approval* of Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan, and must "consult" all others before using strategic weapons. This arrangement, too, provides some degree of negative control, though one which concerns only launch *authority*, whose relevance is mainly political and hard to gauge on the military level. No comparable agreement has been made with respect to non-strategic weapons, perhaps in part because they are due to be withdrawn by the middle of 1992 (though many doubt they will be) and it was felt unnecessary to stipulate a formal consultation commitment for their launch.

Other papers in this book describe in detail various aspects of the current situation of nuclear weapons use control in the former USSR, which is highly differentiated according to location, type of weapon, applicability of arms control agreements, etc.

If events will follow the pattern that has been agreed, this decade should terminate with the complete return of all nuclear weapons to Russia. Even in the best of circumstances, though, this outcome will take some time and is a far from foregone conclusion. In the interim, there is a problem between Russia and the other republics, which have laid various claims to their share of "control" over weapons on their territory. This interim period is one of paramount importance for world security. At stake is nuclear proliferation through the former USSR as well as the possibility of weapons falling into the hands of one or more of the many uncontrolled forces now fighting over ethnic or territorial issues.

"Joint control" over nuclear weapons?

No new ex-Soviet republic claims a right to positive control except Russia. Therefore, the contentious issues are limited to negative control. Various republics claim "control" over nuclear weapons stationed in their territories until they are taken

to Russia, but they are not always clear about exactly what control they would like.

Mostly, new independent states are looking for political recognition of their new stature, and being able to lay some sort of claim over nuclear weapons is one way to ensure that they will be listened to. In this sense, they are right. More concretely, after the withdrawal to Russia is complete, they claim a right to verify that the withdrawn weapons are destroyed and not absorbed into the Russian armed forces.

In order to assess the claims of non-Russians, one must distinguish between nuclear use control *authority* and *capability*. The former refers to the legal right to order or prevent a nuclear launch, whether or not the holder of authority is actually able to do so; the latter to the actual ability to launch or prevent a launch, whether legitimate or not.

The NATO experience¹

NATO has two kinds of joint nuclear use control. One is the so-called *dual-key* control, and it refers to systems whose warheads are provided by one country (the US) and the delivery system by another. Under such arrangement, the US clearly shares use *capability* with an allied country. The country providing the delivery system (with the exception of allied forces on German soil, this was the host country) thereby acquires a clear right of veto over US unilateral nuclear use. The delivery unit, under order from national governments, could simply refuse to fire the US warhead, and nothing would happen.

Another kind of arrangement is found for nuclear weapons whose warhead and delivery system are both controlled by the US. For these weapons, the US is committed to consult host countries, even if they do not man the delivery systems. Therefore, the US shares only nuclear use *authority* with its allies, but not capability. The degree to which the US government would be bound to seek host country approval, as specified by NATO consultation agreements, is unclear. Some European countries, like the UK and Italy, have long claimed that the US would not, "time and circumstances" permitting, launch a weapon in case their governments were not consulted and had approved first. If true, this claim would amount to a *de facto* veto power, though one that would rely only on the US keeping its pledge.

Other countries, most notably Germany, have *not* claimed to have this same final word. They have limited themselves to state that they have no doubt the US would abide by its NATO commitment to consult. The US itself, during the early eighties, when the issue was paramount to the deployment decision for the Pershing II and Cruise missiles, repeatedly denied the Italian and British claims.

While Europeans have been worried about US use from their territories, Americans have been concerned about the possibility of Europeans acquiring positive control of US weapons by force. Therefore, as an additional precaution, all US warheads in Europe, from 1962 onward, have been endowed with mechanical or electronic locks to prevent unauthorized detonations. While various justifications have been put forward over time, the main rationale for these locks has been US concern over the possibility of hostile local take-over, either by allied forces or, less likely, by terrorists. It is no coincidence that all US weapons land-based in Europe (and in Korea) have had these locks, even naval weapons based ashore, while all

¹ The material in this section is taken from the author's Ph.D. dissertation on "The Control of NATO Nuclear Forces in Europe" (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1989).

others have not.

Conclusions

NATO's experience in sharing nuclear use *capability*, hardly offers a feasible pattern for the ex-Soviets. A dual-key system like that of NATO is not applicable for political and technical reasons, and it would be absolutely impractical to actually set up a dual-key mechanisms: it would imply, among other things, the training of non-Russian officers to man dual-key designated warheads, clearly an unworkable proposition. The installment of dual-key physical devices, such as coded electronic locks, would be expensive and should be avoided if possible.

If however the planned withdrawals are slowed-down considerably beyond the agreed deadline (mid-1992 for tactical weapons and 1994 for strategic), it might make sense for the Russians to install add-on PAL-like devices on weapons left behind. The West could readily help financially and/or with relevant technology, though the USSR had its own kind of locks anyway. If nothing else, this would be a precaution against hostile host-country take-over.

After all, the fear of host country take-over was what motivated the installment of US PALs in Europe-based nuclear weapons in the sixties, even though host countries were allies. In the CIS, host countries are not allies, and the degree of domestic unpredictability would warrant additional safety nets.

Other kinds of joint control may be feasible until all nuclear weapons are finally removed from non-Russian territory. NATO's experience in sharing nuclear control *authority* is applicable to former Soviet states, and should provide a degree of political reassurance to host countries until that time when all weapons are removed. This is the most promising area for any kind of joint control between Russia and other CIS states.

A political arrangement that grants host countries a political right of veto (authority) over use by the Russians has practically already been agreed upon, at least with respect to strategic weapons based in Ukraine, Belorus and Kazakhstan. The value of this agreement depends on the degree of mutual trust among the parties concerned. While a very delicate matter even among the staunchest allies, the solidity of this pledge could be tenuous indeed among suspicious neighbors like the former Soviet states. It will be mainly up to the Russians to build up confidence on the part of the others by taking their commitment seriously.

The Russian could at the same time emulate US procedures which envisage the destruction or the disabling of warheads in Europe in cases where they might have to be abandoned. Thus, in the worst conceivable cases, it would take an experienced intruder some time to be able to defeat such measures and utilize the weapon himself. The European NATO allies cooperate extensively to this US effort. Former Soviet states may be less forthcoming, but Western pressure could help. This kind of measure would prove useful even after weapons are withdrawn to Russia, given the unpredictability about the integrity of that country in the future.