

“NATO and the NPT: From Policy to Practice?”

Remarks by Paul Meyer for Panel on NATO and the NPT, Side Event, NPT PrepCom
May 7, 2014 New York

Given that we are meeting here in the great city of New York, I would like to open by paying homage to one of the town’s great wits, Dorothy Parker, who once quipped that “You can’t teach an old dogma new tricks”.

For me this saying in a way encapsulates the Alliance’s love-hate relationship with the NPT and why even in the second decade of the 21st century, NATO still seems to view its role with respect to this treaty from a Cold War perspective.

I am not going to address in my talk the classic argument that the Alliance’s nuclear sharing arrangements are in violation of the NPT’s Articles 1 and 2 commitments. Nor will I refer to the traditional response that these arrangements pre-date the NPT, were not contested at the time and still maintain exclusive US control of the nuclear weapon itself. This dispute I suspect is not going to be resolved anytime soon. What I will address is the extent to which the Alliance, in policy and practice, supports the fundamental purposes of the NPT and the global nuclear order built around it.

To me this question reflects a longstanding struggle in Alliance policy as to whether security should be ensured by primarily military and collective defense measures or by political and cooperative security measures. While NATO will proclaim that it values both, I think the organization’s make-up and ethos has long favoured military over political responses to threats. This is particularly evident in the often difficult time NATO seems to have in dealing with arms control and disarmament as a subject matter and as a component of Alliance security policy.

I had a first hand experience with some of these problems when I served with the Canadian delegation at NATO during the years 1988-1992. This was a period of great transformation of the security landscape in Europe, the collapse of the Soviet bloc, the reunification of Germany and NATO was moving in response to extend its proverbial hand of friendship and to enhance its political strategy and to be seen to be so doing. Part of this effort involved presenting, in 1989, its Comprehensive Arms Control and Disarmament policy, which was the first, public document that affirmed the Alliance’s commitment to pursue security through negotiated arms control and disarmament agreements. This period coincided with some of the major accomplishments in multilateral arms control, the CFE Treaty, the Vienna Document and the Open Skies treaty. It was a period when NATO committees were engaged with the subject matter. I recall semi-annual meetings in NATO’s Political Committee, where I was the representative, devoted to arms control and disarmament, reinforced by colleagues from the disarmament missions in Geneva and experts from capitals. Practical expression was being given to the declaratory policy in support of ACD.

The nuclear realm proved more elusive from this type of policy scrutiny however. Part of this related to the fact that only three of the NATO members were nuclear weapon states and the arms control activity that was underway during the 1990s and up to the present was, when it was occurring at all, an exclusively bilateral US-Russian affair. A handful of non-nuclear allies participated in nuclear delivery roles and the entire membership was involved in the NATO policy, which had at its centre the doctrine of nuclear deterrence.

The advocates within NATO of weaning the alliance off its attachment to nuclear weapons, and Canada was amongst them at that point in time, had to focus on trying to change Alliance nuclear policy. The preeminent espousal of Alliance Policy is contained in its Strategic Concept and I recall, from the vantage of a relevant position in Ottawa, the strenuous efforts made to modernize the nuclear section of the 1999 Strategic Concept. These efforts failed to achieve their aims, in part because by that point NATO had got itself involved in a major military action against Serbia over Kosovo, and there were fervent appeals to Alliance solidarity and the need to avoid divisive debates over nuclear policy.

The reformer's renewed the attempt a decade later when the current Strategic Concept was being prepared and finally released in November 2010 at the Lisbon Summit. The nuclear core of this Strategic Concept was contained in a Janus-faced declaration, set out in the summary, which I will quote: "It [the Concept] commits NATO to the goal of creating the conditions for a world without nuclear weapons – but reaffirms that, as long as there are nuclear weapons in the world NATO will remain a nuclear alliance".

The second part of this ringing declaration is one of the great tautologies of statecraft. Try reversing the sub-clauses to perceive its true meaning: "As long as NATO remains a nuclear alliance there are nuclear weapons in the world".

The first part of the pronouncement however suggests that NATO is embracing the goal of a nuclear weapon-free world, one that the President of its leading member had espoused a year earlier in a famous speech in Prague. The SC went on to say that the Alliance would continue "to play our part in reinforcing arms control and in promoting disarmament of both conventional weapons and weapons of mass destruction". However the SC also affirmed that the Alliance would maintain an appropriate mix of nuclear and conventional forces. So how significant would this pursuit of nuclear disarmament be, if the defense posture was requiring nuclear weapons in the mix?

NATO is not the first nor the last organization to have recourse to a tactic to avoid dealing head on with a controversial topic at a meeting of leaders – strike a committee to review the issue. This was the out at Lisbon which authorized a 'deterrence and defense posture' review. A review that was carried out in the two year period between the Lisbon and the Chicago summits of NATO.

The review produced a document of surprising orthodoxy that repeated the requirement to have nuclear weapons as a core component of NATO capabilities and even warned that the Alliance's development of missile defenses could not be considered a substitute for nuclear arms. These arms remained, in the obsequious terminology of the nuclear hawks, "the supreme guarantee of the security of the Alliance".

Yes there is also in the review the commitment "to create the conditions for a world without nuclear weapons in accordance with the goals of the NPT, in a way that promotes international stability and is based on the principle of undiminished security for all". One might uncharitably note that the commitment has become rather heavily conditioned (who decides whether disarmament is stabilizing or not?). The cynic (or lawyer) might be so unkind as to flag that the Alliance action is to be in accordance with the goals of the NPT, but not necessarily with its provisions.

It is however the deeds rather than the words that matter. What has the Alliance done since Chicago to create the conditions for the world without nuclear weapons? More simply, has NATO spelled out what these conditions are, so that there is some objective criteria to measure responses against? What operational follow-up has the Alliance undertaken to advance the commitments to arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation expressed in the review?

The institutional response by the Alliance to the direction given in the SC, which had instructed that appropriate consultations on arms control and disarmament be organized, is revealing. One might have thought NATO would set up a committee for arms control and disarmament to oversee follow-up. No instead this file was entrusted to the Committee on Proliferation. Ever since NATO set up its WMD Non-proliferation Centre in 2000, its denizens have been more comfortable focusing on the threat of proliferation rather than the promise of disarmament. In such a context, one might get attention with a Proliferation Security Initiative, or a Global Network to Combat Nuclear Terrorism activity, but not the sort of creative diplomacy required to develop arms control initiatives and fashion those measures which will serve as the conditions for a nuclear weapons free world. It is revealing that this theme has been institutionalized in the context of the NATO-Russia Council which has a working group devoted to arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation, but which appears to lack a parallel Alliance body dedicated to preparing positions for the interaction with partner countries.

Disengagement on this file by NATO is ill-advised, in my view, as the NPT and the regime based on it is under considerable strain at present. The Alliance can and should be playing an active part in devising remedial steps to reinforce the NPT's authority and promoting compliance across all its pillars. To do this, the Alliance will need to prepare itself both institutionally and intellectually to carry out the constructive role it says it wants to play with respect to the NPT.

