



Reviving the Special Consultative Group: Past Experiences and Future Prospects

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*"NATO should re-establish the Special Consultative Group on Arms Control for the purpose of facilitating its own internal dialogue about the whole range of issues related to nuclear doctrine, new arms control initiatives, and proliferation". Experts' Group Report May 2010.*²

The recommendation from the NATO Experts' Group quoted above is likely to prompt renewed interest in an almost-forgotten NATO consultative forum which had its heyday during the 1980s. This briefing offers, firstly, an historical analysis of the Special Consultative Group (SCG) to remind readers of its origins, purpose and effectiveness during the Cold War. It then considers what a revival of the SCG might achieve in the current intra-NATO and international contexts.



Joint press conference Madeleine Albright and Anders Fogh Rasmussen presenting the recommendations of the Group of Experts on NATO's New Strategic Concept - photo credit: NATO

The SCG in the Cold War

East-West nuclear arms control negotiations developed from the late 1960s but remained essentially bilateral in nature (i.e. between the US and USSR). During this period 'consultations' on nuclear arms control in NATO entailed the US giving basic-level briefings to its allies, rather than seeking their input into its negotiating position. There is little evidence that this approach was resented, with European governments content to let the US, as NATO's pre-eminent nuclear power, formulate policy. This remained the case for as long as negotiations focused on strategic nuclear

systems, rather than shorter-range American nuclear weapons based in Europe.

The situation changed with debates about the deployment of new Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) in the late 1970s. In October 1977 a NATO 'High-Level Group on Nuclear Force Modernisation' (HLG) was created. The HLG's formation reflected concerns amongst some European governments – West Germany's in particular – that a potentially dangerous gap in NATO's spectrum of nuclear deterrence was emerging. A deeper intra-NATO consultative process was part of American efforts to address these concerns. A second and far more controversial element was the eventual decision to deploy new nuclear missiles in Western Europe (ground-launched cruise and Pershing II). The main impetus for the decision to deploy these missiles came from European governments rather than the United States.³

The INF debate was thus primarily prompted by a perceived need amongst European governments for reassurance about continued transatlantic nuclear coupling and overall American commitment. Only when these concerns were addressed was another reassurance issue – that of public opinion in prospective INF host states – also considered. In April 1979, eighteen months after the HLG had begun its work and with NATO members nearing a decision on INF deployments, the formation of a 'Special Group on Arms Control and Related Matters' (SG) was announced. Hitherto, discussions in the HLG had not focused on prospective INF arms control issues to any appreciable extent.

The SG was very much a European initiative. Published accounts suggest that the German government was the prime mover behind its creation, with the Netherlands acting in strong support.⁴ These two states, as prospective INF 'hosts', had an obvious interest in seeing arms control considered. Bureaucratic politics may have played a role more generally. The formation of the SG, which grouped senior officials from national

foreign ministries as well as the NATO International Staff and International Military Staff, reflected foreign ministries' interest in securing an equivalent NATO group to the HLG, which was staffed by defence ministries.⁵

As suggested above, a sense of NATO members' priorities in the late 1970s can be gleaned from the fact that a consultative forum on INF arms control was not established until after a decision was made in principle to deploy a new type of nuclear weaponry in Europe. Nevertheless the political rationale for stressing arms control and possible disarmament was almost certain to increase once the formal decision was made and opposition movements began to mobilise against it. NATO member states anticipated this by couching their INF decision in December 1979 as a 'dual-track' one, with a willingness to pursue arms control and disarmament as the second track. The SG was rechristened the 'Special Consultative Group' (SCG) and what had until then been an internal NATO working group was in effect publicly launched. The December 1979 ministerial communiqué announced the creation of a 'special consultative body at a high level' in NATO to support the second track.⁶ The addition of the word 'consultative' mattered to both Americans and Europeans. For the former it stressed the 'all-in-this-together' nature of the INF package as a whole. For European governments it promised input into policy-making on nuclear arms control for the first time.

The SCG's heyday came in the first half of the 1980s. This was ironic because there seemed little chance of any actual INF arms control being agreed with the USSR at that time. Nevertheless work was carried out to produce and finesse western proposals, the best-known of which was the so-called 'Zero Option' (i.e. cancellation of the plans to deploy cruise and Pershing II in exchange for Soviet agreement to remove equivalent systems already in place) in 1981. Contemporary analysts almost all agree that the SCG mattered at this time. Thomas Risse-Kappen, citing interviews with West German officials who participated in the group, described the consultations that took place there as "very extensive", adding that "due to this close consultation process it [was] often difficult to discern the origin of a negotiating proposal". William Voegelé similarly argued that during the early phase of INF negotiations, "some of the strongest forces for [US] negotiating shifts were European pressures and perspectives". Lewis Dunn noted, finally, that "the United States stopped short of tabling proposals or responses until they had been in effect agreed to by the Allies".⁷

In a second irony, once Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev announced his willingness to pursue

an INF agreement without preconditions in February 1987, the resulting process led to the increasing marginalisation of the SCG. Partly this was because of the sheer pace of events. Agreement was successfully reached and a treaty signed within ten months. Voegelé noted that when "Soviet concessions were rapid and forthcoming, the US had to impose its preferences" on its allies in the interests of securing agreement quickly.⁸



Soviet SS-20 (left) and US Pershing-II (right) nuclear missiles on display at the National Air and Space Museum in Washington DC – photo credit: Bernt Rostad/flickr

Although the December 1987 INF Treaty was widely hailed, the negative impact of the SCG's marginalisation soon became apparent. Had an intensive programme of multilateral consultations been maintained, greater attention might have been paid to the consequences of the INF agreement for the remaining stockpiles of US/NATO nuclear weapons in Europe and differing attitudes towards them amongst member states. Emerging disputes over these Short-range Nuclear Forces (SNF) – i.e. systems with ranges below 500km⁹ – centred on whether they should be modernised in order to "buttress" deterrence and "compensate" for the INF missiles about to be withdrawn. At a NATO summit meeting in May 1989 a compromise was reached. All members agreed that SNF should be kept up to date "where necessary". Decisions on deployments of specific new weapons would however be deferred until 1992.¹⁰

These decisions seemed by definition to presage a period of quiescence for intra-NATO nuclear consultation. The George H W Bush administration in the US did seek to revive the SCG during 1990 as a forum for discussing SNF arms control proposals, which it saw as a possible trade-off for securing modernisation agreements further down the line.¹¹ However, European governments showed in the main limited interest. This was not necessarily because they wished to keep weapons in place but rather out of the belief that implementing formal agreements could prove prohibitively difficult. Verifying the removal of nuclear artillery shells was held to be a particular

problem. Some officials reportedly felt that rather than spending time negotiating and implementing a problematic SNF treaty, the weapons should be removed on the basis of an informal reciprocal 'gentleman's agreement' between the US and USSR. In September 1991 such views informed President Bush's announcement that he would proceed with the removal of all US land-based and naval SNF in Europe in expectation of reciprocation on the Soviet side. By then the SCG was effectively moribund and had played no formal role in influencing Bush's decision.

Reviving the SCG: Problems and Prospects

The brief history recounted above suggests that a revived SCG could play a number of roles. These will be briefly outlined and analysed in the remainder of this paper.

Bolstering intra-NATO solidarity on nuclear weapons issues

This was a key rationale for the creation of the original SG/SCG in the late 1970s. It is apparent that the 2010 Experts' Group had it in mind when calling for the SCG's revival. The Experts' Group, as noted earlier, suggested that a revived SCG could "facilitate internal dialogue about the whole range of issues related to nuclear doctrine, new arms control initiatives, and proliferation". Such a dialogue however, should evidently *not* extend to the issue of eliminating remaining SNF in NATO-Europe entirely. The Experts' Group is clear that "as long as nuclear weapons remain a reality in international relations, the Alliance should retain a nuclear component to its deterrent strategy".¹²



Arms control - illustration: Jared Rodriguez – photo credit: Truthout.org/flickr

Compared to the 1970s, the strategic and political situation today is of course fundamentally different. Today, there are no calls for bolstering NATO's internal solidarity on nuclear issues with the possible deployment of new weaponry. On the contrary, the backdrop to the Experts' Group's recommendation for reviving the SCG were calls from parliamentarians in several nuclear host states in Europe – Germany in particular – for a debate on the remaining SNF, including potential elimination. The Experts' Group recommendation is in tune with efforts by member states such as the US and senior members of the NATO International Staff to dissuade individual member governments from taking unilateral initiatives.¹³

As noted earlier, in the 1970s the SCG was not created until after a process had been initiated to upgrade NATO-assigned nuclear weapons in Europe. Although there are no current plans to initiate a comparable modernisation process, the situation today bears comparison in one important respect. Although the SCG itself has been moribund for nearly two decades, neither the High-Level Group on Nuclear Force Modernisation nor the Nuclear Planning Group (NPG - NATO's senior forum for political consultations on nuclear weapons issues) have ever gone away. As in the 1970s therefore, a revived SCG would not be starting with a blank sheet. Rather, its deliberations would take place within a context and framework informed by work already ongoing within the HLG which, according to an insightful analysis by Simon Lunn former Secretary-General of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, has concluded that SNF deployment in Europe – based on freefall bombs and associated dual-capable aircraft – should be retained.¹⁴ Obviously, as Lunn notes, NATO members could decide to overrule or ignore the HLG's conclusions. On the other hand, the history of the late 1970s and early 1980s suggests that internal NATO working groups can play a decisive role in shaping a developing policy process. David Nicholls who served as NATO's Assistant Secretary-General for Defence Planning and Policy between 1980 and 1984, has argued that the HLG was "the predominant force for the modernisation of nuclear rockets in the period from 1979 until the achievement of the INF arms control agreement in 1987". In the current context it is not therefore fanciful to envisage it acting as a 'predominant force' for retaining a continuing SNF capability in NATO-Europe.¹⁵

Facilitating SNF arms control and disarmament with Russia

The history of the SCG suggests that although its main designation was as an intra-NATO arms control forum, its actual role in facilitating this during the 1980s was limited. Once the US under Ronald Reagan decided to proceed with

negotiations with the USSR on INF during 1987, the SCG was sidelined. Neither did it play any significant role in the process leading up to the reciprocal US-Soviet SNF initiatives in the autumn of 1991.

This unpromising history is complemented by the poor current prospects for negotiations with Russia on SNF. Partly this is due to the negative legacy of the 1991 'Presidential Nuclear Initiatives' (PNIs) referred to above. Although dramatic, eye-catching and overwhelmingly positively appraised at the time, the PNIs were never subsequently formalised and 'locked-in'. Consequently, there are no agreed monitoring, verification or information-exchange provisions, to the extent that neither side officially even knows how many SNF the other has.¹⁶ Thus there have periodically been predictable mutual accusations of bad faith and suggestions on the western side that the Russian government no longer considers itself bound by informal agreements made by the last Soviet president. The latter have hardly been dispelled by occasional Russian nuclear threats, such as that issued at the time of Barack Obama's election as US president in November 2008.¹⁷

It is difficult to envisage a formal arms control process resulting in anything other than the *complete* elimination of SNF in NATO-Europe given the low number of remaining weapons (between 150 and 250 on most informed estimates). Despite the publicity given to disarmament calls from within the ruling coalition in Germany and elsewhere in Western Europe, it should not be presumed that there is consensus amongst NATO members on such a step. Analysts have noted that attitudes to SNF differ markedly amongst the newer members in Central Europe, most especially in the Baltic States. Here the traditional sense that US nuclear deployments in Europe provide important reassurance about its overall commitment to collective defence still has purchase.¹⁸ Indeed, this is reinforced because the agreements with Russia which accompanied the first round of NATO enlargement into Central Europe during the 1990s stipulated that NATO would refrain from deploying nuclear weapons and supporting infrastructure on the territory of new members. The latter are thus dependent on other European states continuing to host SNF.

There is one more potential difficulty. Throughout the chequered history of NATO-Russia relations since 1991, a continuing source of contention has been over Russian perceptions that NATO members have sought to 'pre-cook' common positions in advance of meetings with Russian representatives and present these as *faits accomplis*. This was, arguably, one of the reasons for the failure of the first NATO-Russia consultative forum, the Permanent Joint Council (PJC) between 1997 and 2002. The Russian government has striven to ensure that discussions in the PJC's successor – the NATO-Russia Council (NRC) – do not follow a similar course.¹⁹ Bearing this in mind, even if the US and its allies were willing to formulate agreed positions on SNF within a revived SCG, it is not clear that this would engender a positive reaction on the Russian side. The NRC has been suggested as a possible forum for NATO-Russia negotiations on SNF.²⁰ However it has apparently not yet discussed the issue in any systematic way.²¹

Consolidating and reducing NATO's remaining SNF

Disappointing though it will doubtless be for advocates of the elimination of NATO SNF, the prospects of this happening, with or without a revival of the SCG, currently appear remote. As noted earlier, the Experts' Group suggest that the SCG be revived more as a means of managing an emerging new intra-NATO debate and trying to prevent unilateral actions than as a means of advancing multilateral arms control. Also, it is by no means clear that the Russian government will be willing to engage in an SNF arms control process and the existence of an internal NATO forum in itself might be regarded suspiciously on the Russian side.



New START negotiators Rose Gottemoeller, Assistant Secretary of State for Verification, Compliance and Implementation and Ambassador Anatoly Antonov of the Russian Federation making a joint presentation on the New START Treaty to international arms control diplomats at a 3 June 2010 plenary of the Conference on Disarmament – photo credit: US Mission Geneva/flickr

Taking these considerations into account, consultations and negotiations within a revived SCG might therefore most likely contribute to a consolidation and *partial* reduction of SNF in NATO-Europe. It has been suggested that a residual NATO SNF stockpile could be based at US facilities in Italy and Turkey.²² This would end the current nuclear sharing arrangements in Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands, where

politicians have raised questions about the future of SNF. It would retain the principle of nuclear sharing however, based on the physical deployment of US nuclear warheads in Europe coupled with participation of all NATO members (except France) in political oversight arrangements in the NPG and the participation of many of them in operational support

Notes

¹ The views expressed here are personal and should not be taken to represent the policy or views of the British Government, Ministry of Defence or the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst.

² *NATO 2020: Assured Security; Dynamic Engagement – Analysis and Recommendations of the Group of Experts on a New Strategic Concept for NATO* (Brussels: NATO 2010), p. 43.

³ See, *inter alia*, Strobe Talbott, *Deadly Gambits* (London: Pan 1985), p. 32; Raymond Garthoff, 'The NATO Decision on Theatre Nuclear Forces', *Political Science Quarterly* 98 2 1983, p. 202 & James Thomson, 'The LRTNF Decision: Evolution of US Theatre Nuclear Policy, 1975-9', *International Affairs* 60 4 1984, pp. 601-14.

⁴ Thomas Risse-Kappen, *The Zero Option: INF, West Germany and Arms Control* (Boulder: Westview 1988), pp. 43-4; Stephen Hanmer, 'NATO's Long-Range Theatre Nuclear Forces', *NATO Review* 28 1 1980, p. 4.

⁵ Talbott, *Deadly Gambits*, pp. 37-8.

⁶ The text of the communiqué can be found in *NATO Final Communiqués 1975-1980* (Brussels: NATO nd), pp. 121-3.

⁷ Risse-Kappen, *The Zero Option*, pp. 68-9; William Voegelé, 'Tough Bargaining and Arms Control: Lessons from the INF Treaty', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 12 3 1989, p. 268; Lewis Dunn, 'Considerations after the INF Treaty', *Survival* XXX 3 1988, p. 206.

⁸ Voegelé, 'Tough Bargaining and Arms Control', p. 269.

⁹ In the late 1980s, NATO's SNF holdings consisted mainly of nuclear-tipped artillery shells, short-range missiles and freefall bombs for use from aircraft.

¹⁰ *Declaration of the Heads of State and Government Participating in the Meeting of the North Atlantic Council, May 1989* at http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_23554.htm? *The Alliance's Comprehensive Concept of Arms Control and Disarmament* at http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_23553.htm?

¹¹ The discussions here are informed by author interviews with members of the NATO Nuclear Planning Directorate in April 1991.

¹² *NATO 2020: Assured Security; Dynamic Engagement*, p. 43.

¹³ At a NATO foreign ministers' meeting held in Tallinn in April 2010 both US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen called for NATO members to avoid unilateral decisions or initiatives on SNF. See Ian Davis, 'NATO nuclear reform off the menu in Tallinn', *NATO Watch Briefing Paper No.9* April 2010.

¹⁴ Malcolm Chalmers & Simon Lunn, *NATO's Tactical Nuclear Dilemma* (London: RUSI 2010), pp. 8-9. Lunn's

programmes.²³ Such a consolidation would also provide an opportunity for an agreed reduction in warhead numbers – say down to 20 or 30 per state – thus bringing about partial SNF disarmament without this being dependent on an agreement with Russia.

contribution to this report is based on extensive interviews with national delegations at NATO headquarters as well as members of the International Staff.

¹⁵ Author interview with David Nicholls in March 1993.

¹⁶ Amy Woolf, *Nonstrategic Nuclear Weapons* (Washington DC: Congressional Research Service 2010). See also David Yost, 'Russia's non-strategic nuclear forces', *International Affairs* 77 3 2001, pp. 540-44.

¹⁷ President Dmitry Medvedev greeted Obama's election with a threat to deploy nuclear capable missiles in Russia's Kaliningrad region in response to US/Czech/Polish agreements to proceed with the deployment of missile defence components in Central Europe. See 'The return of missile diplomacy', *Johnson's Russia List*, 2008-207 at <http://www.cdi.org/russia/johnson/2008-207-22.cfm>.

¹⁸ See Chalmers & Lunn, *NATO's Tactical Nuclear Dilemma*, p. 2, p. 13, p. 14 & p. 16. See also Raymond Knops (Rapporteur), *US Non-Strategic Nuclear Weapons in Europe: A Fundamental NATO Debate* (Brussels: NATO Parliamentary Assembly 2010), para. 38.

¹⁹ For a general history of NATO-Russia relations covering these issues, see Martin A. Smith, *Russia and NATO since 1991: From Cold War through cold peace to partnership?* (Abingdon: Routledge 2006).

²⁰ Franklin Miller, George Robertson & Kori Schake, 'Germany Opens Pandora's Box', *Centre for European Reform Briefing Note* 2010, pp. 4-5.

²¹ Simon Lunn has written that 'NATO has attempted to discuss [Russian SNF] in the NRC, but with no success'. Chalmers & Lunn, *NATO's Tactical Nuclear Dilemma*, p. 13.

²² Chalmers & Lunn, *NATO's Tactical Nuclear Dilemma*, p. 18.

²³ According to Lunn a NATO programme called SNOWCAT provides a framework for allies to contribute to the support of nuclear missions. Chalmers & Lunn, *NATO's Tactical Nuclear Dilemma*, p. 6.