

NATO'S NUCLEAR STRATEGY:
IMPLICATIONS FOR EUROPEAN-AMERICAN RELATIONS

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Table of Contents

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|---|----|
| I. Problem | 1 |
| II. Review of Related Literature | 3 |
| A. The Present Malaise | 3 |
| B. The Pershing II and Cruise Deployments | 5 |
| C. The Policy of "No First-Use" | 8 |
| D. The Policy of "Flexible Response" | 9 |
| E. The Strategic Defense Initiative | 11 |
| III. Findings | 14 |
| A. Deployment and Decoupling | 14 |
| B. "Flexible Response" and Conventional Defenses | 15 |
| C. Problems with the Strategic Defense Initiative | 17 |
| IV. Summary and Conclusions | 20 |
| V. Bibliography | 22 |

I

Since 1977, when the initial decision was made to plan the deployment of 572 Pershing II and cruise missiles in European territory, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has found itself mired in arguably the longest period of controversy over defensive weapons strategy in its thirty-seven year history. How has it come to pass that the Atlantic Alliance finds itself in this situation and what are the implications for European-American relations?

For almost four decades the Atlantic Alliance has served as the primary framework for maintaining peaceful relationships between its members and those states which constitute the Warsaw Pact. In that capacity, notwithstanding varied crises and periods of significant stress, NATO has compiled a track record of enormous achievement. No other collective security organization in modern times has endured for so long in the face of so many obstacles. Nevertheless, NATO cannot rest on its laurels. The continued growth of Soviet military power and the expansionist nature of that country's foreign policy require that the Alliance continues to act as a viable means of deterrence. In this context, a gradual withering of cohesiveness within NATO, or worse, a fracture of its basic foundations could be potentially ruinous.

Therefore, it is imperative that the current troubles

which confront the Alliance be resolved in a manner that is both expeditious as well as comprehensive. Not only would such remedies enhance NATO as a deterrent force, but they would act to heighten the Alliance's political and economic position as well.

This discussion will focus primarily on NATO's current defense strategy of "flexible response", the decision on and eventual deployment of Pershing II and cruise missiles, and the proposed "Strategic Defense Initiative." After a review of related literature on these topics, the discussion will turn to their effect on European-American relations and potential remedial measures.

II

That NATO is now enduring a period of hardship is largely undisputed. The extent to which the Alliance's current troubles have progressed, however, is a matter which has been subject to substantial debate. Lawrence Eagleburger, in an address prepared for the National Newspaper Association, suggested that although there are challenges to be met by NATO, "It is not my thesis that the North Atlantic alliance is now in crisis."¹ Nevertheless, there are a significant number of observers who have stated, for example, that, "Forces beyond the control of any statesman, no matter how skilled or dedicated, have jeopardized the very survival of the Alliance."²

NATO has experienced difficulties many times in the past thirty-seven years. The Suez and Berlin crises of the 1950's, France's withdrawal from the military arm of the Alliance, and the pressure exerted on its members during the Vietnam era have all confronted NATO in one form or another with varying degrees of turmoil. However, the current disenchantment within the Alliance distinguishes itself from other periods of trouble in both degree and composition.

¹Lawrence S. Eagleburger, "The Transatlantic Relationship: A Long-Term Perspective," Department of State Bulletin, 84: 39-42, April, 1984.

²Eliot A. Cohen, "The Long-Term Crisis of the Alliance," Foreign Affairs, 61,2 (Winter 1982-1983): 325-343.

Writing in The Wilson Quarterly, Kolodziej and Pollard state,

Americans and their NATO partners have repeatedly argued over four key issues: military strategy and nuclear weapons, relations with the Soviets, distribution of defense burdens, and trade and monetary matters. But at no time have these four problems afflicted the allies all at once--until now.³

While somewhat simplistic in its analysis, Kolodziej and Pollard's suggestion illuminates the depth of the disputes within the Alliance. These are problems, however, that can be solved,

....by inelegant but workable compromises; the petty resentments of the moment will be understood as such: fits of pique which lead to the spats common to any couple, no matter how secure the marriage.⁴

Although important in their own right, the policy disputes within NATO that have occurred over the last several years take on added significance when they are viewed in a larger context. Freedman suggests that,

....it remains unclear whether this conjunction of arguments is a temporary phenomenon brought about by the strains of recession or by the incompatibility of the current crop of political leaders, or whether we are witnessing the symptoms of a much deeper crisis that is unsettling the whole set of assumptions that have governed Western policy-making over the past three decades.⁵

³Edward A. Kolodziej and Robert A. Pollard, "The Uneasy Alliance: Western Europe and the United States," The Wilson Quarterly, 7, 5 (Winter 1983): 112-120.

⁴Cohen, op. cit., p. 325.

⁵Lawrence Freedman, "The Atlantic Crisis," International Affairs, 58, 2 (Summer 1982): 395-412.

The malaise which NATO now suffers from, and which according to Freedman is possibly representative of structural problems within the Alliance, originated in large part with the decision by the United States to attempt to base intermediate range nuclear weapons in Europe in response to the deployment of medium range SS-20s by the Soviet Union. From almost the moment the decision was made, controversy erupted and to this day is still visible if only in a diluted form.

The December 1979 decision to deploy the missiles took what was called a "dual-track" form. This involved negotiating the limitations of nuclear weapons in Europe while simultaneously preparing to base American Pershing II and cruise missiles on European soil. The logic involved with this decision was that unless NATO had something to trade with the Soviets during arms control negotiations it would be doubtful that Moscow might sacrifice any existing systems. This approach to arms control would eventually falter, however, because,

....the Eurostrategic weapons began to take on a life of their own as American officials, who have lately been excessively running down US defence capabilities, insisted that NATO required these missiles to plug a gap in the deterrent spectrum.⁶

What this did was to foment much opposition from the Europeans who understandably accused the United States of

⁶Stanley Kober, "Can NATO Survive?" International Affairs, 59, 3(Summer 1983) p. 341.

abandoning the negotiating track of the original decision. As Bertram points out, putting nuclear weapons programs in an arms control context makes them more palatable to public opinion which suggests why,

....one of the costly political mistakes of the early Reagan Administration was precisely to express misgivings about the arms control process and to contend that only a strengthened West could induce the Soviet Union to accommodate Western security interests. Deterrence by nuclear weapons will generally only be tolerated by public opinion if it is accompanied by the search for common constraints with the Soviet side.⁷

The other aspect of the Pershing II and cruise missile deployment that acted to cause such controversy was the nature of the weapons themselves. These systems, stationed on European territory, were intended to counter the threat to that same European soil by the Soviet's SS-20s which by design were apparently for use against European targets. This led to the perception that America's European allies were being "decoupled" from the United State's security blanket and that the next war could possibly be fought entirely on their soil. These perceptions were only intensified in 1981 when President Reagan, responding to a question as to the possibility of a limited exchange of nuclear weapons between the United States and the Soviet Union, stated,

I don't honestly know...I could see where you could have the exchange of tactical weapons against troops in the field without it bringing either one of the major powers to pushing the button.⁸

⁷Christoph Bertram, "Europe and America in 1983," Foreign Affairs, 62, 3(Summer 1983) p. 619.

⁸The New York Times, 21 October 1981, p. A5.

Kober suggests, however, that,

The risk of decoupling was probably exaggerated. Deterrence is the result not of the certainty of nuclear retaliation, but of the uncertainty that there will not be retaliation in the event of aggression. Given the destructiveness of the superpowers' huge arsenals, that uncertainty does not have to be very high to be effective. Thus, if extended deterrence appears riskier for the United States in conditions of nuclear parity than it did before it is still doubtful that the Soviet leadership feels it could unleash an attack against Western Europe confident that the United States would refrain from escalating to central nuclear exchanges, especially in view of the continued presence of hundreds of thousands of American troops in Europe.⁹

Although much consternation has been directed by the Europeans towards America in general and the Reagan Administration in particular with regard to arms control and the perceived risk of decoupling, these concerns stem, in large part, from the nuclear strategy which has been adopted by NATO.

The excessive reliance on the threat to use nuclear weapons first in a conflict forces NATO governments to pretend to be more irrational than they actually are, and definitely more than they wish to appear to their public. NATO is caught between the need to warn the Soviet Union that it might escalate a conflict, despite the suicidal implications of such a move, and to reassure the public that it would not be so reckless.¹⁰

The policy that dictates that NATO members might consider the use of nuclear weapons in retaliation to a Soviet attack was formulated when America's nuclear advantage was

⁹Kober, op. cit., p.342

¹⁰Lawrence Freedman, "NATO: Tell-and Trust-the People," The Times of London, 25 January 1984, p.12.

completely overwhelming. This, however, is no longer the case. The nuclear advantage that once was the United States' has now been transferred to the Soviet Union by a slight margin.

The general problem with NATO's present defense strategy is that it is becoming increasingly difficult to entertain the idea that retaliation in response to a Soviet attack on Europe could be implemented without a substantial risk of escalation to nuclear weapons. Currently, there are two major schools of thought which have postulated potential solutions to this problem. The first has been posited by the "Big Four": McGeorge Bundy, George F. Kennan, Robert S. McNamara, and Gerard Smith. They have argued that a policy of "no first-use" of nuclear weapons coupled with a determined build-up of European conventional forces would stabilize the Alliance politically while simultaneously raising the nuclear threshold. They state that,

It is time to recognize that no one has ever succeeded in advancing any persuasive reason to believe that any use of nuclear weapons, even on the smallest scale, could reliably be expected to remain limited. Every serious analysis and every military exercise, for over 25 years, has demonstrated that even the most restrained battlefield use would be enormously destructive to civilian life and property. There is no way for anyone to have any confidence that such a nuclear action will not lead to further and more devastating exchanges. Any use of nuclear weapons in Europe, by the Alliance or against it, carries with it a high and inescapable risk of escalation into the general nuclear war which would bring ruin to all and victory to none.¹¹

¹¹Bundy, Kennan, McNamara, and Smith, "Nuclear Weapons and the Atlantic Alliance," Foreign Affairs, 60,4(Spring '82) p.757.

The second potential solution to the problem of NATO's "flexible response" is not a new strategy at all but merely an augmentation of the current doctrine. The strategy of "flexible response" allows for three types of retaliation to a Soviet attack: 1) direct defense, 2) deliberate escalation, 3) general nuclear response. In the first instance, NATO's conventional forces would defeat a Warsaw Pact invasion or stifle it to the point where responsibility for escalation would be shifted to the Soviets. Deliberate escalation envisions that NATO, faced with overwhelming odds, would escalate the conflict through the use of tactical or theatre nuclear weapons. The third method of retaliation, general nuclear response, would theoretically occur if Warsaw Pact forces had made expansive breakthroughs of NATO lines or if the conflict had already risen to the point of deliberate escalation. The doctrine was formulated to be purposely vague so as to force the Soviets to guess which type of retaliation would occur in response to an attack.

The primary drawback of "flexible response" is that the primary factor constituting its deterrent is the threat of escalation. Although it has already been discussed how this threat of escalation was intended to be inherent in the doctrine, the problem arises in that the current status of NATO's conventional forces render escalation almost a given rather than a threat. By most accounts, it would be only a matter of days before the Warsaw Pact forces had inflicted enough damage on the Alliance's defenses that escalation

would be necessitated unless massive sections of the European landscape were to be sacrificed. Thus, the present state of NATO's conventional forces make it not unlikely that the first response of direct defense would be bypassed.

One of the more vocal advocates of enhancing the doctrine of "flexible response" has been the Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, General Bernard W. Rogers. In response to the present lack of viability of "flexible response's" first stage, he has proposed that,

There is a more acceptable alternative to this posture, namely to acquire a conventional capability that would provide a good prospect of success in the forward defense of Europe...We do need some increase in numbers of forces to offset Soviet military growth, but far more important to success is the enhancement of our ability to do better with our forces in being and to carry out the essential modernization of those forces...we need the capability to hold the lead divisions of a major Warsaw Pact conventional attack while we conduct an effective interdiction and destruction campaign with conventional means against its follow-on forces...At the same time, we must have greater assurance in our ability to control the sea lanes to Europe and to win the air war over the continent.¹²

Knowing the limitations of "flexible response" without a supplemented conventional deterrent, Rogers has, however, shunned the adoption of the policy of "no first-use." He has suggested that,

To say that NATO should strive to attain a conventional posture which would constitute a credible deterrent to Warsaw Pact conventional aggression is not to imply that the Alliance

¹²General Bernard W. Rogers, "The Atlantic Alliance: Prescriptions for a Difficult Decade," Foreign Affairs, 60,5 (Summer 1982) p.1152-1153.

should also now declare a "no-first-use" policy for its nuclear weapons...The single most important factor in restraining Soviet aggression will always be that chasm of uncertainty about Western readiness to cross the nuclear threshold...even if we were to develop a conventional defense during this decade along the lines described, we could never be certain of success without eventual recourse to nuclear weapons...Another inherent danger of declared no-first-use is that many in Europe and the United States would see such a policy as a limitation on the American commitment to European security. This might well create a situation in which the final guarantor of deterrence -the U.S. strategic nuclear arsenal- would be viewed as divorced from the fate of Europe... NATO's ability to deter would be jeopardized as much, or more, by eliminating the flexibility to escalate than it would by continuing the current inflexible posture of having to escalate in order to defend successfully.¹³

The fear of decoupling, that Rogers suggests would result from a policy of "no first-use" of nuclear weapons, has been further exacerbated by President Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI). First presented by Reagan in the Spring of 1983, SDI envisions an array^{of} satellite based lasers and detection devices augmented by land based radars and high speed missiles. These systems would act in the event of a Soviet missile attack as a defensive screen through which, theoretically, none of the enemy's missiles could penetrate. The satellite based lasers would destroy Soviet missiles after they cleared their silos and as they began to release their individually targeted warheads at the top of their ballistic arc. Any warheads that had avoided the space based lasers would then be tracked and fired upon by high speed non-nuclear missiles.

¹³Rogers, op. cit., p.1153-1154.

The theoretical uses of SDI, as the previous description suggests, have largely been applied to those nuclear systems in which a high trajectory and relatively long flight time (approximately thirty minutes) allow for the tracking and targeting of their warheads before they have reached their targets. In other words, SDI in its primary formulation would apparently be intended for use solely against the strategic nuclear arsenals of the Soviets. It is possible then that,

A 'decoupling' of Europe from the US, with inferior security for Europe could arise from any deployed strategic defense against high-trajectory missiles like intercontinental and SS-20 ballistic missiles. This area of SDI research is the most promising-but its success would leave ground-hugging cruise and low-flying ballistic missiles unchallenged. Since the Soviet Union would presumably imitate within five years or so whatever strategic defense the US developed, such an arrangement could effectively neutralize the superpowers' arsenals and leave Europe singularly vulnerable to those cruises and short-range ballistic missiles.¹⁴

The Europeans, as well as many others in the United States, have expressed concerns that aside from possibly decoupling Europe from the United States, SDI would alter the basic status quo of deterrence.

Does not a plan that envisages a world where nuclear missiles are unable to reach their targets undermine the whole basis of deterrence and increase the chances of a conventional war in Europe?¹⁵

¹⁴Elizabeth Pond, "Future of the Atlantic Alliance: Unity...in Diversity?" The Christian Science Monitor, 12 March 1985, p.10-11.

¹⁵Jon Connell, "How 'Star Wars' Could Scuttle Polaris," The Sunday Times of London, 26 February 1984, p.21C.

SDI has also been faulted for its dependence on laser and detection devices based on satellites. While initially the United States space based defense systems would be impervious to Soviet attack, once Russian antisatellite (ASAT) technology advanced far enough,

...the US will be the far greater loser, since it is far more dependent on satellites for essential military communication, positioning, surveillance, and targeting.

Therefore,...it would be to the West's advantage to negotiate a ban on antisatellite weapons now before both sides develop such capability.¹⁶

However,

Washington officials believe that since much of the technology being developed for Asats is similar to that being studied for anti-missile systems, a ban on the former would severely restrict research into the latter. Secondly, Asats are small, and can be easily hidden, so the problems of verifying an Asat ban would be formidable.¹⁷

¹⁶Elizabeth Pond, "Europe Fears 'Star Wars' May Destroy, Not Defend West," The Christian Science Monitor, 12 April 1984, p.38.

¹⁷Connell, op. cit., p.21C.

III

The initial decision to deploy Pershing II and cruise missiles in Europe was in response to a perceived need to counter what was considered to be a significant disparity between the theatre nuclear forces of the Soviet Union targeted at Europe and those, or lack thereof, targeted at the Soviet Union by the Alliance. The coupling of the deployment of these systems to the intention that there be arms control negotiations to reduce such weapons on both sides was originally intended to make their deployment more palatable to the public, specifically the Europeans.

Once, however, the plans for deployment had proceeded, as previously pointed out, they began to take on a life of their own as American officials concentrated their arguments on a perceived "window of vulnerability" while ignoring, to a significant extent, the second track of negotiating their reduction.

In reality, it was the West Germans who had initiated the drive for the deployment of the missiles. The Germans, however, did not wish this posture to be thrashed about in public in view of the strong anti-nuclear sentiments in their country. The United States, nevertheless, wishing to show that they were not the only hawks in the Alliance pressured the Germans to go public. The Soviets on the other

hand were pressuring the Germans with threats of ending détente and starting a new arms race. The Germans, in true Hamlet form, would eventually make no decision save for announcing that deployment should be linked to arms negotiations and stating that they would deploy only if another continental European nation would accept the missiles thereby transferring much of the pressure away from them,¹⁸

The deployment proceedings after that point bogged down in the political controversy in Belgium, Holland, and Italy whose publics were less than enthused about their governments receiving new nuclear weapons. Once Germany had shifted the decision to deploy away from themselves, it was the United States who began to take the brunt of the criticism being the other party most eager to begin deployment. Bertram points out that,

While it is possible that future West European governments will ask for a more defined responsibility in America's nuclear decisions, it is not very likely; more probably, they will want to return to the convenient position of supporting U.S. nuclear decisions without being accountable for them...While it may not be sufficient as a durable formula for Alliance nuclear diplomacy in the future, it is at least politically acceptable in Europe.¹⁹

The NATO defense doctrine of "flexible response" illuminates one of the Alliance's more serious dilemmas. It is largely agreed upon that for "flexible response" to be a

¹⁸Pierre Lellouche, "Europe and Her Defense," Foreign Affairs, 59,4(Spring 1981) p.822.

¹⁹Christoph Bertram, "The Implications of Theatre Nuclear Weapons in Europe," Foreign Affairs, 60,2(Winter 1981-1982) p.313.

more viable defense doctrine, NATO's conventional defense forces must be enhanced significantly. Why then doesn't the Alliance make a concerted effort to supplement them? Senator Sam Nunn suggests that,

....First, the conventional force gap between NATO and the Warsaw Pact has been described as so large for so long that a viable conventional defense is believed by many to be hopeless. Second, the cost of matching Warsaw Pact forces one for one-in tanks troops, artillery, and aircraft-is seen as prohibitive, particularly under current economic conditions.²⁰

The Europeans are not likely, even with pressure from the United States, to increase their defense commitments to NATO by a substantial margin. Proposals made by General Bernard Rogers to achieve this enhancement would require a commitment to defense of 4% of annual real growth through 1988 over the current 3% by all NATO members.²¹

It has been suggested that the United States could attempt to force the Europeans to make spending increases by threatening to withdraw U.S. troops or by adopting a "no first-use" policy. To resort to either of these extremes would leave the Europeans open to Soviet conventional aggression which could in turn put the United States in a position in which they would be forced to use nuclear weapons or sacrifice their NATO allies.

²⁰Senator Sam Nunn, Report to the Committee on Armed Services, United States Senate, "NATO: Can the Alliance Be Saved?" Atlantic Community Quarterly, 20,2(Summer 1982)p.128.

²¹Nunn, op. cit., p.132.

It is becoming increasingly apparent, as the United States' global interests become greater and the current shift in interest towards the Pacific Basin continues, that Europe must begin to assume more responsibility for its own defense. The Europeans are going,

...to have to face an increasingly unfavorable situation given 1) the growing Soviet capacity to launch a surprise attack, and 2) the tendency on the part of the United States to move forces and equipment out of Europe for contingencies arising in Third World regions (in particular, the Persian Gulf area). Improving the conventional military balance between East and West will imply, at the outset, that a number of financial, and therefore political choices have to be made.²²

Nevertheless,

...in the absence of political will among key European nations to take their security into their own hands, it is hard to see how an autonomous European security entity could be established, even in the very long term.²³

The Strategic Defense Initiative, of all the current topics associated with NATO, is probably the most controversial. The risk of Europe being decoupled from the United States' nuclear guarantee, the huge costs associated with the project, and the lingering doubts concerning the program's ability to achieve its intended use all function to make SDI the most potentially divisive issue in NATO history.

The Reagan Administration has done little to calm

²²Lellouche, op. cit., p.830.

²³Ibid., p.828.

Europe's fears of decoupling aside from making bland pronouncements as to how the finished product will protect Europe as well as the United States. European concerns are understandable when the program is termed the Strategic Defense Initiative and the words "tactical" or "theatre" are totally excluded.

The most disturbing thought concerning SDI is that while billions of dollars are slotted to be spent on its development,

...no one with whom I have talked honestly believes that we can ever achieve the President's fanciful objective of-to use his language-rendering the Soviet missile force 'impotent and obsolete.' A few months ago during a private conversation with the administration official who, probably more than any other, provides the intellectual impetus for the star wars project, I asserted that the President's objective was pure fantasy. He replied: 'Of course we all know that. We're embarrassed by it, and we wish he'd start playing a different record. Obviously, we can't hope to build a system that will safeguard American cities or protect the American population, but we should be able to shield at least some of our own nuclear arsenal. We should be able to stop a substantial percentage of the Soviet's nuclear weapons from reaching their targets.'

To that I replied, 'Well, if that's all you hope to accomplish, then the proposal as represented is fraudulent; it is in realistic terms nothing more than a stimulus to escalation; Moscow will have to augment its nuclear arsenal by a factor of 'X' to enable it to launch enough weapons to ensure that the critical minimum gets through. Then we'll have to match that escalation.'

At that point he terminated the conversation, turned and left.²⁴

²⁴George W. Ball, "Reagan's Ramboism-the Fantasy of Star Wars and the Danger of Real Wars," The Christian Science Monitor, 28 April 1986, p.18.

If a high administration official admits that a substantial portion of the rhetoric that the President has been delivering to his European counterparts is duplicitous and largely false, it can only be assumed that the great sums of money the European governments are spending on SDI research will, in the end, only work to promote that decoupling to which they have expressed so many fears and only place more of a strain on the Alliance than that which exists already.

IV

The purpose of this study was to research the reasons for the current problems associated with NATO's defensive doctrine and to see what implications there would be for European-American relations.

The discussion revealed that the Alliance's troubles had arisen in their most earnest form after the initial procedures to deploy Pershing II and cruise missiles. The reason for this disenchantment was linked to the European's perceptions that these deployments would decouple them from America's strategic nuclear arsenals and that arms control negotiations which were to coincide with the deployment were being largely ignored.

The study also showed that NATO's doctrine of flexible response lacked credibility without a solid conventional arm. Without this conventional deterrent, flexible response became inflexible and instead of threatening escalation it almost assumed it.

Thirdly, the discussion pointed out some of the problems associated with the Strategic Defense Initiative. The primary drawbacks with this program are: 1) its threat to decouple Europe from the United States, 2) its huge costs, 3) its lack of viability as a useful strategic deterrent.

The Atlantic Alliance can overcome the problems associated with its defense strategies but its policy-making

must first become more coherent. The disarray that coincided with the deployment of the Pershing II and cruise missiles must be avoided in the future. The continued implementation of divisive policies like this one will only work to drive the wedge deeper between Alliance members.

NATO's conventional forces must be enhanced or flexible response will always lack the viability of a strong deterrent strategy. As the interests of the United States turn elsewhere, it is imperative that Europe begins to supplement here own conventional defenses. The lack of either of these two prescriptions will render NATO's long-term future problematic in that there would have to be a continuing overemphasis on the United States nuclear guarantee.

Finally, the Strategic Defense Initiative should be placed under the closest scrutiny. A program that is purported to protect European interests but in reality does not should be viewed with the utmost suspicion. Whatever research benefits that could be derived from the program should be weighed carefully against the potentially enormous costs, politically, economically, and foremost, militarily.

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