

“No Annihilation Without Representation”:

NATO Nuclear Use Decision-Making During the Cold War

Abstract: Scholars focused on NATO nuclear strategy during the Cold War have devoted little attention to the dynamics of how the Alliance would decide to use nuclear weapons. This article aims to fill this gap by examining the internal debates about how a nuclear use decision would be taken, particularly balancing the desire to ensure adequate consultation of the non-nuclear members without undermining the credibility of NATO’s nuclear deterrent by giving them a veto. To avoid undermining Alliance cohesion, the nuclear use decision process was kept deliberately vague, despite the problems that would almost certainly have arisen in a war.

Keywords: NATO, nuclear strategy, nuclear use, Cold War, flexible response

Throughout the Cold War, NATO grappled with the problem of how to defend itself against aggression from the Soviet Union and its allies. In large part, the Alliance debate was consumed by questions over the relative balance between nuclear and non-nuclear forces, and what types of policies, strategies and postures to adopt, set against the backdrop of an evolving threat and shifting political and military dynamics within the Alliance itself. In practical terms, NATO officials devoted the bulk of their attention to building a military system that possessed sufficient ways and means to defend itself. Plans were developed as were the means to implement those plans. A standing assumption underpinning this effort was that if war erupted the political authority to activate those plans would follow automatically. To question this assumption, so it was believed, would undermine faith in the system, which would then undermine deterrence and make a war more likely. This was particularly the case with the dynamics of how NATO would decide to use nuclear weapons. Whereas the Alliance’s nuclear

strategy presupposed a relatively quick decision-making process, the actual process remained deliberately vague due to the reluctance of NATO members to expose internal divisions on this politically sensitive issue.

In contrast to the vast amount of scholarship on NATO's Cold War nuclear strategy that concentrates on policies, concepts, doctrine, command and control structures, and other operational matters, often in the context of different types of conflict scenarios, there is an important gap with respect to Alliance nuclear use decision-making.¹ Moreover, whereas scholars have examined nuclear decision-making processes in individual countries,² the problems of nuclear decision-making in a multilateral context have been given relatively short shrift. As this article will demonstrate, working out how nuclear use would be authorized *by* the Alliance, as opposed to *on behalf of* the Alliance, proved a thorny political problem in

¹ Within this vast literature, the key work dealing with policies and concepts is Beatrice Heuser's, *NATO, Britain, France and the FRG: Nuclear Strategies and Forces for Europe, 1949-2000* (London: Palgrave 1997). Very few works specifically refer to NATO nuclear use decision-making processes. Among them are Shaun R. Gregory's, *Nuclear Command and Control in NATO: Nuclear Weapons Operations and the Strategy of Flexible Response* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996) as well as Daniel Charles's 'Who Controls NATO's Nuclear Weapons', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 31/4 (1985), 45-47. However, Gregory and Charles had limited access to declassified documents. Timothy A. Sayle's 'A Nuclear Education: The Origins of NATO's Nuclear Planning Group', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 43/6-7 (2020), utilizes extensive documentation but only covers the period up to the 1966 creation of the Nuclear Planning Group.

² For example: Jeffrey G. Lewis and Bruno Tertrais, 'The Finger on the Button: The Authority to Use Nuclear Weapons in Nuclear-Armed States', CNS Occasional Paper #45, February 2019; Ashton B. Carter, John D. Steinbruner and Charles A. Zraket, *Managing Nuclear Operations* (Washington D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1987).

peacetime and would almost certainly have negatively impacted the execution of NATO's nuclear strategy in a war.

With the declassification in recent years of relevant documentation, especially covering the second half of the Cold War, it is now possible to provide a broad overview of how NATO dealt with this controversial issue. To address the policy debates and complexities associated with nuclear use decisions in an Alliance context, I will focus on several themes. To begin, I will provide a framework for identifying the relevant time periods, debates, topics and policy players. This will be followed by a brief overview of the key nuclear consultation dilemmas affecting NATO member states at a bilateral level. Next, I will trace the evolution of the Alliance nuclear use consultation problem prior to NATO's 1967 adoption of a 'flexible response' strategic concept (MC 14/3). The article will conclude with an examination of the internal debates about nuclear use consultation through the mid-1980s. I have deliberately avoided addressing this issue during the late 1980s as relevant documentation remains mostly unavailable.

A Framework for Analysis

To grasp the full extent of the NATO nuclear use consultation problem, it is necessary to appreciate that depending on the time-period and circumstances, the relevant players involved in the decision-making varied. On the surface, the nuclear powers within the Alliance (the US, UK and France) were always going to seem relevant since without their nuclear weapons there would be little to consult about. Among this trio, the US, being in possession of the largest and most sophisticated nuclear arsenal, was clearly the most relevant player. Britain's nuclear arsenal also added to the Alliance's overall strength, but the prospects of London employing its nuclear weapons on behalf of the Alliance in the absence of Washington's prior approval were always viewed as farfetched. As for the French nuclear arsenal, this was viewed as mostly

irrelevant following France's 1966 withdrawal from NATO's integrated military command, despite acknowledgement in the 1974 Ottawa Declaration that French nuclear forces (along with those of the UK) were capable of contributing to the overall Alliance deterrent.³ Because France was no longer directly involved in Alliance nuclear planning after 1966, non-nuclear NATO members were deemed to have greater relevance, and instead of pre-1966 concerns about 15 fingers on the nuclear trigger, after the French withdrawal this was reduced to 14.

Some additional categories must also be mentioned to assess states' place in the relevance hierarchy. First, there were those Alliance members *from* whose territory NATO weapons would be unleashed and that would likely bear the brunt of any retaliation. Second, there were those Alliance members *on* whose territory NATO nuclear weapons would probably be employed to defeat an enemy offensive. There were also those Alliance members whose armed forces didn't possess nuclear weapons in peacetime but with whom US nuclear weapons would potentially be shared and utilized as part of a NATO defence plan.

In addition to member states, there were also institutions and individuals within NATO that were expected to play a role. In the first instance, Major NATO Commanders were likely to request political approval for the use of nuclear weapons and those requests were likely to have originated from front-line commanders. The North Atlantic Council (NAC), as the highest-level political decision-making body, was also a potential player, though following France's withdrawal, the Defence Planning Committee (DPC) became the more relevant decision-making body where nuclear use was concerned. Despite its principal concern being nuclear matters, the Nuclear Planning Group (NPG) would not play a substantive role. Their remit was limited to peacetime policy planning rather than wartime decision-making. The Military

³ NATO. Declaration on Atlantic Relations issued by the North Atlantic Council. June 19, 1974. Text available at: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_26901.htm?

Committee, as the senior military advisory group in the Alliance, also sought a role, with the NATO Secretary General expected to act in a facilitating capacity.

Leaving the policymakers aside, confusion regarding obligations for nuclear use consultation derived from the 1949 North Atlantic Treaty. The principle reference to consultation is Article 4 which refers to allies consulting ‘whenever, in the opinion of any of them, the territorial integrity, political independence or security of any of the Parties is threatened’.⁴ In practice, consultation in various Cold War crises occurred on a range of issues, including out-of-area operations by individual NATO members, albeit usually without invoking Article 4.⁵ Regardless, on many key issues, no crisis consultation occurred, or ‘consultation’ was practically defined merely as a matter of informing members of a decision that had already been taken.⁶ The Cuban Missile Crisis provided an important example where consultation in NATO was notable by its absence.⁷

Similar ambiguities were true for Article 5. The collective defence clause states that members can respond to an armed attack ‘taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties, such action as it deems necessary’.⁸ Because a member state could respond ‘individually’ and with ‘such action as it deems necessary’, this would presumably not place any restrictions on the type of weapons used, nor to oblige any member state to consult with

⁴ The North Atlantic Treaty, Washington D.C., 4 April 1949, NATO Archives (NA).

⁵ Sherrod L. Bumgardner, ‘Article 4 of the North Atlantic Treaty’, *Emory International Law Review* 71 (2019), 71-73.

⁶ Frederic L. Kirgis Jr., ‘NATO Consultations as a Component of National Decisionmaking’, *American Journal of International Law* 73 (1979), 372-406.

⁷ Frank Costigliola, ‘Kennedy, the European Allies, and the Failure to Consult’, *Political Science Quarterly* 110/1 (1995), 105-123.

⁸ The North Atlantic Treaty, 1949.

other members before using those weapons.⁹ To work collaboratively was a choice rather than an obligation. Member states viewed it to be in their individual interest to work collectively, and it is in this voluntary sense that nuclear use consultation should be understood. For example, to defend Western Europe against a Soviet attack required not only collective Article 5 defence planning, but, far more crucially, collective *participation* as laid out in the defence plans, were war to occur. If NATO members refused to contribute the forces they had pledged, as was their right under Article 5, then NATO's ability to defend itself would amount to a sham.

In circumstances in which a quick decision to use nuclear weapons was deemed necessary, bilateral or multilateral consultations were viewed as unrealistic. By contrast, in other situations in which unilateral decisions were likely to pose a significant risk of undermining Alliance cohesion, consultation was preferred. As President Dwight D. Eisenhower noted in relation to consultation with the British Government for use of their bases, 'If ... the British are to fight on our side as our allies, we cannot expect wholly to disregard their views on the use of these weapons and bases in a war which broke out in, so to speak, normal fashion. The situation would be quite different in the case of a Pearl Harbor type of attack. We should then have to act at once'.¹⁰

If consultation in certain circumstances was the preferred option, then did consultation equate to consensus and the right of a member state to veto nuclear use? Moreover, would all NATO members be consulted, or only a handful? In reaction to US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles's January 1954 statement that the US had decided to 'depend primarily upon a great

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Cited in Matthew Jones, 'Great Britain, the United States, and Consultation over Use of the Atomic Bomb, 1950-1954', *The Historical Journal* 54/3 (2011), 820.

capacity to retaliate instantly by means and at places of our own choosing’, Canadian Foreign Minister Lester B. Pearson raised concerns about how this might be interpreted as there was some confusion about whether Dulles was using the word ‘our’ to refer to the US alone or the US in consultation with its allies.¹¹ That Dulles had also referred to ‘instantly’ seemed to imply that there would be no time to consult with allies. In arguing for the necessity of ‘an agreed collective decision, and one which won’t prejudice speedy action in an emergency’, Pearson suggested using the slogan ‘No annihilation without consultation’.¹²

Nearly a decade later, the nuclear strategist Klaus Knorr recognized the preference of all members to want to be consulted, a problem he referred to as ‘no annihilation without representation’.¹³ In an effort to devise a workable consultation mechanism to decide on use of a NATO MRBM system, Knorr proposed a formula whereby Alliance decision-making would operate on two levels. In peacetime, all member states, then numbering 15, would make decisions by consensus. In wartime, however, this number would be reduced to 5 member states. Of these five members, nuclear use would be authorized by a majority vote. The key advantage of this system was also its greatest demerit, namely that the two nuclear powers, the US and UK, could both veto nuclear use but be outvoted by three other non-nuclear members that supported it.¹⁴ Such a system was scarcely credible. There were many other similar proposals. For instance, French President Charles De Gaulle proposed in 1958 forming a

¹¹ Lester B. Pearson, ‘Canada in the World Today’, 15 March 1954. Thanks to Timothy A. Sayle for bringing this speech to my attention.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Klaus Knorr, ‘A NATO Nuclear Force: The Problem of Management’, Policy Memorandum No. 26, Center of International Studies, Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, Princeton University, February 5, 1963, Digital National Security Archive (DNSA).

¹⁴ Ibid.

‘directoire’ composed of the US, Britain and France, but this idea received little support.¹⁵ Likewise, shortly after his retirement as SACEUR, General Lauris Norstad proposed a system in which De Gaulle’s ‘directoire’ would be supplemented with the participation of West Germany and possibly two other states on a rotating basis. In Norstad’s proposal, this consultative body could reach decision by majority vote, with the dissenting member able to withhold all its nuclear forces except those already committed to NATO.¹⁶

As will be discussed in the next sections, the possibility that one country might veto nuclear use was a problem for both the Americans *and* Europeans. For the Americans, retaining as much flexibility as possible to decide when nuclear use would occur was of paramount concern. The prospect of one or more of the fifteen NATO members having the right to veto nuclear use was unacceptable to them - fifteen fingers on the nuclear trigger also meant fifteen on the nuclear safety catch. From the European perspective a veto was both good and bad. It was good in the sense that having a veto power over the Americans might prevent them from taking actions not in their interest. On the other hand, for the Americans to veto using their own nuclear weapons, or those of the British or French, for Europe’s defence, would risk undermining the credibility of NATO’s nuclear deterrent.

Of greatest concern to the Americans was that the process of consulting might prevent or delay a nuclear response in the event of a large-scale Soviet surprise attack, especially on the United States itself. The Americans made it quite clear to NATO allies that there were circumstances such as these in which the US would not even consider consultation. This was accepted by the allies. It was only under less drastic scenarios that the Americans and Europeans were willing to discuss the possibility of consultation on nuclear use. Importantly, the desire of European

¹⁵ Frank Costigliola, ‘The Failed Design: Kennedy, de Gaulle, and the Struggle for Europe’, *Diplomatic History* 8/3 (1984), 235.

¹⁶ Knorr, ‘A NATO Nuclear Force’.

governments to participate in authorizing nuclear use was not always universally shared. In the mid-1950s, for instance, concern was expressed within the Danish Government that to be involved in nuclear use decisions carried considerable responsibility and that if it were publicly known that Denmark could influence the decision-making process this would result in strong political pressure not to use them.¹⁷

Bilateral Consultations Between NATO Member States

Before moving on to discuss the evolution of nuclear use consultation at the NATO level, it is important to highlight the ways in which bilateral consultation arrangements between the United States and particular NATO states were understood as a prerequisite to multilateral consultation. In other words, US leaders assumed that in some key instances it would be essential, if not a binding requirement, to obtain support from individual states prior to consulting with the rest of NATO. Moreover, several allies deliberately sought bilateral assurances the US would consult them about the use of US nuclear weapons from or on their territories.

Among these agreements were longstanding US-UK ‘understandings’ on the use of British bases by American forces, as well as the use of American nuclear weapons by British forces.¹⁸ US obligations to consult with the British on use of the atomic bomb originated with the 1943 Quebec Agreement which stated that ‘we will not use it against third parties without each

¹⁷ Jonathan Søborg Agger and Lasse Wolsgaard. ‘All Steps Necessary: Danish Nuclear Policy, 1949-1960’, *Contemporary European History* 15/1 (2006), 75.

¹⁸ For background on these agreements, see: Memorandum from Merchant to Secretary of State Christian Herter, January 9, 1961, enclosing ‘Understandings with the British on the Use of British Bases and Nuclear Weapons’, National Security Archive (NSA). Available at: <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB159/usukconsult-12.pdf>

other's consent'.¹⁹ In the lead-up to Hiroshima, US officials informed British counterparts of their decision to use the atomic bomb on Japan, though the extent to which British objections would have led to the US altering its decision is debatable. In the event, the British offered no objections.²⁰ With the onset of the Cold War, a number of US-UK agreements on consultation emerged, with commitments reaffirmed whenever a new American President or British Prime Minister came into office and updated as circumstances evolved. According to a 1961 document providing background on these agreements: 'President and PM will reach a joint decision by speaking personally with each other before certain forces equipped with US nuclear weapons and operating from bases in the UK will use nuclear weapons, namely, SAC, British Bomber Command, and SACEUR-assigned forces in the UK (US Polaris submarines should be added to list)'.²¹ This last point about 'SACEUR-assigned forces' caused a complication as the Polaris submarines were technically assigned to SACLANT rather than SACEUR. Despite the initial US wish to retain flexibility by not including the SACLANT-assigned forces as part of the consultation agreement, President Lyndon Johnson and Prime Minister Harold Wilson agreed in 1965 to revise the earlier understanding so that reference was now made to 'forces that are assigned or earmarked for assignment to a NATO commander' although this was limited to UK-based forces and those located in British territorial waters (including Bermuda).²² In this sense, US officials were careful to note that the US-UK agreement on a

¹⁹ Articles of Agreement Governing Collaboration Between the Authorities of the USA and the UK in the Matter of Tube Alloys, August 19, 1943. Text available at: <https://avalon.law.yale.edu/wwii/q003.asp#1>

²⁰ Jones, 'Great Britain, the United States, and Consultation', 801.

²¹ Memorandum from Merchant to Secretary of State Christian Herter, 1961.

²² Letter from President Johnson to Prime Minister Wilson, 11 November 1965, with attached routing memoranda, NSA. Available at: <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB159/usukconsult-24a.pdf>

joint decision did not cover US forces assigned or earmarked to NATO outside this area.²³ To complicate matters further, the US-UK joint decision was to cover US nuclear weapons based in Britain that were to be used by Dutch maritime aircraft for anti-submarine warfare operations.²⁴

One noteworthy aspect of the US-UK ‘understandings’ was the possibility of consulting about nuclear use no matter where it occurred. The impetus for this was the Korean War when US officials had referred to the prospect of nuclear use to defeat the Communist forces but which British officials feared might lead to Soviet intervention, including in the NATO area. If this were the case, then a Soviet attack on NATO might involve atomic attacks on Britain.²⁵ Other NATO allies shared this concern, although it wasn’t until 1962 that Washington agreed to consult with the NAC on the ‘use of nuclear weapons anywhere in the world if time permitted’.²⁶

In the course of US-Canadian talks in the early 1950s dealing with the deployment and stationing of US nuclear weapons on Canadian territory and the overflight of US Strategic Air Command bombers armed with nuclear weapons, differences of opinion arose about the circumstances in which an American decision to use atomic weapons would require prior Canadian approval as well as about what constituted appropriate consultation.²⁷ Like their

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ State Department cable 203272 to U.S. Embassy London, ‘Nuclear Consultation with the British’, 15 December 1970, NSA. Available at: <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB159/usukconsult-30.pdf>

²⁵ Jones, ‘Great Britain, the United States, and Consultation’, 803.

²⁶ Memorandum of Conversation, “Briefing of Joint Committee on Atomic Energy Staff on Defense Issues at NATO Athens Meeting,” 10 May 1962, Secret, DNSA.

²⁷ Timothy Andrews Sayle, ‘A Pattern of Constraint: Canadian-American Relations in the Early Cold War’, *International Journal*, Vol. 62, No. 3, 2007, pp. 689-705.

British counterparts, Canadian officials were concerned about US nuclear use in Asia resulting in an escalation to a global war involving NATO and were therefore reluctant to give the US blanket permission to use Canadian bases and airspace. When asked about the possibility of obtaining permission in the event the Soviets attacked US forces wherever they were situated, Canadian officials expressed strong reservations. In contrast, Canadian officials were willing to give assurances that no prior consultation or even notification would be required in a contingency whereby the Soviets attacked any part of the North American continent, or attacked another NATO member. In order to avoid a situation where the US would be required to request prior consent from the Canadian government to use its bases or airspace for nuclear use, American officials proposed a consultation mechanism in which both governments would discuss their appraisals of world situations that might conceivably give rise to a nuclear use decision, so that both countries' views would be known in advance.²⁸ The vagueness of this mechanism was highlighted by the American preference for the consultations to be 'informal and exploratory', non-committal, and that it would 'hope' a mutually agreeable appreciation of the situation might be forthcoming.²⁹

In the late 1950s, the proposed deployment of US nuclear-armed missiles to Italy led to requests from the Italian Government to have the right to authorize their use.³⁰ Initially, there was only

²⁸ Memorandum of Conversation by the Special Assistant to the Secretary of State (Arneson), 12 May 1951, *FRUS*, 1951, National Security Affairs; Foreign Economic Policy, Vol. 1.

²⁹ Memorandum of Conversation by the Special Assistant to the Secretary of State (Arneson), 14 June 1951, Enclosure: Note Prepared by the Canadian Embassy, *FRUS*, 1951, National Security Affairs; Foreign Economic Policy, Vol. 1.

³⁰ EUR - William R. Tyler through Executive Secretariat to the Secretary, "Atomic Stockpile Negotiations with Italy," 3 October 1961, Secret, NSA; U.S. Embassy Italy Despatch 525 to State Department, "Transmitting

agreement for the Jupiter IRBM to operate under a dual-key arrangement, but Rome wished to extend this to all nuclear weapons based in Italy.³¹ American officials tried to oppose this by making a vague reference to nuclear weapons being ‘employed in accordance with procedures established by SACEUR which will be in accord with approved NATO plans and policies’.³² When this failed to satisfy the Italians, the US relented.³³

West Germany (FRG) also repeatedly sought US assurances about nuclear consultation. Recognizing they were unlikely to have any direct control over nuclear weapons based on their territory, nor the decision to use them, the FRG aimed to gain a right to consult with the nuclear power prior to a use decision on German territory.³⁴ In 1967, for instance, Bonn proposed to Washington that it receive immediate notice of requests submitted by SACEUR for ‘selective release of nuclear weapons to be employed from or on German soil’, and that a decision to release nuclear weapons would follow joint consultations.³⁵ The FRG also proposed an

Documents Constituting Military Atomic Stockpile and ‘Consent’ Agreements,” 17 January 1962, Secret, NSA; Letter from Rusk to McNamara, October 9, 1961, NSA.

³¹ U.S. Embassy Rome Airgram G-922 to Department of State, 29 June 1961, NSA. Available at: <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/documents/us-nuclear-presence-western-europe-1954-1962-part-ii/12.pdf?pdf=722-12>

³² State Department telegram 257 to U.S. Embassy Italy, 27 July 1961, NSA. Available at: <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/documents/us-nuclear-presence-western-europe-1954-1962-part-ii/13.pdf?pdf=722-13>

³³ U.S. Embassy Italy Despatch 525 to State Department, “Transmitting Documents Constituting Military Atomic Stockpile and ‘Consent’ Agreements,” 17 January 1962, NSA. Available at: <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/documents/us-nuclear-presence-western-europe-1954-1962-part-ii/18.pdf?pdf=722-18>

³⁴ Heuser, *NATO, Britain, France and the FRG*, 138.

³⁵ Memorandum for the President, "Consultations with the Federal Republic of Germany on Nuclear Weapons Release," 16 March 1968. Available at: <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB159/usukconsult-25a.pdf>

arrangement whereby Bonn would need to confirm any selective nuclear use by the German armed forces that were acting under SACEUR's orders.³⁶ Although a consultation agreement had been reached during Lyndon Johnson's presidency, the Germans sought further reassurance from Richard Nixon that Bonn would have an opportunity to influence the release decision.³⁷ Crucially, the FRG appreciated the dilemma posed by too many fingers on the trigger as well as on the safety catch. To avoid the widespread destruction of the German interior that was likely to result from a delayed nuclear use, Bonn preferred a quick decision. But to obtain a quick decision meant avoiding lengthy multilateral consultations, much less a veto. Moreover, FRG officials recognized that 'several fingers on the "safety catch" would make deterrence less credible'.³⁸ Thus, there were advantages to concentrating decision authority in Washington rather than at NATO.

From 1971 onwards, West Germany also maintained a separate consultation agreement with the United Kingdom. Under its terms, the Prime Minister was obliged to "consult directly with" (but not to secure the agreement of) the Federal German Chancellor prior to the release of British nuclear weapons stored in Germany'.³⁹ Any release was to occur 'only on the basis of the agreed strategy of the Alliance, in accordance with the applicable political guidelines and military plans of NATO, and under the command of the Supreme Allied Commander

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Cable from American Embassy Bonn to SECSTATE, 031720ZJUL72, Subject: NPG and Nuclear Release Procedures, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA).

³⁸ Heuser, *NATO, Britain, France and the FRG*, 139.

³⁹ Annex E, 'Anglo-German Consultation Arrangements About Nuclear Release', Robert Armstrong to Prime Minister, "Nuclear Release Procedures and Related Matters," June 1983, Top Secret, Excised Copy, CAB 196/124. Accessed at: <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/23835-robert-armstrong-prime-minister-nuclear-release-procedures-and-related-matters-june>

Europe'.⁴⁰ In circumstances where consultation within NATO was precluded, the British and German leaders would still be obliged to consult directly with each other prior to the release of British nuclear weapons stored in West Germany.⁴¹

In contrast to its agreement with the UK, the FRG's relationship with France was more problematic, not for the least of reasons that French nuclear use was not anticipated to occur based on an agreed NATO nuclear strategy. Following the French deployment of the nuclear-armed short-range Pluton missile in 1974, which would likely have been used against targets in West Germany prior to Soviet forces crossing into French territory, Bonn sought to establish consultation arrangements with Paris similar to those it maintained with the US and UK. For more than a decade these efforts proved fruitless. It was not until February 1986 that French President François Mitterrand made a consultation pledge regarding the use of France's tactical nuclear weapons against targets on FRG territory.⁴² Despite this pledge, the problem of how it would be operationalized remained unresolved through the end of the Cold War as French leaders sought to avoid any constraints being placed on their ability make an autonomous decision.⁴³

With the deployment of American ground-launched cruise missiles (GLCMs) to the UK in the early 1980s, British officials discussed the possibility of insisting on dual key arrangements for

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Frédéric Bozo, 'The Sanctuary and the Glacis: France, the Federal Republic of Germany, and Nuclear Weapons in the 1980s (Part I)', *Journal of Cold War Studies* 22/3 (2020), 119-179.

⁴³ Frédéric Bozo, 'The Sanctuary and the Glacis: France, the Federal Republic of Germany, and Nuclear Weapons in the 1980s (Part II)', *Journal of Cold War Studies* 22/4 (2020), 175-228.

their use. In effect this would mean a policy shift from ‘joint decision’ to ‘joint control’.⁴⁴ This was rejected on the grounds that dual key arrangements would undermine the US-UK relationship as it implied the UK ‘had lost confidence’ in the Americans.⁴⁵ Moreover, if the UK insisted on it, so would the Italian Government, given that GLCMs were also to be deployed in Italy. By contrast, it was noted the Germans were ‘precluded by their own internal political imperatives from acquiring even an indirect share in control over a nuclear weapons system which could strike the territory of the Soviet Union’.⁴⁶

One notable feature of the GLCMs was that they were supposed to be deployed off their bases prior to being fired. Therefore, the problem of a ‘joint decision’ to *deploy* the weapons arose. The Americans objected to this as they drew a distinction between measures relating to use of the weapons and measures related to the survivability of the weapons, with authority for the latter being delegated to military commanders. Furthermore, longstanding arrangements were already in place for US aircraft to disperse or be ‘put into the air under positive control’ without prior consultation between the President and Prime Minister.⁴⁷ On the other hand, according to NATO’s existing alert procedures, the British Government were supposed to be consulted *before* ‘authority was given to the relevant military commander to disperse cruise missiles from their bases’.⁴⁸ Only in an emergency where ‘a nuclear attack appeared imminent’ would

⁴⁴ Cabinet, “Nuclear Defence Policy, Minutes of a Meeting Held in 10 Downing Street on Tuesday, 8 March 1983, at 4:30 p.m.,” MISC 7 (83) 2nd Meeting, Top Secret, CAB 130/1224. Accessed at: <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/23833-cabinet-nuclear-defense-policy-minutes-meeting-held-10-downing-street-tuesday-8>

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

SACEUR have pre-delegated authority to disperse the GLCMs to ensure their survivability.⁴⁹ Therefore, whilst the British would insist on off-base deployment being subject to prior Prime Ministerial agreement, it was accepted that in an emergency SACEUR would have standing authority to deploy them without prior agreement.⁵⁰

In the end, the British refrained from pursuing the issue, with the updated May 1983 nuclear agreement with the United States referring to off-base deployment of GLCMs being ‘governed by agreed NATO procedures’.⁵¹ Nevertheless, the issue of a veto remained a problem given the highly-politicized nature of the GLCM deployments in Europe. The discussion then evolved from one of a ‘formal’ veto to an ‘informal’ veto. Though it was appreciated that US GLCMs could technically be launched from inside their bases, the preferred option was to move them to ‘designated firing areas’ outside the bases. As this would require the cooperation of the national authorities, they would have an ‘an effective potential veto’.⁵²

Alliance Nuclear Use Consultation Prior to 1967

Having set the broad context of NATO nuclear use consultation, including consultation at the bilateral level, we now turn to the evolution of consultation from a multilateral perspective. For the first years of NATO’s existence, the question of how a nuclear use decision would be made

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ This updated agreement on ‘Procedural Understandings on the Release for Use of United States Nuclear Weapons Based in the United Kingdom’ was signed by Oliver Wright (UK) and Lawrence Eagleburger (US) on 17 May 1983. Robert Armstrong to Prime Minister, “Nuclear Release Procedures and Related Matters,” June 1983, NSA.

⁵² United States Senate, Report of the Special Committee on Nuclear Weapons in the Atlantic Alliance. A Report to the Committee on Foreign Relations, January 1, 1985 (Washington DC: US Government Printing Office 1985), 15.

at an Alliance level was not discussed in any detail. During that period, NATO's strategic doctrine assumed that nuclear use would be more or less automatic in the event of Soviet Bloc aggression due to the parlous state of the Alliance's conventional forces.⁵³ Moreover, nuclear use was largely assumed to be a US prerogative rather than one requiring a formal multilateral consultation mechanism or a consensus decision prior to use.

Addressing the NAC in April 1954, US Secretary of State Dulles stated that Washington would consult with its allies about nuclear use decisions but warned: 'we must make sure that the methods of consultation ... do not themselves stand in the way of our security. Under certain contingencies, time would not permit consultation without itself endangering the very security we seek to protect. So far as feasible we must seek understanding in advance of the measures to be taken under various circumstances'.⁵⁴ In this sense, there was simply a general expectation that, 'whenever time permits', some form of consultation, presumably in the NAC, would take place. As one 1958 US defence policy document noted, 'it is imperative not to weaken the deterrent by making it appear ... that the NATO Council (or an individual NATO country) has a veto power over the use of force to resist aggression, or over the employment of atomic weapons if necessary'.⁵⁵

Following the US shift to a doctrine of 'massive retaliation', often associated with a speech by Dulles in January 1954 in which he said American policy would place 'more reliance on

⁵³ 'Political authority for use of atomic weapons by NATO forces', US Department of Defense, Office of the Assistant Secretary for International Security Affairs, Secret, Memorandum, 7 April 1958, DNSA: Nuclear History I, 1955-1968.

⁵⁴ Statement by the Secretary of State to the North Atlantic Council Closed Ministerial Session, Paris, April 23, 1954, *FRUS*, 1952-1954, Western European Security, Vol. 5, Part 1.

⁵⁵ 'Political Authority for Use of Atomic Weapons by NATO Forces', NATO Defense Ministers Conference, Paris, 15-18 April 1958, OASD, 7 April 1958, NSA.

deterrent power and less dependence on local defensive power’, and referred specifically to ‘massive retaliatory power’⁵⁶, NATO followed suit some months later with its adoption of a new strategic guidance document, MC 48.⁵⁷ This document stated ‘it is militarily essential that NATO forces should be able to use atomic and thermonuclear weapons in their defence from the outset’. In his April 1954 address to the NAC referred to above, Dulles also stated: ‘the ability to use atomic weapons as conventional weapons is essential for the defence of the NATO area in the face of the present threat. In short, such weapons must now be treated as in fact having become “conventional”’.⁵⁸ From Dulles’ perspective then, there was no special need to consult about nuclear use since nuclear weapons were viewed as just another means of defence rather than a special one requiring specific authorization. Put another way, once NATO was authorized to put its defence plans into effect, nuclear use would follow accordingly. This approach to authorization was controversial. During the drafting of MC 48, senior military officials initially approved the following formulation: ‘in the event of a war ... the commitment to action of forces by NATO countries under Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty should encompass full authority for the employment of atomic and thermo-nuclear weapons ... This authority should be written into the terms of the General Alert’.⁵⁹ An earlier draft also mentioned that a declaration of General Alert ‘will have to include the necessary authority for

⁵⁶ Speech of Secretary of State John Foster Dulles before the Council on Foreign Relations, 12 January 1954.

⁵⁷ ‘The Most Effective Pattern of NATO Military Strength for the Next Few Years’, MC 48(Final) - 22 November 1954, NA.

⁵⁸ 740.5/4-2454, Statement by the Secretary of State to the North Atlantic Council Closed Ministerial Session, Paris, April 23, 1954, Paris, 23 April 1954, *FRUS*, 1952-1954, Western European Security, Vol. V, Part 1.

⁵⁹ Record of Meeting of the Standing Group, 2 September 1954, SG 210-54, NA.

the use of these weapons'.⁶⁰ However, in the final document, all references to the authority to use nuclear weapons were removed.

By the late 1950s, questions about nuclear use consultation gained more attention. Several reasons can be attributed to this. In December 1957, NATO agreed to the deployment of US intermediate range ballistic missiles that were to be 'put at the disposal of the Supreme Allied Commander Europe'.⁶¹ At that time, NATO also agreed to a dual-key sharing arrangement whereby the US would base stocks of nuclear warheads in Europe that could be transferred to Allies for their use in wartime.⁶² The importance of this decision relative to consultation was not just that the US could veto the transfer of warheads to European allies but also that European governments participating in the system would have to choose whether or not they would allow their armed forces to employ the weapons, assuming of course the Americans were willing to authorize their transfer. There was also a civil-military relations aspect to consider. As would later be the case with the West German government, concerns were expressed that European military units might use nuclear weapons based on the orders of SACEUR, an international commander, without first seeking national-level approval.

In the aftermath of the October 1957 launch of Sputnik, and as Soviet intercontinental ballistic missile capabilities were expected to increase significantly in the years ahead, European governments became concerned that America's willingness to employ nuclear weapons would decline due to the Soviet ability to strike US targets more easily. This then led to calls for a European deterrent not reliant on US authorization. To give the non-nuclear allies a greater

⁶⁰ See statement by French representative in: Record of Meeting of the Standing Group, 12 August 1954, SG 209-54, NA.

⁶¹ NATO, Final Communiqué, 16 December 1957, NA.

⁶² Ibid.

strategic nuclear role, one option that gained prominence was for the US to physically provide them with medium- and intermediate-range weapons. Proposals for a Multilateral Force (MLF), an Atlantic Nuclear Force, and an Inter-Allied Nuclear Force were intensely debated but the basic problems of what such a force would consist of, how it would operate, by whom, and how any arrangement could override an American veto on use, remained unresolved.⁶³ By the mid-1960s, the Alliance abandoned the possibility of a ‘hardware solution’. Instead, it emphasized enhanced consultation on nuclear policy. This shift led to the creation of the NPG in December 1966.

Perceptions of the Soviet threat were also changing during this period. In contrast to earlier fears of a full-scale invasion of Western Europe, there was a growing belief in NATO that future conflicts were likely to be limited in nature - for instance a seizure of West Berlin or other types of ‘infiltrations, incursions or hostile local actions’⁶⁴ - in which case employing nuclear weapons on a selective basis rather than massive retaliation would be more appropriate. With this shift in perceptions of the threat, allies grew more insistent on having a voice in nuclear use decisions.⁶⁵

Amidst these developments, there remained a great deal of confusion about how nuclear use would be authorized. One view was that American commanders had been pre-delegated the authority to use nuclear weapons if attacked. Another view was that authority lay with the NAC, and that following a US president’s release of nuclear weapons to SACEUR, the Council

⁶³ Lawrence Freedman and Jeffrey Michaels, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy, 4th Edition* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 361-372.

⁶⁴ NATO, MC 14/2(Revised)(Final Decision), A Report by the Military Committee on Overall Strategic Concept for the Defense of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization Area, 23 May 1957, NA.

⁶⁵ Address by Secretary of Defense McNamara at the Ministerial Meeting of the North Atlantic Council, Athens, 5 May 1962, *FRUS*, 1961–1963, Vol. VIII, National Security Policy.

would then have to approve requests for nuclear use.⁶⁶ According to the Inspector General of the Bundeswehr, General Adolf Heusinger, SACEUR could not authorize the use of nuclear warheads without the unanimous approval of the NAC.⁶⁷ Due to the confusion about nuclear use authority, in May 1961 the US requested that allies offer suggestions ‘as to how a system of NATO control might be created over all NATO nuclear weapons, or some portion thereof, which would ... ensure the most effective allied participation in that control’.⁶⁸ To that end, it was stated: ‘One form that this might take could be the development by the Council of general guidelines regarding the use of nuclear weapons committed to NATO and/or of a political method to facilitate consultation and decision on use’.⁶⁹

In early 1962, NATO Secretary General Dirk Stikker proposed a system of ‘weighted voting’ as well as a system in which a ‘restricted group’ of states would decide.⁷⁰ Neither option was acceptable to the United States. Fearing that Alliance solidarity would be undermined in the absence of an agreed framework for nuclear use consultations, NATO approved the so-called ‘Athens Guidelines’ at its May 1962 Athens ministerial. The Guidelines described three categories in which consultation on use might occur. If the Soviets launched a nuclear attack

⁶⁶ Sayle, ‘A Nuclear Education’, 928.

⁶⁷ Heusinger referred to this in 1960. *Ibid.*, p. 928 FN 31.

⁶⁸ Statement of the United States Permanent Representative to the North Atlantic Council, May 26, 1961 on Defense Matters. Available at the Eisenhower Library online archive. Accessed at: <https://www.eisenhowerlibrary.gov/sites/default/files/research/online-documents/declassified/fy-2012/1961-05-26.pdf>

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Dirk Stikker, ‘Annual political appraisal special report by the Secretary General on NATO defence policy’, 17 April 1962, NSA. Available at: <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB159/usukconsult-16a.pdf>.

against NATO, it was accepted that the possibilities to consult would be ‘extremely limited’.⁷¹ If the Soviets launched a large-scale conventional attack, consultation was ‘anticipated’ to occur.⁷² However, if the Soviets conducted a more ambiguous form of aggression, albeit one that still ‘threatened the integrity of the forces and territory attacked and which could not be successfully held with the existing conventional forces’, then it was agreed the ‘decision to use nuclear weapons would be subject to prior consultation’ in the NAC.⁷³

Whilst marking an advance compared to the lack of earlier guidance, the Athens Guidelines avoided any discussion of procedures to be followed. According to one US analysis of the issue prepared after the Athens meeting, ‘Exact procedures to be followed ... in reaching a NAC decision to use nuclear weapons have never been officially defined’.⁷⁴ The document characterized the decision-making process as ‘obscure’ and referred to SACEUR receiving his authorization from ‘unspecified NATO authorities’ to release nuclear weapons for use by subordinate commanders.⁷⁵ For some US officials this had the advantage of maintaining flexibility, though for European governments as well as senior NATO military officers the lack of a clear chain of command was less than satisfactory. Although it was generally accepted that a request for nuclear use would originate with a major NATO commander in the course of repelling a Soviet aggressor, or by the government of the country being attacked, it was unclear

⁷¹ Memorandum from Secretary of Defense for the President, Subject: Consultation in NATO on Nuclear Weapon Use, 5 May 1969, Declassified Documents Online (DDO).

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ ‘Considerations Influencing the Transfer, Release and Use of Nuclear Weapons’. Department of Defense. 6 July 1962. DDO.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

to which political authorities this request was to be circulated in the first instance and then approved before being acted upon.

Shortly after the Athens Ministerial, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Maxwell Taylor described to President Kennedy his understanding of how NATO nuclear use would occur. In his view, the US president would release nuclear weapons to USCINCEUR (dual hatted as SACEUR) for employment by US and non-US forces under SACEUR's command as directed by the NAC or by NATO governments. But Taylor then noted that 'exact procedures ... in reaching a NAC decision to use nuclear weapons have never been officially defined'.⁷⁶ Taylor also distinguished between the decision by the US president to *release* weapons and a decision to *use* them. In other words, a certain ambiguity remained about whether or not the authority to release weapons was the equivalent of authorizing SACEUR to then make use of them as he sought fit.

Norstad was of the opinion that once the US president released the weapons to his control as SACEUR it would then be up to the NAC to decide the matter. Yet the prospect of the NAC having the final word on nuclear use raised questions about how it would reach a decision and how long it would take to do so, particularly as the Permanent Representatives (Permreps) would be obliged to refer back to their capitals for instructions. If a vote was to be taken, would a consensus have to be reached or would a majority be sufficient to proceed with nuclear use? As an alternative to approaching the NAC, Norstad later intimated that he would have spoken bilaterally with the relevant countries concerned.⁷⁷ Confusion continued during the tenure of Norstad's successor, General Lyman Lemnitzer. At NATO's Fallex 66 exercise Lemnitzer was

⁷⁶ Memorandum from Gen. Taylor to President Kennedy, 2 July 1962, *FRUS*, 1961-1963, Volumes VII, VIII, IX, Arms Control; National Security Policy; Foreign Economic Policy, Microfiche Supplement, Doc. 274.

⁷⁷ Sayle, 'A Nuclear Education', 931-932.

asked what he did with selective nuclear release requests. He answered that he put them on the Secretary General's desk who took them from there.⁷⁸

Nuclear Use Decision-Making after 1967

NATO's decision to adopt a new strategic concept in 1967 was directly related to France's announced withdrawal from the integrated military command a year earlier. Although the US had sought for many years to get NATO to abandon 'massive retaliation' in favor of 'flexible response', France had been adamantly opposed. It was only after the French decision to withdraw that the strategy was changed. The new strategy was based on countering different levels of aggression using a mix of different methods. Should a direct defence with conventional forces not succeed in stopping aggression, the Alliance would deliberately escalate with nuclear weapons to make 'the costs and risk disproportionate to the aggressor's objectives'.⁷⁹ Options included demonstrative nuclear use and selective nuclear strikes on 'interdiction targets' or 'against other suitable military targets'.⁸⁰ These targets would be confined to NATO and non-Soviet Warsaw Pact territory or at sea. If this limited nuclear use was incapable of stopping the aggression, or if the Soviets used nuclear weapons as well, NATO would then escalate to a General Nuclear Response, consisting of 'massive nuclear

⁷⁸ NPG Consultation, US Mission to NATO, Secret, Cable, 17 March 1969, DNSA.

⁷⁹ *Overall Strategic Concept for the Defense of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization Area*, MC 14/3(Final), 16 January 1968, NA.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

strikes' against Soviet territory.⁸¹ NATO nuclear escalatory options would later be described as initial use, follow-on use and general release.⁸²

The shift in NATO strategy once again brought to the fore questions about nuclear use authorization - in particular, how the initial 'selective release' would be authorized. In April 1967, the West German government insisted to the Alliance that 'host countries' should have a 'special influence' on nuclear use decisions.⁸³ A year later, an agreement was reached so that 'special weight' would be given to the views of the allies most directly affected.⁸⁴ This was defined as the country on or from whose territory nuclear weapons would be employed, the country or countries providing the nuclear warheads, and the country or countries providing or manning the envisaged means of delivery. However, the prospect of gaining a formal veto remained elusive. This reflected continuity rather than change in NATO policy. Less than a decade earlier, Norstad had rebuffed a Norwegian request that 'Allied atomic weapons cannot be used against targets on Norwegian territory or in Norwegian territorial waters without the approval of the Norwegian Government'.⁸⁵ In his reply, Norstad emphasized the importance of 'coordination' with the Norwegians, and that 'any NATO Commander authorizing the employment of atomic weapons on Allied territory would, to the maximum practicable extent,

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² J. Michael Legge, 'Theater Nuclear Weapons and the NATO Strategy of Flexible Response', RAND R-2964FF, April 1983.

⁸³ Memorandum from Secretary of Defense for the President, Subject: 'Consultation in NATO on Nuclear Weapons Use', 5 May 1969, DNSA.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Memorandum for the Standing Group, 9 March 1960, SGWM-140-60, NA.

obtain prior approval of appropriate national authorities'.⁸⁶ Yet this response reflected a reluctance to provide a cast-iron guarantee of prior approval.

In the summer 1968, at the behest of Secretary General Manlio Brosio, the NATO International Staff circulated a questionnaire to member governments to clarify the nuclear use consultation process. Among the questions asked were: who will make the ultimate decision, who may initiate consultation on the selective use of nuclear weapons, e.g. SACEUR or a member government; what should be the roles of the NAC, the Military Committee, and the Major NATO Commanders, should NATO consultation seek to reach a 'convergence of judgment' on the timing place, type, and numbers of weapons to be employed, should this judgement be communicated to the nuclear powers by their PermReps or by the Secretary General, and would the nuclear power advise the Council and the Military Committee of its final conclusion on use.⁸⁷

Many of the 'smaller' NATO nations, such as the Netherlands and Italy, sought to use this exercise as an opportunity to give them a larger voice on nuclear matters. On 17 December 1968, NPG PermReps met to discuss the questionnaire. Apart from the US, which deliberately chose to avoid responding to the questionnaire, all other allies 'found substantial agreement on several general principles'.⁸⁸ It was agreed that procedures should be developed to 'enable governments to express their views on any proposed use of nuclear weapons, that the forum for consultation should be Council/DPC, to which requests from MNCs or proposals from member governments should be addressed, and that outcome of consultation should be

⁸⁶ Memorandum for the Norwegian Military Representative, 24 March 1960, SGM-181-60, NA.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Department of State Telegram, 131807Z Dec 68, Subject: NPG - Consultation, DNSA

communicated to nuclear powers by the Secretary General'.⁸⁹ At the same time, they avoided raising any fundamental constitutional issues regarding authority and the power to decide on use. The ultimate decision would still be taken by the nuclear power and achieving unanimity was not the goal of consultation. Instead, consultation entailed allies being informed when the question of selective use arose and was meant to ensure their views would be communicated to the nuclear power. It was expected that once the nuclear power had taken a decision that it would then be communicated to MNCs, the Council/DPC, and capitals.⁹⁰

One proposal suggested by Canadian and British representatives was to give the NAC/DPC a veto on the decision for nuclear use following a US President's provision of release authority. US officials were forthright in their opposition to this proposal on the grounds that it would 'seriously undermine the nuclear deterrent'.⁹¹ Among the reasons for this was fear that in the event of a communications breakdown, or if the NAC/DPC was unavailable for consultation, then any NATO nuclear action would be hamstrung. It was noted that, 'An enemy must not be permitted to infer that by destroying or otherwise rendering incapable a single mechanism or channel of consultation he could slow up or paralyze the decision processes'.⁹² Instead, the US preferred 'simple, flexible arrangements', and would try to reassure allies they would be consulted 'whenever feasible' and 'if time permits' but without actually committing to a formal procedure.⁹³ Among these 'flexible arrangements', US officials discussed various possibilities including 'informal selective release requests from SACEUR to the US, or consultations

⁸⁹ Department of State Telegram, 201927ZDec 68, Subject: NPG-Consultation, DNSA.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ 'Nuclear Planning Group: US position on consultation on nuclear weapons use', US National Security Council Staff, Position Paper, 4 April 1969, DNSA.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Memorandum from Secretary of Defense for the President, 5 May 1969, DNSA.

between SACEUR and the US short of any request, without the other Allies (or some of them) even being notified that SACEUR was considering nuclear weapons use'.⁹⁴ It was further observed that 'there would be no obligation to consult NATO about even a formal SACEUR request unless and until the US tentatively decided to grant the request'.⁹⁵ The Americans' preferred procedural arrangement was for the Major NATO Commanders to notify governments about selective release requests, the governments would then convey their views to the nuclear powers, and finally the nuclear powers would inform other governments of its decision, either directly and/or indirectly via the NAC/DPC.⁹⁶

In February 1969, Brosio told US Defense Secretary Melvin Laird, 'it was very important that there be a plausible way fixed ahead of time which showed that there was a way for all the countries, especially the smallest, to consult in a time of crisis and to show that all will have a chance to be heard'.⁹⁷ Laird informed Brosio that the US had been hesitant to respond to the earlier questionnaire on the basis that a system of 'detailed procedures' would lead to 'complex, unrealistic organizational arrangements involving constraints and preconditions that would threaten to paralyze the decisionmaker [the US] and the Alliance thereby damaging the nuclear deterrent'.⁹⁸ Laird explained that 'Detailed procedures of the kind envisioned in the Questionnaire could lead the Soviets to question NATO's ability to act in response to aggression in wartime, thereby degrading the capability of the nuclear deterrent and perhaps

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Memorandum of Conversation, Meeting of Secretary Laird with the Secretary General of NATO, 14 February 1969, *FRUS*, 1969–1976, Vol. XLI, Western Europe; NATO, 1969–1972.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

tempting the Soviets to test NATO's cohesion and resolve'.⁹⁹ Thus, rather than resolving the underlying problem, US policy was to leave it unresolved. Some five years later, the discussion had hardly changed. As US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld stated in a May 1974 NATO meeting, 'Attempts to develop a collective view on possible use of nuclear weapons could impede the process ... it is important to remember that the consultation process does not have as an objective the development of a collective view' in the NAC/DPC.¹⁰⁰

There is a good deal of evidence that in the following years although many similar ideas were held about how a NATO nuclear use decision would be made, there were also different interpretations regarding the precise details. In 1982, for instance, SACEUR General Bernard Rogers referred to a 'series of steps' that would be taken.¹⁰¹ As he described it, the first step would be to send an 'early notification' message to 'get the political authorities thinking in terms of giving this permission' to use nuclear weapons.¹⁰² This would then be followed by a warning message that a release request would soon be forthcoming, and then the release request itself would be sent. As to the destination, Rogers explained, 'I go to the political authorities at NATO headquarters with the request. I go also to the Ministers of Defense of all nations and I go also to the two nuclear powers simultaneously'.¹⁰³

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Cable from US Mission to NATO to SECSTATE, Subject: May 16 NPG PERM REPS Meeting, 170845Z May 74.

¹⁰¹ Testimony of General Bernard Rogers Before the US Senate, Committee on Armed Services, Department of Defense Authorization for Appropriation for FY83, 97th Congress, 2nd Session, Part 7, Strategic and Theater Nuclear Forces, February-March 1982, 4334.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

According to a 1983 high-level UK document, NATO consultation arrangements were described as follows:

... a request by one of the Major NATO Commanders for the release of nuclear weapons would be conveyed to all member Governments and to the NATO Council. Their views would, if time permitted, be conveyed to the nuclear powers (United States and United Kingdom) who would communicate their decision to the major NATO Commander, the member Governments, and the Council. The Prime Minister's consultations with the President and the Federal Chancellor would be taking place in parallel.¹⁰⁴

An American report from 1985 describes a similar arrangement, albeit not exactly the same. For instance, rather than the UK document's reference to a release request being conveyed to all member Governments *and* to the NATO Council, the US document refers to passing the request to NATO member governments *through* the NAC *or* the DPC. The US document notes that 'National views expressed in the NAC or DPC would then be communicated to the nuclear powers concerned (United Kingdom, United States) who would in turn inform NATO of the decision taken at a national level'.¹⁰⁵ Crucially, it also states: 'the caveat expressed in the Athens Guidelines ("time and circumstances permitting") implies that consultation on nuclear weapons' use is not mandatory, nor does the chain of command require NATO consultation in order to release nuclear weapons'.¹⁰⁶

Within NATO HQ, the nuclear consultation issue provoked efforts by the Military Committee from the late 1960s onwards to play an active role. As their terms of reference included

¹⁰⁴ Robert Armstrong to Prime Minister, 'Nuclear Release Procedures and Related Matters'.

¹⁰⁵ Report of the Special Committee on Nuclear Weapons in the Atlantic Alliance, 1985.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

‘advising the North Atlantic Council/Defence Planning Committee on the use of military power’, and ‘if time permits, the use of nuclear weapons by NATO forces or forces acting in support of the Alliance’, the precise role they would play in wartime remained contested, not for the least of reasons that the Major NATO Commanders were expected to play the leading military role.¹⁰⁷ To give the Military Committee a more prominent role risked interposing a further layer of bureaucracy between the Major NATO Commanders and the political authorities. Consequently, it was agreed that the Military Committee could provide general advice on the basis that its members limited themselves to presenting the positions of their own countries rather than providing a collective Alliance view. By 1974 it was reaffirmed that ‘primary responsibility for the provision of military advice in connection with consultation specifically relating to possible use of nuclear weapons lies with the Major NATO Commanders’.¹⁰⁸

By the mid-1970s, nuclear use consultation featured more prominently in NATO exercises. WINTEX-75 provides a useful illustration of how the system was intended to work. In this exercise, SACEUR and SACLANT provided the DPC with a handful of warning messages and nuclear release requests. Once the DPC received these messages, the Military Committee provided its views to the DPC, the DPC then discussed the matter and transmitted their views to the Secretary General who in turn passed these views to the nuclear powers.¹⁰⁹ National

¹⁰⁷ Cable from US Mission to NATO to SECSTATE, 261910ZMar74, Subject: 25 March NPG Staff Group Meeting, NARA. This issue also arose at Fallex 68. See NAC Participation in Fallex 68, IMSWM-105-68, 29 April 1968, NA.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Cable from US Mission to NATO to SECSTATE, 121530ZAPR75, Subject: NPG PERMREPS Report on WINTEX-75, NARA.

capitals also provided their input. In the case of the UK, a mock Cabinet reviewed the messages from SACEUR and SACLANT and provided their Ambassador to NATO with instructions.¹¹⁰

Although high-level institutions may have been represented in these exercises, it was not always the case that high-level officials participated. The West German Ambassador to NATO complained that the Germans had participated at a high level but this was not replicated by other countries thereby casting doubt on the utility of the exercise.¹¹¹ A US assessment of a similar exercise that took place two years later - WINTEX-77 - warned that there was an imbalance between military and political play, including a ‘tendency for players to skip over the complicated procedures and weighty decisions involved in getting 15 nations simultaneously to go to war’.¹¹² Later Alliance exercises reflected a similar problem. For instance, the ABLE ARCHER 83 exercise designed to ‘practice command and staff procedures, with particular emphasis on the transition from conventional to non-conventional operations, including the use of nuclear weapons’, was a ‘purely military exercise’ that did not include participation from the Alliance’s ‘political authorities’.¹¹³ As with other NATO exercises involving nuclear use, the key objective of ABLE ARCHER 83 was to ensure that a working system was in place so that once a nuclear use order was communicated, it could be executed. Yet the fact that the political authorities were almost always simulated by military personnel or involved officials who in a real crisis *would not* be responsible for making decisions about

¹¹⁰ CAB 130/801, UK National Archives.

¹¹¹ Cable from US Mission to NATO to SECSTATE, 181745Z APR 75, Subject: Council Operations Exercise Committee Meeting, April 17, 1975, NARA.

¹¹² Cable from US Mission to NATO to SECSTATE, 081500ZAPR77, Subject: WINTEX 77 Critique, NARA.

¹¹³ Exercise Able Archer 83: Information from SHAPE Historical Files, March 28, 2013, NSA. Available at: <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB427/docs/6.a.%20Exercise%20Able%20Archer%20SHAPE%20March%202013%20NATO.pdf>

nuclear use, placed limits on the degree these exercises reflected how the system might work had war erupted.

Another problem observable in the WINTEX-75 exercise, as well as earlier ones, was the slow system of communications. US officials were concerned about the long time required to transmit nuclear warning and release requests from the Major NATO Commanders to the Council/DPC and to the capitals.¹¹⁴ Given the delays in communicating these requests, as well as the need to allot sufficient time to allow for deliberations, selective release requests, known as Romeo messages, were to be preceded by warning, or Whiskey, messages. Special attention was also paid to the style and format of the warning and release request messages. The Major NATO Commanders had to make a strong case to the political authorities about why they wanted to employ nuclear weapons. During Fallex 68, one participant observed that effort was placed on getting staff officers to write requests for permission to use nuclear weapons that made the military situation appear as being desperate enough to convince senior leaders to grant approval.¹¹⁵

In addition to consulting about nuclear use decisions, the concept of initial use being principally a means to signal Alliance resolve, which featured in the 1969 'Provisional Political Guidelines for the Initial Defensive Tactical Use of Nuclear Weapons by NATO', led to questions about what messages NATO might wish to communicate to the adversary before and/or immediately after nuclear use. The purpose of doing so would be to induce the enemy to cease aggression before the Alliance resorted to initial use as well as to prevent the possibility

¹¹⁴ Cable from US Mission to NATO to SECSTATE, 181745ZAPR75, Subject: Council Operations Exercise Committee meeting, 17 April 1975, NARA.

¹¹⁵ J.B. Carne, 'SACEUR's selective release procedures and nuclear policy decisions', D-18273-ISA, RAND, 26 December 1968. Available at: <https://www.archives.gov/files/2011-013-doc01.pdf>.

of the Soviet/Warsaw Pact leadership misinterpreting the limited nature of the nuclear use. At a May 1974 NPG meeting in Ankara, a study was initiated to examine the ‘implications of communicating NATO’s intentions to an enemy, to other countries and to the public, and on related procedural matters’.¹¹⁶ As with the more general issue of nuclear use consultation, the possibility of communicating a warning message to the enemy sparked a debate about the timing and content of these messages.¹¹⁷ For example, would the message be sent prior to NATO *deciding* on nuclear use, or *after* a decision had been reached to use nuclear weapons but *before* they were actually used. Whereas the first effectively amounted to an ultimatum, the latter was viewed simply as a means of ‘explaining an already inevitable resort to nuclear weapons’ to avoid misunderstanding by the enemy that a larger attack was being initiated. The timing issue was problematic due to the possibility the enemy, knowing a nuclear attack was forthcoming, might initiate a pre-emptive attack or take other defensive measures. There was also the question of how and who would communicate the warning message. The US position was that the final decision must be taken by the nuclear power.¹¹⁸ One suggestion was that NATO could publicly release the message as an official communiqué and/or all member governments would use whatever means they had at their disposal to convey the message. A public message had both benefits and drawbacks. From an international opinion perspective, an open message of warning might demonstrate NATO’s willingness to use nuclear weapons only as a last resort. On the other hand, a public message risked provoking widespread public

¹¹⁶ Cable from USMISSION NATO to SECSTATE, 021815ZOCT74, Subject: Draft NPG PermReps Report on the Study on Communicating NATO’s Intention to Use Nuclear Weapons, NARA.

¹¹⁷ Cable from US Mission to NATO to SECSTATE, 071424ZMAY77, Subject: NPG: Ambassador Pauls Remarks at May 5 NPG Permrep Meeting, NARA.

¹¹⁸ Cable from US Mission to NATO to SECSTATE, 161710ZOCT75, Subject: NPG: CNI: Messages of Warning, NARA.

opposition and might prohibit the Alliance from offering the Soviets a face-saving de-escalatory option. Particularly for the latter reason, it was argued that a secret communication, either through diplomatic channels or via a nuclear power's hotline, might be preferable.¹¹⁹ As for the content of the message, SACEUR insisted that any general notification of intent to use nuclear weapons make no reference to the specific mode of employment.¹²⁰ The complexity highlighted by these debates and the need to satisfy so many different actors helps explain why formalizing a set of procedures proved so difficult. Nearly a decade after NATO initiated its study, an after-action analysis of the WINTEX-CIMEX-83 exercise noted “‘Communicating NATO Intentions’ (CNI) procedures not formalized’.”¹²¹

The problems of consultation among NATO allies were further compounded with the announcement of the 1973 US-USSR Agreement for the Prevention of Nuclear War. According to the agreement's Article IV, if relations declined to the point that ‘involve the risk of a nuclear conflict’, then both countries would ‘immediately enter into urgent consultations with each other and make every effort to avert this risk’.¹²² This was interpreted by some Allies as placing US-USSR consultations on a higher level than US consultation with other NATO members. West German Defence Minister Georg Leber noted that many German officials ‘thought it

¹¹⁹ Cable from US Mission to NATO to SECSTATE, 121600ZDEC75, Subject: NPG - Comments on Hamburg Ministerial Agenda, NARA; Cable from US Mission to NATO to SECSTATE, 111740ZSEP74, Subject: September 9 NPG Staff Group Meeting, NARA.

¹²⁰ Cable from US Mission to NATO to SECSTATE, 132055ZSEP74, Subject: September 13 NPG Staff Group Meeting, NARA.

¹²¹ Notes of WINTEX 83 Senior Level First Impressions Conference, 22 Mar 1983 and related documents, NSA. Available at:
<https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB427/docs/2.Notes%20of%20WINTEx%2083,%2022%20March%201983,%20and%20related.pdf>

¹²² The text can be found at: <https://nuke.fas.org/control/prevent/text/prevent1.htm>

implies at least an obligation for the nuclear powers to consult prior to the use of nuclear weapons in the event of conflict. If this were the case, NATO strategy, which calls for flexible response to include the use of nuclear weapons, would seem to be undermined'.¹²³ A Canadian diplomat also questioned what the relationship was between the US-USSR agreement and the prospect of NATO communicating its intention to use nuclear weapons.¹²⁴ Such was the backlash that US officials were obliged to downplay the relevance of the agreement by stressing it did not ban use of nuclear weapons, obligations to allies remained unimpaired, including the Athens Guidelines, and that in the event of war it would no longer be binding anyway.¹²⁵ Moreover, US officials highlighted that the agreement placed no secrecy requirement on US-Soviet consultations, and therefore the US would 'remain in the closest contact and consultation with our allies'.¹²⁶ Although the US did not consult with all of its NATO allies in the run-up to the agreement, the US did consult with the British regarding the proposed text. The somewhat ironic situation in which the US came to a nuclear consultation agreement with the Soviets without consulting its NATO allies first was not appreciated by them and added to an already long list yet another complicating factor to Alliance nuclear use decision-making.¹²⁷

¹²³ Cable from AMEMBASSY Bonn to SECSTATE, 051812ZJUL73, Subject: Discussion with Defense Minister Leber on Defense Matters, NARA.

¹²⁴ Cable from USMISSION NATO to SECSTATE, 021855ZJUL74, Subject: NPG Study on Communicating NATO's Intentions to Use Nuclear Weapons, NARA.

¹²⁵ Cable from SECSTATE to all NATO Capitals, 22316ZJUN73, Subject: Agreement on Prevention of Nuclear War, NARA.

¹²⁶ Cable from SECSTATE to all Diplomatic Posts, 221659ZJUN73, Subject: Agreement on Prevention of Nuclear War, NARA.

¹²⁷ Stephen R. Twigg, 'Operation Hullabaloo: Henry Kissinger, British Diplomacy, and the Agreement for the Prevention of Nuclear War', *Diplomatic History* 33/4 (2009), 689-701.

Conclusion

In early 1983, the KGB distributed to some of its key station chiefs instructions to ‘uncover NATO preparations for a nuclear missile attack on the USSR’.¹²⁸ The instructions noted:

Nuclear consultations begin after NATO (the Planning Council/Committee) have received notification from a nuclear power belonging to the grouping of the intention to use nuclear weapons or a request from a non-nuclear country in NATO or one of the main commands of the bloc (Supreme Command of NATO Forces in Europe, Supreme Command of NATO Forces in the Atlantic or the NATO Command in the Channel) for the use of nuclear weapons. The aim of these consultations is to convey to the nuclear powers concerned the views of the other members of the bloc on the questions of launching a nuclear attack so that it should take them into account before taking its own *final* decision. NATO attaches great importance to beginning nuclear consultations at the earliest possible state of a political crisis in East/West relations which is threatening to develop into armed conflict.¹²⁹

At that time, the view of the Soviet leadership was that NATO might initiate aggression against the Warsaw Pact. Due to the short flight-time it would take for the soon-to-be deployed Pershing-2 missiles to reach ‘long-range targets in the Soviet Union’, Soviet intelligence was tasked with increasing the warning time available by seeking indications of NATO preparations

¹²⁸ KGB Headquarters Moscow, to the London KGB Residency, ‘Permanent operational assignment to uncover NATO preparations for a nuclear missile attack on the USSR’, and enclosed documents, February 17, 1983, NSA.

Available at:

<https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB426/docs/9.Permanent%20Operational%20assignment%20to%20Uncover%20NATO%20preparations%20for%20a%20nuclear%20missile%20attack%20on%20the%20USSR-February%202,%201983.pdf>

¹²⁹ Ibid.

for an attack.¹³⁰ These preparations were assumed to begin ‘at the moment when the other sides’ political leadership reaches the conclusion that it is expedient to use military force ... and takes a *preliminary* decision to launch an attack on the Soviet Union’.¹³¹ Following the preliminary decision, the nuclear consultations described above were expected to commence.

As can be discerned from the Soviet leadership’s desire for intelligence about NATO nuclear use consultations, as well as their general assumption of NATO as the *aggressor* in a potential war with the Warsaw Pact, their understanding of how the Alliance would use nuclear weapons in wartime was deeply flawed, even if their knowledge of procedural matters was mostly accurate. As the evidence presented in this article has shown, NATO nuclear strategy during the bulk of the Cold War suffered from a lack of agreement about how to authorize nuclear use at a multilateral level. To share control, particularly if it meant nuclear use could only be authorized by a consensus decision, or to insist on lengthy consultation procedures, would have reduced the prospect of the weapons being used and therefore would have undermined their deterrence value. Although NATO policymakers recognized the problem and sought solutions, in the process of seeking solutions they often created more problems. By not insisting on strict nuclear use procedures, NATO’s leadership prioritized Alliance political cohesion in peacetime even if this raised the risk that authorizing nuclear use was likely to prove chaotic in wartime.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid.

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