

NATO's Role in Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Arms Control: A (Critical) History

by Leopoldo Nuti

ABSTRACT

This paper looks at the interaction between the Atlantic Alliance and the main arms-control negotiations of the nuclear age. The first part is dedicated to the role the Alliance played in the arms-control and non-proliferation process that shaped the global nuclear order during the Cold War. The second part of the paper discusses the Alliance's adaptation to the post-Cold War period. In the new security environment that has emerged after the end of the bipolar confrontation, NATO has faced an increasing number of challenges in its efforts to reconcile its arms-control policy with its commitment to maintain a credible deterrence posture.

NATO | Nuclear weapons | Arms control | Non-proliferation | Transatlantic relations

keywords

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Introduction

Can a military alliance such as NATO, which has never played a *formal* part either in the negotiation or in the implementation of any arms-control agreements, plausibly claim to have any role in the field of nuclear arms control and non-proliferation? And if it did, what would it be? What was the overall contribution of the Alliance to the stability of the global nuclear order, during and after the Cold War? The purpose of this paper is to try and provide an answer to these questions by discussing the interaction between the Atlantic Alliance and the main arms-control negotiations of the nuclear age.¹ As the paper will hopefully make clear, NATO has indeed been involved in shaping many arms-control decisions – albeit with a rather mixed record, given the limited weight it could have on these issues.

The paper starts out by briefly looking at the origins of NATO's reliance on nuclear deterrence during the Cold War. It then focuses in more detail on those episodes when the Atlantic Alliance had to reconcile its nuclear strategy with attempts to regulate a global nuclear order – namely, the negotiations of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of nuclear weapons (NPT) and the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT I and SALT II). A survey of the euromissile crisis and its sudden, unexpected conclusion wraps up the first section. The second part of the text examines the evolution of the Alliance's nuclear posture after the end of the Cold War – looking in particular at the key turning point of 1989-1992, when NATO drastically reduced its reliance on nuclear deterrence. Many of the Alliance's subsequent choices were

¹ Throughout the paper, I will discuss the role of NATO in shaping nuclear arms control and non-proliferation agreements. I will not discuss such conventional arms-control agreements as the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty or the Missile Technology Control Regime.

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but the inevitable consequence of what happened – and of what *did not* happen – during that crucial turn of events. A brief conclusion compares the results NATO achieved during and after the Cold War, and tries to assess the overall arms-control performance of the Alliance throughout the whole period.

The paper relies on a variety of sources, but there is a significant difference between sections 1 and 2. The first section is based on an abundance of historical literature and on a wide array of primary sources, some of which literally became available as this text was being written. The second one, on the other hand, analyses more recent events and is inevitably based on a more limited, and qualitatively different, set of sources. I have tried to make up for the scarcity of primary archival evidence in Section 2 by relying on NATO's official documents, and I have attempted to compensate for the limited historical scholarship by using a large number of think-tank reports and contemporary assessments.

1. NATO, nuclear deterrence and arms control: the history of a difficult relationship

1.1 *The origins of NATO's reliance on nuclear deterrence*

The nuclearization of NATO strategy came about as a result of a number of factors which overlapped around 1952-1953 – namely:

1. the failure to implement the massive programme of conventional rearmament agreed upon at the February 1952 meeting of the North Atlantic Council (NAC) in Lisbon;
2. the protracted stalemate of the Korean War;
3. US President Harry Truman's decision to produce a fusion weapon in early 1950, and its first successful test in 1952;
4. a technological quantum leap in the US capacity to produce (and miniaturize) nuclear warheads; and
5. the influence of the advanced reflections of the British Chiefs of Staff in crafting a strategy of nuclear deterrence with their Global Strategy Paper.

All these aspects must be kept in mind in order to understand the choices of the new Eisenhower administration in 1953. The incoming President found himself faced with the twin unpleasant prospects of covering most of the expenses that the Lisbon programme entailed and of fighting an endless series of costly military interventions, such as the Korean one, across the globe. Maintaining a policy of containment of the Soviet Union along these lines while preserving US economic vitality seemed an intractable problem until, as David Calleo aptly put it, technology seemed to offer a solution for preserving "hegemony on the cheap".² In October 1953 the US National Security Council (NSC) approved its Report No. 162/2, which

² David P. Calleo, *Beyond American Hegemony. The Future of the Western Alliance*, New York, Basic Books, 1987, p. 41-43.

concluded that "in the event of hostilities, the United States will consider nuclear weapons to be as available for use as other munitions".³ A few months later Secretary of State John Foster Dulles explained to the Council of Foreign Relations the key concepts of the New Look of US foreign policy and of the massive retaliation theory. From then on, nuclear weapons assumed a central salience in US strategy.

On the other side of the ocean, the European members of NATO reacted with some perplexity to this profound strategic innovation. After some nervous debates, the Alliance adapted to the new reality with the document MC 48, "The Most Effective Pattern of NATO Military Strength for the Next Few Years", which was approved by the North Atlantic Council in December 1954. It concluded that "in the event of a war involving NATO it is militarily essential that NATO forces should be able to use atomic and thermonuclear weapons in their defense from the outset".⁴ In Marc Trachtenberg's brilliant synthesis, "the essence of the new strategy was that the response would be *both* tactical *and* strategic: the attack on the Soviet Union would be massive, and, above all, very rapid".⁵ This basically meant transferring the theory of nuclear deterrence to the battlefield level by deploying an increasing number of short-range nuclear weapons for tactical purposes. Inevitably, but not without many difficulties, NATO adjusted to this transformation in the strategic posture of its most important member. Until the end of the Cold War, nuclear deterrence became the bedrock of the Alliance's strategy.

Such a choice, in turn, entailed a series of complex and long-lasting consequences for the Alliance. Throughout the rest of the Cold War, NATO struggled with the problem of the *credibility* of US extended deterrence – particularly after the Soviet Union demonstrated its technological prowess in matching US strategic capabilities. The European Allies wrestled with the opposing fears of *not* being defended by the US in case of Soviet aggression, if Washington showed any sign of reluctance to extend its nuclear guarantee to Western Europe, and of being defended *too much* if the US seemed a bit too relaxed about the possible use of nuclear weapons in case of a crisis. As Robert Wampler wrote, nuclear weapons "have played a Janus-like role in NATO history – the cause of divisive strains as well as a primary source of cohesion".⁶

³ "Report to the National Security Council by the Executive Secretary (Lay)" (NSC 162/2), 30 October 1953, in Lisle A. Rose and Neal H. Petersen (eds), *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952–1954, National Security Affairs, Vol. II, Part 1*, point 39.b(1), Washington, United States Government Printing Office, 1984, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1952-54v02p1/d101>.

⁴ North Atlantic Military Committee, *The Most Effective Pattern of NATO Military Strength for the Next Few Years. Decision on M.C. 48*, 22 November 1954, point 22(a), <https://www.nato.int/docu/stratdoc/eng/a541122a.pdf>.

⁵ Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace. The Making of the European Settlement, 1945-1963*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1999, p. 159.

⁶ Robert Wampler, "NATO Strategic Planning and Nuclear Weapons, 1950-1957", in *Nuclear History Program Occasional Papers*, No. 6 (1990), p. 50.

A first crucial consequence of this basic predicament of extended deterrence was the Western European Allies' attempt to be formally involved in the decision-making process related to the possible use of the US nuclear arsenal. For most Western European members of the Alliance, achieving nuclear status became paramount in order to influence the Alliance's posture. Either directly through the acquisition of a national deterrent or indirectly by sharing the control of the American one within a multilateral framework, most NATO members wanted to have an active role in defining the Alliance's nuclear activities. From the late 1950s through to the mid-1960s, an increasing number of US nuclear delivery systems were deployed across Europe to implement the new strategy, and "[b]etween 1952 and 1958, the number of nuclear weapons allocated for war planning purposes to NATO's supreme allied commanders grew from 80 to more than 3500".⁷ The non-nuclear members of the Alliance put increasing pressure on the Eisenhower administration in order to find out more about how the US intended to use this arsenal, as well as to have a saying in the decision to resort to it. Gradually, the US seemed inclined to acquiesce to some of the Allies' demands, both in order to reassure them and to prevent them from developing their own nuclear arsenals, even if US law continued to restrict any such policies. A number of plans were hatched about how this could be accomplished. All of them remained controversial and very difficult to put into practice – but some of the countries that were hosting US delivery systems did acquire a de facto growing degree of control over the US weapons. In 1960 the Chair of the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy, Representative Chester Earl Holifield (D-Cal.), led a group of US congressmen to inspect US nuclear facilities in Europe. They were shocked by the conditions in which they found the US nuclear weapons being kept – eliciting a somewhat dry comment in the internal history of US Air Forces in Europe.⁸

The Holifield report [...] alleged [...] that "possession is lost when warheads are mated with Allied missiles". The DOD [Department of Defense] reply had pointed out that complete, positive control of weapons would require their use only in United States sovereign areas, and that something less than assured United States control had to be accepted in the NATO area.⁹

⁷ David Alan Rosenberg, *Constraining Overkill Contending Approaches to Nuclear Strategy, 1955-1965*, paper presented at the 9th Colloquium on Contemporary History "More Bang for the Buck: U.S. Nuclear Strategy and Missile Development 1945-1965", 12 January 1994, <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/m/more-bang-buck.html#rosen>.

⁸ US Congress, *Executive Session, Joint Committee on Atomic Energy, Meeting No. 87-1-4*, 20 February 1961, in National Archives, Record Group 128: Records of the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy, Box 10, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/nukevault/ebb442/docs/doc%206%20JCAE%20jupiters.pdf>.

⁹ United States Air Forces in Europe (USAFE), *History of Headquarters, United States Air Forces in Europe, 1 January-30 June 1961*, USAFE Office of Information-Historical Division, 1962. I am grateful to Mike Yaffe for providing me with a copy of this document.

1.2 NATO transformed – the early steps towards détente

By the late 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s, the credibility of the strategy of massive retaliation was increasingly being questioned. The Soviets' technological progress in their intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), as well as the consequent vulnerability of US territory, compelled the Kennedy administration to rethink some of the basic assumptions of US strategy. The result was the new doctrine of flexible response, which tried to raise the nuclear threshold by strengthening NATO conventional forces. Furthermore, the dramatic crises of Berlin and Cuba, as well as the first Chinese nuclear test in October 1964, clearly demonstrated the twin dangers of an unregulated arms race and an unrestricted dissemination of nuclear weapons. This series of events had a paramount impact on the evolution of the Cold War, as both the US and the USSR felt the need to introduce a measure of restraint in their confrontation. By the mid-1960s both superpowers felt inclined to explore possible paths to strengthen arms control and non-proliferation. The 1963 Limited Test Ban Treaty was the first step in this direction, and by 1966 the US and the USSR were ready to move ahead with the conclusion of a non-proliferation agreement.¹⁰

Once again NATO was called upon to adapt to a rapidly changing strategic environment. Until then, arms control and disarmament had not been among the Alliance's priorities: while paying them customary lip service in their official declarations, member states had consistently displayed a preference for reinforcing the Alliance's strategic posture and for trying to benefit from the US nuclear arsenal in one way or the other. The systemic shift of the mid-1960s, therefore, became a crucial test of NATO's capacity to adapt to a different set of priorities while maintaining intact the credibility of its strategic deterrent.

From 1966 through to 1968 NATO went through a veritable revolution, made up of a series of interlocking steps conceived to adapt it to such a profound transformation of the international system.¹¹ The most important one was undoubtedly the complex process of redefining the Alliance's goals, which lasted from December 1966 to December 1967. It eventually resulted in the report on the "Future Tasks of the Alliance" (the outcome of a working group led by the Belgian Foreign Minister, Pierre Harmel), which marked a significant departure from NATO's previous strategic posture by explicitly adding the task of promoting political détente to the traditional ones of providing defence and deterring aggression through the buildup of adequate military strength. It made clear that providing "military security and

¹⁰ William C. Potter, "The Origins of US–Soviet Non-proliferation Cooperation", in William C. Potter and Sarah Bidgood (eds), *Once and Future Partners: The US, Russia, and Nuclear Non-proliferation*, London/New York, Routledge, 2018 (Adelphi Series No. 464-465), p. 23-54.

¹¹ On the transformation of NATO, see Helga Haftendon, *NATO and the Nuclear Revolution: A Crisis of Credibility, 1966-1967*, Oxford/New York, Oxford University Press, 1996; Andreas Wenger, "Crisis and Opportunity: NATO's Transformation and the Multilateralization of Détente, 1966–1968", in *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 6, No.1 (Winter 2004), p. 22-74.

reducing tensions were not contradictory but complementary".¹² Significantly, during its drafting, an explicit proposal was made to create inside the Alliance a new arms-control committee:

It seems clear that the Alliance should give increasing concern to arms control issues. Problems of arms control and possible security arrangements should be examined with as much continuing care and attention as NATO devotes to force planning, strategy and nuclear questions. The Council has often discussed questions of arms control. Disarmament experts are considering these problems at the technical level during regularly scheduled meetings. These efforts, although valuable, have not proven adequate. The Alliance should establish regular and continuing machinery to examine and evaluate all aspects of proposals or suggestions in this field. This could be accomplished by establishing, under the authority of the Council, a separate, permanent committee, called the Arms Control and Disarmament Committee.¹³

Even if eventually no such committee was created, the report formally endorsed the process of arms control.¹⁴

By the time the report was approved it had also become clear that the US had dropped any previous intention to share control of its nuclear weapons with the European Allies. The issue had retained a critical salience in NATO throughout the late fifties and the early sixties, as the non-nuclear European members of NATO continued to see it as their best option to gain an entry into the restricted club of the nuclear powers. By 1965, however, the Johnson administration reached the conclusion that nuclear sharing with the Allies and the promotion of non-proliferation with the Soviet Union were not compatible. As a consequence, it abandoned the ill-fated Multilateral Force (MLF), which envisaged the creation of a surface fleet armed with Polaris intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBM) and jointly manned by crews of different nationalities of the NATO countries. In its place the US promoted the creation of the Nuclear Defense Affairs Committee and of the Nuclear Planning Group, which were conceived to appease the Europeans' nuclear anxieties by allowing them a degree of consultation over plans for the possible use of nuclear weapons in the Alliance's theatre of operations. Shifting the core of the Alliance's nuclear sharing from the hardware to the software, i.e. from the physical control of the delivery systems to consultations about their planning

¹² North Atlantic Council, *The Future Tasks of the Alliance. Report of the Council – 'The Harmel Report'*, 13-14 December 1967, point 5, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_26700.htm.

¹³ North Atlantic Council, *Future Tasks of the Alliance - "Harmel Report"*, Vol. 6: *Report by Sub-group 3 The Future Security Policy of the Alliance (April 1967–October 1967), Final Draft*, 6 October 1967, p. 25, <https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/80988.htm>.

¹⁴ Andreas Wenger, "Introduction: The Multilateralization of Détente: NATO and the Harmel Exercise, 1966-68", in Anna Locher and Christian Nuenlist (eds), *The Future Tasks of the Alliance: NATO's Harmel Report, 1966/67*, Washington/Zurich, PHP Publications Series, July 2004, p. 2-18, <https://css.ethz.ch/en/services/digital-library/publications/publication.html/108636>.

and targeting, was not easy. Some Allies initially regarded consultations as a poor substitute for sharing the actual weapon systems and suggested they would accept the creation of the planning group only if it *supplemented* sharing, not if it replaced it.¹⁵ It was only when it became clear that consultation and planning were going to be the only options left that some of the recalcitrant Allies accepted it – and insisted they be included as permanent members of the new institution that was going to be set up.¹⁶

The creation of the Nuclear Planning Group had also to be made acceptable to the Soviet Union. The initial Soviet position was that even consultation among NATO members on nuclear planning should be prohibited by a future non-proliferation treaty (NPT): as a Soviet diplomat warned his American counterpart, “present NATO arrangements [...] were unacceptable, on the grounds that participation by the Federal Republic [of Germany], even in planning for nuclear strategy, would be the equivalent to access to nuclear weapons”.¹⁷ “Any arrangements which would bring Germany into closer association with nuclear weapons” made a non-proliferation treaty impossible, Soviet Premier Kosygin argued.¹⁸ This stance forced the US to negotiate on two fronts. The Johnson administration eventually succeeded in persuading both the Soviets and its NATO Allies: the former consented to the creation of the NPG and the latter, *bon gré mal gré*, accepted it as a replacement for sharing the delivery systems. The interesting part of the story, as far as NATO is concerned, is the awareness of the connection between the NPG and the Non-Proliferation Treaty. The wording of the NPT and the exact definition of what the Nuclear Planning Group could do were carefully crafted with each other in mind. The NPG, in other words, was conceived to be legally possible in a future world that would be ruled by NPT norms. Similarly, the negotiations of the NPT were carried out in such a way as to guarantee that the Nuclear Planning Group could be allowed to function without having its existence questioned by the USSR. Finally, the text of the NPT was also formulated to enable the US to continue the deployment of its nuclear weapons on the territory of its allies as long as they remained tightly under US control, and no physical nuclear sharing was envisaged.¹⁹

¹⁵ Helga Haftendon, *NATO and the Nuclear Revolution*, cit., p. 163; Paul Buteux, *The Politics of Nuclear Consultation in NATO, 1965-1980*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983, p. 50.

¹⁶ On Italy's initial doubts about the NPG, and on its insistence to be included, see Leopoldo Nuti, *La sfida nucleare. La politica estera italiana e le armi atomiche 1945-1991*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2008, p. 281-286.

¹⁷ “Record of a Private Meeting of the Council held on Wednesday, 12th January [1966]” (PR(66)01), point 35, in *NATO Archives Online, NPT Documents*, Vol. 1, <https://archives.nato.int/record-of-a-private-meeting-of-the-council-held-on-wednesday-12th-january-at-10-15-a-m>.

¹⁸ “Record of a Private Meeting of the Council held on Wednesday, 2nd March [1966]” (PR(66)08), point 9, in *NATO Archives Online, NPT Documents*, Vol. 1, <https://archives.nato.int/record-of-a-private-meeting-of-the-council-held-on-wednesday-2nd-march-1966-at-11-00-a-m>.

¹⁹ Daniel Khalessi, “Strategic Ambiguity: Nuclear Sharing and the Secret Strategy for Drafting Articles I and II of the Nonproliferation Treaty”, in *The Nonproliferation Review*, Vol. 22, No. 3-4 (2015), p. 421-439. William Alberque, “The NPT and the Origins of NATO's Nuclear Sharing Arrangements”, in *Proliferation Papers*, No. 57 (February 2017), <https://www.ifri.org/en/node/12652>.

Nevertheless, it took some rather intense negotiations to persuade every NATO member to accept the NPT.²⁰ The most difficult hurdle was to convince the non-nuclear members of the Alliance, and in particular the Federal Republic of Germany and Italy, to abandon any project of nuclear sharing. Both countries had based their previous nuclear policies on the assumption that their nuclear aspirations could be met through NATO. Therefore, both had always supported the principle of non-dissemination of nuclear weapons, expecting it to be fully compatible with the continuation – if not the deepening – of the NATO practice of nuclear sharing. Indeed, until 1965 the US itself was willing to go along with this interpretation. As we have seen, however, this was exactly what the Soviet Union was not disposed to concede. The USSR systematically rejected all US attempts to demonstrate that creating an MLF was actually a means to prevent national proliferation, and by late 1966 Washington was clearly inching towards the Soviet position. This convergence resulted in the new formulation of the first article of the draft NPT, which prevented the nuclear-weapon states from providing nuclear weapons to any non-nuclear state or group of states, thus making impossible the continuation of NATO nuclear sharing as practised at the time – let alone any future expansion of it. The British government had consistently advocated the conclusion of a non-dissemination treaty along these lines and was in favour of the new draft, but both the German and the Italian governments saw this turn as little short of a betrayal. What was at stake, for them, was the very essence of the Alliance. If NATO had been set up to contain Soviet expansionism and deter Soviet aggression, it needed all the force it could muster. Reaching an agreement on the dissemination of nuclear weapons with the Soviet Union and then asking the European Allies to accept it and come to terms with it somewhat seemed to defy the very logic on which the Alliance had been built. It required a fundamental paradigm shift.²¹

Beside a thick web of bilateral meetings, the North Atlantic Council became one of the key places where the US and its European Allies could try to reconcile their differences. It provided an extremely useful multilateral framework within which extensive consultations could be held and diverging views slowly, and sometimes painfully, reconciled. Without looking into the details of the lengthy and complex negotiations, it suffices here to say that at least three articles of the final text of the

²⁰ Hal Brands, "Progress Unseen: U.S. Arms Control Policy and the Origins of Détente, 1963–1968", in *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (April 2006), p. 253-285; Hal Brands, "Non-Proliferation and the Dynamics of the Middle Cold War: The Superpowers, the MLF, and the NPT", in *Cold War History*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (2007), p. 389-423. Andrew Priest, "From Hardware to Software: The End of MLF and the Rise of the Nuclear Planning Group", in Andreas Wenger, Christian Nuenlist and Anna Locher (eds), *Transforming NATO in the Cold War. Challenges Beyond Deterrence in the 1960s*, London/New York, Routledge, 2006, p. 148-161.

²¹ Leopoldo Nuti, "Negotiating with the Enemy and Having Problems with the Allies: The Impact of the Non-proliferation Treaty on Transatlantic Relations", in Jussi Hanhimäki, Georges-Henri Soutou and Basil Germond (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Transatlantic Security*, London/New York, Routledge, 2010, p. 89-102. For an example of the German scepticism about the NPT, see German Delegation to NATO, "Statement made by the German Permanent Representative at the Council Meeting on 4 April 1967", in *NATO Online Archives, NPT Collection*, Vol. 2, Item 84, <https://archives.nato.int/statement-made-by-the-german-permanent-representative-at-the-council-meeting-on-4-april-1967>.

NPT²² were profoundly shaped by the need to accommodate the requests of the European Allies:

1. Article III, which regarded the implementation by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) of the safeguards for the “verification of the fulfilment” of the member states’ obligations under the treaty, was conceived in such a way as to allow the members of EURATOM a collective negotiation with the IAEA, which was in charge of carrying out the verification procedures. It also restricted the application of the safeguards to “all source or special fissionable material in all peaceful nuclear activities” of the member states as requested by the Europeans, who feared any possible form of espionage of their industrial activities if safeguards were to be applied to their industrial facilities.²³
2. Article VI, which regarded the commitment of the nuclear-weapon states to negotiate “in good faith” to stop the arms race and achieve international nuclear disarmament, was the result of a steady pressure to move a vague pledge to disarm from the preamble of the treaty to a more cogent commitment in the main text. While it did not entirely redress the balance of duties between the nuclear and the non-nuclear states, it made the treaty less glaringly unequal than it had been in its early formulation.
3. The treaty was not given an indefinite duration, as the US and the USSR clearly preferred: at the request of the Allies, Article X.2 adopted a compromise formula, calling for a review conference twenty-five years “after the entry into force of the Treaty [...] to decide whether the Treaty shall continue in force indefinitely, or shall be extended for an additional fixed period or periods”.²⁴

Finally, by 1967 the Alliance also adapted its military posture to the new strategic environment by formally adopting the new doctrine of flexible response (MC 14/3), which the US had proposed at the beginning of the Kennedy administration. While it would take many years for the military structure of the Alliance to fully implement the new strategy, the adoption of MC 14/3 confirmed the necessity of moving NATO away from a posture almost completely based on the immediate recourse to its nuclear arsenal.²⁵

By the end of this lengthy and complex process, NATO had become one of the critical fora in which the Western states could exchange information and coordinate their positions in the field of arms control. As George Bunn aptly phrased it, the Alliance became one of a number of “committees” that any US administration should consult

²² Text of the Treaty available in UNODA website: <https://www.un.org/disarmament/wmd/nuclear/npt/text>.

²³ On the European Allies’ insistence on making Art. III compatible with EURATOM, see, for instance, “Statement by the German Permanent Representative at the Council Meeting on 20 September 1967”, in *NATO Archives Online, NPT Documents*, Vol. 3, Item 40, <https://archives.nato.int/statement-by-the-german-permanent-representative-at-the-council-meeting-on-20-september-1967>.

²⁴ George Bunn, Charles N. Van Doren and David Fischer, “Options & Opportunities: The NPT Extension Conference of 1995”, in *PPNN Studies*, No. 2 (1991), p. 6-8.

²⁵ Francis J. Gavin, *Nuclear Statecraft. History and Strategy in America’s Atomic Age*, Ithaca/London, Cornell University Press, 2012, p. 30-56.

to make sure that its arms-control proposals would be successful.²⁶ This does not mean that NATO received a veto power over what the US wanted to achieve: once it became clear that there was consensus within the Johnson administration in support of the NPT, the Alliance had no choice but to go along with the American decision. Its members did have enough leverage, however, to persuade the US to introduce a number of important modifications to the original draft of the NPT.

Some scholars, moreover, reach the conclusion that through its capacity to craft this compromise between very different positions, NATO played a major role in strengthening the whole non-proliferation regime. According to this argument, the complex interplay between the creation of the Nuclear Planning Group, the continuation of US extended deterrence and the introduction of the Non-Proliferation Treaty prevented some of the Western European Allies from developing a national nuclear option, no matter how remote and distant such an eventuality might have appeared at the time.²⁷ In other words, by providing the framework that facilitated the prevention of proliferation inside the Western bloc, NATO played a major role in the evolution of the global nuclear order.²⁸

1.3 NATO and the “golden age” of arms control

The pattern of tight consultation established during the NPT negotiations was consolidated throughout the following twenty years, almost until the very end of the Cold War.²⁹ NATO continued to be one of the key “sounding boards” on which US arms-control proposals would be tested and shaped in order to ensure their successful implementation. The Alliance was never a *formal* party to any of the negotiations that contributed to creating the global nuclear order in the later part of the Cold War, but its members were regularly consulted through a number of different fora: the North Atlantic Council, the Nuclear Planning Group, and the

²⁶ George Bunn, *Arms Control by Committee. Managing Negotiations with the Russians*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1992.

²⁷ Alexandre Debs and Nuno P. Monteiro, “NATO and Nuclear Proliferation, 1949–1968”, in Ian Shapiro and Adam Tooze (eds), *Charter of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Together with Scholarly Commentaries and Essential Historical Documents*, New Haven/London, Yale University Press, 2018, p. 193-211; Bruno Tertrais, “NATO and the Non-Proliferation Regime”, in Joseph F. Pilat and David S. Yost (eds), “NATO and the Future of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty”, in *NDC Occasional Papers*, No. 21 (May 2007), p. 91-98, at p. 93, <https://www.ndc.nato.int/download/downloads.php?icode=21>.

²⁸ Oliver Bange, “NATO as a Frame Work for Nuclear Nonproliferation: The West German Case, 1954–2008”, in *International Journal*, Vol. 64, No. 2 (Spring 2009), p. 361-382, at p. 381.

²⁹ US diplomats were well aware that the NAC consultations about the NPT had created a most useful pattern: see “Telegram from the Mission to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization to the Department of State”, 2 February 1969, in James E. Miller and Laurie Van Hook (eds), *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Vol. XLI: Western Europe; NATO, 1969–1972*, Washington, United States Government Printing Office, 2012, p. 26-30, at p. 28, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v41/d6>. On the importance of this process, and more in general on the relationship between NATO and non-proliferation, see also Alexandre Debs and Nuno P. Monteiro, “NATO and Nuclear Proliferation, 1949–1968”, cit.

Defense Planning Committee.³⁰ In the NPT negotiations, however, the Allies retained a higher degree of leverage as they could refuse to sign a multilateral treaty, whereas their power to influence bilateral arms-control negotiations between Moscow and Washington was clearly much more limited. Given the disparity of power in the transatlantic relationship, moreover, there was, and to a certain extent there still is, an inherent dialectical pattern in any negotiations between the US and its European Allies: the US is usually bound to lead and the Allies can either resist or second its leadership. Sometimes, as has happened repeatedly in the history of the transatlantic alliance, this can lead to rather dramatic clashes – and the shaping of NATO's strategic posture and of its arms-control position were no exceptions to this rule. As the US Representative to the North Atlantic Council summed it up in 1969, "The North Atlantic Treaty Organization is an organized controversy about the content and balance of the transatlantic security bargain—who is going to do how much, how soon, to carry out the purposes of the treaty?"³¹

When the US entered the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) negotiations with the Soviet Union in 1969, one of its first steps was to make sure that the NATO Allies accepted the very concept of strategic stability on which the negotiations were going to be based. Washington had to reassure its Allies that another round of nuclear negotiations with the Soviet Union would not amount to the confirmation of a superpower condominium created behind their back.³² President Nixon committed himself to a "full round of consultations with our NATO allies before substantive negotiations begin with the USSR".³³

The Nixon administration expected the Allies to welcome an arms-control agreement as a major step towards détente in Europe, but it was also aware that the Allies had a number of nagging concerns. The State Department's Office of Intelligence and Research (INR) assessed the initial European reaction as one of general support but one that would require "careful handling". As the negotiations

³⁰ Ralph L. Dietl, *Beyond Parity. Europe and the SALT Process in the Carter Era, 1977–1981*, Stuttgart, Franz Steiner Verlag, 2016, p. 12.

³¹ "Telegram from the Mission to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization to the Department of State", 23 January 1969", in James E. Miller and Laurie Van Hook (eds), *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Vol. XLI*, cit., p. 19-21, at p. 19-20, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v41/d4>.

³² "Memorandum from President Nixon to Acting Secretary of State Richardson", 21 May 1969, in Erin R. Mahan (ed.), *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Vol. XXXII: SALT I, 1969–1972*, Washington, United States Government Printing Office, 2010, p. 16-17, at p. 17, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v32/d8>; Ralph L. Dietl, *Beyond Parity*, cit., p. 22. On SALT, John Newhouse, *Cold Dawn. The Story of SALT*, New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973; Gerard Smith, *Doubletalk. The Story of the First Strategic Arms Limitation Talks*, New York, Doubleday, 1980; David Tal, *US Strategic Arms Policy in the Cold War. Negotiations and Confrontation over SALT, 1969–1979*, London/New York, Routledge, 2017; Matthew J. Ambrose, *The Control Agenda. A History of the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks*, Ithaca/London, Cornell University Press, 2018. See also, more in general Raymond L. Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation. American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan*, Washington, The Brookings Institution, 1985; and Henry Kissinger, *White House Years*, Boston, Little, Brown and Co., 1979.

³³ "Memorandum from President Nixon to Acting Secretary of State Richardson", cit.

with the Soviets proceeded, some of the original European enthusiasm began to waver when the allies fully grasped the basic fact that the US and the Soviet strategic arsenals more or less balanced each other.³⁴ Such preoccupations could grow as the negotiations progressed, National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger warned the President, and they should be taken into account before firming up the American position.³⁵ Kissinger thought that consultation with the Allies, both inside NATO and at the bilateral level, should therefore be “genuine, not pro forma”,³⁶ a position that was also shared by other members of the administration – and which may come across as somewhat disingenuous, given Kissinger’s inclination for backchannel negotiations.³⁷ Nixon had a slightly different view: consultation within NATO “should be therapy” and the US “initial position in talks should not be known to Congress and Allies in advance”.³⁸ From the guidelines that the US delegation to NATO received at the beginning of SALT, it was clear that US diplomats in Brussels were supposed to reassure the Allies but also to keep their own hands as free as possible.³⁹ Nevertheless, the President seems to have concluded that the US should maintain continuous consultations with its Allies.⁴⁰ The Europeans themselves, on the other hand, insisted on the importance of regular, in-depth consultations, stirred by some “deep anxieties” over the whole process – as the British Prime Minister (PM) Harold Wilson warned Nixon.⁴¹

Throughout the whole SALT I and SALT II negotiations, NATO consultations took place on a steady, regular basis. The Allies were particularly concerned about the possible inclusion in a future SALT agreement of US dual-capable aircraft in Europe, the so-called Forward Based Systems (FBS). The Nixon administration was

³⁴ INR Report, US Soviet Talks on Strategic Arms Limitations, Preliminary Reactions in Key Capitals to US Draft, 9 February 1969, and Memorandum for the President from Henry Kissinger, SALT Consultations Elicit Concerns from NATO Allies, 10 July 1969, in *Digital National Security Archive* (DNSA).

³⁵ “Paper Prepared by the Interagency SALT Steering Committee”, undated, in Erin R. Mahan (ed.), *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Vol. XXXII*, cit., p. 26-39, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v32/d14>.

³⁶ “Memorandum from the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon”, 24 June 1969, in Erin R. Mahan (ed.), *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Vol. XXXII*, cit., p. 80-82, at p. 81, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v32/d21>.

³⁷ “Memorandum from the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs (Warnke) to Secretary of Defense Laird”, 28 January 1969, in James E. Miller and Laurie Van Hook (eds), *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Vol. XLI*, cit., p. 22-26, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v41/d5>.

³⁸ “Minutes of a National Security Council Meeting”, 25 June 1969, in Erin R. Mahan (ed.), *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Vol. XXXII*, cit., p. 83-85, at p. 84, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v32/d22>.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 85, footnote 4.

⁴⁰ Memorandum for the Secretary of Defense from Henry Kissinger, SALT Consultations with NATO, May 4, 1970, in DNSA.

⁴¹ Ralph L. Dietl, *Equal Security. Europe and the SALT Process, 1969–1976*, Stuttgart, Franz Steiner Verlag, 2013, p. 36. For an example of the variety of European concerns, see “Private Record of a Meeting of Ambassadors on Thursday, 23rd January, 1969” (PR(69)04), in *NATO Archives Online, NPT Documents*, Vol. 1, <https://archives.nato.int/private-record-of-a-meeting-of-ambassadors-on-thursday-23rd-january-1969-at-10-15-a-m>.

keenly aware of the problem and the US delegation systematically rejected Soviet attempts to make FBS part of the negotiating package, to such an extent that by December 1970 there was a risk that negotiations might break down “over the FBS issue”.⁴² The US was also careful to turn down repeated Soviet attempts to include in the text of the agreement any reference to the French and British nuclear forces – the so-called “third party” forces. Nevertheless, while consultations did take place, there were some inevitable tensions with the European Allies.⁴³ In order to make sure that their interests were taken into account, the Europeans repeatedly talked about setting up their own caucus within NATO. This project was initially launched by the British Defence Minister Dennis Healey and eventually evolved into the so-called Petrignani Group, named after the Italian Representative to the NAC.⁴⁴ The US, on the other hand, was often concerned that the intra-European talks might limit its own freedom of manoeuvre, and from very early on it worried lest their caucus might reinforce the European attempt to shape a somewhat more autonomous foreign policy.⁴⁵ Given the precarious state of transatlantic relations in the first half of the 1970s as well as the notorious inclination of Nixon and Kissinger to carry out part of the negotiations with the Soviet Union – including SALT – through a personal backchannel, it is all the more remarkable that the US continued to consult the Europeans in the elaboration of a mutually acceptable arms-control stance.⁴⁶

In the aftermath of the SALT I negotiations – and, in particular, during the stalemate that occurred in the early stage of the SALT II ones – the US continued to be very careful about “third party forces” and FBS. It also made a formal pledge to the Allies to consult with them on the language to be used in the eventual formulation of a non-circumvention or non-transfer clause in a future treaty, after the Allies had

⁴² See, for instance, the discussion at the NSC, “Minutes of a National Security Council Meeting”, 8 March 1971, in Erin R. Mahan (ed.), *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Vol. XXXII*, cit., p. 414-421, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v32/d137>; and Nuclear History II, 1969-1976, Forward-Based Systems and the Non-circumvention Formula in the First Phase of SALT (1969-1972), 6 June 1973, in DNSA, p. 2-3.

⁴³ Ralph L. Dietl, *Equal Security*, cit., p. 183-184.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 77-78.

⁴⁵ “Telegram from the Mission to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization to the Department of State”, 2 February 1969, cit.; and “Memorandum from Secretary of Defense Laird to President Nixon”, 20 February 1969, in James E. Miller and Laurie Van Hook (eds), *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Vol. XLI*, cit., p. 37-43, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v41/d8>.

⁴⁶ The most important breakthrough in the SALT I negotiations, namely the 20 May 1971 announcement about the future agreement on ABM and on the limitation of offensive strategic weapons, was actually the result of a bilateral negotiation between Kissinger and Soviet Ambassador to Washington Anatoly Dobrynin, unbeknownst not only to the European Allies but even to the US delegation in Geneva: Gerard Smith, *Doubletalk*, cit., p. 233-235; Raymond L. Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation*, cit., p. 147-150. On US–European relations under Nixon, see Luke A. Nichter, *Richard Nixon and Europe. The Reshaping of the Postwar Atlantic World*, Cambridge/New York, Cambridge University Press, 2015; and Mario Del Pero, “Henry Kissinger’s Three Europes”; Jussi N. Hanhimäki, “Re-configuring the Free World: Kissinger, Brzezinski, and the Trilateral Agenda”; and Thomas Alan Schwartz, “‘A Frankenstein Monster’: Henry Kissinger, Richard Nixon, and the Year of Europe” – all in *Journal of Transatlantic Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (March 2019), p. 5-21, 23-41 and 110-128.

"grudgingly" expressed their approval of the non-circumvention principle.⁴⁷ This compromise was particularly important in the light of growing concern among the European Allies lest any non-circumvention provision should prevent the possible deployment of cruise missiles, a new weapon system that by the mid-1970s was seen by some influential analysts as particularly fit for the European theatre.⁴⁸ As usual, tensions did occur from time to time, as the US resented the presentation of the Allies' point of view when this was seen as too "peremptory".⁴⁹

It is not easy to assess how much the US negotiating position was affected by the Allies' requests. The least one could say is that they were always present into the background when the US was crafting its negotiating stance. It seems a bit of a stretch, however, to conclude that it was "NATO Europe" that prevented an early conclusion of SALT II by tying the hands of the Ford administration.⁵⁰ A substantial majority of the literature, as a matter of fact, argues that the stalemate in the SALT negotiations was the result of a domestic shift in US public opinion and not of the need to accommodate its European Allies. By the mid-1970s several powerful political forces in the US had become particularly wary about the continuation of dialogue with the Soviet Union, and very distrustful about the entire arms-control process.⁵¹

In the late 1970s this growing US pessimism about détente became inextricably intertwined with three other issues – namely, the negotiations and the conclusion of a SALT II agreement, the modernization of the Alliance's intermediate-range nuclear forces (INF)⁵² and the need to forge a common position to respond to the Soviet Union's deployment of a new missile system, the SS-20s.⁵³ The Alliance

⁴⁷ "In letters to the [North Atlantic] Council of June 18 and July 25, 1973, [US] Ambassador Rumsfeld reiterated that 'if it becomes appropriate' to propose specific non-circumvention language, we would first consult with the NAC", in Memorandum from Helmut Sonnenfeldt to the Secretary of State, "SALT and NATO Sensitivities", May 14, 1975; see also Nuclear History II, 1969-1976, Forward-Based Systems – both in DNSA.

⁴⁸ Ralph L. Dietl, *Beyond Parity*, cit., p. 21; for a balanced survey of the issue, see David N. Schwartz, *NATO's Nuclear Dilemmas*, Washington, Brookings Institution, 1983, p. 203-206.

⁴⁹ Nuclear History II, 1969-1976, and Memorandum from Helmut Sonnenfeldt to the Secretary of State, "SALT Consultations with UK", 16 June 1975 – both in DNSA.

⁵⁰ Dietl goes so far as to conclude that "NATO Europe was the nemesis of the SALT II process. Europe feared an early SALT ratification. The SALT process was artificially delayed in order to create a 'time window' for an INF deployment." Ralph L. Dietl, *Beyond Parity*, cit., abstract, available at <https://elibrary.steiner-verlag.de/book/99.105010/9783515112437>.

⁵¹ On the domestic criticism of détente in the US, see Anna Kasten Nelson, "Senator Henry Jackson and the Demise of Détente", in Anna Kasten Nelson (ed.), *The Policy Makers. Shaping American Foreign Policy from 1947 to the Present*, Lanham, Rowman and Littlefield, 2009, p. 83-106; Giordana Pulcini, *Sicurezza, equilibrio e vulnerabilità. Il controllo degli armamenti strategici negli Stati Uniti alla fine della distensione*, Milan, Mondadori Università, 2018. On SALT II, see Strobe Talbott, *Endgame. The Inside Story of SALT II*, New York, Harper & Row, 1980.

⁵² For the sake of consistency throughout the paper, I have chosen to refer to this category of weapons as Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF) rather than using the definition of the time, Long Range Theatre Nuclear Forces (LRTNF).

⁵³ Leopoldo Nuti et al. (eds), *The Euromissile Crisis and the End of the Cold War*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2015.

multiplied the number of internal fora in which these issues could be discussed – first by creating the High Level Group in 1977 to debate the modernization of its arsenal, then by adding the Special Group in 1979 to formulate an adequate arms-control position vis-à-vis the new Soviet missiles. The creation of these two bodies reflected the diverging positions inside the Alliance, as well as inside the governments of the member states, between two different mindsets. A firm belief that the upgrading of NATO's intermediate-range forces was inevitable (and that any arms-control initiative was little more than a fig leaf to make the former acceptable to the reluctant public opinions of the member states) stood in stark contrast to the hope that if an arms-control solution to the deployment of the SS-20s could be found, it might make modernization of the Alliance's weapon systems unnecessary.

The result was the December 1979 "dual track" decision, a compromise that reconciled the different priorities by committing the Alliance to simultaneously engage in a renewed arms-control effort with the USSR *and* to firmly commit to a modernization of its INF if the negotiations with Moscow failed. Ideally, the threat to upgrade the Alliance's theatre nuclear forces (TNF) would force the Soviets to negotiate a serious arms-control agreement. As Marilena Gala has convincingly argued, the most significant aspect of this whole process was the extent to which the European Allies were able to cooperate in order to affect the final decision and to reconcile strains inside the Alliance.⁵⁴

It was, however, only a temporary achievement. For the next decade NATO found itself once again at the centre of a protracted tension – this time between the incoming Reagan administration and the European Allies. The new administration was firmly committed to bolstering the US posture vis-à-vis the Soviet Union, it was very sceptical about arms control in general and was determined to reassert US leadership within the Alliance.⁵⁵ Most European countries, on the other hand, had become firmly committed to détente and reluctant to jettison arms control, which they regarded as a key part of the dialogue with the Soviet Union. The early steps of the Reagan administration, therefore, saw a reduced level of concertation: President Reagan's November 1981 announcement of support for a "zero option" for solving the euromissile crisis was well received by most of the Allies (albeit by no means by all of them) but it was not elaborated inside the North Atlantic Council, even if the President knew that it was likely "to elicit positive reactions in all the basing countries in Europe".⁵⁶ Similarly, the attempt by Paul Nitze, Reagan's

⁵⁴ Marilena Gala, "The Essential Weaknesses of the December 1979 'Agreement': the White House and the Implementing of the Dual-Track Decision", in *Cold War History*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (2019), p. 21-38, at p. 25.

⁵⁵ On Reagan's attitude on nuclear weapons, there is a growing and controversial literature: for an early assessment of the debate about arms control, see Strobe Talbott, *Deadly Gambits. The Reagan Administration and the Stalemate in Nuclear Arms Control*, New York, Knopf, 1984.

⁵⁶ The role of the Allies in the adoption of the 1981 "zero option" remains a matter of dispute: according to Gala, France and Britain were opposed but Germany was in favour of it (Marilena Gala, "The Essential Weakness...", cit., p. 30); Bunn writes that the Alliance was advised but not consulted

chief negotiator, to achieve a compromise solution with his Soviet counterpart during the Geneva negotiations – their famous “walk in the woods” in 1982 – saw the Allies annoyed by the lack of consultation but pleased that the proposal had at least been formulated.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, there was also an important moment that, once again, saw the Alliance play a significant role in determining what the US position vis-à-vis the Soviet Union should be: Gala has highlighted how the 1983 “interim” proposal in the INF negotiations was influenced to a large extent by the views expressed by some of the European members of the Alliance.⁵⁸ The proposal was meant to find a solution that would allow both the US and the USSR to deploy a number of weapon systems greater than zero, and it was the result of a protracted effort among the Allies to shape a common position. Its adoption by the Reagan administration “helped the Alliance to enhance its cohesion and credibility”.⁵⁹

The final part of the euromissile crisis saw the continuation of this transatlantic tug-of-war, but with its roles reversed. By the beginning of his second mandate, and particularly after Mikhail Gorbachev was appointed Secretary General of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in March 1985, Reagan showed a growing inclination to resume negotiations on nuclear weapons. Most European Allies supported this change of attitude but were somewhat disconcerted by its sudden acceleration. When in 1986 at Reykjavik President Reagan dramatically reversed the US position and seemed ready to make a giant step towards a drastic cut to the US strategic deterrent, the Allies reacted with a mixture of incredulity and astonishment. In spite of their failure, as a matter of fact, the Reykjavik negotiations sent many a shiver down the spines of the Western European leaders. Reagan had single-handedly proposed to Gorbachev the abolition of all ICBMs within the next ten years. Suddenly the ghost of a bilateral agreement behind the back of the Europeans seemed to be threatening the Alliance’s cohesion once again. British PM Margaret Thatcher’s spirited reaction was perhaps the most extreme, but by no means unique: “My own reaction when I heard how far the Americans had been prepared to go was as if there had been an earthquake beneath my feet. [...] The whole system of nuclear deterrence which had kept the peace for forty years was

(George Bunn, *Arms Control by Committee*, cit., p. 149). See also Maynard W. Glitman, *The Last Battle of the Cold War. An Inside Account of Negotiating the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, p. 54-56.

⁵⁷ During their July 1982 “walk in the woods” near Geneva, Nitze and the chief Soviet negotiator, Yuli Kvitsinski, agreed to a compromise that would allow the US and the Soviet Union to deploy in Europe 75 launchers each: every Soviet launcher would carry one SS-20 with three warheads, and each US one be equipped with four single-headed Cruise missiles. The US would abstain from deploying the Pershing II IRBMs, which the Soviets saw as particularly dangerous because of their short flight time: Strobe Talbott, *The Master of the Game. Paul Nitze and the Nuclear Peace*, New York, Knopf, 1988, p. 174-175; George Bunn, *Arms Control by Committee*, cit., p. 152. It was not just the Allies, however, who were kept in the dark: Nitze kept the details of the proposal to himself and informed only Eugene Rostow, the Director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency: Maynard W. Glitman, *The Last Battle of the Cold War*, cit., p. 76.

⁵⁸ Marilena Gala, “The Essential Weakness...”, cit.; Maynard W. Glitman, *The Last Battle of the Cold War*, cit., p. 89-90.

⁵⁹ Marilena Gala, “The Essential Weakness...”, cit., p. 35.

close to being abandoned.”⁶⁰ The German Chancellor Helmut Kohl raised similar points with Reagan, and, in a later meeting with the French President François Mitterrand, Kohl admitted his concern that European security could be decoupled from that of the United States.⁶¹ As for the rest of his government, it was split between those who, like Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher, supported the renewed dialogue between the superpowers and the Defence Minister Manfred Wörner who voiced his fears about the de-nuclearization of Western Europe and the subsequent decoupling effect.⁶² A similar split occurred within the French government. Mitterrand seemed to have been personally supportive of Reagan’s Reykjavik proposals, but he told Thatcher that while a zero option at the European level did not really bother him he was concerned about a possible zero option at the strategic level, which would have serious implications for the survival of the French *force de frappe*. The new PM Jacques Chirac and most of his ministers, however, shared the concerns of the other Europeans and were very worried by a sudden removal of all the INF.⁶³ The Quai d’Orsay worried about “*le dérapage* [slide; literally, “skid”] de Reykjavik” and Defence Minister André Giraud defined the Western acceptance of the dual zero option as a “new Munich”.⁶⁴ Rumours soon began to circulate that the British, the French, the Germans and the Italians had launched “a new effort to better coordinate their arms control positions”. Even if these seem to have been false, the very fact that they were spread testified to the extent of European concern.⁶⁵

These growing perplexities were clearly reflected in NATO’s official declarations in late 1986 and early 1987. These never mentioned the total abolition of ICBMs, which had been discussed in Reykjavik. Yet by early 1987 these wide-ranging disarmament scenarios suddenly became all the more concrete, after Gorbachev declared that he was willing to separate the negotiations on intermediate nuclear forces from those on the reduction of strategic armaments and on missile defence. Suddenly the zero option and the abolition of all intermediate nuclear forces seemed a very real possibility. Once again the Atlantic Alliance witnessed a veritable *tourbillon* of

⁶⁰ Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years*, New York, Harper Collins, 1993, p. 470-471. See also her comment to French President François Mitterrand, in Jacques Attali, *Verbatim II. Chronique des années 1986-1988*, Paris, Fayard, 1995, p. 179-183; and the briefing memo for Reagan before their November meeting, “Memo for the President”, 15 November 1986, “Meeting with PM Margaret Thatcher”, and “Presidential Talking Points with PM Thatcher”, both in the Declassified Documents Reference System (DDRS); Ronald Reagan, *The Reagan Diaries*, New York, Harper Collins, 2007, p. 451.

⁶¹ Helmut Kohl, *Erinnerungen. 1930-1982*, Munich, Droemer, 2004, p. 442.

⁶² Hans-Dietrich Genscher, *Rebuilding a House Divided. A Memoir by the Architect of Germany’s Reunification*, New York, Broadway Books, 1998, p. 218-221; Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years*, cit., p. 770-775.

⁶³ Pierre Favier and Michel Martin-Rolland, *La décennie Mitterrand, Vol. 2: Les épreuves (1984-1988)*, Paris, Seuil, 1991, p. 778-780; Hubert Védrine, *Les mondes de François Mitterrand: à l’Elysée 1981-1995*, Paris, Fayard, 1996, p. 388-389.

⁶⁴ Frédéric Bozo, *Mitterrand, la fin de la guerre froide et l’unification allemande. De Yalta à Maastricht*, Paris, Odile Jacob, 2005, p. 48 (Giraud) and p. 388 (dérapage).

⁶⁵ “Memo for the President”, 15 November 1986, “Meeting with PM Margaret Thatcher”, both in DDRS.

bilateral and multilateral meetings, debates and fierce discussions.⁶⁶ Many voices – including important ones such as that of General Bernard W. Rogers, the Supreme Allied Commander in Europe – expressed their concern that a zero option might open the way to a complete denuclearization of Western Europe and a potential decoupling of transatlantic security.⁶⁷ It is simultaneously somewhat paradoxical and symbolic that the last hurdle that delayed the conclusion of an agreement on the abolition of an entire class of nuclear weapons was an outdated weapon system whose existence had been almost forgotten. This comprised the seventy-two old Pershing 1A missiles that the US had deployed in Germany since the 1960s, and which were so obsolete that the company that produced them had already decided by 1992 that it would no longer manufacture their spare parts.⁶⁸ The Soviet Union insisted that the Pershing 1A system be included in the zero option, while the West German government wanted to exclude it. Only after some rather heated wrangling about its possible modernization was the Pershing 1A included in the package, thus opening the way to the signature of the Washington treaty in December 1987.⁶⁹

The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty marked the most important step in the history of arms control to date, eliminating for the first time an entire class of nuclear weapons. Once the treaty was signed on 11 December 1987, the North Atlantic Council expressed its satisfaction and declared it “perfectly compatible” with the Alliance’s security. The Council also called for further reductions of the superpowers’ strategic arsenals – by up to 50 per cent. It should be noted, however, that at the same time the Council also stated that any further reduction of the Alliance’s ground-based short-range systems should be encouraged only if it was matched by significant progress in the reduction of conventional forces and by the total abolition of chemical weapons. “The denuclearization of Europe”, Kohl stated at the time, “would not advance peace but would pose a threat to the future”.⁷⁰ This cautious pattern would remain a constant feature throughout the following years.

⁶⁶ The most remarkable of which was probably the one held in Venice in 1987, as narrated by Hubert Védrine, *Les mondes de François Mitterrand*, cit., p. 725-729.

⁶⁷ Thomas Halverson, *The Last Great Nuclear Debate. NATO and Short-Range Nuclear Weapons in the 1980s*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 1995, p. 95.

⁶⁸ Thomas Risse-Kappen, *The Zero Option. INF, West Germany and Arms Control*, Boulder, Westview Press, 1988, p. 141.

⁶⁹ On this issue, see the collection of documents in Svetlana Savranskaya and Thomas Blanton (eds), “The INF Treaty and the Washington Summit: 20 Years Later”, in *National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Books*, No. 238 (December 2007), <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB238>; Hans-Dietrich Genscher, *Rebuilding a House Divided*, cit.; Helmut Kohl, *Erinnerungen*, cit., p. 550-553.

⁷⁰ Hans-Dietrich Genscher, *Rebuilding a House Divided*, cit., p. 233.

2. The post-Cold War era

2.1 The crucial period, 1989-1992

2.1.1 Introduction

Between 1989 and 1992 much of NATO's previous strategic posture was rapidly modified, in some cases to an extent that would have been dismissed as impossible only a few months before. As a matter of fact, in the early months of 1989 NATO was still formally committed to modernizing, not to dismantling, a significant part of what remained of its nuclear deterrent after the implementation of the INF Treaty – namely, the short-range Lance missiles and the Alliance's dual-use nuclear artillery. Within the next couple of years, as the Warsaw Pact unravelled and the Soviet Union eventually collapsed, NATO would not only abandon any plans to modernize its short-range nuclear forces but it would actually accept their radical reduction. This process of rethinking the entire structure of its nuclear arsenal was another crucial test of the Alliance's cohesion and of its capacity to carefully balance its shifting strategic requirements with the swift progress of the arms-control process. Eventually, this brought the overall number of sub-strategic nuclear weapons in Europe back to the level seen in the mid-1950s – the most far-reaching alteration of the Alliance's strategic posture in forty years.⁷¹ Yet, in hindsight, one could also agree with William Walker's comment that this was a period when "cooperative reduction of nuclear arms and consolidation of the non-proliferation regime" prevailed over the more radical disarmament proposals that had been circulated in the previous years, with the consequence that "nuclear deterrence survived the end of the Cold War".⁷² Between 1989 and 1992, in other words, NATO did show a remarkable capacity to adapt, and to a certain extent to creatively react, to the most significant transformation of the global nuclear order since its formation. At the same time, however, the Alliance's evolution throughout this period showed NATO's *reluctance* to rethink its reliance on nuclear deterrence as well as its flexibility.

2.1.2 Adapting NATO's strategy

The early months of 1989 saw an unexpectedly lively debate about the strategic choices facing the Alliance at a time when the Eastern European political landscape was showing the early – and still uncertain – signs of its possible transformation. The new US administration of President George H.W. Bush, the Thatcher government in the UK and the Mitterrand government in France all

⁷¹ According to Hans Kristensen, by the early 2000s there were "approximately 480 nuclear weapons in Europe" (p. 8) while at the peak of the deployment, in 1971, they had been "approximately 7,300" (p. 24); Hans M. Kristensen, *U.S. Nuclear Weapons in Europe. A Review of Post-Cold War Policy, Force Levels, and War Planning*, Washington, Natural Resources Defense Council, February 2005, <https://www.nrdc.org/node/16451>.

⁷² William Walker, *A Perpetual Menace. Nuclear Weapons and International Order*, London/New York, Routledge, 2012, p. 108.

continued to show some concern lest the INF Treaty open the door to a complete denuclearization of Europe – and possibly to a strategic decoupling of the Alliance. To counter this trend, they proposed an early decision about the modernization of its short-range nuclear forces (SNF), and in particular about the deployment of a new weapon system to replace the obsolete short-range Lance missiles (Follow-On to Lance, or FOTL).⁷³ In the Federal Republic of Germany, on the other hand, Foreign Minister Genscher was concerned that such a stance might affect the momentum of the *détente* with the Soviet Union that had been created by the signature of the INF Treaty and by a number of other significant steps that had taken place throughout 1988. To this end, he tried to prevent the Alliance from taking any initiative that might have a negative impact on Gorbachev's foreign policy. Chancellor Kohl gradually came around to supporting Genscher's view, and in late April he made it clear that the German government preferred any decision on FOTL to be postponed. The potential clash between these different positions was resolved at the subsequent NATO Summit of 29-30 May 1989 through a carefully crafted, but rather convoluted, compromise: any decision about the modernization of the SNF was postponed until 1992 – while at the same time a negotiation for their *partial* reduction could be started, but only *after* the first cuts of conventional forces envisaged by the Conference on Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) had been implemented.⁷⁴

The SNF decision was incorporated into a broader compromise: the Alliance's Comprehensive Concept for Arms Control and Disarmament, a lengthy document that had been prepared by the North Atlantic Council over the previous few months.⁷⁵ This emphasized the importance of promoting arms control and it praised the Alliance's contribution to the remarkable achievements of the new *détente* with the USSR. It also tried, however, to balance the promotion of any further dialogue with Moscow against the Alliance's strategic requirements: "The basic goal of the Alliance's arms control policy is to enhance security and stability at the lowest balanced level of forces and armaments *consistent with the requirements of the strategy of deterrence*".⁷⁶ To this end, the Alliance must preserve its capacity to deter any aggression, as "the principles underlying the strategy of deterrence are of enduring validity". In particular, "strategic nuclear

⁷³ "Memorandum from National Security Advisor Scowcroft to President Bush, Short-Range Nuclear Forces and NATO's Comprehensive Concept", 10 February 1989, in DNSA, <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/dc.html?doc=3402674-Document-13-Scowcroft-to-Bush-Short-Range>; Thomas Halverson, *The Last Great Nuclear Debate*, cit.; Timothy Andrews Sayle, *Enduring Alliance. A History of NATO and the Postwar Global Order*, Ithaca/London, Cornell University Press, 2019, p. 213.

⁷⁴ Thomas Halverson, *The Last Great Nuclear Debate*, cit., p. 125-130; Timothy Andrews Sayle, *Enduring Alliance*, cit., p. 213-214.

⁷⁵ According to a note prepared by the Italian Foreign Ministry, the postponement of a decision about the SNF was the result of careful German and Italian pressure: "Memorandum by Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'SNF Negotiations'", 26 June 1990, in *Archivio Giulio Andreotti, NATO Series*, Box 175, Subseries 1, Folder 101, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/155217>.

⁷⁶ NATO, *The Alliance's Comprehensive Concept of Arms Control and Disarmament*, adopted by the Heads of State and Government at the meeting of the North Atlantic Council, 29 May 1989, point 5, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_23553.htm [emphasis added].

forces provide *the ultimate guarantee* of deterrence for the Allies. [...] The strategic nuclear forces of the United States provide *the cornerstone of deterrence* for the Alliance as a whole. The independent nuclear forces of the United Kingdom and France fulfil *a deterrent role of their own* and contribute to the overall deterrence strategy of the Alliance", while "nuclear forces below the strategic level provide *an essential political and military linkage between conventional and strategic forces* and, [...] *make an essential contribution to deterrence*".⁷⁷ Any further arms-control agreement, the document continued, must therefore be reconciled with the fulfillment of these tasks, and "*Decisions on arms control matters must fully reflect the requirements of the Allies' strategy of deterrence* [...] In each area of arms control, the Alliance seeks to enhance stability and security".⁷⁸

This cautious and carefully balanced conceptual framework remained in place throughout the turmoil of the next two years, in spite of an uninterrupted series of major political shocks that completely transformed the strategic environment in which the Alliance was called upon to operate. In May 1990, as the negotiations towards a possible German reunification were picking up speed, the Bush administration unilaterally announced its decision to cancel *both* the deployment of any new weapon system to replace the Lance *and* the modernization of the Alliance's dual-capable artillery.⁷⁹ Shortly afterwards the decision was welcomed by NATO's Nuclear Planning Group, which highlighted "once again the ability of the Alliance to take the initiative in a rapidly changing situation". In the same meeting, however, the NPG confirmed the need to reassess the "future qualitative and quantitative requirements for NATO's sub-strategic nuclear forces", in the light of "the changed politico-military environment".⁸⁰

In July 1990 the NATO Council of the Heads of State and Government in London went a step further. After inviting the former members of the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union to send their diplomatic representatives to Brussels, and proposing to them "a joint declaration in which we solemnly state that we are no longer adversaries", the Council called for the elimination of the remaining short-range nuclear artillery in Europe. Its final declaration stressed that "[t]he political and military changes in Europe, and the prospects of further changes, now allow the Allies concerned to go further. They will thus modify the size and adapt the tasks of their nuclear deterrent forces".⁸¹ It added:

The Allies concerned can *reduce their reliance on nuclear weapons*. These will continue to fulfil an essential role in the overall strategy of the Alliance

⁷⁷ Ibid., points 25-27 [emphasis added].

⁷⁸ Ibid., points 61-62 [emphasis added].

⁷⁹ Thomas Halverson, *The Last Great Nuclear Debate*, cit., p. 131.

⁸⁰ NATO Nuclear Planning Group, *Final Communiqué*, Kananaskis, 9-10 May 1989, point 6, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_23555.htm.

⁸¹ NATO, *Declaration on a Transformed North Atlantic Alliance*, issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council ("The London Declaration"), 5-6 July 1990, point 16, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_23693.htm.

to prevent war by ensuring that there are no circumstances in which nuclear retaliation in response to military action might be discounted. However, in the transformed Europe, they will be able to adopt a new NATO strategy making nuclear forces *truly weapons of last resort*.⁸²

Such a significant change did not go unchallenged. In spite of the fact that the proposal was endorsed by President Bush himself, PM Thatcher and President Mitterrand both expressed their worries about it: Thatcher insisted that to avoid any ambiguity the final declaration should indeed mention the essential role of nuclear weapons, and Mitterrand indulged in a brief lecture on the virtues of the French nuclear doctrine.⁸³

The new posture was reaffirmed by the Nuclear Planning Group by the end of the year.⁸⁴ It was further reinforced by the sweeping additional steps taken by President Bush – first with the signature of the START I Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty at the end of July 1991, and then by the so-called Presidential Nuclear Initiative (PNI) two months later. Faced with the sudden prospect of a Soviet collapse after the failed anti-Gorbachev coup of August 1991, and frightened by “the reliability of Soviet nuclear command and control” (or rather, the lack of it) during the coup,⁸⁵ the US President unilaterally decided to introduce a new round of radical reductions in the US nuclear arsenal. Calling, *inter alia*, for the total elimination of US dual-capable artillery and atomic demolition munitions (ADMs) from Europe, the PNI provided a new stimulus for rethinking the Alliance’s strategic posture. The measures contained in Bush’s PNI, as a matter of fact, went even further than the removal of all dual-capable artillery from Europe advocated by the North Atlantic Council in London a year before.⁸⁶ Perhaps more importantly, President Bush’s proposal seems to have been completely shaped through an internal debate within the administration, with no consultation of NATO Allies.⁸⁷ The President only *informed* some close Allies (Mitterrand, British PM John Major, Kohl, Wörner, now NATO Secretary General) and – significantly – both Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin (then President of the Russian Federation) shortly before making his announcement on 27 September 1991.⁸⁸ The NPG approved the initiative – and at its October meeting in Taormina, Sicily, decided to make some additional cuts to the Alliance’s nuclear arsenal by “greatly reducing” the remaining stockpile of air-

⁸² Ibid., point 18 [emphasis added].

⁸³ North Atlantic Council, Verbatim Record of a Meeting (C-VR(90)36-PART1), 5 July 1990, and (C-VR(90)36-PART2), 6 July 1990, in *NATO Online Archives, Fonds NAC - 01, The North Atlantic Council*, <https://archives.nato.int/verbatim-record-of-meeting-part1-2>, and <https://archives.nato.int/verbatim-record-of-meeting-part2-2>; Timothy Andrews Sayle, *Enduring Alliance*, cit., p. 229-232.

⁸⁴ NATO Defence Planning Committee and Nuclear Planning Group, *Final Communiqué*, Brussels, 6-7 December 1990, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_23689.htm.

⁸⁵ Susan J. Koch, “The Presidential Nuclear Initiatives of 1991–1992”, in *WMD Case Studies*, No. 5 (2012), p. 3, <https://wmdcenter.ndu.edu/Publications/Publication-View/Article/627149>.

⁸⁶ See *ibid.*, p. 40-45, Appendix B, for a complete list of the proposals.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 14-16.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 16-17.

delivered bombs.⁸⁹ Eventually, all these steps were subsumed into the Alliance's New Strategic Concept, released during the Rome Meeting of the North Atlantic Council in November 1991, which emphasized the *political* as well as the *military* function of nuclear weapons as the crucial linkage between European and American security. This made it necessary for the Alliance to "maintain adequate nuclear forces in Europe [...] as a credible and effective element of the Allies' strategy in preventing war [...] at the minimum level sufficient to preserve peace and stability".⁹⁰

Once again, the shift towards a reduced salience for nuclear deterrence was reportedly met with some scepticism. A November 1991 internal assessment of the meeting by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, for instance, remarked that "particularly on nuclear matters, there are still considerable divergences". The Italian document singled out France in particular as resisting the redefinition of nuclear weapons as weapons "of last resort". The same document, however, concluded that by and large the Rome session of the North Atlantic Council had been a success, and that it had laid the foundation for further strategic convergences among the member states.⁹¹

2.2 The transformation of the Alliance in the post-Cold War era

For the next twenty years the Alliance's reliance on its nuclear deterrent was gradually but steadily moved to the back burner, as NATO faced a host of more urgent challenges. The stabilization of Europe, the peacekeeping missions in the Balkans and the complex process of eastward enlargement all seemed to require much more attention in view of defining a different strategic posture from that prevailing during the Cold War. Then after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the need to adapt to the new scenario of a "Global War on Terror" further contributed to this process of transformation. Yet attempts to reduce NATO's reliance on nuclear deterrence continued to meet with stiff resistance. In this section of the paper I will briefly focus on the two most important of these attempts, highlighting the difficulties that emerged in each case.

⁸⁹ According to Kristensen, the number of gravitational bombs was halved, from 1,400 to 700 (Hans M. Kristensen, *U.S. Nuclear Weapons in Europe*, cit., p. 32). See also NATO Nuclear Planning Group, *Final Communiqué*, Taormina, 17-18 October 1991, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_23852.htm.

⁹⁰ NATO, *The Alliance's New Strategic Concept*, agreed by the Heads of State and Government participating in the Meeting of the North Atlantic Council, 7-8 November 1991, point 55, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_23847.htm.

⁹¹ "Memorandum by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the Secretary General, 'Atlantic Summit in Rome – Assessment'", 11 November 1991, in *Archivio Giulio Andreotti, NATO Series*, Box 176, Subseries 1, Folder 107, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/155220>.

2.2.1 Into the 1990s

The early 1990s were a time when arms control and non-proliferation seemed to gather an irresistible momentum. NATO's reduced reliance on nuclear deterrence, in other words, was part of a much broader trend that also saw the *complete* denuclearization of South Africa, Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan; the signature of the START I and START II treaties; the indefinite extension of the Non-Proliferation Treaty at the 1995 Review Conference; the signature of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty in 1996; the introduction of the Additional Protocol by the International Atomic Energy Agency; and the (short-lived) solution of the first North Korean nuclear crisis with the Agreed Framework in 1994. A number of major international initiatives openly supported the idea of a nuclear-free world: in 1993 "the Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs produced a seminal work examining the desirability and feasibility of a nuclear free world, while the Henry L. Stimson Center, established in Washington DC in 1989, launched a substantial project on this same idea".⁹² In 1995 the Australian government set up an impressively staffed commission to assess the options for a nuclear-free world: it was the first time that a state had officially backed a project of this kind. In 1996 the Canberra Commission's final report called upon the nuclear-weapon states to exploit the existing momentum and not to miss the window of opportunity presented by the post-Cold War period.⁹³

Some of the *zeitgeist* affected NATO as well. At its January 1994 meeting in Brussels, for instance, the North Atlantic Council declared that it attached "crucial importance to", and supported "achieving further progress on", the NPT, and expressed its interest in the continuation of arms-control efforts.⁹⁴ In June 1994 the Council also adopted the Alliance Policy Framework on Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction.⁹⁵ Further efforts to lessen the Alliance's reliance on nuclear weapons, however, turned out to be rather uncoordinated and unsuccessful. The most significant ones were probably those that took place during the discussion on the New Strategic Concept at the December 1998 North Atlantic Council. The German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer proposed a striking innovation to a long-standing NATO principle (not to mention one of the key tenets of US nuclear strategy) by suggesting that the Alliance adopt a no-first-use doctrine as a first step towards the complete withdrawal of all remaining sub-strategic nuclear weapons

⁹² Marianne Hanson, "A Pivotal Moment for Global Nuclear Arms Control and Disarmament Policies: The Contribution of Robert O'Neill", in Daniel Marston and Tamara Leahy (eds), *War, Strategy and History. Essays in Honour of Professor Robert O'Neill*, Acton, ANU Press, 2016, p. 197-216, at p. 204, <http://dx.doi.org/10.22459/WSH.05.2016.13>.

⁹³ A few years later Richard Rhodes could optimistically write a survey of all the sweeping changes of this period and title it *The Twilight of the Bombs*, New York, Knopf, 2010.

⁹⁴ NATO, *Declaration of the Heads of State and Government*, participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council ("The Brussels Summit Declaration"), 11 January 1994, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_24470.htm.

⁹⁵ NATO, *Alliance Policy Framework on Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction*, issued at the Ministerial Meeting of the North Atlantic Council, 9 June 1994, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_24450.htm.

from Europe. The proposal, writes Fischer in his memoirs, created a “moment of panic” and some “intense exchanges of looks” among the participants in the NATO Council, and it was not endorsed by any other country.⁹⁶ Asked to comment on Fischer’s proposal at a press conference, US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright put the matter to rest by reaffirming her trust in the traditional nuclear posture of the Alliance: “We do believe that we have the right nuclear strategy, and at the same time we all discussed the fact that we are involved in a fairly radical disarmament program through the START negotiations. So I think we all felt pretty comfortable with where we are.”⁹⁷

At the same December 1998 Council another suggestion was put forward by the Canadian Foreign Minister Lloyd Axworthy, who requested that the new NATO Strategic Concept emphasize that “nuclear weapons are far less important to Alliance strategy than they were in the 1980s and early 1990s”. He then proposed that the Concept commit the Alliance “to doing more” in the arena of disarmament.⁹⁸ The Strategic Concept that was eventually approved at the NATO Council in Washington in April 1999, however, struck the customary compromise between preserving unscathed the core reference to nuclear deterrence while at the same time gnawing away at it – more or less effectively – by emphasizing the importance of reducing the Alliance’s nuclear arsenal and endorsing disarmament and arms-control proposals. Such a renewed pledge to support arms control, however, was more than matched by the emphasis assigned to the Alliance’s nuclear arsenal, which reaffirmed the centrality of NATO’s nuclear posture by stressing once again that “the nuclear forces of the Allies [...] will continue to fulfil an essential role by ensuring uncertainty in the mind of any aggressor about the nature of the Allies’ response to military aggression” and by providing “the supreme guarantee of the security of the Allies”.⁹⁹ A final paragraph reasserted this precarious balance between two potentially diverging approaches: “The circumstances in which any use of nuclear weapons might have to be contemplated by them are therefore even more remote”.¹⁰⁰

Since 1991, therefore, the Allies have taken a series of steps which reflect the post-Cold War security environment. These include a dramatic reduction of the types and numbers of NATO’s sub-strategic forces including the elimination of all

⁹⁶ Joschka Fischer, *Die rot-grünen Jahre. Deutsche Aussenpolitik vom Kosovokrieg bis zum 11. September*, Kindle ed., Köln, Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2007, position 1444 and 1451; Thomas Maettig, “Tactical Nuclear Weapons in Germany: Time for Withdrawal?”, in *NTI Articles*, 1 March 2008, <http://nti.org/4181A>. Maettig wrote that the proposal was supposedly “badly prepared” and not previously coordinated with other countries.

⁹⁷ Madeleine K. Albright, *Press Conference at NATO Headquarters*, 8 December 1998, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_26018.htm.

⁹⁸ Address by the Honourable Lloyd Axworthy Minister of Foreign Affairs at the meeting of the North Atlantic Council, 8 December 1998, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_26005.htm. For an extensive analysis of this speech see Eric Terzuolo, *NATO and Weapons of Mass Destruction. Regional Alliance, Global Threats*, Milton Park, Routledge, 2006, p. 57 and p. 73-74.

⁹⁹ NATO, *The Alliance’s New Strategic Concept*, cit., point 54.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, point 56.

nuclear artillery and ground-launched short-range nuclear missiles; a significant relaxation of the readiness criteria for nuclear-armed forces; and the termination of standing peacetime nuclear contingency plans. NATO's nuclear forces no longer target any country. Nonetheless, NATO will maintain, at the minimum level consistent with the prevailing security environment, adequate sub-strategic forces based in Europe which will provide an essential link with strategic nuclear forces, reinforcing the transatlantic link. These will consist of dual capable aircraft and a small number of United Kingdom Trident warheads. Sub-strategic nuclear weapons will, however, not be deployed in normal circumstances on surface vessels and attack submarines.¹⁰¹

As if to underscore the continuing importance of the Alliance's nuclear deterrent, in 1999 the US Air Force in Europe started a modernization programme for its Weapons Storage Systems in Europe and in the following years the B-61 gravitational bombs stored in Europe were "modified and equipped with new capabilities".¹⁰²

The difficulty in reconciling aspirations to strengthen arms control and the basic requirements of nuclear deterrence was confirmed the following year. In May 2000 a group of five NATO member states (the informal group of the so-called "NATO 5", which comprised Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Norway), presented a proposal at the Conference on Disarmament. It advocated a number of significant disarmament steps, including "the reduction and ultimate elimination of non-strategic nuclear weapons in the overall nuclear arms reduction negotiations" as well as the creation "in the Conference on Disarmament [of] an ad hoc working group for the exchange of information and views on endeavours towards nuclear disarmament".¹⁰³ By the time the Alliance had completed its long-awaited "Report on Options for Confidence and Security Building Measures, Verification, Non-Proliferation, Arms Control and Disarmament" in December 2000, however, these impulses were once again balanced by the traditional reference to nuclear deterrence. While paying the customary tribute to the changing strategic environment, the "Options" report did not contain any "major revision of NATO nuclear policy", "reiterating that nuclear weapons remained essential to preserving peace".¹⁰⁴

In a way, this systemic oscillation reflects what William Walker writes about with regard to the limits of arms control during the early/mid-1990s – namely, that promoting disarmament meant coming to terms with the centrality of nuclear deterrence, a project that did not come to fruition in the 1990s. Indeed, by the time

¹⁰¹ Steve Andreasen et al., "Building a Safe, Secure, and Credible NATO Nuclear Posture", in *NTI Reports*, January 2018, p. 48, <http://nti.org/2018>.

¹⁰² Hans M. Kristensen, *U.S. Nuclear Weapons in Europe*, cit., p. 20.

¹⁰³ Working paper submitted by Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Norway, complementary to the European Union Common Position, for consideration in Main Committee I and Subsidiary Body 1 (NPT/CONF.2000/MC.I/WP.7), 4 May 2000, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/413519>.

¹⁰⁴ Eric Terzuolo, *NATO and Weapons of Mass Destruction*, cit., p. 59.

some NATO member states had tried to harness the Alliance's strategic posture to the global disarmament trend, the wind was already blowing in the opposite direction.

A clear sign that the times were changing was the slowly grinding halt to the bilateral arms control process between the United States and Russia. In the US there was increasing domestic pressure to continue research on anti-missile defence capabilities, which Russia regarded as a violation of the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty and of the fundamental tenets of strategic stability. Besides this, the Russian Duma had developed second thoughts on the ratification of START II – both because of the US work on missile defence and for the reduction of MIRVed missiles that it envisaged.¹⁰⁵ In March 1997 US President Bill Clinton and Russian President Yeltsin met in Helsinki and reached a compromise that limited US missile-defence projects to regional ones in return for a low ceiling of their strategic arsenals for a future START III treaty, "making it easier for Russia to afford a nuclear arsenal roughly equal in size to that of the U.S."¹⁰⁶ At the end of their meeting they released a joint statement calling for an early ratification of START II in order to begin negotiations on START III immediately afterwards.¹⁰⁷ In September of that year, Secretary of State Albright and Russian Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov signed a protocol and exchanged letters to facilitate the entry into force of START II.¹⁰⁸ As Yeltsin warned Clinton,¹⁰⁹ however, the Kosovo war would make it increasingly difficult for the Duma to ratify START II, which it did not do until April 2000.

While the US–Russian dialogue was slowly grinding to a halt, over the next couple of years any hope of strengthening the global nuclear order was dealt two additional, serious blows. A first turning point came in May 1998, when the Indian and Pakistani governments carried out a series of tests that "consecrated" them as nuclear states. The second came on 13 October 1999, when the US Senate refused to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), with 51 votes against 48 – "marking the first time that it ha[d] defeated a security-related treaty since the Treaty of Versailles nearly 80 years" before.¹¹⁰ The defeat of the Treaty, writes

¹⁰⁵ Bill Clinton, *My Life*, London, Arrow Books, 2005, p. 750.

¹⁰⁶ Strobe Talbott, *The Russia Hand. A Memoir of Presidential Diplomacy*, New York, Random House, 2002, p. 378. Clinton specifies that at Helsinki the two governments agreed to a bracket of "between 2,000 [and] 2,500 warheads" (Bill Clinton, *My Life*, cit., p. 750-752, at p. 751).

¹⁰⁷ Joint Statement on Parameters on Future Reductions in Nuclear Forces, 21 March 1997, <https://fas.org/nuke/control/start2/text/helsinkistate.htm>.

¹⁰⁸ Protocol to the Treaty between the United States of America and the Russian Federation on Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms of January 3, 1993, 26 September 1997, <https://fas.org/nuke/control/start2/text/protocol.htm>.

¹⁰⁹ "Memorandum of Telephone Conversation: Telephone Conversation with Russian President Yeltsin", 24 March 1998, in *DNSA*, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu//dc.html?doc=4950575-Document-16-Memorandum-of-Telephone-Conversation>.

¹¹⁰ Craig Cerniello, "Senate Rejects Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty; Clinton Vows to Continue Moratorium", in *Arms Control Today*, Vol. 29, No. 6 (September/October 1999), p. 26-29, at p. 26, <https://www.armscontrol.org/node/532>.

William Walker, "signaled that something fundamental was happening to US nuclear policy".¹¹¹

2.2.2 *The last great nuclear debate, 2008-2012*

The second moment at which arms control and nuclear disarmament moved once again to the centre of NATO's attention came between 2007 and 2012. In the early years of the new century the US and the rest of the world focused on the shock of 9/11, on the "Global War on Terror" and on the US-led invasion of Iraq – and the Atlantic Alliance was forced to concentrate on these momentous issues. The 2003 vitriolic debate about the US decision to invade Iraq, moreover, badly shattered the cohesion of NATO, making its future seem all the more uncertain.¹¹² In its aftermath every member felt it necessary to preserve the unity of the Alliance, carefully avoiding some of the most divisive topics on its agenda.

At the same time, the nuclear order suffered a series of setbacks that confirmed the negative trend emerging at the end of the previous decade. In less than four years between 2002 and 2006 the compromise solution that had temporarily settled the North Korean crisis in 1994 collapsed entirely, and by 2006 the North Korean government had carried out its first nuclear test. Fears of unrestrained nuclear proliferation were reinforced in 2003 by the revelation of Iran's enrichment activities. The discovery led to an IAEA resolution calling on the Iranian government to stop its enrichment and reprocessing related activities,¹¹³ which opened up a new crisis that deteriorated over the following years. Simultaneously, the architecture of the bilateral arms-control process between Russia and the United States entered into a more complicated phase. The signature of the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT) in May 2002 seemed to relaunch the bilateral dialogue by committing the two governments to further cut their strategic arsenals to a bracket of between 1,700 and 2,200 operational warheads – even if the Treaty was also criticized for its complete absence of verification provisions. Barely two weeks after its signature, however, the old tenets of strategic stability were dealt a serious blow when the George W. Bush administration announced that it would withdraw from the ABM Treaty in June. From then on, the US intention to develop its missile-defence capacities introduced another variable into the delicate strategic balance between the two countries, making further progress in arms control more difficult. A few days after the US announcement, as a matter of fact, the Russian Duma withdrew its previous ratification of the START II Treaty.

Caught between the post-9/11 turmoil and these structural changes in the nuclear order, NATO focused mostly on the former and took a very cautious

¹¹¹ William Walker, *A Perpetual Menace*, cit., p. 139.

¹¹² Eric Terzuolo, *NATO and Weapons of Mass Destruction*, cit., p. 117-120.

¹¹³ International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), *Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, Resolution adopted by the Board on 12 September 2003, <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/gov2003-69.pdf>.

attitude towards the latter. Throughout the two George W. Bush administrations the Alliance paid increasing attention to ballistic-missile defence: in 2002 NATO launched a feasibility study for a theatre defence system against ballistic missiles which was concluded in 2006, and at the Bucharest Summit in 2008 it tasked the Council to “develop options for a comprehensive missile defence architecture to extend coverage to all Allied territory”, in view of any future decision.¹¹⁴ As for non-proliferation, the North Atlantic Council repeatedly stated its commitment to reinforce the non-proliferation regime, as it did at its 2004 session in Istanbul, but it did not manage to achieve any coordination of the positions among the member states before the 2005 NPT Review Conference.¹¹⁵ A similarly cautious interest was displayed towards the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) launched by the Bush administration in May 2003: the NATO Council, for instance, gave it rather qualified, and carefully worded, support at its December meeting.¹¹⁶ An insider observer noted a few years later that the Alliance’s efforts to promote non-proliferation could be considered as being mostly limited to useful exchanges of views but with “little measurable follow-up in terms of concrete action”, even if the Alliance continued to express a significant degree of support for the NPT.¹¹⁷

By early 2007, however, a renewed impulse to relaunch arms control and nuclear disarmament came from the publication of a *Wall Street Journal* editorial by four of the most well-known figures of the US foreign-policy establishment – former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, former Secretary of Defense William Perry, former Secretary of State George Shultz and former Senator Sam Nunn. The article called for the nuclear-weapons states to take radical steps towards nuclear disarmament, and to this end it listed a number of detailed measures that would help move in that direction – including the eventual removal of tactical nuclear weapons from Europe.¹¹⁸ After these “four horsemen” followed up with a second editorial a year later, similar articles appeared across Europe, with some key figures from Germany – “former chancellor Helmut Schmidt, former foreign minister

¹¹⁴ NATO, *Bucharest Summit Declaration*, issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Bucharest on 3 April 2008, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_8443.htm. See also David S. Yost, *NATO's Balancing Act*, Washington, United States Institute of Peace Press, 2014, p. 98-99.

¹¹⁵ Joseph F. Pilat and David S. Yost, “Introduction: NATO and the Future of the NPT”, in Joseph F. Pilat and David S. Yost (eds), “NATO and the Future of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty”, cit., p. 7-18 at 14.

¹¹⁶ Eric Terzuolo, *NATO and Weapons of Mass Destruction*, cit., p. 153. The PSI was launched by the Bush administration as “a voluntary initiative [...] toward enhancing individual and collective partner nations’ capabilities to [...] deal with a fast-changing proliferation threat environment”. It particularly aims to stop illegal trafficking of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and their delivery means.

¹¹⁷ Roberto Zadra, “Nuclear Proliferation and NATO Policy and Posture”, in Joseph F. Pilat and David S. Yost (eds), “NATO and the Future of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty”, cit., p. 106-114, at p. 107.

¹¹⁸ George P. Shultz et al., “A World Free of Nuclear Weapons”, in *The Wall Street Journal*, 4 January 2007, p. A15, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB116787515251566636>; and “Toward a Nuclear-Free World”, in *The Wall Street Journal*, 15 January 2008, p. A13, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB120036422673589947>. On the history of the initiative, see Philip Taubman, *The Partnership. Five Cold Warriors and their Quest to Ban the Bomb*, New York, Harper, 2012.

Hans-Dietrich Genscher, former president Richard von Weizsäcker and retired minister of state Egon Bahr" – in the forefront.¹¹⁹ Most importantly, the renewed attention towards nuclear disarmament was further encouraged by a speech given in Prague in April 2009 by the new US President, Barack Obama, openly declaring "America's commitment to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons".¹²⁰

This renewed ferment clearly had an impact on the Alliance. A number of member states became particularly active in requesting that NATO follow the trend and reinforce its role in the promotion of arms control. At the Bucharest Summit, in April 2008, the North Atlantic Council "took note" of a report prepared "on raising NATO's profile" in the field of arms control. The Council reiterated its commitment at the Strasbourg/Kehl Summit in 2009 by adding that the Alliance aimed at "achieving a higher level of public awareness of NATO's contribution in these fields".¹²¹ Another major push in this direction came in October 2009 with the formation of a new government in Germany, based on a coalition between the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union and the Free Democratic Party, which was firmly committed to promoting the cause of arms control.¹²² The new German Foreign Minister, Guido Westerwelle, actively campaigned for NATO to strengthen its arms-control role.¹²³ After calling for the withdrawal of NATO tactical weapons at the Munich Security Conference in February 2010, he coordinated with the governments of Belgium, the Netherlands, Norway and Luxembourg, who sent a joint letter to the NATO Secretary General "asking him to put the withdrawal on the agenda of the informal NATO meeting of the foreign affairs ministers in Tallinn, Estonia, in April 2010".¹²⁴ A similar proposal was put forward by the Polish and Swedish Foreign Ministers, Radek Sikorski and Carl Bildt, in a letter to the New

¹¹⁹ Götz Neuneck, "European and German Perspectives", in Tom Nichols, Douglas Stuart and Jeffrey D. McCausland, *Tactical Nuclear Weapons and NATO*, Carlisle Barracks, US Army War College, 2012, p. 257-278, at p. 266, <https://www.hsdl.org/?abstract&did=706112>.

¹²⁰ Remarks by President Barack Obama in Prague as Delivered, 5 April 2009, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-barack-obama-prague-delivered>. President Jimmy Carter had made a similar pledge but in a somewhat more nuanced way in a speech to the Thirty Second Session of the UN General Assembly in October 1977: <https://undocs.org/en/A/32/PV.18>.

¹²¹ NATO, *Strasbourg / Kehl Summit Declaration*, Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Strasbourg / Kehl, 4 April 2009, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_52837.htm. See also David Yost, "Introduction: Special Issue on NATO and Deterrence", in *Strategic Insights*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (September 2009), <https://www.hsdl.org/?abstract&did=791495>.

¹²² Franklin Miller, George Robertson and Kori Schake, "Germany Opens Pandora's Box", in *CER Briefing Notes*, February 2010, <https://www.cer.eu/publications/archive/briefing-note/2010/germany-opens-pandoras-box>.

¹²³ The US State Department immediately picked up on the chance that the new FM might ask for the withdrawal of US nuclear weapons: Email from Sidney Blumenthal to Hillary Clinton, "H: New Memo on New German Foreign Minister and Other German Matters", 30 September 2009, in *Hillary Clinton Email Archive*, <https://wikileaks.org/clinton-emails/emailid/7438>.

¹²⁴ Götz Neuneck, "European and German Perspectives", cit., p. 267.

York Times on 10 February.¹²⁵

At the Tallinn meeting the proposal was discussed again, but US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton basically prevented any drastic change in the Alliance's strategic posture by convincing the Council to approve a formula that affirmed "that there would [be] no unilateral action by any member to alter the status quo" and that any reductions of these weapons should be connected to a similar reduction of Russian non-strategic nuclear weapons.¹²⁶ Any further discussion of the balance between arms control and deterrence was therefore postponed to the drafting of the new Strategic Concept that the Alliance was going to discuss at its December meeting in Lisbon.

A similar attitude was also confirmed by the group of experts that had been appointed by Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen after the Kehl/Strasbourg meeting to provide some guidance on the drafting of the new Strategic Concept. When their report was released, on 17 May 2010, the experts concluded that

1. As long as nuclear weapons exist, NATO should continue to maintain secure and reliable nuclear forces, [...] at the minimum level required by the prevailing security environment. Any change in this policy [...] should be made, as with other major decisions, by the Alliance as a whole.
2. NATO should invite an ongoing dialogue with Russia on nuclear perceptions, concepts, doctrines, and transparency, and should convene a Special Consultative Group in order to inform and coordinate its internal dialogue about nuclear-related issues.¹²⁷

Such a dialogue with Russia "should help set the stage for the further reduction and possible eventual elimination of the entire class of sub-strategic nuclear weapons".¹²⁸

¹²⁵ Carl Bildt and Radek Sikorski, "Next, the Tactical Nukes", in *The New York Times*, 1 February 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/02/opinion/02iht-edbildt.html>.

¹²⁶ Nick Childs, "Europe, NATO's Tactical Nuclear Conundrum, and Public Debate: Be Careful What You Wish For" p. 308, in Tom Nichols, Douglas Stuart and Jeffrey D. McCausland, *Tactical Nuclear Weapons and NATO*, Carlisle Barracks, US Army War College, 2012, p. 301-320, at p. 309, <https://www.hsdl.org/?abstract&did=706112>. See also Hans M. Kristensen, "Non-Strategic Nuclear Weapons", in *FAS Special Reports*, No. 3 (May 2012), p. 35, https://fas.org/_docs/Non_Strategic_Nuclear_Weapons.pdf; and Jeffrey A. Larsen, "The Role of Non-Strategic Nuclear Weapons: An American Perspective", in Tom Nichols, Douglas Stuart and Jeffrey D. McCausland, *Tactical Nuclear Weapons and NATO*, Carlisle Barracks, US Army War College, 2012, p. 327-358, at p. 345, <https://www.hsdl.org/?abstract&did=706112>; NATO, *Ministers Discuss Future of NATO's Nuclear Policy and Prospects for Missile Defence*, 23 April 2010, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_62852.htm.

¹²⁷ NATO, *NATO 2020: Assured Security; Dynamic Engagement. Analysis and Recommendations of the Group of Experts on a New Strategic Concept for NATO*, 17 May 2010, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_63654.htm.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 43. Kristensen highlights the fact that the report actually "went beyond the NPR [of the Obama administration], which did not explicitly endorse the elimination of non-strategic nuclear weapons". See Hans M. Kristensen, "Non-Strategic Nuclear Weapons", cit. p. 36.

In the following months these conflicting visions continued to be discussed by the member states and proved very difficult to reconcile. On the one hand, the pressure to go ahead and reinforce the Alliance's arms-control policy was strengthened by the conclusion of the US–Russian New START Treaty in April 2010: in his speech at the signing ceremony, President Obama called for further future reductions of both strategic and *tactical* weapons.¹²⁹ The results of the First UN Nuclear Security Summit (April 2010) and of the Review Conference of the NPT (May 2010) also enhanced the salience of nuclear disarmament: the final document of the NPT Review Conference, in particular, asked the nuclear-weapon states to “address the question of all nuclear weapons regardless of their type or their location as an integral part of the general nuclear disarmament process”.¹³⁰ The Obama administration also altered the previous approach to missile defence by adopting a more flexible plan, the European Phased Adaptive Approach, and by cancelling the deployment of the equipment previously scheduled to be introduced in Poland and the Czech Republic. While Russia welcomed the new administration's policies, however, the emphasis on missile defence continued to raise some eyebrows among NATO members.¹³¹ On the eve of the Lisbon Summit, there were still wide discrepancies among the allies' positions, with France remaining sceptical about “the merits of missile defence, while the Germans [saw] it as a way of lessening reliance on nuclear weapons”.¹³²

The outcome of this extended debate was the New Strategic Concept that was eventually approved by the Atlantic Council at its Lisbon meeting in December 2010. The new Concept did go further than any previous NATO document in declaring that the Alliance was committed to “create the conditions for a world without nuclear weapons in accordance with the goals of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty”.¹³³ It also added that the Alliance, after having “dramatically reduced the number of nuclear weapons stationed in Europe and [its] reliance on nuclear weapons in NATO strategy [...] will seek to create the conditions for further reductions in the future”¹³⁴ – albeit linking such steps, as David Yost has pointed out, to a more forthcoming attitude from Russia on this matter.¹³⁵ Such an

¹²⁹ The Treaty set a ceiling of 700 deployed strategic missiles and bombers, of 800 deployed and non-deployed ones, and of 1,550 operational warheads.

¹³⁰ Final Document of the 2010 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT/CONF.2010/50, Vol. I), New York, 2010, p. 21, [https://undocs.org/NPT/CONF.2010/50\(vol.i\)](https://undocs.org/NPT/CONF.2010/50(vol.i)). See also Götz Neuneck, “European and German Perspectives”, *cit.*, p. 258.

¹³¹ David S. Yost, *NATO's Balancing Act*, *cit.*, p. 100.

¹³² Ian Traynor, “Germany and France in Nuclear Weapons Dispute Ahead of NATO Summit”, in *The Guardian*, 18 November 2010, <https://gu.com/p/2y7kc>.

¹³³ NATO, *Active Engagement, Modern Defence. Strategic Concept for the Defence and Security of the Members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization*, Adopted by Heads of State and Government at the NATO Summit in Lisbon 19-20 November 2010, p. 23, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_82705.htm.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

¹³⁵ David S. Yost, *NATO's Balancing Act*, *cit.*, p. 326. A similar argument in Hans Kristensen, “10 NATO Countries Want More Transparency for Non-Strategic Nuclear Weapons”, in *FAS Strategic Security*

explicit linkage, Hans Kristensen wrote, was perceived as replacing the previous US unilateral reductions of its tactical nuclear weapons (TNW) "with a much more cautious and bureaucratic arms control approach that essentially hands over the initiative to the Kremlin by conditioning further U.S. reductions in Europe on Russian agreement to reduce its posture".¹³⁶

At the same time the New Strategic Concept formally declared NATO to be "a nuclear Alliance", a phrase that, surprisingly, had never been used before – not even at the height of the Cold War. No wonder that there are still wide discrepancies among the many interpretations of this ambiguity: one scholar wrote at the time that a "close reading of the Lisbon documents reveals that the New Strategic Concept facilitates the complete withdrawal of NSNWs" (non-strategic nuclear weapons) – hence, marking a significant step forward in the field of arms control.¹³⁷ Writing ten years later, two other scholars reached almost opposite conclusions on this point: Jeffrey Larsen argued that the document's "change in verbiage, while not publicly highlighted by US or Alliance leaders, was a significant departure from the standard post-Cold War deterrence phraseology and opened the door to a potential future Alliance decision to remove the remaining US warheads located in Europe".¹³⁸ Kjølvs Egeland, on the other hand, claimed that the surprising result of the Strategic Concept was its further embedding of nuclear deterrence in the very identity of NATO, making any transformation of its strategic posture and of its reliance on nuclear weapons all the more difficult.¹³⁹ As yet another observer noted, the document actually postponed, rather than resolved, the differences between the Allies, by asking for a Deterrence and Defence Posture Review (DDPR) to further discuss this crucial issue.¹⁴⁰

Over the next two years, as the DDPR got under way, the Alliance went through an unprecedented debate about what role it should play in the promotion of arms control. The Lisbon NATO Council had "agreed to establish a Committee to provide advice on WMD control and disarmament" in order to support the review process. Setting up the committee, however, turned out to be a rather complicated task, as some of the Allies wanted the new body to become a permanent structure while

Blog, 24 April 2011, <https://fas.org/blogs/security/2011/04/natoproposal>.

¹³⁶ Hans M. Kristensen, "Non-Strategic Nuclear Weapons", cit., p. 41.

¹³⁷ Trine Flockhart, "Nuclear Posture, Missile Defence and Arms Control – Towards Gradual but Fundamental Change", in Jens Ringsmose and Sten Rynning (eds), "NATO's New Strategic Concept: A Comprehensive Assessment", in *DIIS Reports*, No. 2011:02 (2011), p. 155-164, at p. 163, <https://www.diis.dk/node/16704>.

¹³⁸ Jeffrey A. Larsen, "NATO Nuclear Adaptation Since 2014: The Return of Deterrence and Renewed Alliance Discomfort", in *Journal of Transatlantic Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (June 2019), p. 174-193, at p. 181.

¹³⁹ Kjølvs Egeland, "Spreading the Burden: How NATO Became a 'Nuclear' Alliance", in *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, Vol. 31, No.1 (2020), p. 143-167.

¹⁴⁰ Simon Lunn, "NATO Nuclear Policy: Reflections on Lisbon and Looking Ahead to the DDPR", in Steve Andreasen and Isabelle Williams (eds), "Reducing Nuclear Risks in Europe. A Framework for Action", in *NTI Reports*, 2011, p. 24-51, at p. 25, <http://nti.org/3982A>.

other ones – France, in particular – regarded its task as being only temporary.¹⁴¹

Some of the Allies insisted at the same time in promoting other initiatives that would enhance NATO's arms-control profile: on 14 April 2011, the governments of Poland, Norway, Germany and the Netherlands presented a "non-paper" that called for additional transparency regarding the command and control arrangements and the operational status of NATO's theatre nuclear weapons.¹⁴² The debate picked up speed in the US as well: in February 2011 the Obama administration decided to promote an internal process to address the issue of TNW and "examine the kinds of verification measures that would be necessary to monitor limits on them".¹⁴³ Shortly afterwards, former Senator Sam Nunn published an influential essay in which he explicitly advocated the removal of all US TNW from Europe.¹⁴⁴

In the summer of 2011 NATO intensified its work on the Deterrence and Defence Posture Review on the basis of four "scoping papers", which laid the groundwork for a more intense round of discussions in the following autumn.¹⁴⁵ The result of a year and a half of incessant debating was, unsurprisingly, a number of compromises to preserve the cohesion of the Alliance. In May 2012, in Chicago, the North Atlantic Council approved the new DDPR, which – like most of its predecessors, and perhaps inevitably – continued to walk a thin line between encouraging arms control and disarmament and preserving the fundamental role of deterrence. Indeed, together with missile defence and conventional forces, nuclear deterrence and arms control were clearly identified as the essential pillars on which NATO's security should be built.¹⁴⁶ The Council reiterated the Alliance's commitment to a further reduction of its TNW, but made any such step conditional on Russian reciprocal action.¹⁴⁷ Nor did the decision to endorse the development of territorial missile defence at the regional level reduce, or even completely replace, the salience of nuclear deterrence as some allies might have expected.¹⁴⁸ As one anonymous analyst noted, "None of

¹⁴¹ David S. Yost, *NATO's Balancing Act*, cit., p. 314-315.

¹⁴² Poland, Germany, Norway and the Netherlands, *Non-Paper on Increasing Transparency and Confidence with Regard to Tactical Nuclear Weapons in Europe*, 14 April 2011, <https://fas.org/programs/ssp/nukes/nuclearweapons/nato-nonpaper041411.pdf>.

¹⁴³ Steven Pifer "Arms Control Options for Non-Strategic Nuclear Weapons", in Tom Nichols, Douglas Stuart and Jeffrey D. McCausland, *Tactical Nuclear Weapons and NATO*, Carlisle Barracks, US Army War College, 2012, p. 411-436, at p. 415, <https://www.hsdl.org/?abstract&did=706112>.

¹⁴⁴ Sam Nunn, "The Race Between Cooperation and Catastrophe", in Steve Andreasen and Isabelle Williams (eds), "Reducing Nuclear Risks in Europe. A Framework for Action", in *NTI Reports*, 2011, p. 1-18, <http://nti.org/3986A>.

¹⁴⁵ Simon Lunn and Ian Kearns, "NATO's Deterrence and Defence Posture Review. A Status Report", in *ELN NATO Policy Briefs*, No. 1 (February 2012), p. 4, <https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/?p=1728>.

¹⁴⁶ Gary Schaub, *Adjusting the Architecture. Arms Control, Disarmament, and Non-Proliferation in NATO*, Copenhagen, Centre for Military Studies-University of Copenhagen, October 2013, p. 2, <https://cms.polsci.ku.dk/english/publications/adjusting>.

¹⁴⁷ Steven Pifer, "Bilateral and Multilateral Nuclear Arms Reductions (Start/Global Disarmament)", in Joseph F. Pilat and Nathan E. Busch (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Nuclear Proliferation and Policy*, London/New York, Routledge, 2015, p. 289-305, at p. 298.

¹⁴⁸ Jacek Durkalec, *The 2018 U.S. Nuclear Posture Review, NATO's Brussels Summit and Beyond*,

the contentious issues – over the need to maintain US nuclear forces in Europe, on the steps needed to sustain these forces and on declaratory policy – appeared ripe for resolution in Chicago.”¹⁴⁹

In Chicago the Allies also agreed “to establish a committee as a consultative and advisory forum” on arms control, whose exact mandate and name would be defined by the following North Atlantic Council on December.¹⁵⁰ In February 2013, after additional rounds of uneasy negotiations, the Alliance agreed to set up a Special Advisory and Consultative Arms Control, Disarmament and Non Proliferation Committee *without* a firm decision about its duration – a solution which, as David Yost aptly noted, was likely to make the new institution “a de facto permanent body”.¹⁵¹ As other analysts also remarked, the creation of this committee “was contentious and has remained so with different views on its appropriateness, its role and even on its duration”.¹⁵² A four-year debate, at a time when there had been a sudden upsurge of strong optimistic expectations for some major transformations, thus ended up introducing some important innovations but, not surprisingly, without altering the status of deterrence as the bedrock of NATO strategy.

Since the end of the 2010-2013 debate – according to Jeffrey Larsen, Jacek Durkalec and others – NATO has suffered from a serious nuclear identity crisis, as its previous coherence about the importance of nuclear deterrence has continued to erode. Many Allies expected to further reduce its importance and increase the Alliance’s arms-control profile, while others steadily opposed any further changes in this direction. This uneasy compromise created a growing sense of uncertainty, which became all the more evident in 2014 after Russia’s annexation of Crimea and its invasion of Ukraine, as well as the first US accusation of a Russian violation of the INF Treaty.¹⁵³ Since then, and all the more so with the inauguration of the Trump administration in 2017, the Alliance has been forced to adapt its posture to a constant deterioration of the strategic landscape. Obviously, this has had a serious impact on many of the previous assumptions about the continuation of any arms-control dialogue with Russia. In the years after 2014 there has been a cautious but steady alteration of the previous uneasy compromise between the

Livermore, Center for Global Security Research-Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, June 2018. p. 6, <https://cgsl.llnl.gov/content/assets/docs/NPR2018BOOKdigital.pdf>.

¹⁴⁹ David S. Yost, “NATO’s Deterrence and Defense Posture after the Chicago Summit. A Report on a Workshop in Rome”, in *NDC Workshop Reports*, October 2012, p. 5, <https://www.ndc.nato.int/download/downloads.php?icode=356>.

¹⁵⁰ David S. Yost, *NATO’s Balancing Act*, cit., p. 315.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Simon Lunn and Ian Kearns, “NATO’s Deterrence and Defence Posture Review. A Status Report”, cit., p. 11.

¹⁵³ The US State Department first denounced the violation in the July 2014 Compliance Report. See: *Adherence to and Compliance with Arms Control, Nonproliferation, and Disarmament Agreements and Commitments*, July 2014 <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/230108.pdf>. See also Dániel Bartha and Anna Péczeli, “Nuclear Arms Control: Implications from the Crisis in Ukraine”, in *NDC Research Papers*, No. 108 (February 2015), <https://www.ndc.nato.int/download/downloads.php?icode=438>.

traditional nuclear posture and the ambition to strengthen arms control, making it “increasingly difficult for the NATO allies to balance nuclear deterrence with disarmament aspirations”.¹⁵⁴ The 2016 North Atlantic Summit in Warsaw, in particular, marked something of a U-turn in the language of its final communiqué, re-emphasizing the importance of deterrence in terms that clearly indicated that there was a new level of awareness and cohesion among the Alliance members.¹⁵⁵ This renewed attention to deterrence has not implied a total reversal of the previous inclination to balance its salience with a reiterated commitment to arms control. Even in this rather unpromising environment there were efforts to reinforce the Alliance’s arms-control profile, as shown by the 2017 decision to merge the Arms Control and Coordination Section with the WMD (weapons of mass destruction) Nonproliferation Centre. Further scepticism about the new emphasis on deterrence can also be detected in the mixed reception with which some NATO members greeted the Trump administration’s 2018 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR). As Jacek Durkalec has noted, there were some “stark differences” between the US posture as defined by the NPR and the Allies’ position: some “European observers” expressed their uneasiness about the very limited role assigned to arms control in the document.¹⁵⁶ Nevertheless, by 2019 the Alliance unanimously decided to support the US decision to abandon the INF Treaty as a result of the Russian violations, even if the Allies explicitly reaffirmed their intention to remain “firmly committed to the preservation of effective international arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation”.¹⁵⁷

NATO’s firm commitment to deterrence has also shaped its hostile rejection – so far – of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW). After the 2010 NPT Review Conference, a number of states began to promote a series of conferences on the Humanitarian Impact of Nuclear Weapons, which gradually gained momentum as their debate moved to an open-ended working group of the UN General Assembly. By the end of 2016 the initiative gained additional salience as the UN General Assembly decided to convene negotiations for a nuclear-weapons-ban treaty. At about the same time, the Alliance began to take a critical stance towards the new project. In October 2016 the US mission to NATO made clear its opposition to the treaty by circulating a non-paper in which it “strongly encourage[d]” its allies to vote against even starting any negotiations on a ban treaty inside the UN First Committee.¹⁵⁸ When the Treaty was approved by 122 states at

¹⁵⁴ Jacek Durkalec, *The 2018 U.S. Nuclear Posture Review, NATO’s Brussels Summit and Beyond*, cit., p. 7.

¹⁵⁵ Jeffrey A. Larsen, “NATO Nuclear Adaptation Since 2014”, cit., p. 185-186; Jacek Durkalec, “NATO Nuclear Adaptation at the Warsaw Summit”, in Karsten Friis (ed.), *NATO and Collective Defence in the 21st Century. An Assessment of the Warsaw Summit*, London/New York, Routledge, 2017, p. 41-51.

¹⁵⁶ Jacek Durkalec, *The 2018 U.S. Nuclear Posture Review, NATO’s Brussels Summit and Beyond*, cit., p. 8, 21.

¹⁵⁷ NATO, *NATO and the INF Treaty*, 2 August 2019, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_166100.htm.

¹⁵⁸ United States Mission to NATO, *United States Non-Paper: Defense Impacts of Potential United Nations General Assembly Nuclear Weapons Ban Treaty (AC/333-N(2016)0029 (INV))*, 17 October

the UN General Assembly in July 2017, all the NATO members abstained. The NATO Council released a statement on 20 September 2017, in which it criticized it as being "at odds with the existing non-proliferation and disarmament architecture" and risking undermining the NPT. The Council restated the commitment to "bolster deterrence as a core element of our collective defence".¹⁵⁹ Similarly, as soon as fifty countries completed the Treaty's ratification process in October 2020, making inevitable its entry into force in January 2021, the NATO Council released another statement in December 2020 collectively reiterating its "opposition to this treaty, as it does not reflect the increasingly challenging international security environment and is at odds with the existing non-proliferation and disarmament architecture".¹⁶⁰

Conclusions

Three conclusions can be drawn from this survey of the complex relationship between NATO and arms control. The first is that a defensive Alliance that very early on adopted the basic tenets of nuclear deterrence and made them the central pillar of its strategy has gradually learned to combine them with the logic of arms control. The experience of détente during the second part of the Cold War, as well as the relaxation of tensions in the early post-Cold War years, showed the NATO Allies that it was possible to retain their reliance on nuclear weapons and to balance it with the promotion of a dialogue with the Soviet Union first, and subsequently with Russia. To be sure, this has never been an easy or smooth process, as reconciling these two approaches required tense negotiations and constant adaptations to shifting strategic priorities. The structural imbalance in the Alliance between the US and Europe has made this adaptation even more contentious and troublesome.

The second conclusion takes the form of a paradox often highlighted in the scholarly literature – namely, that by helping to forge a consensus inside the Western bloc, NATO has played an important role in shaping the history of the global nuclear order despite the fact that the Alliance as such has never been a formal party to an arms-control treaty. By serving as a clearing house for the somewhat heated exchanges among the Allies, it has helped them manage their often sharply divergent views. And as we have seen, some scholars go even further and add that by its very existence NATO has played a role in strengthening the non-proliferation regime by restraining the nuclear impulses of some European countries.¹⁶¹

2016, https://www.icanw.org/us_pressured_nato_states_to_vote_no_to_a_ban.

¹⁵⁹ North Atlantic Council, *Statement on the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons*, 20 September 2017, https://www.nato.int/cps/ua/natohq/news_146954.htm.

¹⁶⁰ North Atlantic Council, *Statement as the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons Enters Into Force*, 15 December 2020, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_180087.htm.

¹⁶¹ Alexandre Debs and Nuno P. Monteiro, "NATO and Nuclear Proliferation, 1949–1968", cit.; Bruno Tertrais, "NATO and the Non-Proliferation Regime", cit., p. 93; Oliver Bange, "NATO as a Frame Work for Nuclear Nonproliferation: The West German Case, 1954-2008", p. 381.

Both these conclusions, however, require some additional qualifications. First of all, the consultation process among the Allies has never been a debate among equals. It has systematically been shaped and directed by the hegemonic position of the US, which has often used NATO as a crucial tool to craft agreement supporting its own positions. There have also been a number of instances, however, in which the Alliance has allowed the member states to make their voices heard and play a limited role in influencing the outcome of the debate. To the extent that there ever was a multilateral forum in which arms-control positions were forged, it has been the Atlantic Alliance – even if the extent of this multilateralism should not be exaggerated. The second proviso is that this slanted multilateral consultation seems to have worked better during the Cold War than afterwards. For most of the Cold War the reduction of tension through arms control proved to be compatible with, and indeed often essential to, the retention of an effective deterrent posture. After the end of the Cold War, however, the arms-control aspirations of some member countries moved increasingly in the direction of actual disarmament measures, and the tension between the two approaches became more conspicuous. In the aftermath of the bipolar confrontation, in other words, the reconciliation of the Alliance's strategic posture with its arms-control profile turned out to be more contentious than before.

As for the argument that NATO actually did prevent more widespread national proliferation inside the Western bloc through its unique mix of extended deterrence, nuclear-planning consultation and non-proliferation norms, this seems to present a similar problem. The fragile compromise *may* have helped prevent further proliferation at the height of the Cold War, even if some scholars point out that the record of its impact is indeed a rather mixed one.¹⁶² But *after* the end of the Cold War the compromise seems to have become even more fragile, as the continuous salience of extended deterrence – reduced as it may be – is increasingly called into question, often by countries such as Germany that supposedly lay at the receiving end of the US nuclear guarantee. The entry into force in 2021 of the TPNW will further exacerbate this underlying tension.

The third, and final, conclusion stems from the observation of such growing difficulty in reconciling the twin logics of deterrence and arms control after the end of the Cold War: even at a time when the importance of nuclear deterrence appears to be receding, and despite the many conspicuous cuts in the size of its nuclear weaponry, NATO has remained deeply committed to it. Such an attachment has been all the more remarkable when NATO was called upon to face a number of very different non-nuclear challenges, from out-of-area missions in the Balkans or in Afghanistan to its process of eastward enlargement. It needs, therefore, to be further investigated in the light of what William Walker writes about the "embeddedness of nuclear weaponry in national and international contexts":

¹⁶² Alexandre Debs and Nuno P. Monteiro, "NATO and Nuclear Proliferation, 1949–1968", cit.

The anchors of nuclear weaponry are to be found more within states than in their external relations – in the preoccupation with identity, in vested interests, in entrenched loyalties and bureaucratic processes, in material “facts on the grounds” and weapon succession processes, in cultures of conformity and in factional struggles among other things.¹⁶³

In the current strategic environment, such an embeddedness is unlikely to be questioned any further by the Alliance for quite some time. Growing concerns about Russian foreign policy after the Ukrainian crisis seem to have reversed the previous trend towards the promotion and the reinforcement of collaborative measures in the field of international security. As a consequence, the space for new arms-control initiatives seems to have dramatically shrunk at a time when it would seem to be particularly needed. The 2019 US withdrawal from the INF agreement, inevitable as it may have been because of the protracted Russian violations, is a clear symbol of the challenges that lie ahead to any attempt to strengthen the current nuclear order and to prevent its further unravelling.¹⁶⁴ And although it might be crucial for NATO, the deterioration of the bilateral US–Russian relationship is just one of the many problems facing the international nuclear order.¹⁶⁵ The current crisis provoked by the Covid-19 pandemic, moreover, is a powerful reminder that there is also a profound need to reconsider some of the key assumptions on which governments think about their security – and about the role they want to keep envisaging for military force in a world where, in comparison with past experience, severe threats can come from a variety of very different sources.¹⁶⁶

Updated 15 January 2021

¹⁶³ William Walker, *On Nuclear Embeddedness and (Ir)Reversibility. A Working Paper*, Princeton, Program on Science and Global Security, Princeton University, February 2020, p. 40, <https://sgs.princeton.edu/pdf/walker-2020.pdf>.

¹⁶⁴ Linton F. Brooks, “The End of Arms Control?”, in *Daedalus*, Vol. 149, No. 2 (Spring 2020), p. 84-100, https://doi.org/10.1162/daed_a_01791; and Steven E. Miller, “A Nuclear World Transformed: The Rise of Multilateral Disorder”, in *Daedalus*, Vol. 149, No. 2 (Spring 2020), p. 17-36, https://doi.org/10.1162/daed_a_01787; Steven E. Miller, Robert Legvold and Lawrence Freedman, *Meeting the Challenges of the New Nuclear Age: Nuclear Weapons in a Changing Global Order*, Cambridge, American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2019, p. 28-61, <https://www.amacad.org/node/31099>.

¹⁶⁵ Steven E. Miller, “A Nuclear World Transformed”, cit., p. 20.

¹⁶⁶ Daryl G. Kimball, “Pandemic Reveals Misplaced Priorities”, in *Arms Control Today*, Vol. 50, No. 3 (April 2020), p. 3, <https://www.armscontrol.org/node/11503>.

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