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## **Part I**

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# **THE EVOLUTION OF THE ALLIANCE**

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## NATO's Radical Response to the Nuclear Revolution

Francis J. Gavin

In the seventh decade since the United States, Canada, and their West European allies negotiated and signed a peacetime military alliance, what is its historical legacy? Broadly speaking, there are two ways to think about the North Atlantic Treaty and the institution it engendered, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

The first view—the one I would suggest is the conventional wisdom—sees NATO as a fairly orthodox and benign organization. It emerged to deal with the looming specter of Soviet expansion that threatened a weak, disorganized, and embittered Western Europe struggling to find its bearings after World War II. Led but not dominated by the United States, NATO succeeded by creating a largely defensive strategy that deterred but did not threaten the Soviet Union. In the process, it served as a vehicle to lessen and eventually eliminate long-held intra-European tensions by focusing on cooperation and consensus. Its success in promoting European security led NATO, despite predictions to the contrary, not only to survive the end of the Cold War but to expand both its membership and its mission over the past three decades.<sup>1</sup>

There is much truth in this view. Building upon and expanding the March 1948 Brussels Treaty signed by Great Britain, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg, the original signatories to the 1949 treaty, while recognizing its boldness, did not see it as a revolutionary act. Few if

any believed NATO was more than a political association to help pool and coordinate their collective resources while generating a mechanism to distribute military aid from the United States. No one anticipated developing a fully integrated military organization and lasting after the original threat disappeared.

A second view recognizes that NATO developed into (and in some ways remains) a truly radical organization, unprecedented in the history of international politics. To give just a few examples: before NATO, alliances were fungible and ever-shifting, constantly changing members and measured in years, not decades. NATO developed into something altogether different: once you get in, it has been almost impossible (with the partial exception of France), to get out, even after the original geopolitical impetus for the alliance's formation disappeared. Furthermore, NATO became a vehicle to rehabilitate and exploit West German military power less than a decade after the horrors of Nazi Germany, a fact that alarmed not just Soviet adversaries but many members the alliance was set up to protect. At the same time, it successfully managed to restrain West Germany's political ambitions and prevent it from accessing the most powerful new weapons, all to reassure both NATO's enemies and its own members. When the Cold War ended, NATO was a key enabler of German reunification, despite deep reservations in Russia and throughout Europe. In the successful aftermath of reunification, NATO expanded eastward into territories long seen as part of Russia's sphere of influence. None of this was foreseen in 1949.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, NATO's relationship with the United States is especially puzzling and hard to square with the more conventional understanding of the organization. From our contemporary perspective, many see NATO as an instrument of American hegemony in and over Europe, reflecting the United States' imperial ambitions in the world. For more than a few American leaders, however, NATO was, from its earliest days, a resented and unloved burden. Before NATO, the United States was allergic to peacetime alliances and standing military deployments overseas. NATO's military strategy developed in ways completely at odds with the traditional American way of warfare, which was predicated upon exploiting the nation's geographic and economic advantages to mobilize slowly but massively to fight grinding wars of attrition.<sup>3</sup> NATO's military plans and deployments threatened the United States' long-held beliefs in strict civilian control of the military and congressional oversight in matters of war and peace. Most important, the notion that the US would not only permanently commit to such an entity, but forwardly deploy hundreds

of thousands of troops, would have been dismissed as absurd when the treaty was first considered.

What factors transformed NATO's original, more modest ambitions in just a few years? One looms above all else: nuclear weapons. The revolution in military technology (especially thermonuclear weapons), the ability to deliver them rapidly and over great distances, and the near futility of defensive measures had a profound influence on geopolitics and military affairs during the postwar era, driving much of NATO's more radical orientation. In a non-nuclear world, or a world where the United States retained its atomic monopoly, NATO might have been a conventional alliance: an agreement among sovereign states to pool resources in the face of a common enemy, an arrangement that would loosen and disappear altogether as the shared threat changed or disappeared. But the unique challenges brought on by nuclear weapons demanded dramatic responses, which shaped NATO's choices from the 1950s onward and, in ways rarely stated, continue to do so to this day.

In this essay I will focus on two of the interrelated and radical strategic choices made by NATO and the challenges they presented. First, I will look at how and why NATO adopted an extraordinarily aggressive military strategy in the early and mid-1950s. First laid out in the strategy document MC-48 (see Documents section), NATO's strategy appeared to rely on the massive, preemptive use of nuclear weapons against Soviet military assets in the first hours of a war. Although the alliance began curtailing some aspects of this strategy in the 1960s, many of its aggressive features remained in place throughout the Cold War. The second NATO choice involved the organization's role, driven largely by US preferences, as a vehicle to suppress the spread of nuclear weapons within (and outside of) the alliance. One of NATO's most important, yet unstated and largely unrecognized missions, was and remains nuclear nonproliferation.

These dual nuclear missions were often in conflict: a military strategy that relied so heavily on threatening early and massive use of nuclear weapons intensified the desire of NATO members to possess them. These contradictions, and the difficulties spawned by the political and military policies needed to carry out NATO's radical mission, were never fully resolved. The result was decades of tensions and even crisis, involving both alliance members and outside countries. Ironically, however, these same radical policies helped stabilize geopolitics in what was once the world's cauldron of war, Central Europe.

**NATO NEEDS A STRATEGY**

NATO's early efforts to develop a military strategy have been effectively laid out by several scholars, notably Robert Wampler, David Rosenberg, and especially Marc Trachtenberg.<sup>4</sup> But the narrative is worth repeating.

Early postwar plans to defend Western Europe, which preceded NATO, were rather simplistic. They recognized an essential asymmetry between the East and the West: the Soviet Union had an overwhelming superiority in conventional military power, which might allow it to overrun and dominate the European Continent. The United States had a monopoly on atomic weapons. It did not, however, possess a large number of bombs, which were unassembled and not married to delivery capabilities. While the means to deliver the weapons and their destructive capacity were limited compared to what was to come, the United States believed, or rather hoped, that the threat of using the bomb was enough to deter a Russian attack while Western Europe recovered. Should deterrence fail and war ensue, the United States would unleash its stockpile of atomic bombs on Russia while mobilizing its industrial base to fight and win a longer war. Such a Soviet attack was not expected, however, given that Russia was itself recovering from the devastation of war.

The unexpected testing of a nuclear device by the Soviet Union in August 1949 upended those assumptions. If both superpowers had the bomb, wouldn't their weapons cancel each other out? In other words, could the United States be expected to launch an atomic assault on Russia if it would be hit by devastating attacks in return? And even if the United States were willing to take such risks, from where would it launch these attacks, and how would it return and liberate the Continent? The United States and its Western European allies faced a dire prospect: Europe quickly overrun by Soviet conventional military power, the United States held off by Soviet atomic power, and the enormous resources of the captured Continent exploited. Even without a war, this strategic reality was bound to cast a shadow over Europe, possibly leading to an unwelcome drift toward accommodation and neutrality vis-à-vis the Soviets. These disturbing scenarios seemed even more plausible after the North Korean invasion of South Korea in June 1950, and the People's Republic of China's subsequent intervention against UN forces led by the United States. The Sino-Soviet bloc appeared united, and atomic weapons seemed to make it more aggressive. Western Europe was exposed and vulnerable, and the Communist powers appeared on the move, all while a large portion of America's forces were pinned down on the Korean peninsula.

One possible response was to try to match Soviet conventional power. In fact, early NATO goals called for just that: a force of ninety divisions, just enough, it was hoped, to keep Western Europe from being overrun. But this goal proved out of reach for NATO members, for financial and political reasons.

NATO faced a profound strategic challenge: an alliance with weak, recovering states, led by a superpower an ocean away filled with deep ambivalence about any permanent military commitment to Europe. A further challenge was that the greatest reservoir of unexploited military power lay in West Germany, a divided and occupied country less than a decade removed from the end of World War II and the demise of nazism. Any effort to build up and exploit this unused power was bound to create political difficulties of the highest order, both *vis-à-vis* the Soviets and within NATO.

NATO's response was a military strategy eventually laid out in MC-48. This strategy was deeply intertwined with both complex negotiations over the political and military status of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and the nuclear strategy of the United States.<sup>5</sup> It had several components. First, West Germany's untapped military power had to be exploited if NATO was to have any chance of stopping a Soviet onslaught. But this policy carried enormous risks. Would the FRG's neighbors, both allies and adversaries, accept West German rearmament so soon after the war? How would rearmament affect West German behavior and ambitions? The collapse of the European Defense Community negotiations in 1954 demonstrated how complicated and volatile the "German question" was. The issue was not just the recent memory of the horrors of World War II and the Holocaust. Even a truly reformed, repentant FRG was not a status-quo state. It was divided, and presumably one of its primary goals would be reunification. How might that square with the objectives of other European powers (and Russia) that were not displeased by the status quo?

The second issue was that rearmament would require limitations and controls on German power. The FRG could not have complete freedom to pursue whatever foreign policy it wanted, nor could it have its own nuclear weapons, restrictions that were enunciated in a series of political agreements reached in 1954. But how could the FRG's limited political and especially military status be maintained? The rest of NATO would demand a strong American presence to keep a lid on German ambitions. Would West Germany accept such discrimination, given the resentment that similar restrictions had produced in interwar Germany? Would the United States, long allergic to such



obligations, be willing to commit forces to the Continent in large enough numbers, and for a sufficiently long term, to make its European allies (and again the Russians) comfortable with a semisovereign West German state and a revived army? And how might the Soviets, emboldened by their acquisition of atomic power, react to this new arrangement? None of these questions could be answered with confidence as the strategy was developed and implemented.

The military challenges for NATO were as daunting as the political issues. First, the alliance confronted a Soviet conventional superiority that it was not likely to match. Despite the loss of the nuclear monopoly, atomic weapons were bound to be part of any military strategy. How would they be employed? Second, to ensure West German participation, the FRG would have to be defended as best as possible at the intra-German border; West Germany was unlikely to participate in a plan that ceded its territory in the first days of the conflict. Better still, from the German perspective, would be to attack Warsaw Pact military assets before they even reached the border with the FRG.

The military strategy that ensued—both from MC-48 and from the US efforts (including President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s Solarium exercise to explore different possible strategies) that produced the “New Look,” or massive-retaliation, policy—was truly radical. It contained both preemptive and counterforce elements. In order to defeat a Soviet attack, nuclear weapons would have to be used early—even, it was hinted, when it was clear that the Soviets were invading but before any actual shots had been fired. The key, however, would be to incapacitate or blunt the USSR’s ability to respond with its own nuclear weapons. This meant that Soviet nuclear assets would have to be targeted.<sup>6</sup> The United States would not simply react, slowly, as the war developed, biding its time and slowly mobilizing for a war of attrition. Instead, it would react as soon as possible, perhaps as soon as it became clear that war was imminent.

It is important to keep in mind what NATO’s military strategy was not: it was not passive or reactive, nor did it rely on the concept of mutual assured destruction (MAD). Instead, it was a strategy that contemplated massive use of nuclear weapons against specific Soviet military targets at the start of a war. The number of weapons, the sophistication of the delivery systems, and the intelligence capabilities needed to implement such a strategy were extraordinary, far beyond what would be required if NATO had adopted a less ambitious strategy or if the United States was only defending itself. More worrisome, this strategy, and the military force needed to carry it out, would

look highly threatening to the Soviets; it could even be interpreted as a first-strike, or preemptive, force.

The strategy was only possible because the United States implemented a massive military buildup, as called for in the April 1950 document NSC-68 and applied in the years after China's intervention in the Korean conflict. The US defense budget was almost quadrupled, and most of the funds went to building nuclear weapons and delivery systems. In 1952, the United States successfully tested thermonuclear weapons, leading to massive increases in the destructive capacity of the American stockpile. This military shield, it was hoped, would deter the Soviets while NATO developed and implemented its sweeping transformation. The strategy also required a complex set of political trade-offs and compromises developed in 1954: a significant American military commitment to allow West German rearmament to take place despite significant limitations on the political and military independence of the Federal Republic of Germany. The vision behind General Hastings Ismay's oft-cited comment—that the goal of NATO was to keep the Americans in, the Russians out, and the Germans down—was to be realized, though at considerable risk and cost.

The combination of massive retaliation and MC-48 was, by all measures, successful. Western Europe recovered politically, economically, and militarily, the Soviets were deterred, and the danger of war appeared to recede. By the mid-1950s, stability and confidence began to replace panic in Central Europe. NATO's military strategy, however, contained the seeds of its own demise. What would happen if and when the United States grew tired of its expensive military commitment to Western Europe? What if the West Germans resisted the political and military restrictions placed upon them? The most pressing short-term concern was the Soviet reaction to the strategy. What if the USSR responded with its own military buildup, developing the ability to strike quickly and decisively with nuclear weapons, not just in Western Europe but also in the continental United States? The launch of Russia's Sputnik satellite in 1957, and the ensuing fears of both a bomber and a missile gap between the two superpowers, highlighted the worrying fact that the preemptive nuclear strategy that was at the military and political heart of the NATO strategy would last only as long as the United States and its Strategic Air Command could credibly threaten a first strike.

Thus, the conventional wisdom, while acknowledging the aggressive nature of MC-48 and massive retaliation, argues that it was a short-lived strategy. Even by the end of the Eisenhower administration, and certainly by the

Kennedy/Johnson period, this aggressive strategy fell out of favor. Building on the work of many of its critics, NATO adopted a more nuanced, fine-tuned strategy that came to be called “flexible response.” This strategy was first laid out by US Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara in a secret speech to NATO defense Ministers in Athens, Greece, in the spring of 1962. Formally embraced as NATO strategy in MC-14/3 in January 1968, it was supposed to be a dramatic break with the past. The US promise to defend Western Europe with its strategic nuclear weapons was seen as problematic. The confrontations with the Soviet Union in 1958 and 1961 over the status of West Berlin had revealed that there were crisis scenarios where employing military forces at a far lower level of the escalatory ladder might be appropriate. Flexible response was supposed to be a strategy that relied far more on conventional forces, that paused before using nuclear weapons, and that resisted rapid escalation. Furthermore, as the 1960s and 1970s progressed, there seemed to be at least a public embrace in certain strategic and policy circles of the idea of “mutual vulnerability,” a condition of mutual assured destruction between the superpowers.

As I have written elsewhere, there is evidence that the differences between the older NATO strategy and the new one were overdrawn.<sup>7</sup> The strategic nuclear plans of the United States, which were the backbone of any NATO military strategy against the Soviet Union, still appeared to contain preemptive and counterforce elements. Despite lots of pressure, NATO never came close to embracing a “no-first-use” doctrine. Nor did the United States ever permanently forgo its efforts to achieve the nuclear primacy needed to make NATO’s radical nuclear strategy plausible. For example, the United States spent hundreds of billions of dollars on nuclear forces, delivery capabilities, and targeting intelligence in the later years of the Cold War, well after it had achieved quantitative parity with the Soviet nuclear arsenal. These enormous resources weren’t spent to increase the sheer numbers or destructive capabilities of the weapons, both of which were restricted by strategic arms limitation treaties with the Soviets (SALT I and SALT II). Instead, the money went into making US forces faster, more accurate, and better able to survive a Soviet nuclear attack. Furthermore, the United States increased its ability to locate, target, and destroy Soviet nuclear forces by developing such weapons as the Pershing II, Trident D5, and MX missiles, the B-1 bomber, and C3I (command, control, communication, and intelligence) procedures, as well as the ability to attack Soviet submarines with nuclear weapons (antisubmarine warfare, or ASW). These forces

were the backbone of a counterforce strategy whose emphasis on intelligence, accuracy, speed, and hard-target capabilities seemed to indicate that it retained its preemptive qualities.<sup>8</sup> A strategy based on MAD which assumed that NATO and the United States would take action against enemy civilian targets after absorbing a nuclear first strike would not demand such technologically advanced, sophisticated, and expensive systems. Why build these forces, at such financial and political cost, if your strategy was based on mutual vulnerability?

NATO's strategy was not driven solely by aggressive or imperial instincts on the part of the United States; in fact, top American decision-makers often resented and tried to lessen or end the alliance's commitment to nuclear deterrence. Nor was the strategy the result of bureaucratic, organizational, or ideological factors alone. It was not, to cite one of our foremost scholars of nuclear strategy, "illogical."<sup>9</sup> Instead, the strategy was driven by the same political and military puzzle that was present at the start of the thermonuclear age and persisted for decades: how could NATO deter the Soviet Union and defend Western Europe by relying on West German economic and military power, without allowing it to develop its own nuclear weapons? If the strategy accepted nuclear parity, or MAD, as a "fact," there was little reason for the FRG to take seriously NATO's promise to defend it. If the FRG were to pursue the logical next step and acquire its own nuclear weapons, the consequences might be grave indeed.

#### **WHAT IS GOOD FOR ME IS NOT GOOD FOR YOU**

If NATO retained elements of a preemptive, nuclear-intensive strategy, why did the rhetoric of the alliance change in the 1960s and beyond? Why did both the United States and NATO try to distance themselves from the ideas they had embraced during the 1950s?

There is no doubt that some of the more aggressive elements of the early NATO strategy were reined in, in part because of the influence such a forward-leaning strategy had on nuclear proliferation. NATO's strategy prioritized nuclear weapons, making it clear they and not other types of armaments were what mattered in the modern world. Tanks, planes, and divisions were fine, but such assets were not decisive in conflict. States that didn't possess nuclear weapons would be relegated, almost by definition, to second-rate status. The centrality of nuclear weapons in NATO's plans made it hard to argue, as many advocates of nuclear nonproliferation contended, that such weapons were ugly, immoral, or irrelevant.

Another factor in NATO's rhetorical shift was the nature of the strategy itself: if nuclear weapons were to be used very early in any conflict, almost preemptively, then the decision about when and how to use them would have to be predelegated from the highest political levels down to commanders on the battlefield. There would be very little time for national legislatures to debate whether to go to war or not. Decisions would have to be made in hours, not days or weeks, and national leaders would have to rely on military officials on the scene. And NATO, as an integrated military organization, might find high-ranking military officials from any number of states, including West Germany, involved in these decisions.<sup>10</sup>

We now know that West German officials consciously sought not to foreclose the option of developing their own atomic bomb. They also pressured the United States to give them some say over nuclear decision-making within NATO, as well as access to and control over the weapons. This initiative—to which President Eisenhower was personally sympathetic—generated grave tensions with the Soviet Union and concern within the alliance itself. Even those who did not share Eisenhower's view that a nuclearized Bundeswehr was both inevitable and not disastrous, recognized that the question had to be handled carefully. There was a widespread fear of the consequences of blatantly treating West Germany's nuclear ambitions differently than, say, France's and Great Britain's.

As the 1960s progressed, broader concerns over the consequences of unchecked nuclear proliferation grew.<sup>11</sup> West Germany's potential nuclearization was, because of its history and geopolitical situation, in a category by itself. By the late 1950s, the Soviet Union made it clear that it would not accept a West Germany with the bomb. This was the driving issue behind the great crisis period of 1958–1962, and by 1963 the United States agreed. But the prospect of other nations acquiring the bomb, either within the NATO alliance (say, Italy) or outside (say, India, China, Japan, Sweden, or Australia), was a cause for concern. How long could NATO expect West Germany to remain non-nuclear if less important states like Sweden or Israel had atomic weapons? There was also a fear of nuclear “tipping points,” or dominoes, whereby if one key state acquired the bomb, several others might as well.<sup>12</sup> Not only would this potentially make the world more dangerous, the United States in particular was worried that nuclear weapons would be used to *deter* it. As a result, nuclear nonproliferation became a far higher US strategic interest, and its policies in this area became more vigorous. By the end of the

1960s, after remarkable cooperation with its adversary, the Soviet Union, a Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty was signed.

The US nuclear nonproliferation policy was in some tension with NATO's forward-leaning nuclear strategy.<sup>13</sup> Various efforts were made to bridge this gap, such as the ill-fated Multilateral Force initiative and the Nuclear Planning Group. The strategy of flexible response, with its stated emphasis on the need for centralized control of nuclear decision-making, was also an effort to ease proliferation pressures within the alliance. The Kennedy and Johnson administrations were undoubtedly alarmed by the rather loose controls and predelegation orders they inherited in NATO's nuclear plans. But it was not lost on European observers such as the French and even the British that requiring centralized control was an argument against independent nuclear programs.

On the other hand, NATO's radical military strategy served a nonproliferation purpose. If West Germany and other non-nuclear NATO states were to eschew the bomb, they would have to be convinced that the strategy would deter an attack and protect them should war come. The credibility of America's nuclear umbrella, its extended deterrent guarantee, would be (and was) doubted in an age of nuclear parity, especially if the Soviet Union retained a significant edge in conventional capabilities.<sup>14</sup> To a certain extent, this was a problem that simply had to be accepted. But a strategy could be devised, and forces developed, that at least made a military defense of Europe against a Soviet invasion plausible. If the United States had hundreds of thousands of conventional forces on the front lines of any battle, it would be hard to disentangle them from the conflict. And if the US continued to build a force that made a counterforce, preemptive nuclear strike plausible, not to say wise, if all other options failed, this could enhance deterrence. West Germany first and foremost, but also others inside and outside the NATO alliance, might make the calculation that US security guarantees were, if not as effective a deterrent as their own nuclear weapons, good enough, and would come without all the complications, costs, and controversies that a national nuclear weapons program would bring.

This narrative, stressing both the continuing elements of NATO's radical strategy through the end of the Cold War and the linkage between this strategy and nuclear nonproliferation, is more speculative than one would like. We don't have as many documents for the 1970s and 1980s as for earlier periods, and most documents involving both nuclear weapons and the German question

are likely to remain classified for the foreseeable future. Furthermore, the deep sensitivity surrounding these questions, and the treatment by the United States of its closest allies, often produced a euphemistic language to avoid hurt feelings (for instance, the phrase “European stability” became a cover for the German question). The argument for this later period is supported less by historical evidence than by an appreciation of the logic of nuclear weapons and their profound influence on international affairs. But the documents, once they become available, may well tell a different story.

#### CONSTANT CRISIS TO GENERATE STABILITY

Efforts were undertaken to make NATO’s military plans more flexible and less frightening. The 1967 Harmel Report and the ensuing MC-14/3 document officially enshrined aspects of flexible response into NATO’s war planning, though again the degree of change has often been overstated. In some ways, however, the specifics of the strategy are less important than the overall logic. Relying on the nuclear umbrella of the United States, NATO’s embrace of extended deterrence was guaranteed to generate continual crisis, both within the alliance and vis-à-vis the Soviets.<sup>15</sup> This tension was felt between the United States and its European NATO partners, among NATO’s European powers, between NATO and the Warsaw Pact, and within the United States itself.

In hindsight, it’s clear that this sense of perpetual crisis was in the DNA of NATO’s radical strategy. Consider the position of the Federal Republic of Germany within the alliance. The West Germans resented being discriminated against in the nuclear field, especially as Great Britain and France developed their own weapons. Why should they be singled out, especially when NATO’s strategy emphasized nuclear weapons? American policymakers were keenly aware that the failure to impose military restrictions on Germany during the interwar period had played a role in the rise of the Third Reich. Nevertheless, any efforts by NATO or the United States to reassure the FRG on this point by giving them access to nuclear weapons produced complaints by the Russians and other European countries. To generate the reassurance necessary to keep West Germany content, the United States had to deploy large numbers of conventional forces.

NATO’s strategy also generated tension within the United States. The expense of maintaining these conventional forces, in both budgetary and balance-of-payments terms, provoked constant complaints among American policymakers. Keeping several hundred thousand US troops and their families in West Germany, while the Vietnam War and other conflicts raged and

America's economic woes put pressure on budgets and currency reserves, tested the political capabilities of several administrations.<sup>16</sup> The whole NATO strategy of extended deterrence was predicated on meaningful United States nuclear superiority and a willingness to use nuclear weapons, if not first, at least early in a conflict. Such an aggressive and potentially dangerous strategy was alarming both to the Soviet Union and to many in the United States.

Many of the crises in NATO's history had one or more of these dynamics as their taproot. In the late 1950s, for example, NATO moved toward allowing West Germany greater access to and control over nuclear weapons. The Soviets responded by initiating the Berlin crises of 1958 and 1961, in part to indicate their great displeasure. By 1963, the United State recognized that NATO could not allow nuclear weapons to fall in the hands of the Federal Republic and, through the mechanism of the Partial Nuclear Test Ban Treaty negotiations in the summer of 1963, came to an agreement on this point with the Soviets. The West German government was deeply upset, and the United States responded by promising to station American troops in the country on a permanent basis. The costs of these troops, however, were onerous, and throughout the 1960s the United States made efforts to pull them out, to the anger of West Germany.<sup>17</sup>

The tensions of the 1970s turned around both these issues and the Soviet achievement of strategic nuclear parity with the United States. How could America's extended deterrent, its willingness to use nuclear weapons if Western Europe was attacked, be carried out if the promise to "trade Chicago for Hamburg" was not credible? As the USSR continued to upgrade its strategic nuclear forces, medium-range missiles, and conventional forces, the sense of crisis deepened. The so called Euromissile crisis generated by the Soviet deployment of massive, rapid SS-20s targeted at Western Europe caused deep anxiety, as did NATO's deployment of Pershing II missiles in response.<sup>18</sup>

Tellingly, NATO's perpetual sense of crisis abated but did not completely go away once the Cold War ended and the supposed target of the alliance's military strategy, the Soviet Union, disappeared. At least one part of NATO's radical strategy, nuclear nonproliferation, presumably remained. Consider the controversial subject of NATO expansion. From its earliest days, the policy was justified by the need to spread stability and democracy to the former Eastern bloc. But consider another (though complementary) logic. Given what we know about the extraordinary power of nuclear weapons to deter conventional invasions, such weapons must have been extraordinarily appealing to a newly independent Poland. Poland's history was scarred by brutal



invasions and land grabs by both Germany and Russia, and the prospect of forever ending such a nightmare must have been very appealing. But a Poland with nuclear weapons, no matter how justified and understandable it would have been given its history and interests, would have upset the nuclear nonproliferation regime. More to the point, it would have opened up the awkward question of nuclear weapons in Central Europe, and in particular, a newly unified Germany. Could Germany long remain non-nuclear with nuclear-armed countries to both the east and west? Perhaps, but would anyone really want to risk finding out? Expanding NATO, and a credible US nuclear umbrella, to Poland and other Eastern European countries would arguably address these concerns, at least partially.

The irony of NATO's radical military strategy during the Cold War is that while it created constant crisis and generated both inter- and intra-alliance tension, it was ultimately stabilizing—certainly more so than the alternative strategies the alliance might have chosen. NATO could have attempted to match Soviet conventional capabilities, with potentially ruinous economic and political consequences. Or the United States could have left Western Europe to organize its own defense. As long as nuclear weapons existed, however, and as long as the Soviet Union possessed and demonstrated a willingness to use them, the temptation for Western Europe, and particularly the Federal Republic of Germany, to acquire them would have been enormous. A divided Germany—with nuclear weapons—would have been unacceptable not only to the Soviet Union, but to Great Britain and France as well. A Western alliance would have been difficult if not impossible to create under those circumstances. Eschewing the nuclear route, however, the FRG would have feared domination by the Russians. The drift toward neutrality may have been unavoidable, with all the geopolitical dangers that would bring. In the absence of NATO's radical nuclear strategy, where West Germany was both credibly protected and constrained by American power, the options were not appealing.

The constant crisis and tension produced by NATO's strategy, both within the alliance and with the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact, exacted a high price, but it was likely necessary to remedy the difficult and potentially explosive issues surrounding the German problem in a nuclear world.

## CONCLUSION

To argue that NATO's nuclear strategy during the Cold War was radical is not necessarily to condemn it. On the one hand, a counterforce, preemptive

strategy involved serious risks and dangers. A strategy focused on the utility of nuclear weapons made the bomb more appealing, and efforts to promote nuclear nonproliferation less convincing. In a crisis, NATO's strategy made the dangers of miscalculation or an accident far higher. Furthermore, any effort to establish credibility in a nuclear crisis could have led to dangerous brinkmanship and unthinkable disaster. Even absent such a cataclysm, NATO's radical nuclear strategy demanded extraordinary expenditures to improve targeting, speed, accuracy, survivability, and intelligence. This fueled an expensive and contentious qualitative arms race, ironically at the very time that SALT I and SALT II successfully limited the quantitative competition in strategic nuclear arms between the superpowers. NATO's strategy was expensive both economically and politically.

On the other hand, the strategy appeared to work. Historians are sensitive to the fact that correlation is not always (or even often) causation, but the Cold War ended on terms favorable to NATO. Germany did not acquire nuclear weapons, and there are far fewer nuclear weapons states around the world than anyone would have predicted or hoped for fifty years ago. Most important, nuclear weapons have never been used by or against NATO, or anyone else for that matter, since 1945. Would a less radical strategy—one based solely on conventional defense, or one that acknowledged and accepted mutual nuclear vulnerability—have produced similar results? We can't know, of course. But merely posing the question highlights how remarkable NATO's history has been.

### Notes

1. The best version of this conventional wisdom can be found throughout John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy during the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). See also Robert J. Art, *A Grand Strategy for America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), pp. 214–16.

2. Much of this analysis is based on the pathbreaking work of Marc Trachtenberg. See especially "The Nuclearization of NATO and U.S.–West European Relations" and "The Berlin Crisis" in *History and Strategy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), pp. 153–234; and *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945–1963* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), especially pp. 95–145.

3. Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1960).

4. Robert Wampler, "Ambiguous Legacy: The United States, Great Britain, and the Formulation of NATO Strategy, 1948–1957" (Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1991); David Alan Rosenberg, "A Smoking Radiating Ruin at the End of Two Hours": Documents on American Plans for Nuclear War with the Soviet Union, 1954–1955," *International Security*, Volume 6, Number 3 (Winter 1981/1982), pp. 3–38; David Alan Rosenberg, "The Origins of Overkill: Nuclear Weapons and American Strategy, 1945–1960," *International Security*, Volume 7, Number 4 (Spring 1983), pp. 3–71.

5. Dr. Gregory W. Pedlow, chief, Historical Office Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe, in collaboration with NATO International Staff Central Archives, NATO Strategy Documents, 1949–1969, available at <http://www.nato.int/archives/strategy.htm>.
6. Trachtenberg, “The Nuclearization of NATO.”
7. Francis J. Gavin, *Nuclear Statecraft: History and Strategy in America’s Atomic Age* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), pp. 30–56.
8. Austin Long and Brendan Rittenhouse Green, “Stalking the Secure Second Strike: Intelligence, Counterforce, and Nuclear Strategy,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Volume 38 (2015), pp. 1–2, 38–73, doi: 10.1080/01402390.2014.958150.
9. Robert Jervis, *The Illlogic of American Nuclear Strategy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984).
10. Trachtenberg, “The Nuclearization of NATO.”
11. Francis J. Gavin, “Blasts from the Past: Proliferation Lessons from the 1960s,” *International Security*, Volume 29, Number 3 (Winter 2004/2005), pp. 100–135. See also Shane J. Maddock, *Nuclear Apartheid: The Quest for American Atomic Supremacy from World War II to the Present* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).
12. Nicholas L. Miller, “The Secret Success of Nonproliferation Sanctions. International Organization,” available on CJO2014. doi:10.1017/S0020818314000216.
13. Susanna Schrafstetter and Stephen Twigge, *Avoiding Armageddon: Europe, the United States, and the Struggle for Nuclear Nonproliferation, 1945–1970* (Westport, CT: Praeger Press, 2004).
14. Many analysts overstated Soviet superiority in conventional capabilities throughout the Cold War, insisting that from the early 1960s on NATO forces could have likely withstood a Soviet invasion of Western Europe without immediate recourse to nuclear weapons. See, for example, John J. Mearsheimer, “Why the Soviets Can’t Win Quickly in Central Europe,” *International Security*, Volume 7, Number 1 (Summer 1982), pp. 3–39.
15. A Google search on “NATO” and “crisis” yields 26 million hits.
16. Francis J. Gavin, *Gold, Dollars, and Power: The Politics of International Monetary Relations, 1958–1971* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).
17. These stories can be found in Gavin, *Gold, Dollars, and Power* and Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace*.
18. On the Euromissile crisis, see Leopoldo Nuti’s excellent edited volume *The Euromissile Crisis and the End of the Cold War* (forthcoming).