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NO-FIRST-USE IN NATO:

TIME TO RECONSIDER?

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→ A good paper

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In 1982, four prominent American statesmen ignited a controversy over NATO's military strategy by proposing that the Atlantic Alliance adopt a declaratory "No First Use" policy on nuclear weapons. "The time has come," they wrote, "for ...a new Alliance policy and doctrine: that nuclear weapons will not be used unless an aggressor should use them first."¹ Though McGeorge Bundy, George Kennan, Robert McNamara and George Smith tied their suggestion to an improvement in NATO's conventional military capabilities, it was the no-first-use (NFU) aspect of their proposal that captured the headlines and spooked the Alliance's leaders.

In succeeding months, the NFU suggestion was buried under a rockslide of criticism from both sides of the Atlantic. The heaviest boulders in the rebuttal avalanche were rolled down by General Bernard Rogers, who was then Supreme Allied Commander, and by a group of German statesmen. Rogers and the "European Gang of Four" argued that the possible first use of nuclear weapons was essential both to the credibility of NATO's flexible response military strategy and to alliance political cohesion. Without these, the overall goal of Alliance policy -- to deter the Warsaw Pact from attacking -- might be jeopardized.² When the dust settled, NFU was a dead issue.

The rejection of NFU in the early 1980's was due as much to static inertia within the alliance as to sound strategic reasoning.

¹McGeorge Bundy, George F. Kennan, Robert S. McNamara, and Gerard Smith, "Nuclear Weapons and the Atlantic Alliance," Foreign Affairs 60 (Spring 1982): 754.

²See General Bernard W. Rogers, "The Atlantic Alliance: Prescriptions for a Difficult Decade," Foreign Affairs 60 (Summer 1982): 1145-1156; and Karl Kaiser, Georg Leber, Alois Mertes, and Franz-Josef Schulze, "Nuclear Weapons and the Preservation of Peace," Foreign Affairs 60 (Summer 1982): 1157-1170.

Having adopted flexible response in 1967 only after six years of bitterly divisive debate, NATO was not about to throw it away -- and reopen the contentious issue of its military strategy -- just on the say-so of Messrs. Bundy, Kennan, McNamara, and Smith. A reassessment of NATO's military strategy has awaited a more compelling motive.

That motive is near at hand.

In the past twelve months, the geostrategic situation in Europe has changed to a degree that was beyond imagining a year ago. This change is already causing ferment within NATO, and a fundamental reassessment of Alliance military strategy will soon become irresistible. A reconsideration of the role of nuclear weapons will be an important part of that process. A declared policy of No First Use is likely to be one result. If this comes to pass, it will have far-reaching consequences both for NATO and for the United States.

This paper will examine the evolution of NATO's current strategy of flexible response, and explain why continuing changes in Europe are likely to lead to a no-first-use policy. It will also consider some of the likely military and political consequences of this policy.

NATO'S STRATEGIC HERITAGE

Three factors have shaped the strategic outlook of the Atlantic Alliance since its inception. These are: the presumed aggressive intent of the Soviet Union; the apparent conventional military inferiority of NATO relative to its communist adversaries; and the

*Yes
It is
happening*

availability of nuclear weapons. Throughout its history, the Alliance has struggled to offset the first two features by a rational inclusion of the third in its strategic calculations.

When the North Atlantic Alliance was formed in 1949, it was done in response to widespread European fears of Soviet invasion or intimidation. Since the conclusion of World War II, the Soviet Union had tightened its grip over the Eastern European states occupied by the Red Army at the end of the war. European and American statesmen saw evidence of further aggressive intent by the Russians in the subversion of Czechoslovakia, the communist insurgencies in Greece and Turkey, and by the blunt attempt to eject the Western Allies from West Berlin by economic blockade. There was no doubt in European capitals that the Soviet Union was a brutish neighbor bent on further conquest, and this fear prompted the formation of NATO as a defensive alliance to contain the Russians.

Even by banding together, the North Atlantic states could not muster conventional military forces comparable to those held by the Soviet Union. In 1952, hopeful Alliance strategists called for the fielding of 96 NATO divisions by 1954 -- a force that was far beyond the economic capacity of the war-ravaged European allies, and that in any event would still be dwarfed by the estimated 175 divisions of the Red Army. Even with the permanent stationing of substantial American combat forces on the continent, the creation of an integrated military command structure, and the rearming of West Germany, NATO planners conceded that a conventional defense against a Soviet attack was not feasible.

What saved the Alliance from despair was the third factor: the American possession of nuclear weapons. Though the United States had largely demobilized its armed forces following World War II, its effective monopoly of nuclear weapons meant that it still possessed unequalled military capacity. By ratifying the North Atlantic Treaty, the United States committed itself to the security of Western Europe, and American atomic bombs were the collateral that gave meaning to that promise.

Through the mid-1950's, these three elements continued to dominate NATO's strategic outlook. The Russians maintained their hostile demeanor and their apparent superiority in conventional armed forces, while nuclear weapons remained the Alliance's trump card. Even after the Soviet Union developed its own nuclear weapons, the strategic superiority of the United States was still presumed to rest in its vastly more capable fleet of manned bombers. (In comparison to the United States, the USSR initially lacked the means, the experience, and the forward bases necessary to conduct an atomic bombing campaign.)

NATO's reliance on American nuclear weapons gained new impetus in 1953-54 as a result of the Eisenhower Administration's "New Look" strategy. The New Look touted the American capacity for nuclear retaliation as the primary deterrent to communist aggression in any theater.

Within NATO, where the promise of American nuclear retaliation had always been considered part of the North Atlantic Treaty's fine print, the chief consequence of the New Look was the planned employment of "tactical" nuclear weapons on the battlefield.

An American study in 1951 had suggested that "atomic weapons used tactically are the natural armaments of numerically inferior but technologically superior nations. They are the natural answer to the armed hordes of the Soviet Union and its satellites."³ In early 1954 the American Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, urged the Alliance to plan for the tactical employment of nuclear weapons "to compensate in part for the numerical disparity between NATO and Soviet forces." Dulles further explained that "the United States considers that the ability to use atomic weapons as conventional weapons is essential for the defense of the NATO area." Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery, NATO's Deputy Supreme Commander, announced shortly thereafter that "we at SHAPE are basing all our operational planning on using atomic and thermonuclear weapons in our own defense."⁴

Through the end of the 1950's, the American array of strategic and tactical nuclear weapons remained NATO's principal deterrent against "the armed hordes of the Soviet Union." So dependent was NATO strategy on the use of nuclear arms that the conventional forces deployed by the Alliance were publicly referred to as a mere "tripwire" whose engagement would trigger the retaliatory atomic salvos.

³ Memorandum from Chief of Special Projects to Chairman of the Joint Atomic Energy Committee, August 1951, quoted in Jane E. Stromseth, The Origins of Flexible Response: NATO's Debate over Strategy in the 1960s (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), p. 17.

⁴ Statements by John Foster Dulles and Field Marshal Bernard L. Montgomery quoted in Stromseth, p. 14.

By the end of the 1950's, NATO was reevaluating two of the three factors (Soviet hostility, conventional inferiority, nuclear weapons) that governed the Alliance's strategic outlook. The Soviet Union seemed as hostile and dangerous as ever, as evidenced by its brutal repression of Hungary, renewed pressure on West Berlin, and by the comic opera belligerence of Premier Nikita Khrushchev. However, the Alliance's views on Soviet conventional superiority and on the usefulness of its own nuclear weapons were undergoing important changes.

Since the end of the Second World War, NATO strategists had generally agreed that the Soviets maintained a standing force of some 175 divisions. In 1959, General Maxwell Taylor pointed out the economic and military improbability of this figure, with the result that Western estimates of Soviet conventional forces were revised downward.⁵ That the Russians (including now their Warsaw Pact allies) retained a conventional advantage over NATO still remained an article of faith in Western chancelleries. Still, the revised estimates showed the enemy margin of superiority to be much less than had been thought to exist previously. Ironically, this smaller conventional differential was used as an argument for increasing NATO's own non-nuclear forces, since a moderate improvement in Alliance capabilities seemed likely to return real battlefield dividends.

Coincidentally, the Alliance began as well to reconsider its own narrow reliance on the threatened use of nuclear weapons to

⁵ General Maxwell Taylor, The Uncertain Trumpet (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959), pp. 136-139.

deter a Warsaw Pact onslaught. By the late 1950's, this policy seemed increasingly unwise. Criticisms of "massive retaliation" generally followed two lines of argument.

The first criticism was based on the growth of Soviet nuclear capability. By the end of the decade, the USSR had come to possess not only a sizable nuclear arsenal of its own, but also the apparent capability to deliver its atomic weapons onto American targets. The launching of the Soviet *Sputnik* satellite in 1957 traumatized the American public, not least because it was final, conclusive proof that the Russians had the technical means to rain nuclear warheads onto American cities. (In fact, this capability had emerged earlier -- albeit in less dramatic form -- in the maturing of the Soviet strategic bomber forces.)

Western strategists perceived that the Soviet nuclear forces undermined the unique deterrent value of NATO's weapons. Since both sides now had nuclear arms, each would regard itself as being restrained from using them out of fear of retaliation in kind by the other side. This concept of "mutual deterrence" took away the central pillar of NATO's military strategy: nuclear weapons alone could no longer offset the conventional advantage enjoyed by the Soviet Union in Europe. Mutual deterrence also seemed to threaten NATO's political cohesion, as Europeans wondered nervously whether the United States would really invite its own nuclear devastation to protect foreign allies.

The second criticism of NATO's strategy focused on its conventional capability. Secure under the American nuclear umbrella, NATO member states had never taken seriously the need to

build conventional forces except as a token tripwire. As a result, the United States and even the Alliance as a whole lacked the military wherewithal necessary to respond to local crises in which the threat of nuclear weapons would not be useful or believable. This reality was painfully driven home by the 1961 Berlin crisis, as President Kennedy found that existing contingency plans for dealing with threats to Berlin rested entirely on the use of nuclear weapons.⁶

To develop a more balanced capability, the United States urged NATO to adopt a strategy of "flexible response." What this meant was that NATO should give up its singleminded reliance on nuclear weapons, building instead a more balanced mix of conventional and nuclear forces. Nuclear forces would still be retained in both their strategic and battlefield roles; but, most importantly, the Alliance's conventional forces would be strengthened.

This strengthened conventional capacity would build "flexibility" into NATO's military strategy in two ways. First, it would give the Alliance more effective options for countering low-level provocations such as Berlin. Secondly, stronger conventional forces -- estimated at a more realistic 30 divisions -- would be able to slow down any Warsaw Pact conventional attack, thereby allowing the use of nuclear weapons to be a more rational, controlled, and (hopefully) limited undertaking.

Flexible response was extremely controversial, since it disrupted so many of the Alliance's entrenched ideas. Extended

⁶ Arthur M. Schlesinger, A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), p. 326.

haggling followed over the size and composition of the conventional buildup; over the complexion and control of tactical nuclear weapons; and over whether flexible response tended to lessen the apparent American willingness to use its strategic nuclear arsenal in Europe's defense. Most European states were particularly unenthusiastic about conventional defense, since it implied both an increase in their peacetime defense budgets and in their susceptibility to wartime destruction. In the end, flexible response became official Alliance strategy through political compromise -- though not until France had withdrawn from NATO's military command structure and announced its intention to pursue its own national nuclear deterrent.

As finally adopted in 1967, NATO's flexible response strategy includes three elements. These are: *direct defense* to defeat an attack, or place the burden of escalation on the aggressor; *deliberate escalation* through the controlled use of nuclear weapons; and *general nuclear response*, "the ultimate guarantor of deterrence."⁷

These measures are not necessarily meant to be taken sequentially in the event of war -- a caveat bound up in the "compromise" nature of flexible response, and reflecting major differences within the Alliance. The United States has generally been the most energetic in promoting direct defense and the warfighting utility of tactical nuclear weapons, and in articulating theoretical "firebreaks" in the escalatory use of nuclear arms. The Europeans have always had less appetite for a new major war --

⁷ Rogers, pp. 1150-1151.

whether conventional or "theater nuclear" -- on their territory, and so still tend to endorse the deterrent value of the American strategic nuclear arsenal. (This view also coincides with the traditional European reluctance to undertake expensive new outlays for conventional forces.) The "not necessarily sequential" formula allows the NATO members to take refuge in whatever interpretation they prefer, while still publicly adhering to the overall flexible response strategy.

During the fifteen years immediately following the Alliance's adoption of flexible response, NATO's perceptions of Soviet hostility, of Warsaw Pact conventional superiority, and of the utility of its own nuclear weapons grew more complex.

Between 1967 and 1982, the Russians occasionally showed a new willingness to accept reduced tensions and to negotiate agreements that promoted European stability and security. Balancing detente, various arms control agreements, *Ostpolitik*, and even the Helsinki Accords, however, were demonstrations of continued Soviet ruthlessness and thuggery: the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia, near-intervention in the 1973 October War, and the 1979 invasion of Afghanistan. Furthermore, from the early 1970's the Warsaw Pact began to expand and modernize its military forces in Eastern Europe until they greatly exceeded self-defense requirements. Against this backdrop, NATO's long-standing perception of the Soviet Union as a dangerous military bully continued unabated.

Despite modest improvements in NATO's conventional strength, Alliance leaders continued to worry about the Warsaw Pact's

advantage in this area -- an advantage that, by some calculations, seemed to widen during the 1970's. This concern over a growing Pact superiority sprang from three sources.

First, there was the arms buildup underway within the Soviet camp. Not only were existing forces expanded and made more robust, but the new presence (after 1968) of several Soviet divisions in Czechoslovakia increased the frontline forces bordering NATO. Adding to the disparity between NATO and the Warsaw Pact was a perceived decline in the morale, discipline and general combat worthiness of NATO's forces in the early 1970's. Because of the Vietnam War and social upheavals in the US, the American armed forces in Europe constituted a "hollow army" torn by racial tensions and drug abuse, and desperately short of spare parts and modern equipment. Buffeted by public resistance to continued conscription, the armies of the European allies were little better: many found themselves embroiled in controversies over the creation of "soldiers' unions" and the abolition of traditional military discipline.

A second source of concern was the evolution of new military technologies. To the extent that NATO had ever considered its forces capable of resisting the Warsaw Pact in a stand-up fight, much of its limited confidence had been based on a presumed margin of technological superiority. Clearly, the broad modernization program underway on the other side of the Iron Curtain threatened to close this gap.

Equally disconcerting were the apparent lessons of the 1973 October War, which showed that even a technologically superior force should expect enormous losses against modern weapons. NATO

analysts who projected Israeli losses and munitions consumption rates onto the Alliance force structure predicted that NATO's conventional resistance would evaporate within days under the weight of Warsaw Pact numbers.

A third source of NATO's pessimism regarding the Warsaw Pact's conventional superiority had to do with arms control gamesmanship. In late October 1973 (in fact, within days of the Arab-Israeli War), negotiators from NATO and the Warsaw Pact began meeting in Vienna to negotiate "mutual and balanced force reductions" (MBFR). Though little real progress was made at the negotiating table, the talks served to focus the attention of Western analysts on the asymmetries between the Atlantic Alliance and the communist coalition. In part to bolster NATO's contention that conventional force cuts should not be equal across the board -- even equivalent percentage cuts would hurt NATO more than the stronger Warsaw Pact -- Western strategists outdid themselves in enumerating inherent, "nonquantifiable" sources of NATO's weakness. Various think-tanks and armchair strategists proudly explained that NATO was vastly inferior to its adversaries in such realms as equipment and doctrinal interoperability, mobilization planning, political cohesion and "scrutability," geographical depth, logistical sustainability and reinforcement access (sea lines-of-communication across the Atlantic versus a continental railnet), available reserves of trained manpower and serviceable equipment, and surge industrial capacity. Much of this energy was eventually

channelled into interesting proposals for military reform, but in the short run it caused a pessimistic pall to settle over NATO.⁸

Taken together, these factors caused NATO leaders to be more sensitive to the relative conventional inferiority of their forces than at any time since the early 1960's. In part because of this heightened sense of conventional vulnerability, and in part because of growing obsolescence of existing systems, the Atlantic Alliance began to upgrade its tactical nuclear weaponry. This process focused public attention on NATO's nuclear arsenal, leading to a growing chorus of complaint over flexible response and the deterrent role of nuclear weapons within the alliance.

The process of modernizing NATO's tactical nuclear arsenal began innocuously enough by replacing old tactical missiles such as the Sergeant with the Lance. Consistent with its interpretation of flexible response, which emphasized conventional defense and theater nuclear warfighting, the United States also planned to introduce "enhanced radiation warheads" (the so-called neutron bomb) into its tactical nuclear stockpiles in Europe. In theory, these weapons would have reduced radioactive fallout and "collateral damage" to the European landscape in the event of their use.⁹

⁸ An analysis of the relative strengths of NATO and the Warsaw Pact, with suggestions for MBFR, is Robert Lucas Fischer, Defending the Central Front: The Balance of Forces, Adelphi Paper No. 127 (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1976). "Reformist" articles include Steven Canby, The Alliance and Europe: Part IV: Military Doctrine and Technology, Adelphi Paper No. 109 (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1974-1975).

⁹ David N. Schwartz, "A Historical Perspective," in Alliance Security: NATO and the No-First-Use Question, ed. John D. Steinbruner and Leon V. Sigal (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1983), pp. 16-17.

This reasoning touched a raw nerve with the European allies. They suspected that such logic might lead to an American (or worse, a *Soviet*) belief that a limited nuclear war could be fought in Europe without undue risk of retaliation against the superpowers' homelands. This perception reopened the old wounds that had been bandaged over by the flexible response compromise. Even though the United States backed down from deploying the neutron bomb, enough public rhetoric was expended to make flexible response more contentious than ever.

Against this backdrop, the Soviet Union began in the late 1970's to deploy SS-20 intermediate range missiles in Eastern Europe. This alarmed the European members of NATO who feared that these weapons would further "destabilize" the European balance. After some headscratching, NATO decided upon a "two-track" strategy: it would pursue negotiations with the Soviets over reducing or eliminating intermediate range missiles, while simultaneously going ahead with its own deployment.

Once again, the proposed fielding of new nuclear systems in Western Europe provoked a public outcry. Abetted by self-serving disclaimers from the Soviet side, opponents of the new NATO nuclear forces charged that the American missiles constituted the real threat to peace in Europe. The result was more public bloodletting over flexible response, and particularly over the role of nuclear weapons in the defense of Europe. As an official NATO publication delicately (if somewhat windily) describes it:

The specific issue of the need... for a modernization of NATO's nuclear forces involving new deployments of intermediate-range forces in six European basing countries, gave rise to an intense, heated and prolonged public debate... The public impact of the INF deployment issue revealed... that more adequate explanations backed by detailed information had to be provided regarding the role of nuclear weapons in Alliance policies. While they had long represented an integral and essential part of a deterrent strategy designed to make war of all kinds, nuclear or conventional, less likely, and involved the maintenance of the minimum level of forces required to implement the strategy of flexible response against any future aggression, they were not seen by some sectors of public opinion as defensive and deterrent in effect. Many misperceptions persisted regarding their deterrent role.¹⁰

An important feature of the public debate over INF fielding and the continuing relevance of flexible response was a growing European sense that there was a difference between shared *risk* and shared *consequences*. The Atlantic Alliance accepted the principle of shared *risk* -- the Treaty's "an attack upon one is an attack upon all" concept was meant to reassure Europeans, for example, that American involvement in their defense would be swift and sure.

However, as the debate over INF fielding made increasingly clear, there was an important difference between American and European liability for the *consequences* of a war in Europe. To Europeans, the success of flexible response (or of any other strategic formula which the Alliance might devise) was to be measured solely in its deterrence effectiveness. Any outbreak of general hostilities in Europe, whether conventional or nuclear, would devastate Western Europe; yet, only a general nuclear exchange

¹⁰ NATO Information Service, The North Atlantic Treaty Organization: Facts and Figures (Brussels: NATO Information Service, 1989), p. 126.

would inflict any damage at all on the United States proper. This anxiety was sharpened by careless American statements about the possibility of limited nuclear warfare confined solely to Europe.

In light of the ongoing deployment of the Soviet SS-20's, many Europeans reasoned that the presence of American nuclear systems on their soil greatly increased their own vulnerability. They calculated that a Soviet attack might well include a pre-emptive nuclear strike to destroy the American Pershing II's and cruise missiles before "controlled escalation" could be brought into play. In such circumstances, American promises of strategic retaliation would be little consolation.

Where these (and other) arguments led was to a reconsideration of the role of nuclear weapons in the Alliance. For thirty years, NATO's strategic catechism had held that nuclear weapons could compensate for conventional weakness in one way or another. By the beginning of the 1980's, a growing body of European public opinion (though still a minority) was challenging the deterrent value of flexible response. Others condemned the very presence of American nuclear weapons on their soil as a threat to peace and stability.¹¹

It is in this context that the No-First-Use proposal by Bundy, Kennan, McNamara, and Smith was made. Theirs was an apparent attempt to bolster public support for NATO by finding a non-nuclear

¹¹ A discussion of the impact of INF on the strategic balance in Europe and on European public opinion is in Panayiotis Ifestos, Nuclear Strategy and European Security Dilemmas (Brookfield, Vermont: Gower Publishing Company, 1988), pp.124-132. See also Stephen J. Cimbala, Rethinking Nuclear Strategy (Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 1988), pp. 68-72.

deterrent alternative. Because their proposal suggested increased outlays for conventional forces, it was unpopular on economic grounds; because it implied a weakening of America's willingness to commit itself wholeheartedly to Europe's defense, it was unpopular with the European governments; and, because it was an American plan fostered by establishment elites, it failed to appeal to populist peace movements such as the Greens. One analyst compared the NFU proposal to another misguided American initiative of some years before: "It [NFU] was a kind of political 'MLF': a made-in-America solution to a European political problem as misperceived by Americans."¹²

Whatever its objective merits, the NFU proposal helped elevate the discussion over NATO's nuclear arsenal to a more rational level. Updated justifications of flexible response were advanced by scores of analysts, reflecting the current views on the role of nuclear weapons within the Atlantic Alliance.¹³

According to its defenders, NATO's flexible response strategy continues to perform its deterrence function despite all of the strains within the Alliance over its precise implementation. At a minimum, this deterrence depends upon NATO's *capability* and apparent *willingness* to use the military means at its disposal --

¹² Gregory F. Treverton, Making the Alliance Work: The United States and Western Europe (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 55.

¹³ See, for example, Colin S. Gray, "NATO's Nuclear Dilemma," Policy Review 22 (Fall 1982), pp. 97-116; Peter J. Liberman and Neil R. Thomason, "No-First-Use Unknownables," Foreign Policy 64 (Fall 1986), pp. 17-36; Francois de Rose, European Security and France, trans. by Richard Nice (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1983), pp. 32-36; and Stephen J. Cimbala, Nuclear Strategizing: Deterrence and Reality (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1988), pp. 248-249.

including nuclear weapons -- to meet an enemy attack. How that capability is structured, and how that willingness is credibly communicated to the Soviet Union, remains the stuff of intra-alliance controversy.

In fashioning NATO's *capabilities*, the current governing principle is that flexible response is consistent with "escalation dominance." This means that NATO should have sufficient conventional and nuclear forces so that the Soviet Union cannot foresee gaining any political advantage at any level of conflict from conventional warfare to general nuclear war.

As in the past, where friction most often arises is over whether enhanced warfighting capability improves deterrence in general, or undermines it by admitting the possibility of limited conventional or theater nuclear conflicts. The United States generally inclines to the former view, while Europeans tend to hold to the latter.

In addition to adequate *capability*, deterrence requires a credible *willingness* to use even nuclear weapons in the event of actual war. In the European view, deterrence is best served by advertising a short powder trail leading from direct defense to a massive response by American strategic weapons. According to this view, the more horrible the full consequences are made to seem, the better deterrence is. From the American standpoint, the believability of a strategy that jumps quickly from local conventional defense to all-out nuclear war is a hard sell. (Part of the credibility problem stems from a genuine American reluctance to make this a suicide pact. Americans, in this case, are reluctant

to promote a product that they themselves may not fully believe in.) American strategists assert that an enemy can best be convinced of one's willingness to take drastic steps if those steps are small ones rather than great leaps.

Both European and American leaders agree that any public irresolution, whether through contemplation of No First Use or in any other way, weakens deterrence. In some superstitious societies, uttering the name of a demon out loud is thought to give that demon power over you; within NATO, Alliance leaders refrain from questioning their own willingness to use nuclear weapons in order to ward off the Warsaw Pact.

The tide of rebuttal commentary on the 1982 No First Use proposal served to reaffirm NATO's adherence to flexible response, however troubling that strategy might be in terms of internal discord. As a result, in the latter half of the 1980's the strategic outlook of the Atlantic Alliance was still shaped by the the same three precepts as had existed since 1949: a belief that the Soviet Union constituted a continuing military threat; conventional military inferiority relative to the Warsaw Pact; and an enduring faith that the threatened use of nuclear weapons could hold these in check.

A NEW EUROPE: THE CONSEQUENCES OF CHANGE

In his 1961 inaugural address, President John F. Kennedy proclaimed, "We intend to have a wider choice than humiliation or all-out nuclear war." For forty years NATO has sought to deter Soviet invasion and intimidation by military means, including the

threatened use of nuclear weapons. In the past year, events in Europe have so transformed the political environment as to call into question the three elements that have dominated the Alliance's strategic outlook.

Underlying all of the political changes that have swept over Europe is a new Soviet countenance. The essence of this new visage is that the Soviet Union under Mikhail Gorbachev is no longer a proximate military threat to its western neighbors. In general, this has manifested itself in two dramatic ways.

First, the USSR seems to have given up its longstanding determination to dominate the states on its western borders. In pursuit of this goal, the Soviets had installed communist systems in the countries of Eastern Europe, and had periodically enforced political obedience there by force of arms. It was to protect themselves from this fate that the Western European states first sought safety in NATO.

In the past several months, the Russians have not only refused to use the Soviet Army to prop up unpopular communist regimes, they may actually have restrained local tyrants from using their own armed forces to sustain themselves. The end result of this forbearance has been the downfall of the pro-Soviet satellite regimes, and the emergence of popular governments with a hunger for democracy and capitalism.

Secondly, the Soviet government has undergone a personality change with respect to its willingness to enter into international security arrangements. Not only has President Gorbachev signalled his readiness to enter into treaties limiting nuclear weapons and

reducing conventional forces, he has even made astonishing unilateral cuts in Soviet armed might.

Together with the greater "openness" in the conduct of Soviet policymaking, these two trends have gone far to establish a new persona for the USSR in international affairs. For NATO, the most significant consequence of this has been to erode the longstanding (1) image of the Soviet Union as a constant military threat. So striking has this change been, that one could easily see how there would probably never have been a NATO at all had Soviet conduct in the immediate postwar years been like it is today.

A second consequence of the upheaval in Europe has been to invalidate all previous comparisons of military might. Through the entire life of the Atlantic Alliance, NATO planners have labored under the shadow of Warsaw Pact conventional military superiority. As a military coalition, the Warsaw Pact has now collapsed like a punctured balloon. If not already gone for good, its previous superiority is vanishing so quickly that NATO's senior leaders cannot tell for sure what remnants might still remain. The change in the military balance has been most dramatic in three respects.

First, the Soviet Union has initiated the unilateral withdrawal of its forces from Czechoslovakia and Hungary, and has stated its willingness to reduce its overall presence in Eastern Europe through Conventional Forces in Europe negotiations. In addition to this drawdown, the Soviets have announced plans to restructure their forces and doctrine to make them more defensive in nature.

Secondly, the withdrawal of Soviet forces from their forward positions in Eastern Europe also means the abandonment of the

military infrastructure that had been built up in those countries. This greatly reduces the Soviet stature as a potential military threat to Western Europe, since any projection of conventional force in the future would have to be done without the benefit of the forward bases, depots, pipelines, and other facilities that the Russians now enjoy. As a consequence, Soviet operational difficulties (particularly in logistics and command control) would be greatly magnified, and NATO could reasonably expect extended mobilization warning as well.

Third, the emergence of non-communist governments throughout Eastern Europe effectively ends any expectation that these states would cooperate with the Soviet Union in any offensive military venture. Whether the non-Soviet Warsaw Pact armed forces would ever have amounted to anything is now a moot point: the fact is that those countries would probably regard any future Soviet attempt to transit their territory to get at NATO as an invasion in its own right, and would act accordingly.

Just as the political transformation of Europe has removed the Soviets as the long-feared threat and ended NATO's conventional inferiority, so too has it brought pressure to bear on the third element of the Alliance's strategic outlook. In simple terms, the fact that the Soviet threat is receding and that the Warsaw Pact no longer looms as a potential invading host means that the whole *raison d'etre* for nuclear weapons in NATO's strategy is now without any rational basis.¹⁴

¹⁴ See, for example, "Pentagon Said to Imply Need for Atom Arms in Europe Has Faded," Washington Post, 14 March 1990, p. A12.

The role of nuclear weapons in NATO is already under attack in light of the changed political circumstances. Under European pressure, the United States has agreed to postpone indefinitely the modernization of its existing Lance missiles in West Germany -- a decision that is tantamount to cancellation. Some European leaders have suggested that the United States should unilaterally remove its nuclear artillery shells from the continent, a move apparently supported by the Pentagon.¹⁵ Senator Sam Nunn, whose views on American security issues carry great weight in the Congress, has gone even farther by calling for the elimination of all ground-based nuclear systems in NATO. "I do not believe," wrote Nunn, "there is a role in a new military strategy for land-based nuclear weapons whose range is so limited that they could only detonate on the soil of our allies or the newly emerging democracies in Eastern Europe."¹⁶ This point will be strongly seconded by the West European allies, who have always been uncomfortable with shortrange "warfighting" munitions.

Where does all of this lead?

Clearly, a major restructuring of security arrangements in Europe is likely to occur within the next few years. Whether NATO itself will survive this in its present form is uncertain. What is

¹⁵ "A Nuclear Withdrawal?" Newsweek, 2 April 1990, p. 4.

¹⁶ Sam Nunn, "A New Europe -- A New Military Strategy," The Washington Post, 24 April 1990, p. A25. Though Nunn agrees that "NATO's reliance on the threat of early first use of short-range nuclear weapons to deter a conventional attack is no longer credible," he stopped short of endorsing an outright No First Use posture. However, the only justification Nunn acknowledges for the continued presence of any nuclear weapons in NATO is "to deter Soviet use of nuclear weapons in Europe." One might honestly wonder whether such a posture, if adopted, would not be tantamount to No First Use.

likely is that before then NATO will announce a declaratory policy of No First Use.

The stimulus for this policy will come from the European members of NATO. The logic for this no-first-use declaration will be that the strategic assumptions which led to flexible response, and which have shaped the Alliance's strategic reasoning for more than forty years, are no longer a basis for policy. The Soviet Union no longer constitutes a proximate military threat; the existing conventional forces fielded by NATO following a CFE agreement will be seen as being adequate for conventional security requirements; and therefore a strategy that links European defense to the possible first use of nuclear weapons will be judged unnecessary and even dangerous.

CONSEQUENCES OF NO-FIRST-USE

The adoption of a No First Use policy within NATO will have major military and political consequences. Even in the absence of new security arrangements in Europe, these consequences alone will transform the Atlantic Alliance to a significant degree.

One likely result of a NFU policy in NATO is political pressure to declare Europe a "nuclear free zone." This idea has previously been limited to minority peace groups in Europe, but the advent of a

"new millennium of peace and security in Europe" will increase the general attractiveness of this theme.¹⁶

Some European leaders may even see in this a way to shift the full burden of nuclear risk back onto the United States: since nuclear weapons would only be used by the Alliance in retaliation for previous use, they would no longer serve any real "warfighting" or even controlled escalation role. Consequently, the proposed use of nuclear weapons would essentially be in the form of strategic retaliation only. |?

Against this, other Europeans will worry that such a policy will effectively "decouple" the United States' nuclear deterrent from European defense once and for all. Whether this fear will dampen the tantalizing prospect of a Europe free from the threat of nuclear weapons is uncertain.

Most likely, enough reservations about the sturdiness of the new peaceful security environment will exist to allow the political defeat of a "nuclear free zone" movement in the European parliament or elsewhere for several years after the adoption of NFU. If European peace and concord do prove durable, then a Europe free from the presence of nuclear weapons will become more likely.

Another likely consequence of a declared NFU policy is a substantial reduction in American nuclear weapons systems in Europe. No First Use would effectively revise flexible response into a "conventional response only" strategy. Under such a strategy, the

¹⁷ For an analysis of the prospects of a nuclear free zone and NFU in Europe as part of a restructuring of NATO, see Henry Kissinger, "Living With the Inevitable," Newsweek, 4 December 1989, p. 56. where?

presence of the existing "battlefield" nuclear weapons would no longer be justified in a warfighting sense. Their presence would be judged by Europeans to be not only unnecessary but dangerous, since in a general nuclear exchange they might invite counterforce strikes.

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A tempting compromise (already suggested by Senator Nunn) will be the removal of American land-based systems only, while entrusting NATO's second-use retaliation to air- or sea-based platforms. For Europeans, this would seem to have the advantage of removing the most numerous and most visible systems, though whether air-delivered or submarine-launched systems would adequately soothe "decoupling" fears is uncertain. The United States is likely to consider this solution undesirable, since air- and sea-launched retaliatory strikes -- even if meant as a limited retaliation for a strike against NATO -- would be virtually indistinguishable from the employment of American strategic systems. Under these circumstances, the theoretical line between a limited, or theater, nuclear war and a general exchange would be all but erased. (As outlined above, this objection is likely to be of more concern to American strategists than it is to Europeans.)

One ironic result of reducing American nuclear systems in Europe might be a greater European desire to retain American conventional forces on the continent. With the withdrawal of most (or even all) of the American nuclear hardware, a residual conventional force may have greater appeal as a continuing token of American commitment.

A No First Use policy and a concomitant reduction of American nuclear systems in Europe is likely to have two other military consequences.

First, there will be strong pressure to make the Alliance's Supreme Allied Commander a European. Such a proposal has surfaced occasionally in the past, but generally has foundered on the issue of American control of the vast NATO nuclear arsenal. An Alliance committed to using nuclear weapons only in retaliation could more easily accommodate a European SACEUR as its operational commander.

Second, a reduction of American nuclear systems in Europe will make it difficult for the US Army to retain such systems in its inventory. Unlike the Navy and the Air Force, the Army's nuclear systems are all "tactical," and intended primarily for a European warfighting role. In the absence of this requirement, Army funding for those systems will be slashed, and they might even disappear from the Army's force structure altogether. While this outcome will be decried by some as a dangerous lessening of American flexibility, it will be a refreshing affirmation that strategy defines force structure rather than the other way around.

Aside from its military consequences, NFU will have some important political results as well.

A No First Use policy in NATO will greatly reduce the stature of the United States in the Alliance. Throughout the lifetime of NATO, the United States has always been the senior military partner by virtue of its near-exclusive control over nuclear weapons. This military pre-eminence has translated into political dominance as

well. A diminished role for nuclear weapons will mean a diminished status for the United States, though it will still exert a major influence by virtue of its economic and general political clout. This will be felt not only in internal Alliance affairs, but in matters outside the Alliance's geographical boundaries where the European allies will probably feel less compulsion to support US initiatives except in their own self-interest.

A second political consequence may be to build momentum toward American military disengagement from Europe. This result would stem not from a No First Use policy alone, but rather from the possible accumulation of trends (CFE reductions in US forces, withdrawal of nuclear weapons, a European SACEUR, increased European assertiveness) of which NFU might be just a part. Without a clear nuclear or conventional role to tie America to its European allies, domestic politics will almost certainly demand at some point that the United States stop spending money to maintain a needless military presence in Europe.

Finally, the adoption of a No First Use policy could have interesting political consequences in Europe itself. Three possible results come immediately to mind.

First, a declaratory NFU strategy might smooth the way for the reintegration of France into the Alliance's military structure. Clearly, other political factors (including perhaps the stature of a reunited Germany within the Alliance) would be decisive in French calculations. Still, France left the Alliance in part over dislike of flexible response; the effective abandonment of that strategy might make French reentry more attractive.

A second consequence could be a complete revamping of British strategy. The issue of "denuclearizing" British strategy and forces is a subject of hot debate in Britain. The Labour Party already supports unilaterally giving up British nuclear weapons, and endorses a "non-nuclear" strategy for NATO. The Liberal Alliance (the Liberal Party and the Social Democrats) is willing to retain some small nuclear posture for Britain, but favors a "no early use" nuclear strategy for NATO as a step toward an eventual "nuclear weapons free zone" in Europe. These positions have so far had little impact on British policy, since Thatcher's Conservative government has remained strongly committed both to Britain's nuclear deterrent forces and to existing NATO strategy. However, the adoption of a No First Use policy within NATO would give new energy to the arguments for a "denuclearized" Britain. In the event that the Tory government is defeated in future general elections, the existence (or even the early prospect) of a No First Use posture in NATO could result in a drastic remodeling of Britain's strategy and force structure.¹⁸

No longer?

A third -- and perhaps most intriguing -- political result of a No First Use policy could be the incorporation of new members into the Atlantic Alliance. At first glance such a prospect seems farfetched, given the longstanding reality of Cold War politics in Europe. However, one consequence of NATO's reliance on American nuclear weapons has been to prevent its evolution into a regional

¹⁸ The subject of non-nuclear defense for Britain is discussed at length in Ken Booth and John Baylis, Britain, NATO and Nuclear Weapons: Alternative Defence versus Alliance Reform (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989). A comparison of the current viewpoints of Britain's various political parties is on pp. 12-13.

security system independent of superpower bloc politics. Today, traditional Cold War divisions are giving way throughout Europe. Easing the Alliance's dependence on American nuclear weaponry could result in a broader, bolder, and (from the Soviet viewpoint) less threatening role for NATO as a forum for regional security cooperation and reassurance. (Such a view appears to be taking hold in the possible Russian willingness -- however reluctant -- to allow a reunited Germany to be a member of NATO.) Whether NATO could eventually become the nucleus around which other nations gather (perhaps as "affiliated members") to produce a post-Cold War security structure for Europe cannot be foreseen. Nevertheless, a declared NFU policy could well make such a prospect more attractive.

That NATO will make a No First Use declaration is by no means a foregone conclusion. A number of political imponderables -- the reunification of Germany, the outcome of CFE and START arms control negotiations, the security arrangements undertaken by the former Soviet satellites in a post-Warsaw Pact Europe, and even the possible breakup of the Soviet Union and the political survival of Mikhail Gorbachev -- can all decisively influence the eventual outcome.

Given current trends, however, No First Use will soon appear as a highly charged topic on NATO's political agenda. Alliance leaders, reviewing the longstanding rationale for a first-use stance, will discover that the basis for that has disappeared. As Fred C. Ikle wrote recently, "The unexpected global transformation should embolden us to reach for an exit from this nuclear Cold War. To

begin with, it's time to recognize that NATO's hoary doctrine -- to deter conventional war by threatening nuclear holocaust -- has lost its military rationale and political support."¹⁹ As the Soviet Union sheds its aggressive image and completes its withdrawal from Eastern Europe, political pressure within the Atlantic Alliance to declare a No First Use nuclear policy will eventually become irresistible.

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¹⁹ Fred C. Ikle, "New World, Old Strategy," The Washington Post, 16 April 1990, p. A15.

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