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The Myth of Flexible Response: United States Strategy in Europe during the 1960s

PICK UP ANY book on post-war United States foreign relations and you will almost certainly be told that US national security policy changed dramatically on 20 January 1961, when the incoming John F. Kennedy administration began to replace Dwight D. Eisenhower's 'massive retaliation' with a new military strategy of 'flexible response'. The strategy, which focused largely on the Soviet threat to Western Europe, was, and is, seen as a radical change which supposedly enhanced deterrence by providing the president with flexible nuclear options and increased conventional capabilities to deal with a variety of military crises.

This view of flexible response is widely held among both strategists and historians.¹ However, the *operational* changes in US strategy in Europe during the 1960s have been exaggerated. Recently declassified documents and transcribed recordings reveal that senior officials, including the president and secretary of defence, were not persuaded by the core *strategic* assumptions underlaying the doctrine of flexible response as they applied to the role of the United States in Europe. Like Eisenhower before them, they were not convinced that 'controlled' nuclear war was possible, entertained the possibility of assisting independent European nuclear

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¹ See, e.g., J. E. Stromseth, *The Origins of Flexible Response: NATO's Debate over Strategy in the 1960s* (New York, 1988); J. L. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy* (Oxford, 1982); D. Shapley, *Promise and Power: The Life and Times of Robert McNamara* (Boston, 1993); A. L. Friedberg, *In the Shadow of the Garrison State: America's Anti-Statism and Its Cold War Grand Strategy* (Princeton, 2000); L. Freedman, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy* (2nd ed., New York, 1997); F. Kaplan, *The Wizards of Armageddon* (New York, 1983). Cf., e.g., J. S. Duffield, 'The Evolution of NATO's Strategy of Flexible Response: A Reinterpretation', *Security Studies*, i (1991), 132-56; D. A. Rosenberg, 'Reality and Responsibility: Power and Process in the Making of United States Nuclear Strategy, 1945-68', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, ix (1986), 35-52; D. Ball, 'The Development of the SIOP, 1960-83', in *Strategic Nuclear Targeting*, ed. D. Ball and J. Richelson (Ithaca, 1986), pp. 35-56; and M. Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of a European Settlement, 1945-63* (Princeton, 1999).

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programmes, and would have preferred to reduce rather than enlarge the US conventional forces in Western Europe.

The *rhetoric* of flexible response, however, suited senior US policy-makers for reasons having little to do with enhancing deterrence or winning a nuclear war. While Kennedy, like Eisenhower, did seek a wider range of military options to help him to meet the anomalous challenge of *maintaining* West Berlin's *viability* in the face of Soviet pressure, neither he nor Eisenhower supposed that 'flexible' responses suited to managing a crisis over Berlin were appropriate to a Soviet blitzkrieg or even a limited land grab, which would provoke an immediate nuclear response. The Kennedy administration's rhetorical adoption of flexible response, and the Lyndon B. Johnson administration's efforts to persuade its NATO allies to adopt the strategy, were motivated by the need to ease difficult intra-alliance tensions over the two crucial questions of the cold war in Europe, the German question and the nuclear question. By emphasizing conventional forces, controlled response, and centralized command and control of nuclear weapons, the new strategy helped to resolve complex and potentially explosive issues in Central Europe surrounding the military status of West Germany.

Understanding the origins and meaning of flexible response is also important for other reasons. First, the new evidence shows that the United States's strategy of containment was not applied only to the Soviet Union. Especially after the Berlin and Cuban missile crises, US policies on nuclear sharing and conventional forces in Europe were often shaped as much by the complexities of the German question. Second, the evidence has important implications for international relations theory. Contrary to Waltzian neo-realism, US strategy in Europe reveals that the cold war was *not* simply a bipolar struggle, and that balancing occurred *within* as well as between alliances. Waltzian neo-realism, which asserts that allies were irrelevant during the bipolar struggle between the superpowers, must come to terms with US strategy in Europe during the 1960s, as Kenneth N. Waltz's own arguments about the dynamics of bipolar systems and alliances derive entirely from the history of the cold war.¹

Third, a proper understanding of flexible response has implications for policy today. The United States still maintains large conventional forces in Germany, almost ten years after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The question of Germany's military status and the presence of US forces have the potential to become explosive issues in the future. The German chancellor, Gerhard Schroeder, complained in September 1999 that NATO once 'served to protect Germany but also [acted] as protection against

¹ K. N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass., 1979).

Germany', a concept that 'has no value from now on'. Germany, he claimed, having become 'a great power in Europe', would not hesitate to pursue its national interests, however it defined them. Since the United States's similar stance of containing while protecting Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan may be challenged in the future, a better understanding of how the United States restrained West Germany during the 1960s offers guidance on how to respond.¹

* * *

The term 'flexible response' was vague, and rarely used in private by senior officials. The president's special assistant for national security affairs, McGeorge Bundy, criticizing the process of rewriting the Eisenhower administration's Basic National Security Policy, told the state department's policy planning chairman, Walt Rostow, in April 1962 that he had 'grave reservations about the notions implied by the words "doctrine" and "strategy" in connection with basic policy'.² At a White House staff meeting on 4 February 1963, Bundy added 'in the most serious way that he felt there was really no logic whatever to "nuclear policy"'. In other words, 'military planners who calculate that we will win if only we can kill 100 million Russians while they are killing 30 million Americans are living in total dreamland'.³ The man responsible for implementing strategy in Europe, NATO's supreme allied commander, General Lyman Lemnitzer, actually forbade the use of the term flexible response, because he complained that 'so many of my people didn't really know' what it meant.⁴ And the official history of the United States's nuclear command and control effort contends that 'to the extent it amounted to a doctrine, it was open to different interpretations, and it is not easy (if at all possible) to find a single coherent, clear statement of it, even among authoritative pronouncements of the President and the Secretary of Defense'.⁵

Despite the confusion, the term is normally associated with a cluster of assumptions with important implications for NATO strategy during the 1960s, in general by replacing what was viewed as excessive reliance on nuclear weapons with greater reliance on conventional forces. These would allow NATO to respond effectively to a Soviet provocation that did

¹ See R. Cohen, 'A New German Assertiveness on Its Foreign Policy Stance', *New York Times*, 12 Sept. 1999, p. 8.

² Bundy to Rostow, 13 April 1962, *F[oreign] R[elations of the] U[nited] S[tates]*, 1961-3, viii. 263.

³ L. J. Legere, cited in editorial note 127, *ibid.*, p. 463, concerning a White House daily staff mtg. held on 4 Feb. 1963.

⁴ Interview with Lemnitzer, 11 Feb. 1970, pp. 6-7 [Boston, John F.] Kennedy Library, Oral History Collection.

⁵ L. Wainstein et al. 'The Evolution of US Strategic Command and Control and Warning, 1945-72', Institute for Defense Analyses, June 1975 [Washington, DC], D[e]partment O[f] D[e]fence-F[reedom] O[f] I[n]formation O[f]fice], p. 287.

not merit a nuclear attack, such as the seizure of a 'hostage city' like Hamburg, or an attack by conventional forces on Western Europe. Nuclear strategy shifted away from an all-out nuclear attack towards the 'flexible' use of nuclear forces to deliver a controlled, graduated nuclear response.¹

This article shows that this view of flexible response is misleading, at least for the 1960s. The first section examines whether US nuclear strategy became more flexible by analysing policy debates over controlled response, damage limitation, nuclear sharing, and the military effectiveness of tactical nuclear weapons. The second section examines whether after 1961 the United States did, in fact, rely less on nuclear escalation and more on conventional war. It shows that Kennedy and McNamara wished to *reduce* US conventional forces in Europe, and explains the *specific* and *unique* connection between conventional forces and the crisis over the status of Berlin. The third section examines the relationship between flexible response, US conventional forces in Europe, and German nuclear politics during the Johnson administration.

* * *

The strategy of flexible response presupposed the capability to wage limited nuclear war by offering the president of the United States the choice of deviating from the pre-programmed attack envisioned in the Single Integrated Operational Plan (SIOP); in other words, flexible response would allow the United States to 'control and direct' its nuclear forces in a crisis 'as the military situation may dictate', as McNamara claimed in a top-secret speech in Athens to NATO on 5 May 1962.²

Despite the enthusiasm among defence analysts for 'graduated' and 'controlled' responses, they were not possible at the time. When McNamara asked the joint chiefs of staff to prepare a doctrine that permitted controlled response with pauses for negotiation, they replied that it could not be done.³ In December 1961, the Net Assessment Committee, led by Lieutenant General Thomas Hickey, presented McNamara with a study that concluded that controlled response would have to be postponed until the late 1960s at the earliest, owing to the technical constraints.⁴ In practice, as David Rosenberg shows, during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations

¹ It is often forgotten that the *Eisenhower* period ended with his secretary of state, Christian Herter, asking NATO to embrace 'flexibility of response': airgram from the delegation at the NAC to state dept., 17 Dec. 1960, *FRUS*, 1958-60, vii, no. 1. 674-82.

² 'Remarks by Secretary McNamara, NATO Ministerial Meeting, 5 May 1962, Restricted Session', 5 May 1962, OSD-FOIO, pp. 79-481.

³ Wainstein et al., 'Evolution of US Strategic Command', p. 288. See also, Lemnitzer to McNamara, 18 April 1961, *FRUS*, 1961-3, viii. 74.

⁴ See *FRUS*, 1961-3, viii. 196 n. 5, describing the contents of 'A Study of Requirements for US Strategic Systems: Final Report', 1 Dec. 1961.

only superficial changes were made to the war plan.¹ The director of the joint strategic planning staff, General Bruce Holloway, claims that McNamara allowed him and his staff to work out the plan as they saw fit.²

Defence department officials were shocked during the Richard M. Nixon administration to find how little their predecessors under McNamara had done to plan for limited nuclear war. In January 1969, they identified significant weaknesses in the United States's ability to respond flexibly to a less than all-out Soviet attack: the United States 'had the number and types of weapons' but not the 'planning and command and control capability' to respond with anything other than large, pre-planned strikes. The assistant secretary of defence for system analysis concluded that the United States would not be able to respond 'with strategic nuclear weapons at less than SIOP levels until 1975-76'.³ And when the secretary of defence, James Schlesinger, laid out the Nixon administration's new nuclear strategy in 1974, he claimed that it represented a dramatic change from the past:

The thing that is different about the targeting doctrine that I have outlined to you is the emphasis on selectivity and flexibility. In the past we have had massive preplanned strikes in which one would be dumping literally thousands of weapons on the Soviet Union. Some of those strikes could to some extent be withheld from going directly against cities, but that was limited even then. With massive strikes of that sort, it would be impossible to ascertain whether the purpose of a strategic strike was limited or not.⁴

Despite the rhetorical emphasis on flexible nuclear response during the 1960s, McNamara quickly lost interest. Henry Rowen explains that, by 1963, McNamara felt that efforts to develop flexible, limited nuclear options were no longer worthwhile: the contingencies requiring nuclear weapons were so 'unpredictable' that 'nuclear planning could only be done when the contingency arose'.⁵ According to the report on nuclear command and control, written by a group led by Leonard Wainstein in 1975, the complex issues behind flexible nuclear options 'that received major attention in the early 1960s' were 'pushed into the background by the war' in South-East Asia. The period ended with 'just as much, if not more' concern over the fundamental issue of survivability. Looking back on the

¹ Rosenberg, 'Reality and Responsibility', pp. 46, 48.

² Trachtenberg, *Constructed Peace*, pp. 318-19 n. 124.

³ Wainstein, 'Evolution of US Strategic Command', pp. 430, 432.

⁴ The testimony of Hon. James R. Schlesinger, Secretary of Defense, 'US-USSR Strategic Policies', 93rd Congress, 1st Session, Subcommittee on Arms Control, Committee on Foreign Relations, 4 March 1974, p. 9.

⁵ H. S. Rowen, 'The Evolution of Strategic Nuclear Doctrine', in *Strategic Thought in the Nuclear Age*, ed. L. Martin (Baltimore, 1979), p. 151.

1960s, the report concluded that 'the issue of flexible response seems to have been a less significant theme than it appeared at the time.'¹ When Schlesinger was asked by the Committee on Foreign Relations in March 1974 whether McNamara's strategic plan involved 'a massive attack on cities and missile silos and other limited targets alike' which the Nixon administration was replacing with 'a range of options which would range from attack on missile sites up to a massive attack on cities', he replied 'Yes, sir.'²

The issues surrounding McNamara's calls for a second-strike counterforce capability – or damage-limiting force – are even murkier. In his first budget statement in 1961, McNamara suggested a strategic posture that rejected both the extremes of minimal deterrence and first-strike capability. The resulting strategic compromise, known as 'damage limitation', required strategic superiority in order to attack Soviet military targets *after* the United States had absorbed a Soviet first strike. McNamara explained the logic behind 'damage limitation' in his speech to NATO in Athens.

McNamara never took the concept of second-strike counterforce seriously. The deputy special assistant for national security affairs, Carl Kaysen, claimed that McNamara stressed damage limitation because he doubted whether the public or the military would accept minimal deterrence: 'these figures were the lowest that he could consistently support and carry the military along with him.'³ Shortly after the NATO meeting in Athens, the assistant secretary of defence for international security affairs, Paul Nitze, asked McNamara why he had deleted the words 'relative to the US' from the following statement: 'Attainment of a stable military environment requires strategic forces sufficiently effective so that Sino-Soviet leaders would expect – without question – the Bloc's present power position [relative to the United States] to be worsened drastically as a result of a general nuclear war.'

As damage limitation assumed that the United States would survive a nuclear exchange with superior forces, Nitze asked McNamara to put back the deleted phrase to strengthen the language. McNamara, who refused, explained that 'the concept of a "worsened relative military position after a general nuclear war" is not a meaningful one to me when each side has the capacity to destroy each other's civilization.'⁴

¹ Wainstein, 'Evolution of US Strategic Command', pp. 415, 436.

² Committee on foreign relations, 'US-USSR Strategic Policies', p. 9.

³ Interview, Joseph O'Connor with Carl Kaysen, 11 July 1966, p. 12, Kennedy Library, Oral History Collection. See also May, Steinbruner, and Wolfe, 'History of the Strategic Arms Competition', 1981, DOD-FOIO, p. 520.

⁴ Memo, Nitze to McNamara, 5 June 1962, *FRUS*, 1961-3, viii. 303 and n. 3. See memo for sec. of defence, 20 April 1963, *ibid.*, p. 481 and n. 4.

As the Kennedy administration was confident in its overwhelming nuclear superiority, one wonders why McNamara would argue for a nuclear strategy in which he did not believe. An exchange in September 1962 with Britain's minister of defence, Peter Thorneycroft, helps to answer the question. When asked to explain the counterforce strategy, McNamara answered that the point of his speech in Athens had been to *convince the Soviets* to strengthen their strategic nuclear forces. McNamara explained that the 'Soviet forces were so soft that, if they believed the US were going to attack, the Soviets would have no option but to hit first. Therefore the Americans believed that the Russians would have to escape from this dilemma by hardening bases and sites and diversifying systems ... it would make for safety by reducing the pressure on the Soviets.' McNamara concluded that 'in the conditions of today *neither side was likely in fact to resort to counter force strategy*.'¹ Thorneycroft, who thought the explanation bizarre, attributed McNamara's speeches to the demands of US domestic politics.

By the summer of 1963, the idea of maintaining strategic superiority had been dropped. In a meeting on 30 July, after McNamara told Kennedy that a second-strike counterforce policy would no longer limit the damage to the United States, McGeorge Bundy jokingly commented that any strategy 'was only good for about a year'.² More than twenty years later, he confessed that he and other senior officials in the Kennedy administration were 'assiduous propagators of the fallacy of usable nuclear superiority. We owe some atonement for that.'³ By the end of 1963, McNamara's budgets reflected the administration's abandonment of the strategy of using second-strike counterforce weapons to limit damage.⁴

The debate over second-strike capability may have been irrelevant. Kennedy, unlike McNamara and McGeorge Bundy, was more interested in the mechanics and possibility of a pre-emptive strike in the event that a crisis with the Soviet Union should escalate.⁵ He told the joint chiefs of staff in 1961 that the critical point was to 'use nuclear weapons at a crucial moment before they use them', and asked the joint chiefs whether the

1 Minister of defence's visit to the US, Sept. 1962, 'Counter Force Strategy', 19 Sept. 1962 [Kew, Public Record Office], PR[im]E M[inister's Office Records] 11/3779; minister of defence's visit to the US, note on mtg. with McNamara, 19 Sept. 1962 [Kew, Public Record Office], DEFE[nce Ministry Records] 13/323; and 'NATO Strategy - Statement by Mr McNamara at the ministerial mtg. on 5 May, 1962', 15 Aug. 1962, DEFE 6/83.

2 Tape 102/A38, 30 July 1963, Kennedy Library.

3 Comments, McGeorge Bundy, Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard University, 12 Oct. 1983. I thank Marc Trachtenberg for providing this information.

4 See draft memo, McNamara to Johnson, 6 Dec. 1963, *FRUS*, 1961-3, viii. 550; and Keeny to Bundy, 22 Nov. 1963, *ibid.*, p. 534.

5 Trachtenberg, *Constructed Peace*, pp. 292-7. See also, F. Kaplan, 'JFK's First-Strike Plan', *Atlantic Monthly*, Oct. 2001, pp. 81-6.

United States was able to mount a pre-emptive strike without letting the Soviets know.¹ In 1963, Kennedy explained to the national security council that he had been advised that if he ever released a nuclear weapon on the battlefield he 'should start a pre-emptive attack on the Soviet Union', as 'the use of nuclear weapons was bound to escalate and we might as well get the advantage by going first.'² The question of when, and under what circumstances, became frighteningly real when the United States discovered that the Soviet Union was secretly sending medium-range missiles to Cuba. During the crisis, Kennedy stated that 'everybody sort of figures that in extremis' the United States would use nuclear weapons. However, 'the decision to use any kind of nuclear weapon, even the tactical ones, presents such a risk of it getting out of control so quickly, that there's ...' Although Kennedy's voice trails off at this point, he must have been emphasizing the advantages of pre-emption,³ as he showed in his comments a year later. When told that a clean first strike was no longer possible, he asked, 'why [do] we need to have as much defense as we have' if US strategy was to be 'based on the assumption that even if we strike first' nuclear weapons offered no protection?⁴

Although most of the evidence has yet to be released, what has been shows that the replacement of the SIOP with a *limited* first strike was investigated in 1961, after intelligence revealed that the Soviets had fewer intercontinental missiles than had been thought. Kaysen argued in September that a smaller, cleaner strike, having a better chance of success, was better suited to contingencies likely to arise out of the Berlin crisis.⁵ Kennedy's military representative, Maxwell Taylor, forwarded Kaysen's analysis under a generally favourable covering letter. The day after receiving it, on 19 September 1961, Kennedy asked his military advisers, including General Thomas Power of Strategic Air Command, 'how much information did the Soviets need' and 'how long do they need to launch their missiles?'⁶ Years later, in 1988, Kaysen was asked if the point of the exercise was 'an attempt to implement a relatively subtle strategy for controlled thermonuclear war, "the counterforce/no-cities" strategy that had been developed mainly at RAND in the late 1950s, and which would be outlined by Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara in his Athens and Ann Arbor speeches in 1962?' He replied:

1 Mem of con. with Kennedy, 27 July 1961, *FRUS*, 1961-3, viii. 123.

2 Trachtenberg, *Constructed Peace*, p. 292.

3 Transcript of mtg., Mon., 29 Oct. 1962, 10.10 A.M., in *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House during the Cuban Missile Crisis*, ed. E. May and P. Zelikow (Cambridge, Mass., 1997), p. 657.

4 517th mtg. of the NSC, report of the net subcommittee, 12 Sept. 1963, *FRUS*, 1961-3, viii. 499-507.

5 Kaplan's account of this limited pre-emptive strike plan (*Wizards of Armageddon*, pp. 297, 301) is misleading.

6 *FRUS*, 1961-3, viii. 128-31.

No, it was just, 'Look, we may get in a war. We now know and have known for some months the Soviets really haven't got an operational missile force. Therefore, maybe we really can disarm them. Can we disarm them? It would be great if we could. By God, we can.' That was all it was. I remember standing in the corridor outside the Cabinet Room in the White House with Harry [Rowen]. And, as I said, there had been some Berlin discussion and I don't know why I was there since I usually wasn't, but I was. And I said, 'Look Harry, who the hell knows what's gonna happen? We ought to ask ourselves the question. We know the Soviets really have no missiles, that we can take care of them. Do we have a disarming strike and what will we need to do it?' And the point is, we didn't need all of SAC. That was the message. We just were saying, 'Can we make sure that the Soviets can't launch a really serious heavy attack on the United States?' And the answer was that in 1961 we could have made sure, with rather a high level of confidence.¹

Planning a clean first strike, with the aim of pre-empting a Soviet response, is by no means the same thing as developing a flexible war-fighting doctrine. Little, however, was done with Kaysen's plan and the next SIOF – SIOF-63 – was only superficially revised. Its stipulated willingness to refrain from attacking Soviet satellite countries was not a radical break from the past. It remained the type of plan Eisenhower had approved: a massive, pre-programmed, strategic nuclear attack that contained little flexibility.

The flexible response strategy may have had a more marked effect on the politically contentious question of the possession and control of nuclear forces by US allies. Even though US policy on this question was often obscure during the late 1950s, Eisenhower had sympathized with the allies' nuclear ambitions.² The Kennedy administration, by contrast, was adamantly opposed to independent allied nuclear forces, at least publicly. It justified its stance by the logic of nuclear strategy; that small forces, unstable themselves, invited Soviet pre-emption and were effective only against cities, not the types of military targets US strategists emphasized in their counterforce strategies. In addition, a strategy of graduated response and damage limitation required centralized decision-making. As McNamara put it in his speech at Athens: 'In short, then, weak nuclear capabilities, operating independently, are expensive, prone to obsolescence, and lacking in credibility as a deterrent. It is for these reasons that I have laid such stress on unity of planning, concentration of executive authority, and central direction.'³

¹ Trachtenberg and Rosenberg's unpublished interview with Carl Kaysen at his office in Cambridge, Mass., in Aug. 1988.

² See M. Trachtenberg, 'The Nuclearization of NATO and US-West European Relations' and 'The Berlin Crisis', in *History and Strategy* (Princeton, 1991), esp. pp. 163-8 and 180-91.

³ 'Remarks by Secretary McNamara, NATO Ministerial Meeting, 5 May 1962, Restricted Session', 5 May 1962, OSD-FOIO, pp. 79-481.

If flexible response had been taken seriously, the United States should have tried to persuade or compel its European allies to abandon their nuclear programmes. However, the Athens speech did not reflect the actual views of either McNamara or Kennedy about sharing nuclear technology. Only weeks before the speech, McNamara told Kennedy that sharing with the French 'would be justified on balance of payments reasons alone'.¹ Other defence department officials such as Roswell Gilpatric and Nitze, the ambassador to France, James Gavin, and Taylor supported sharing.² When Kennedy decided to prohibit it, his reasons had little to do with military strategy: he 'did not want to have the Germans clamoring for help in their turn'.³

The administration's policy on nuclear sharing remained an open question throughout 1962 and 1963. Kennedy toyed in September and October 1962 with the idea of helping the French,⁴ and after a meeting with the British at Nassau in December, he offered them the Polaris missile to replace the Skybolt air-to-surface missile which McNamara had cancelled for budgetary and technical reasons. As Polaris would extend the life of Britain's nuclear deterrent well into the future, Kennedy, with McNamara's support, decided in December 1962 to reverse his decision to deny nuclear weapons to France. He directed Gavin's successor, Charles Bohlen, to offer France everything, including warheads and submarines, in return for French support of US European policy.⁵

Despite the failure to come to terms with France, the United States reopened the question during the summer of 1963. Surprisingly, given the awful state of Franco-American relations, the Kennedy administration was willing to supply the French with 'Polaris or Minutemen missiles ... or Polaris submarine technology' in return for agreement to the partial test-ban treaty.⁶ Kaysen, who took part in the test-ban negotiations, claimed that the administration was even willing in return to give the French

¹ Kohler to Rusk, 'Secretary McNamara's Views on Nuclear Sharing', 12 April 1962 [Washington], U[nited] S[tates] N[ational] A[rchives, Records of the Dept. of State], R[ecord] G[rup] 59, S[tate] D[eartment] D[ecimal] F[ile] 740.5611, p. 1.

² Bundy, memo for president, 'Action on Nuclear Assistance to France', 7 May 1962, Kennedy Library, P[resident's] O[ffice] F[iles], 116a, France-Security.

³ Ibid., p. 6.

⁴ See minutes of the 505th mtg. of the NSC, 20 Oct. 1962, *FRUS*, 1961-3, xi. 126-36; and minutes of the 506th mtg. of the NSC, 20 Oct. 1962, *FRUS*, 1961-3, xi. 141-9.

⁵ See R. Neustadt, 'Skybolt and Nassau: American Policy-Making and Anglo-American Relations', 15 Nov. 1963 [Austin, Lyndon B. Johnson Library], [Francis] Bator Papers. This account follows Trachtenberg, *Constructed Peace*, pp. 359-67.

⁶ 'A USSR-US Enforced Non-Proliferation Agreement – the Probable Positions of the FRG, France, Italy, Norway, Belgium, and the Netherlands', n.d. [June 1963], Kennedy Library, N[ational] S[ecurity] F[iles], Carl Kaysen, Nuclear Energy Matters, 6/63, box 376, p. 3. See also, 'On Nuclear Diffusion, Volume II', Kennedy Library, NSF, Carl Kaysen, Briefing Book, vol. II, box 376, p. 3.

'nuclear warheads for their bombs'.¹ Although nothing came of the offer, it was clear that the Kennedy administration did not object to France's nuclear forces for the reasons McNamara laid out at Athens.

The gap between rhetoric and action over nuclear sharing arose not from military considerations but from a political question: German rearmament. If the United States helped Britain and, if Britain, also France, West Germany would expect similar treatment. Even as Kennedy reversed US policy at Nassau and offered nuclear weapons to France, he explained that his reluctance arose from fear of how the decision might be interpreted in West Germany:

The United States however had not supported the French in the nuclear field and the result of this policy had been to sour American relations with France. Rightly or wrongly they had taken this attitude because of Germany ... The United States were concerned at what would happen in Germany after Dr Adenauer left the scene ... They regarded Germany as potentially the most powerful country in Europe and one whose future was in some doubt ... And if the United States did help France then pressure in Germany for similar help would rise.²

Similar dilemmas characterized the administration's debate over whether a flexible response would be more or less likely to rely on theatre nuclear weapons. On the one hand, as Taylor told McNamara on 25 April 1962, tactical nuclear weapons provided another rung on the escalation ladder short of general war: a 'flexible nuclear response' short of the big ones'.³ Thus, tactical nuclear weapons should have been part of a 'controlled response' or limited nuclear option. Yet, in practice, such weapons were not suited to the centralized command structure that flexible response demanded. If tactical nuclear weapons were to be effective, authorization to use them had to be delegated ahead of time to commanders on the battlefield; in which case, McNamara wondered, how do 'we preserve command and control in the tactical atomic environment?'⁴

Nor was the administration certain that tactical nuclear weapons would be effective in a war limited to the European continent. Some military authorities argued that such weapons would cancel out the Soviet Union's superiority in conventional weapons; that they might deter the Soviets from mobilizing their conventional forces owing to their vulnerability to tactical nuclear attacks.⁵ On the other hand, there was a natural fear that

¹ Interview, O'Connor with Kaysen, 11 July 1966, Kennedy Library, p. 131.

² Mtg. between Kennedy, Macmillan, and other officials, at Nassau, 19 Dec. 1962, Record of Nassau Conference, PREM 11/4229.

³ Taylor to McNamara, 25 April 1962 [Washington, DC, National Defense University, Department of Special Collections], [Maxwell D.] Taylor Papers, box 35.

⁴ McNamara to chairman, JCS, 23 May 1962, Taylor Papers, box 35, p. 2.

⁵ See, 'Further Study of Requirements for Tactical Nuclear Weapons', prepared by Special Studies

the use of any nuclear weapon would *increase* the chance of general war. Normally strong advocates of flexible response such as Kaysen, Rowen, and the deputy comptroller of the department of defence, Alain Enthoven, argued that tactical nuclear weapons were irrelevant since the strategic exchange would determine the outcome of a general war.¹

As the Kennedy administration never resolved these dilemmas, its policy towards the use of tactical nuclear weapons in Europe remained inconsistent. For example, in 1961, it decided to restrict their build-up. Similarly, at Athens, McNamara argued that they would soon have little utility. Seven months later, however, in a speech to NATO at Paris in December 1962, he stated: 'I want to make it perfectly clear that it is our intention to maintain and increase tactical nuclear weapons in Europe.' One military aide, Major William Y. Smith, remarked that the statement led 'our allies [to] believe we have plans to increase nuclear weapons in Europe' while the administration's declared policy remained one of 'reducing the number of deployed weapons if possible'.²

Most of the civilian advocates of flexible response held strong reservations about the use of tactical nuclear weapons in battle. But the weapons served the important *political* purpose of reassuring European allies, especially the West Germans, that the United States would not try to 'de-nuclearize' Europe. As McGeorge Bundy pointed out when discussing the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons in Europe, 'the forces that one wants for war are not necessarily those which one may want "diplomatically"'.³ Ultimately, the numbers of tactical nuclear weapons dramatically increased during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, for reasons less of military need than the management of allies.⁴

* * *

The difference between the nuclear policies of the Eisenhower and Kennedy/Johnson administrations was not as sharp as conventional wisdom suggests. But underlying the latter's emphasis on flexible response was the need to enhance *non-nuclear* capabilities in Europe. By making a quick Soviet takeover of the continent more difficult and a forward defence of West Germany more realistic, strengthened conventional forces would both enhance deterrence and raise the nuclear threshold in the event of

Group (JCS), April 1963, *FRUS, 1961-3*, viii. microfiche supp., doc. 291.

¹ See 'Views of Dr Enthoven on Tactical Nuclear Warfare', 7 Feb. 1963, *ibid.*, doc. 289.

² Smith for Goodpaster, 'US Policy on Tactical Nuclear Weapons in Europe', 6 Feb. 1963, *ibid.*, doc. 288, p. 4.

³ Daily White House staff mtg., 23 Jan. 1962, *ibid.*, doc. 287.

⁴ For the increase in tactical nuclear weapons in Europe during the 1960s, see J. M. Legge, *Theater Nuclear Weapons and the NATO Strategy of Flexible Response* [RAND, Santa Monica], RAND paper R-2964-FF, April 1983, p. 16.

war. Nonetheless, senior US officials did not necessarily believe in the *strategic*, as opposed to the *political*, logic behind their call for increased conventional capabilities, nor that the United States should enlarge its own conventional forces in Europe.

It is often forgotten that the Kennedy administration inherited from its predecessor six US divisions stationed in Europe. Given the importance of defence in the 1960 election, one would have expected that McNamara's first defence budget would signal the administration's strategic priorities with appropriations to increase their strength. To the surprise of advocates of conventional warfare, McNamara provided no additional money for increased conventional forces in Europe. Taylor was 'sorry to note the intention to cut back the level of conventional forces',¹ while the secretary of state, Dean Rusk, complained to Taylor in October that McNamara's budget 'actually projects a cutback in force levels, principally in the Army, below those currently approved'.² Kaysen, noticing that McNamara's five-year plan kept 'limited-war' forces unchanged until the financial year of 1969, asked McGeorge Bundy, 'is this the New Look which corresponds to the President's program?'³

The argument over the size and cost of the permanent conventional force continued throughout the early months of 1962.⁴ Although the call-up of reservists and the mobilization of two National Guard divisions after the conference at Vienna in June 1961 temporarily increased the army's size, McNamara refused to budget for the million-plus-man army proposed by advocates of flexible response. Despite intense lobbying, he 'showed no great increase in his receptivity' permanently to enlarge the United States's conventional forces.⁵ He had his way, both in the 1961 budget and in those that followed.

More surprisingly, Kennedy frequently threatened to *withdraw* large numbers of US troops from Europe. Almost from the start of his administration, he linked the presence of US conventional forces in Europe to political and economic interests, in particular an end to the US balance-of-payments deficit.⁶ In January 1963, he told the national security council:

1 Taylor for McNamara, 'Preliminary Comments on the Department of Defense FY '63 Budget and 1963-7 Program', Kennedy Library, NSF, Department and Agencies, box 275, p. 2.

2 Rusk to Taylor, 29 Oct. 1961, *FRUS*, 1961-3, viii. 191.

3 Kaysen to Bundy, 'Secretary McNamara's Memorandum on the Defense Budget dated October 6, 1961', 13 Nov. 1961, Kennedy Library, NSF, box 275, p. 1.

4 See, e.g., Rusk to McNamara, 20 Jan. 1962, *FRUS*, 1961-3, viii. microfiche supp., doc. 256; Kaysen to Bell, 23 Jan. 1962, *ibid.*, doc. 257; Taylor to president, 'Scheduled Reduction in Strength of the US Army in Fiscal Year 1963', 17 April 1962, *ibid.*, doc. 264.

5 Kaysen to Taylor, 23 Jan. 1962, *ibid.*, doc. 258.

6 See A. Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (New York, 1965), p. 601; W. W. Rostow, *The Diffusion of Power: An Essay in Recent History* (New York, 1972), p. 136; and memo of con., Kennedy and Adenauer, 24 June 1963, *FRUS*, 1961-3, ix. 170; Johnson Library, George

'we cannot continue to pay for the military protection of Europe while the NATO states are not paying for their fair share and living off the "fat of the land".' The United States must 'consider very hard the narrower interests of the United States'.¹ In May 1963, he warned Heinrich Krone, a minister in the German government, that the United States would be forced to withdraw troops on account of its dollar and gold outflow. And in May, General Francisco Franco told the German ambassador to Spain, Freiherr von Welck, that Kennedy had warned him: 'the question of the American balance of payments constituted one of his greatest concerns.' Unless he could reverse the outflow, he would be forced to 'change his whole policy' and 'dismantle the military support of Europe'.²

The balance-of-payments deficit was not the only issue that drove Kennedy to consider troop withdrawals from Europe. By 1962, both the French and West German governments were irritating him by openly criticizing the administration's policies. He told Thorncycroft in September that if France and West Germany were co-operating on a nuclear programme, as he suspected, the United States might simply 'haul out', because if West Germany broke the Brussels treaty of 1954 which prohibited it from making atomic weapons, the United States would 'have to consider whether they should regard themselves [as] still committed to their own obligations for keeping troops in Europe'.³ Similarly, Kennedy warned the French minister of cultural affairs, André Malraux, in May 1962 that if de Gaulle preferred a Europe dominated by Germany, the United States would bring its troops home and save \$1.3 billion, an amount that 'would just about meet our balance of payments deficit'. He told the West German chancellor, Konrad Adenauer, in June that 'economic relations' were 'possibly even more important to us now than nuclear matters', because the West was strong enough to deter a nuclear attack.⁴ And at a meeting in September 1963 with Schroeder, Kennedy said that 'the US does not want to take actions which would have an adverse impact on public opinion in Germany but does not wish to keep spending money to maintain forces which are not of real value'.⁵

As troop withdrawals contravened flexible response, many US officials were puzzled by Kennedy's desire to pull troops out of Europe. At the state department, the deputy assistant secretary for European affairs, J.

Ball Oral History, no. 2, AC 88-3, p. 29.

¹ Remarks of President Kennedy to the national security mtg., 22 Jan. 1963, *FRUS*, 1961-3, xiii. 486.

² Von Welck and Franco, 29 May 1963, *A[kten zur] A[uswartigen] P[olitik der Bundesrepublik] D[eutschland]*, 1963, i. no. 18; no. 185 n. 9.

³ Visit to the United States, 9-17 Sept. 1962, DEFE 13/323.

⁴ Memo of con., 'Trade and Fiscal Policy Matters', 24 June 1963, *FRUS*, 1961-3, ix. 170.

⁵ Memo of con., 'US Troop Reductions in Europe', 24 Sept. 1963, *ibid.*, p. 187.

Robert Schaetzel, asked how the United States could demand a 'greater European contribution to a flexible strategy' while taking steps 'toward a détente with the Soviet Union', and at the same time 'move unilaterally toward significant cutbacks in our present commitments and drift back toward the plate glass doctrine'.¹ Kaysen, who thought that McNamara's plan to withdraw troops from the Far East would require a shift in strategy towards 'an immediate nuclear response', asked whether similar withdrawals in Europe would not require the same shift.² To David Klein, on the staff at the White House, the withdrawals made the administration appear Gaullist:

We are calling for the creation of the MLF [Multilateral Force], with the proviso that the contributions to the conventional forces will *not be reduced*. But then we go on to say, *either* you put more into the conventional pot, and support our strategy, *or* we'll pull back and support your strategy. And then before the Europeans can respond, we go on to the *or* of the *either-or* condition, and come out looking like good Gaullists.³

The seeming contradiction is less puzzling when one remembers that Kennedy was far more concerned with political and economic interests than the effect of withdrawals on flexible response. In December 1962, he told the joint chiefs that Europe was getting a 'free ride'; that 'this situation with our NATO allies had to be changed this year'.⁴ Two months later, he ordered them to examine 'how much we can reduce our forces in Europe in the next twelve months'.⁵ Planning for withdrawals continued throughout the spring and summer of 1963. Kennedy, who ignored protests from the military and the state department that the withdrawals would jeopardize US military strategy in Europe, did not want to endanger the US economy defending countries which were simultaneously undermining US political and economic interests.⁶

Kennedy not only considered troop withdrawals in order to protect the United States's international monetary position, but he also did not accept the military and strategic necessity of stationing US conventional forces in Western Europe. By 1962, Kennedy seems to have concluded that the only military reason for the presence of large numbers of American troops was

1 Schaetzel to Kitchen, 'Balance of Payments and Force Withdrawal', 24 July 1963, *FRUS*, 1961-3, viii. microfiche supp., doc. 336.

2 Kaysen to Bundy, 20 May 1963, *ibid.*, doc. 326.

3 Klein to Bundy, 10 May 1963, *ibid.*, doc. 323.

4 JCS mtg. with president, 27 Dec. 1962, *FRUS*, 1961-3, viii. 453.

5 JCS mtg. with president, 'Force Strength in Europe', 28 Feb. 1963, *FRUS*, 1961-3, xiii. 517.

6 The international economic side of this story – involving offsets by West Germany – is told in F. J. Gavin, 'The Gold Battles within the Cold War: American Monetary Policy and the Defense of Europe, 1960-3', *Diplomatic History*, xxvi (2002), 61-94.

the threat to Berlin. The second Berlin crisis began in November 1958, when the Soviet Union announced it would sign a peace treaty with East Germany and, in the process, declare the Western powers' rights in Berlin null and void. If the West did not accept the Soviet Union's proposal of making Berlin a 'free city', the rights of access to Berlin from the West would be turned over to East Germany. The Soviets also declared that they would use force to defend East Germany against any Western attempt to use military means to maintain their rights. The Soviet premier, Nikita Khrushchev's, ultimatum threatened to escalate into a military confrontation between the Soviet bloc and the Western powers on several occasions in the late 1950s and early 1960s.¹

As West Berlin lay well within the Eastern bloc, NATO, in the event of a blockade, would have to initiate military action to restore Western access to the city. US nuclear forces, on the other hand, could do little to protect West Berlin, whose situation was anomalous, almost bizarre: the defence of Western Europe was a simpler strategic problem than maintaining access to West Berlin. Kennedy assumed that if the Berlin crisis could be resolved, he could bring home large numbers of American troops.²

The troops, after all, were not needed for the defence of Western Europe. *Any* Soviet move against Western Europe would 'lead promptly to nuclear warfare'. As the United States 'would be forced to use nuclear weapons against the first Russian who came across the line', 'the nuclear deterrent would be effective.'³ Recently released secret recordings reveal that Kennedy told Eisenhower in September 1962: 'if we did not have the problem, I say, of Berlin and maintaining access to that autobahn of ours, then you can say that any attempt to seize any part of West Germany, we would go to nuclear weapons.' In order to ensure access to Berlin, the United States could not suddenly 'drop nuclear weapons the first time you have difficulty'. Kennedy added that de Gaulle would 'be perfectly right in talking about our immediate use of nuclear weapons, it seems to me, if we didn't have [the] Berlin problem, because then obviously any Soviet intrusion across the line would be a deliberate one and would be a signal for war'. He concluded that the unique and perplexing challenge the West faced in Berlin was the only 'valid reason' for 'our emphasizing the necessity of their building up conventional forces'.⁴ Similarly, in October,

¹ See M. Trachtenberg, *History and Strategy* (Princeton, 1991), pp. 169-234.

² See, e.g., Kennedy-Bundy-Rusk-McNamara mtg., 10 Dec. 1962, *FRUS*, 1961-3, microfiche supp., xiii-xv. doc. 27; Kennedy-McNamara-JCS mtg., 27 Dec. 1962, *FRUS*, 1961-3, viii. 449; and memo for the record, 'Joint Chiefs of Staff Meeting with the President, February 28th, 1963 - Force Reductions in Europe', 28 Feb. 1963, *FRUS*, 1961-3, xiii. 516-18.

³ Memo, Smith to Taylor, 9 Aug. 1962, *FRUS*, 1961-3, xv. 268-9; Kennedy-Bundy-Rusk-McNamara mtg., 10 Dec. 1962, *FRUS*, 1961-3, microfiche supp., xiii-xv. doc. 27, p. 3.

⁴ Con. between Kennedy and Eisenhower, 10 Sept. 1962, Kennedy Library, Presidential Recordings,

Kennedy told the mayor of West Berlin, Willy Brandt, that 'the geography of Berlin was such that the disadvantage lay with us because it was we who would have to make the first military move. This detracted from the credibility of our threat of nuclear war and made necessary readiness to use our conventional forces.'¹

Kennedy understood that reducing the numbers of US conventional forces in any theatre meant that nuclear weapons would be used sooner. During a meeting on 25 September 1962 to discuss strategy in the Far East, Taylor argued that the United States should use nuclear weapons in Korea 'at once' if the Chinese crossed the Yalu River. Kennedy replied: 'I don't think you could say if they came across the Yalu River, but you could say that we certainly use it [nuclear weapons] if they attack in force across the cease-fire line.' Taylor pointed out that the line crossed was less important than the timing: nuclear weapons must be used early, because 'we would not be prepared to hold them [the Chinese] back by conventional methods if they came en masse. How they got there wouldn't particularly matter.'

During the same conversation, McNamara advocated lowering the nuclear threshold to enable the United States to reduce its conventional forces and 'free substantial Korean forces' that were being paid for with US aid: 'In the long run it would greatly reduce our military assistance program because we're supplying air power to Korea and Taiwan, and we will have to supply it to Thailand if we continue the present policy, which wouldn't be required if we understood that we could use nuclear weapons, particularly nuclear weapons delivered by US aircraft.'² When the assistant secretary of defence for international security affairs, William Bundy, contended that this strategy was the opposite of US strategy in Europe, Kennedy, disagreeing, replied that the reason why the United States hesitated to use nuclear weapons in Europe was the anomaly of Berlin: 'if you didn't have the Berlin problem, you just had a thin line, you would use nuclear weapons almost from the beginning if they [the Soviets] came in force.' Six months later, when McNamara claimed that conventional forces might be needed in Europe for contingencies other than Berlin, the 'President did not seem persuaded'.³

Proponents of flexible response wanted to enhance the United States's conventional forces for 'limited war' contingencies besides Berlin that fell below the threshold of general war, for example what strategists called the

transcribed by Erin Mahan.

¹ Mtg., Kennedy and Brandt, 5 Oct. 1962, *FRUS*, 1961-3, xv. doc. 128.

² Con. between Kennedy, Taylor, McNamara, Ball, Harriman, Lemnitzer, William Bundy, Forrestal, and others, 25 Sept. 1962, transcribed by George Eliades, Kennedy Library, Presidential Recordings.

³ Kennedy-Bundy-Rusk-McNamara mtg., 10 Dec. 1962, *FRUS*, 1961-3, microfiche supp., xiii-xv. doc. 27, p. 3.

'hostage city' scenario. Kennedy, however, dismissed the idea that the Soviets would try to seize a West German city such as Hamburg: 'of course they never will.' Owing to the 'great deal of doubt in the Soviet Union about whether or not we would use nuclear weapons ... it would be unlikely that the Soviet Union, with this doubt in their minds, would take up a venture such as the seizure of a city in Western Germany.'¹ As Kennedy told the national security council in January 1962, the 'credibility of our nuclear deterrent' held the Soviets back: 'they think we might use the bomb if they pushed us hard enough.'² Only the 'geography of Berlin', which might force the West to 'make the first military move ... detracted from the credibility of our threat of nuclear war' and made it necessary to 'use our conventional forces'.³ Similarly, Kennedy told Thorneycroft in September that the 'Berlin situation distorted the whole Western military posture': NATO could manage with only 'ten divisions in Central Europe' but for the need to maintain access to West Berlin. The British, who took Kennedy's statements seriously, tried to work out how many troops NATO would need if his premisses of a nuclear stalemate and a trusteeship for Berlin came to pass.⁴

In fact, if the Soviets had attacked West Berlin rather than simply cut it off, the US response would not have been flexible. When McNamara asked on 18 October what should happen if US troops in West Berlin were overrun, the under-secretary of state, George Ball, replied, 'it's perfectly clear': the United States would 'go to general war'. When Kennedy asked if that meant a nuclear exchange, an unidentified speaker replied: 'that's right.'⁵ Kennedy confirmed the strategy the next day. If the Soviets took 'Berlin by force', he had 'only one alternative': to 'fire nuclear weapons' and 'begin a nuclear exchange'.⁶ He reinforced the message in a meeting with congressional leaders three days later. If the Soviets seized Berlin, 'our war plan at that point has been to fire our nuclear weapons at them.'⁷

In the end, Kennedy withdrew few troops from Western Europe, though for reasons that had little to do with military strategy. By agreeing, after intense US pressure, to sign the partial test-ban treaty, West Germany

¹ JCS mtg. with president, 'Force Strength in Europe', 28 Feb. 1963, *FRUS*, 1961-3, xiii. 517. See also, memo of con., the president and Couve de Murville, 9 Oct. 1962, *FRUS*, 1961-3, xv. doc. 130.

² Summary of president's remarks to the NSC, 7 Jan. 1962, Kennedy Library, NSF, box 313, NSC mtgs., 1962.

³ Memo of con., Kennedy and Brandt, 5 Oct. 1962, *FRUS*, 1961-3, xv. 347.

⁴ Chiefs of staff committee, joint planning staff, 'Reductions in NATO Deployed Forces', 2 May 1963, DEFE 6/84.

⁵ Transcript of mtg., Thurs., 18 Oct. 1962, 11.00 A.M., in *Kennedy Tapes*, ed. May and Zelikow, p. 144.

⁶ Transcript of mtg., Fri., 19 Oct. 1962, 9.45 A.M., *ibid.*, p. 176.

⁷ Tapes 33.2 and 33A.1, Mon., 22 Oct. 1962, 5.30-6.30 P.M., Kennedy Library, POF, Presidential Recordings.

agreed to remain a non-nuclear state, a concession that relaxed the tensions between the West and the Soviet Union over the status of Berlin. In return for accepting second-class status, West Germany was entitled to a large US troop presence, to pay for which it agreed to take financial and monetary measures designed to neutralize the effect on the US balance of payments. This interlocking arrangement protected both Western Europe and the dollar while helping to end the showdown over Berlin.

The debate about the numbers of conventional troops to be committed to NATO turned on geopolitical and economic questions. Rarely were narrowly military considerations – in this case, the strategy of flexible response – even discussed at the highest levels of the Kennedy administration. Ironically, Kennedy committed the United States to maintaining large-scale conventional forces in Western Europe after relations with the Soviets had improved dramatically and the danger of war had subsided.

* * *

The monetary-security framework that kept US troops in West Germany and buttressed the rhetoric of flexible response in Europe remained fragile throughout the 1960s. The Johnson administration, like its predecessor, wondered how long West Germany would accept its non-nuclear status and how long it would be willing to make onerous ‘offset’ payments to relieve the foreign-exchange costs of the US troops. At home, the administration wondered whether increasing balance-of-payments deficits and the war in South-East Asia would also increase domestic pressures to redeploy the troops; for how long it could play its three-layered game of deterring the Soviets, restraining West Germany, and winning domestic support for an expensive overseas commitment in the face of an emerging US-Soviet détente, German resentment, and demands to bring home the troops. The détente magnified the problems underlying US military strategy in Europe, particularly the question of NATO’s need for conventional forces.

In fact, three years later, NATO seemed to be coming apart. In 1966, France announced its intention to withdraw from the integrated military command, Britain announced plans drastically to shrink the British Army on the Rhine because of its own balance-of-payments problem, and West Germany unilaterally abrogated the offset arrangement with the United States, the quid pro quo for Kennedy’s expensive commitment to conventional forces. These events followed a worsening situation in Vietnam, a bigger balance-of-payments deficit, and calls within Congress for a reduction in the number of US forces stationed in Western Europe.¹ Given

¹ Mansfield Resolution (Senate Res. 300), 31 Aug. 1966, *Congressional Record*, 1966, senate, p. 21442.

the pressures, the administration had no choice but to withdraw troops from Europe. How many troops would be brought back to the United States, and how their redeployment would be squared with the official strategy of flexible response, were questions urgently in need of answers.

McNamara, who had lectured the Europeans in 1962 on the need for flexible response, was now more concerned with the balance of payments than with military considerations or even deterrence. In his view, the question to be answered was simple: if West Germany did not meet its financial obligations, the United States should withdraw at least two divisions, regardless of the effects on NATO strategy.¹ Whereas others within the administration – particularly the state department and the joint chiefs of staff – worried about the loss of political and military clout, McNamara worried more about the gold and dollar drain and less about flexible response. As one national security council aide, Francis Bator, told Johnson: ‘McNamara believes a two division cut would be safe.’²

At times, Johnson himself appeared willing to go further. In the midst of a disastrous summit meeting in September 1966 with Adenauer’s successor, Ludwig Erhard, Johnson asked McNamara to work out how much the balance of payments would benefit by the withdrawal of all the US troops from Western Europe. ‘How much, when you pull *all your troops out of there*? Just suppose that you decided that we couldn’t afford it.’ McNamara, taken aback, replied: ‘Of course, if we were going to pull them all out, it would be quite a difficult movement’ because the United States had ‘something like a million tons of equipment in Germany’. Johnson was unfazed. ‘Looks to me, we ought to take advantage of this opportunity to make him tell us that he cannot afford to have our troops there.’³

The West Germans hardly knew what to make of McNamara’s ‘repeated explanations, threats, and disclaimers’ about troop withdrawals. They found it ‘extremely difficult to induce McNamara, who has ... a mind of his own, to take a cooperative position’.⁴ Would he really undermine his own doctrine of flexible response to which he had finally, despite great difficulties, persuaded West Germany to subscribe?⁵ ‘McNamara is totally aware of the fact that the enemy’s fighting strength has not decreased, but rather increased. If he conceded to the domestic policy pressure on

For Johnson’s response, see tel. con., Johnson and Long, 1 Sept. 1966, in *FRUS, 1964-8*, xv. 398-440.

¹ Rostow, Bowie, Leddy, and Kitchen for Rusk, ‘OSD Proposal for Reducing US Forces in Europe’, n.d., Bator Papers, Trilateral/Military, box 17.

² Bator for Johnson, ‘The US Position in the Trilateral Negotiations’, 23 Feb. 1967, Johnson Library, NSF, Trilateral Negotiations and NATO, box 51, pp. 2-3.

³ Tel. con., Johnson and McNamara, 26 Sept. 1966, *FRUS, 1964-8*, xv. 434-5.

⁴ Knappstein, ‘Conversation with Secretary of State Rusk; Here, New Rumors about Troop Withdrawal’, 23 July 1966, *AAPD*, 1966, ii. doc. 233.

⁵ Note of Carsten, con. with Heusinger, 31 May 1966, *AAPD*, 1966, ii. doc. 171.

decreasing the troops in Europe too early, his concept of defense would be questioned.¹ Giving up 'the American concept of the "flexible response" and thus lowering the nuclear threshold' through troop withdrawals would 'mean the deathblow for NATO'.²

The West Germans eventually understood that McNamara and others in the administration were willing to pull troops out of Europe regardless of the strategy of flexible response. The West German ambassador to the United States, Heinrich Knappstein, repeatedly warned the foreign ministry that the Johnson administration was seriously considering large withdrawals of troops from Europe for reasons that included the balance-of-payments deficit, the Vietnam War, 'increasing discontent' with European attitudes, and even an alarming 'neo-isolationist trend' that assumed that the United States 'could defend itself only with the missile potential'. Beyond these substantive issues lay an 'emotional position', not entirely new but 'gaining in weight and momentum', that 'fat and lazy' Europeans merely wanted to 'enjoy their prosperity [under] the protection of the American nuclear shield'. One day these feelings would force the administration to confront the question of a 'substantial reduction of troops': 'the demand "bring the boys back home" that Eisenhower successfully adopted ... in 1952 ... has still today an attractiveness that should not be underestimated.'³ The US efforts to undermine its own strategy led Erhard in October 1966 to tell Johnson's special envoy, John McCloy, that 'flexible response is no longer believed in'.⁴

In order to manage US troop withdrawals without completely unraveling NATO, the United States began in the same month high-level trilateral talks with Britain and West Germany about conventional force requirements and costs. While the ostensible purpose of the talks was to re-examine NATO strategy, the real reason for the deployment of so many US troops in Europe emerges from the documents setting out the US position on withdrawals, in which strategy against the Soviet Union and flexible response in particular were underplayed and at times ignored. As Bator told Johnson, 'the military issue is only a small part of the picture ... Atlantic politics and US-German relations' along with 'domestic politics' were 'the heart' of the debate over the size of the US force to be stationed in Europe.⁵

1 Envoy of Lilienfeld, Washington, to the Office of Foreign Affairs, 19 Sept. 1966, *AAPD*, 1966, ii. doc. 294.

2 Knappstein to Schroeder, 10 June 1966, *AAPD*, 1966, ii. doc. 189; J. G. Giauque, 'Offers of Partnership or Bids for Hegemony? The Atlantic Community, 1961-3', *International History Review*, xxii (2000), 86-111.

3 Knappstein to Schroeder, 10 June 1966, *AAPD*, 1966, ii. doc. 189.

4 Con., Erhard and McCloy, 20 Oct. 1966, *AAPD*, 1966, ii. doc. 342.

5 Bator for Johnson, 'US Position in the Trilateral Negotiations', pp. 2-3.

One of the key papers written at the state department, which opposed McNamara's proposals for withdrawals, ruled out a deliberate decision by the Soviets to launch a full-scale invasion. The paper argued that the mobilization of large numbers of Soviet divisions would eliminate all hope of surprise and a quick victory; more important, such an attack would risk, if not ensure, a devastating US response. The paper concluded that 'not even the dissolution of NATO would altogether assure Moscow that the US might not see an attack upon Western Europe as so great a threat to American vital interests [as] to warrant American intervention.'¹ The discussion confirmed McNamara's assumption that American troops could be brought home without endangering peace in Western Europe. Even 'a total reduction in NATO Central Region M-Day army manpower of 75-150,000 would not seriously weaken our conventional capabilities' to meet the most likely threats. The 'threat of nuclear response', not conventional capabilities, has 'provided and will continue to provide a highly effective deterrent against massive Soviet non-nuclear attack'.²

Ironically, the state department contended that the one truly frightening scenario would be a *reduction* in the numbers of Soviet troops stationed in East Germany. In reversing the trend towards 'greater stability' there, it might prompt West Germany to intervene 'with all the ramifications which that might have'.³ In other words, the withdrawal of US and Soviet troops would remove the restraints on the Bundeswehr. This anti-German role for US troops in Central Europe had little to do with the nuances of flexible response.⁴

From a military point of view, the number of US combat troops stationed in Europe could be reduced without tempting the Soviets. McNamara assumed that three US divisions would be enough to check even a major Soviet conventional attack. A report on NATO written in November 1967 in preparation for the trilateral talks stated: 'If the relationship between Western Europe and the US had been based merely on common defense against the Soviet threat, it might be logical to conclude that the basic *raison d'être* of the alliance was rapidly being eroded.' But the US role in NATO served *political* purposes that were becoming more important than its military purpose; one being the reduction in the scope of 'traditional power politics' represented by de Gaulle's 'hegemonic drive',

¹ Garthoff and Sonnefeldt, 'Soviet Intentions: Possible Soviet Uses of Military Force in Europe', 24 Oct. 1966, Johnson Library, NSF, Trilateral Negotiations and NATO, box 51, p. 4.

² 'The Threat: Warsaw Pact Capabilities in the Central Region', n.d. [late 1966-early 1967], *ibid.*, p. 15.

³ Garthoff and Sonnefeldt, 'Soviet Intentions', p. 10.

⁴ For shared US and Soviet concerns about a rearmed West Germany intervening in East Germany, see A. Harriman, 'Outlook for Future Discussions with USSR', 30 July 1963, Kennedy Library, NSF, Carl Kayser: Test Ban and Related Negotiations, box 376, pp. 2-3; and memo of con., Kissinger and Strauss, 10 May 1961, *ibid.*, box 320, p. 5.

and another, the contribution NATO and the US troops made to resolving 'the German problem'. The US commitment had allowed West Germany to be 'integrated into the West European political fabric' without upsetting the region's internal balance of power, and 'this factor contributing to NATO's strength seems to be growing more important as time passes.'¹

The effect of troop withdrawals on the 'German question' rather than their effect on flexible response alarmed the US officials who argued against them. In 1963, West Germany had reluctantly agreed to arrangements that 'precluded independent nuclear forces' so long as the United States guaranteed its security.² 'The objective of German security policy is assurance that her borders will be defended by adequate and appropriate forces. As long as the German government and people are convinced that the United States will defend Germany, Germany does not need nuclear weapons.' The arrangement, based on the extension of the US 'commitment to the defense of Europe, should not and cannot be lightly made'.³

By the mid-1960s, nonetheless, discussion of US troop withdrawals left West Germany increasingly doubtful of the seriousness of the US commitment. A report written by the state department's policy planning council, dated 16 November 1967 and entitled 'Implications of a More Independent German Foreign Policy', claimed that 'the mood underlying present FRG policies is, to a much greater extent than prior to 1966, one of uncertainty, resentment, or suspicion regarding the direction of US policy.' These feelings arose from the fact that the United States had threatened to withdraw troops from West Germany while simultaneously trying to conciliate the Soviet Union. 'Many Germans fear deeply that the US will either progressively reduce its forces in Europe and thus make the Germans vulnerable to Soviet pressure, or strive increasingly for accords with the USSR at the expense of FRG interests, or both.' The typical rebuttal that 'the Germans have no place to go' only applied when West Germany had 'confidence in US support for German security and reunification'.⁴ Many Germans worried that their confidence was no longer warranted. The US ambassador to West Germany, George McGhee, revealed that the West

1 Background Paper, Trilateral Talks, 'Political Significance of NATO: US Protection of and Political Predominance Exercised through NATO', 18 Nov. 1966, Johnson Library, NSF, Trilateral Negotiations and NATO, pp. 3-4.

2 'A USSR-US Enforced Non-Proliferation Agreement – the Probable Positions of the FRG, France, Italy, Norway, Belgium, and the Netherlands', 12 June 1963, Kennedy Library, NSF, Carl Kaysen, Test Ban and Related Negotiations, box 376, pp. 4-6.

3 'On Nuclear Diffusion', 20 June 1963, *ibid.*, p. 5.

4 State dept. policy planning council, 'Implications of a More Independent German Foreign Policy', 16 Nov. 1967, Bator Papers, box 22, p. 3; state dept. policy planning council, 'The Future of NATO: A Pragmatic View', 1 Nov. 1967, *ibid.*; memo, no author, 'Key Issues in US-European Relations', 8 Nov. 1967, *ibid.*; McGhee to state dept., 17 Aug. 1966, *FRUS*, 1964-8, xv. 390.

Germans were complaining that the Americans were making them the 'Pruegelknabe', or whipping boy.¹

A similar paper written three months later for the policy planning council was even more pessimistic. As 'the Germans are convinced that the US will in the relatively near future make further substantial and unilateral reductions in its forces in Germany,' they would be increasingly willing to make concessions to the Soviet Union in return for the liberalization of East Germany which would purchase nothing but disappointment and eventually cause resentment. 'Disillusion in West Germany might well set in and produce radical movements of the right and left,' as the fear of troop withdrawals made the West Germans feel 'intensely isolated'. They would suspect that the United States was forcing them to accept a neutralized status in which the permanent division of Germany would be institutionalized by East-West security-control arrangements. Thus, they might try to purchase confederation with East Germany from the Soviets at the price of neutralization as a desperate last chance for reunification.² Ball warned the president on 21 September 1966 that US troop withdrawals would cause the Germans to 'develop neuroses that can be catastrophic for all of us. *They did it before and they can do it again ...* A neurotic, disaffected Germany could be like a loose ship's cannon in a high sea.'³

Such geopolitical as opposed to military considerations carried the day among US policy-makers, who supported the continuation of a strong conventional force in Germany in the 1960s for reasons other than rebuffing a Soviet attack. This explains the meaning of such euphemisms as 'maintaining the cohesion of the alliance' or 'enhancing the stability of the alliance', which were said to be the purpose of the trilateral talks. Given that the Soviets were not expected to invade Western Europe in the near future, the talks focused on the management of the German problem. The presence of American troops in Europe ensured that West Germany would remain in NATO while preventing it from taking destabilizing initiatives in the East or acquiring a nuclear capability.

For the same reasons, the Kennedy and Johnson administrations were eager to maintain the British Army on the Rhine. Neither the Americans nor the West Germans thought highly of the British units as a fighting force, partly because the British, according to the West German represent-

¹ For US assessments of West Germany's waning confidence in the United States's security commitment, see esp. McGhee to state dept., 17 Aug. 1966, *ibid.*, pp. 389-92; McGhee to Rusk, 25 Aug. 1966, *ibid.*, pp. 394-6; McGhee to state dept., 25 Aug. 1966, *ibid.*, pp. 417-20; and same to same, 26 Feb. 1967, *ibid.*, pp. 493-6.

² State dept. policy planning council, 'Germany and the Future of Western Europe', 23 Feb. 1968, Bator Papers, box 22, p. 1.

³ Ball, memo for president, 'Handling the Offset Issue during Erhard's Visit', 21 Sept. 1966, Bator Papers, Erhard - 9/66, box 21, pp. 1-2a. Emphasis added.

ative for Questions of Disarmament and Arms Control, Swidbert Schnippenkoetter, thought 'a conventional defence in Europe is hopeless and therefore neither strong conventional forces nor war supply for more than fourteen days are required in Central Europe.' Nor were the British worried about the military balance with the Soviets if NATO's conventional capability was diminished. While 'Soviet capabilities have not receded, the USSR has no intention of attacking Europe today'. Soviet doctrine 'is based on the use of nuclear weapons from the outset'. This left the British convinced that 'a long conventional war in Europe is unlikely; any conflict there is likely to escalate to an all-out nuclear exchange very quickly. Even in the unlikely event of a Soviet attack with conventional forces, NATO forces would be compelled to use tactical nuclear weapons within days, if not hours.'¹

The British understood the *political* implications of a withdrawal, however: 'London fully realizes that its contribution to NATO forces enables it to participate in Allied efforts to control West Germany's present and future place in Europe ... Some London editorialists have recently expressed concern that withdrawal of British (and US) troops would lead Bonn to argue that they should be replaced by Germans and "properly" armed with nuclear weapons.'² For the Johnson administration, a British military presence helped to place the German problem in a multilateral – and less coercive – context. Furthermore, a British withdrawal would buttress the efforts of critics like Senator Mike Mansfield of Montana who were trying to compel the administration to withdraw large numbers of US troops from NATO.

To stress the political role is not to discount the military role of the American and British troops stationed in Europe during the mid-1960s. Without being overawed by a strong US combat force, the Western European states might have succumbed to blackmail by the Soviet bloc without a shot being fired, drifted towards neutralism or, worse, revived their former rivalries. Owing to the stability in Europe between the Eastern and Western blocs, however, senior officials in the Johnson administration assumed that the Soviet Union was unlikely to attack, or even try to blackmail the Western European states, even if two or three US divisions were withdrawn. Both they and their predecessors in the Kennedy administration were unconcerned about the effect of the withdrawals on the *strategy* of flexible response.

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1 Note, Schnippenkoetter, 4 Jan. 1967, *AAPD*, 1967, doc. 6.

2 Background Paper, 'Factors Arguing for and against UK Troop Cutbacks in Germany', n.d. [2 Nov. 1966], Trilateral Negotiations and NATO, box 51, pp. 1-4.

Thus, the conventional account of the strategy of flexible response is flawed. The shift in both conventional and nuclear strategy between the Eisenhower period and Kennedy/Johnson period was not as great as the literature contends. US nuclear strategy did not become more 'flexible' in the 1960s, and the United States did not rely less on nuclear escalation and more on conventional weapons.

Both Kennedy and McNamara knew that they followed Eisenhower's programme more closely than they cared to admit in public. For example, Kennedy originally planned to retain Eisenhower's secretary of defence, Thomas Gates, for at least the first year of his administration and to appoint his own brother, Robert, as under-secretary, to be trained by Gates until he was ready to take over. Despite Robert's interest, this plan was rejected on the political grounds that Gates would use the position to increase his chances of becoming governor of Pennsylvania.¹ One would hardly have assigned a strategic revolution to a holdover from the Eisenhower administration.

McNamara, too, knew that the strategic differences between the administrations had been oversold. In briefing McNamara and Kennedy during the transition, Gates explained that the United States had the capabilities to fight a conventional war: they need not 'step them up'.² After McNamara told the Democratic Party's platform committee in 1964 that three years earlier 'we found military strategy to be the stepchild of a predetermined budget', with 'no coordination' among the services and the strategic nuclear force 'vulnerable to surprise missile attack', Gates charged him with making statements he knew to be false:

I cannot believe that you agree with these statements yourself ... If the conditions actually had been as you have described them, then I could not consciously have remained in office – nor would I have been allowed to; in fact, if our defense posture then had actually been in the state of disorder you have painted, I doubt that anyone could have corrected it in the time you have been in office ... If the allegations you made, at complete variance not only with the content of your dispatch to me but also with a number of statements you had earlier put on the public record, were inserted in your presentation to serve a political purpose, then August 17th was an unfortunate day for the process of government in this nation.³

Important changes to US strategy did occur during the 1960s. The deployment of sophisticated weapons systems like the Polaris and Minute-

¹ See J. B. Martin interview with R. F. Kennedy, 29 Feb. and 1 March 1964, pp. 15-16, Kennedy Library, Oral History Collection.

² Memo, transfer, 19 Jan. 1961 mtg. of president and Senator Kennedy, 19 Jan. 1961 [Abilene, Dwight D. Eisenhower Library], Whitman File, Presidential Transition Series, box 1, item 7.

³ Gates to McNamara, 15 Sept. 1964, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania, Annenberg Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Thomas S. Gates Jr. Collection, box 12: 'McNamara – Secretary of Defense'.

man, authorized by Eisenhower, brought the cold war into the missile age; new reconnaissance satellites improved targeting; and the conventional forces, even if not increased, were supplied with more modern weapons and supported by increased airlift capability. Lastly, an important shift in attitudes towards the military utility of nuclear weapons occurred between the Eisenhower and Kennedy/Johnson periods.

But it is important to emphasize what *did not* happen to US strategy in Europe during the 1960s. Nuclear sharing with the British and the French was not ruled out; a flexible nuclear strategy was not developed because of both technical constraints and, after 1962, lack of interest; and despite the talk about moving away from massive, pre-planned attacks, the SIOP was not altered in the 1960s to provide for limited, flexible responses. Moreover, the problems underlying complicated issues such as the utility of tactical nuclear weapons or the meaning of damage-limitation, second-strike, counterforce targeting were not seriously addressed. And not only were conventional forces in Europe not increased, withdrawals were constantly discussed owing to the tension caused by the gold and dollar outflows. Kennedy came to believe that the only military justification for the large numbers of US conventional forces in Europe was the Berlin crisis, which might compel the United States to go on the offensive to maintain the viability of a small enclave deep within enemy territory. After the Berlin crisis subsided, many senior US officials wanted to bring troops home. McNamara, a balance-of-payments hawk throughout his term as secretary of defence, finally succeeded in 1967 in withdrawing significant numbers, paradoxically in the same year that NATO formally embraced the doctrine of flexible response.

One reason why the Kennedy and Johnson administrations talked up a strategy they did not believe in was the nuclear politics underlying the German question. If the United States admitted that it did not believe in either controlled response or a viable first strike, it would reveal that its nuclear guarantee of Western Europe was fraudulent. The Europeans, including the West Germans, would demand nuclear forces of their own, which would jeopardize the United States's politically motivated aim to prevent West Germany's nuclearization. The Kennedy and Johnson administrations had to stress the utility of conventional forces in order to support their claim that the Europeans, especially the West Germans, would make a valuable strategic contribution by augmenting them. Although many senior US officials questioned the military need to station six US divisions in West Germany, they feared the political consequences within NATO and especially West Germany likely to follow from withdrawals.

Reinterpreting the strategy of flexible response forces us to reassess the

relationship between military strategy and power politics in Europe during the 1960s and beyond. The field of security studies too often views the cold war as a bipolar conflict whose shape was dictated by a military environment of robust nuclear deterrence. In this model, strategy becomes static and determinist, as if the cold war, driven by military circumstances, was void of political content. This was not the case. By focusing solely on the nuclear environment and bipolarity, such a model cannot explain why the Soviet Union risked a dangerous crisis over Berlin and Cuba (1958, 1962) while strategically vulnerable, yet become a status-quo power in Europe after it achieved strategic parity (post-1963). Nor can the model explain why the United States made a permanent conventional force commitment to NATO *only after* the Soviet Union stopped putting pressure on West Berlin (again, post-1963). Although the actions of both the Soviet Union and the United States were conditioned by strategic circumstances, their strategies were driven by core geopolitical interests, often complicated and even overlapping.

This does not mean that one cannot see the cold war in Europe clearly while looking through a realist lens. Intentions and capabilities did matter, but they mattered in a multilateral context. Balancing went on simultaneously between alliances and within alliances. Throughout the cold war, the primary concern of both the United States and Western European states was the Soviet threat. But each of these actors had other power political worries. Like the Soviets, France, Britain, and the United States could not help but have serious reservations about an increase in the power of West Germany. Likewise, the Western Europeans, including the West Germans, resented US hegemony, and senior US officials accepted many Soviet aims, particularly their wish to anticipate the military resurgence of Germany, as legitimate. For example, McGhee warned Rusk in August 1966 that the United States 'would withdraw', its NATO allies would 'dissociate themselves from Germany', and the Soviet Union would 'make such efforts the subject of a preemptive attack', if West Germany tried to acquire a national nuclear capability. For their part, the West Germans understood that there were a 'number of mutual interests emerging between the US and the Soviet Union, which they feel could bring about a realignment in the post-war security pattern'.¹ At the same time, the Europeans, and especially the West Germans, were loath to see the superpowers come to a bilateral agreement at their expense.

A successful US strategy in Europe had to take account of all of these complex issues, as well as manage the domestic political and economic consequences of its policy choices. And while issues such as strategic

¹ McGhee to Rusk, 25 Aug. 1966, *FRUS*, 1964-8, xv. 395.

vulnerability, limited war, and flexible response played a lesser role, political considerations played the dominant one. Nuclear strategy was often the servant of political imperatives: of the need to deter the Soviets while both restraining and reassuring the West Germans; and of maintaining domestic support for a military strategy rhetorically based on containing the Soviets in the face of superpower détente and balance-of-payments pressures. Such political questions underpinned US policy on nuclear sharing, strategic targeting, tactical nuclear weapons, and conventional force levels in Europe during the 1960s and beyond. Even if we no longer worry about all-out nuclear war, these questions continue to shape policy on NATO's role in Europe, the military status of Germany, and the United States's relations with Russia. US policy-makers would do well to recognize the continuities not only within the cold war era, but also between that era and our own.

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