The eternal night begins and it will be terrible.
What will happen when men realize that there will be no more sun?

Gérard de Nerval, *Aurélia*

Nuclear deterrence is seemingly very simple: if the enemy attacks me, he knows that I will wipe him off the map. In reality, the doctrine of “massive retaliation”, expounded for the first time in 1954 by Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, quickly raised questions about its military effectiveness and whether it compromised the quality of Western relations. Originally, the nuclear New Look launched by the Eisenhower administration was meant to provide the means of finally defending Europe against the Red Army, while being fiscally sound. Indeed, it is (wrongly) assumed that atomic weapons are less expensive than conventional weapons (the Lisbon Conference of February 1952 initially planned for about 100 American and European divisions, instead of 30, at an astronomical cost). Nevertheless, one fact is certain: firepower increased tenfold. In reality, the New Look profoundly modified the nature of the Atlantic Alliance while cruelly emphasizing the attrition of the allied armies. The following is a non-exhaustive list of vital questions raised by this doctrine.

From the point of view of inter-allied relations: how was the protection of the North American continent and the defense of Europe articulated in the New Look?

From a specifically European point of view: did the European governments not risk sheltering themselves behind the American nuclear umbrella instead of improving their own defenses?

From a tactical and operational point of view: what mission did the New Look assign to American divisions in Europe? Are they still useful? What was forecasted for the future of European ground forces and tactical aviation? Who supports what? Would the nuclear fire cover the ground divisions, or would they only serve to flank the atomic artillery? In these conditions, what was the place of French and German units in the reformed Atlantic battle group? What of the Anglo-Saxon naval aviation and the advanced line that would absorb the first shock of a Soviet invasion?
In terms of strategy: can the nuclear all or nothing be avoided? At what point can the assumption of a “local and limited war” still be reconciled with the principle of general deterrence?

On the general plan of the Cold War: did Eisenhower and Dulles really strengthen the vitality of the Alliance? Would not they have devised a Maginot Line strategy, behind their row of nuclear rockets?

These issues boil down to one central question: could Europe really be defended with nuclear arms without buttressing it? The attempts at formulating politicomilitary responses during the 1950s will be discussed through the two major Atlantic nuclear guidelines of the 1950s: directive MC 48 adopted by the North Atlantic Council in December 1954, and directive MC 70, started in 1956, long classified as “Cosmic Secret” and applicable from 1960 to 1965.

The origins of Western nuclear defense: American Executive Directive NSC 162

Upon taking office, the Eisenhower administration spent its first eight months developing a secret internal directive: NSC (National Security Council) 162. NSC 162 was a complicated document, because it attempted to reduce the contradictions resulting from the Cold War. In particular, the Pentagon and the State Department disagreed over the most important clause, paragraph 39(b): would nuclear retaliation be automatic in the case of Soviet aggression, even if it was limited or indirect? What could atomic weapons do if the USSR seized a country by internal subversion, like the Prague coup in 1948? What if a satellite state crossed the iron curtain to achieve its own territorial objectives: for example, an incursion by East German forces into the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), with Berlin and Hamburg making an agreement, a hypothesis considered plausible at the time by the military staffs? Or Romania fighting against Yugoslavia to rectify a boundary line? Or even Yugoslavia reconciled with the USSR, confronting Italy about Trieste?

Most importantly, when would Soviet aggression justify a nuclear response? At the first mushroom cloud of enemy origin, or from an aerial violation of NATO’s borders? Similarly, how should a high concentration of troops at the iron curtain be considered? Should it be interpreted as an act of war, on the same basis as a general mobilization (cf. July 1914), and thus trigger “pre-emptive” nuclear fire before being caught by surprise?

Paragraph 39(b) of NSC 162 did not provide an answer and merely states that “in the event of hostilities, the United States will consider nuclear weapons to be as available for use as other munitions.” The Pentagon saw this as a green light to freely develop its war plans, privileging the use of special weapons over conventional means. According to its scheme, US commanders would only consider the use of atomic weapons according to the evolution of operations and based on tactical objectives. To increase its responsiveness, the Pentagon sought and obtained from President Eisenhower the possession of bombs in peacetime.² Hitherto, nuclear warheads had been kept by the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC), a civilian agency created by Truman in order to circumscribe the military staff.

Vis-à-vis the Pentagon, Dulles and the State Department approved the “militarization” of the nuclear arsenal, but strongly contested the systematic use of nuclear fire. This
decision should come exclusively from the president of the United States at the appropriate time, and not from the generals. According to American diplomacy, one must always wonder whether tactical nuclear weapons would widen a conflict, or upset allied cohesion, for fear of an even more deadly Soviet nuclear retaliation. The State Department accepted only one case justifying an automatic response: a nuclear Pearl Harbor against American territory.3 Regarding the rest, John Foster Dulles secretly doubted the pertinence of the New Look.

Secretary of State Foster Dulles painfully enunciated the formal presentation of the New Look at the Atlantic Council of April

In fact, the allies had to wait for Dulles’ speech at the next Atlantic Council in April 1954 to hear the first coherent description of the New Look. The Secretary of State linked the five aspects of the problem: (1) the Sino-Soviet threat; (2) the strategic concept of massive retaliation on a global scale; (3) the inclusion of tactical nuclear weapons in the conventional arsenal of NATO; (4) planning in times of peace and the procedure for inter-allied consultation in case of war; and (5) the right of the United States to use the atomic bomb first, in the event of war being started by the USSR, on behalf of overall Western interests.4 However, in the autumn of 1954, the most difficult task remained to be done: turning American directive NSC 162/2 into an Atlantic doctrine. This was the issue at stake in the MC 48 document, and which resulted, in the Atlantic case, in deliberations similar to those of the American National Security Council.

MC 48: A directive to Atlanticize nuclear war: to deter before defending?

Analysis

Formally, MC 48 initially resulted from the policy decisions of the North Atlantic Council in December 1953, and from the studies of the Military Committee at the request of the United States, to adapt the Atlantic strategy to the New Look.5 But in reality, the basis of MC 48 was the “Capabilities Studies” of the three main commanders of the Alliance, in particular General Gruenther, commander-in-chief of NATO (SACEUR). Unsurprisingly, it contained the plans adopted by the American National Security Council. In particular, it took into account Western economic resources.6 In the second place, the Standing Group of Washington (the United States, Great Britain, and France) synthesized the multiple sources and wrote the first draft of MC 48, drawn especially from the SACEUR (September–October 1954). The Standing Group concluded that the “immediate” outbreak of nuclear fire, tactical and strategic, would be the only way to deter or defeat the USSR, if it initiated a war, even a purely conventional one. Then, the MC 48 draft obtained the nihil obstat of the other military delegations that were convened in the NATO Military Committee (MC) and was adopted without any real debate at the end of November 1954. The Military Committee transmitted its “report” to the Atlantic Council on 22 November 1954. Outside the Standing Group, the allies of the Big Three thus only became aware of the text 15 days before the official Atlantic Council. This procedure proved to be a bit cavalier for a document that involved the survival of the entire Western world, and in this context discord was inevitable.7
MC 48 was entitled: “The most effective pattern of NATO military strength for the next few years.” It was subdivided into seven parts: “The defensive aims of NATO”; “Probable nature and duration of future war involving NATO”; “Factors affecting the outcome of the initial phase”; “Factors affecting the outcome of subsequent operations”; “Examination of Soviet capabilities and probably strategy”; “The task of NATO forces in Europe”; and “Control of sea communications.”

MC 48 thus sought a large counterattack during the first days of the conflict, so as to prevent the enemy from retaking the nuclear initiative and make it capitulate. This assumed three essential conditions: first, the existence of an instantaneous air alarm system; next, the ability of SACEUR to react instantly, while launching tactical nuclear fire in response without waiting for orders from political bodies; and, finally, that the industrial capacity of the West could mass-produce the maximum number of bombs possible, to “provide us with a residual for use in the subsequent phase of operations.”

Comment

In spite of European fears about an excessive and dangerous doctrine, MC 48 contained a bold and innovative subtlety. Hitherto, and in spite of official discourse, the USSR could succeed in a conventional invasion of Europe. Much later, the United States would attempt to recover the lost continent. It was also known that America possessed, thanks to its atomic bombs, the means of cruelly wounding the Soviet bear, but undoubtedly not of killing it, given its insufficient stockpiles. Basically, everything rested on the question of whether the Kremlin leadership would sacrifice Moscow and Leningrad to install itself in Western Europe. The precedent of 1812–14 makes one wonder. Furthermore, the American–Atlantic “new approach” was no longer content with simply deterring the Soviet threat. From then on, in the event of war, not only was defeat no longer certain against the USSR, but victory became possible on the condition of replying within the hour after the first violation of the original Soviet boundary, and possessing an atomic arsenal superior in numbers. The productivist and quantitative logic of the two previous world wars accelerated. The new dogma of European defense rested as much on the moral determination of the allies to combat the USSR as on the industrial productivity of the United States. The America of Eisenhower launched itself on the race for nuclear armament. It went from 1000 nuclear warheads in 1953 to 18,000 in 1960 (against only 200 in the USSR).

A fortiori, the possibility of victory strengthened deterrence. The Kremlin, in effect, could doubt Atlantic reprisals if they led to the automatic suicide of Western civilization. In this case, Western leaders might prefer subjugation to annihilation. However, from the moment when the immediate use of American weapons permitted a forward strategy and the possibility of a victory for the Alliance, the Soviets would worry and would hesitate a long time before taking the plunge. Perhaps the apocalypse would occur but the angel of destruction would not maintain an equal balance. Still American diplomacy needed to convince the allies of the relevance of the new doctrine.

The European authorities struggled to discern the boundary between conventional war and nuclear war

In 1954, the dogma cracked and gaps appeared. In France, for example, Raymond Aron criticized the modalities that accompanied the new doctrine, namely the
announced withdrawal of two divisions from Korea and, implicitly, American divisions from the FRG. The French philosopher noted that Eisenhower and Dulles had paradoxically reverted to the strategy that Truman had used before 1950, in relying excessively on atomic weapons and the mobility of a strategic reserve, based in North America:

To say that “the mobile reserve” and “strategic aviation” will prevent an attack is excellent, but if, after all, local aggression occurs, we may be torn as it almost was in 1950, by the choice between surrender or general war, two possibilities that we want to avoid. In other words, the concentration of military resources on a single weapon, contrary to the assertions of M.J.F. Dulles, would tend to reduce, and not expand the freedom of decision.11

How, in these conditions, could the Europeans rely on the New Look to protect their interests and their security? A new feeling of dependence towards the United States was created. The future of the continent rested in foreign hands, friends today but perhaps indifferent tomorrow. Consider the ambiguity of Atlantic integration that was increasingly unequal and discriminatory: only the American forces in Europe wielded atomic weapons and they remained under the orders of the White House. The president of the United States, the commander-in-chief of American forces in Europe, and all the military subordinates, would consider European security alone, relying exclusively on American nuclear weapons. As Dulles declared in April 1954 to G. Bidault “no power has ever given another power the option of determining its entry into war.”12 Eisenhower or his successors could decide either not to defend Europe or to plunge it into nuclear apocalypse. Understandably, the French and European governments had difficulty conceiving an intermediate situation between these two disasters.

Military Committee and the equipping of the allied forces with tactical nuclear weapons: a disguised return to the excessive figures of the Lisbon Conference (1952)?

When leaving behind theory to elaborate a practical doctrine, everything needs to be reinvented. A privileged witness of the American strategic evolution, General Valluy commented from his post as French representative to the Permanent Group in Washington:

The American military chiefs who, not without pride, are conscious of shaping the military thought of the free world, today feel, as General Taylor [Chief of Staff of the Army], unable to declare a simple and revolutionary doctrine, speaking instead, without dogmatism, of slow evolution, of contradictory needs, of necessary compromises, of the durability of the heroic soldier.13

This approximation involuntarily weighed heavily on everyone, including the British heads of staff, who held the closest known point of view to that of the United States and believed in keeping with their own government.
Even the Committee of the British Joint Chiefs of Staff doubted the soundness of US plans to defend Europe and the United Kingdom

In contradiction to the American executive, the English generals criticized the optimism of MC 48 for its decrease in conventional forces in favor of an atomic build-up. From September 1954, even before the adoption of MC 48, they denounced the insufficiency of the “forces-in-being” intended for the forward defense.14

Like the French, the British Chiefs of Staff feared that they should have to pay the costs of the persistent myth of the “American fortress.” Did they fear becoming victims of a “peripheral super-strategy” that haughtily ignored the security of the British Isles? In any case, they thought that, strategically, “as rapid and decisive as nuclear strikes are, aerial responses are not guarantees of an immediate cessation of enemy attacks, ground or naval.” Tactically, it seemed inconceivable to them to ever regain the lost regions of Western Europe devastated by nuclear weapons: “The idea of liberating the lost ground, using nuclear weapons, is so serious that it becomes unthinkable.” Finally, the British High Command returned to the inadequacy of the nuclear response to local crises: “If the Communists returned to an aggressive policy, “conventional forces” would be necessary to oppose their threats and their bluff.” In short, the British command called for a serious re-evaluation of MC 48.15

However, despite the warnings of their military advisors, British political leaders wanted to return to New Look orthodoxy, and confirm the primacy of tactical and strategic nuclear technology over conventional units. From a chronological perspective, it was therefore up to the governments of Eden and Macmillan, in 1956–57, to launch the first studies that led to MC 70. To the great displeasure of the British Government, the drafting of MC 70 led to diametrically opposite results: the strengthening of conventional units and the augmentation of military budgets. Until this paradoxical result, the English concerns in 1956 attracted the sympathetic attention of SACEUR, General Gruenther, who decided to rethink the doctrine of the employment of forces.

From MC 48 to MC 70: the tactical will of General Gruenther (autumn 1956)16

General Gruenther was aware of the criticisms of the doctrine that he himself had inspired. Before handing over his post to General Norstad, he provided a more nuanced reading of MC 48, which paved the way for directive MC 70, adopted in 1958.

Let us be wary of the legend at the time attributed to US officials: no American officer, and no serious study by the Pentagon, ever believed that nuclear war would abolish land combat. The question was rather the degree of confidence given to tactical nuclear weapons to win the battle of Europe. In September 1956, General Gruenther weighed in on a report about the desirable ratio between nuclear forces and conventional elements. He proposed four series of adjustments to dispel allied concerns. The first change: he adjusted the automatic nature of the atomic response and considered it more and more as one option among others. The implacable resolve of the allies would achieve the real goal of never resorting to nuclear fire.

The second innovation: General Gruenther admitted the possibility of a purely local and conventional conflict. He proposed “to give Europeans an environment of military confidence and security,” which implied that

the maintenance of forces on the ground, adequate, properly arranged, and highly trained, which would constitute evidence that any local aggression – from a small
scale that could lead to general war – could be contained and would not give the advantage to the enemy.17

Consequently, a NATO rapid reaction force (“ready reserves”) would be created, preferably multinational, under the direct command of SACEUR, which would immediately be assigned to the threatened region.

The third novelty: the “shield” must be reinvigorated, i.e. the army, navy, and air force in Europe. This term replaced the expression “forces in being”, used in MC 48. The shield

must possess sufficient power and a deployment on the ground such that there does not exist in the mind of the aggressor any hope of obtaining a partial gain nor of reaching a favourable compromise.18

In particular, it must commit the enemy to making massive and overt conventional preparations, which would leave no doubt about its intentions. Next, “the shield must raise the stakes so that the aggressor, who decides to attack, faces the devastating consequences of total nuclear war.” If war broke out, then the first five days would be characterized by an intense tactical nuclear duel. SACEUR would no longer settle for launching an immediate nuclear retaliation campaign to neutralize the military capabilities of the enemy, beginning by destroying its nuclear delivery systems. It would also defend [emphasis added] the populations, territories, vital maritime regions and offensive capabilities of NATO.19

Note that this view already agreed with the conceptions of the French High Command, for whom real deterrence was both nuclear (sword) and conventional (shield).20

Fourth, the Gruenther report largely considered the second phase of the conflict. MC 48 did not exclude a conflict that exceeded 30 days, but deemed it impossible at the time to prepare, due to the lack of resources available.21 SACEUR now emphasized the second month of war (M + 30) and the phase of reconditioning and restocking, essential to victory. Gruenther asked Eisenhower to maintain two divisions in the United States as reinforcements for the European theatre during the first month of the conflict. (It should be specified from the start that the president refused to provide these strategic reserves, initially due to budgetary considerations, and, besides, because he did not see how to send forces out of America in a nuclear context when the United States itself would be devastated and in need of all available support.)

The “policy directive” launching the preparatory studies for MC 70
(Atlantic Council, 14 December 1956)

The report of General Gruenther received the approval of the European Staffs, unlike the American Joint Chiefs of Staff, who accused him of “continuing to develop its recommendations according to the norms of Lisbon.”22 SACEUR’s recommendations led to the “policy directive” of 14 December 1956, itself the direct cause of MC 70. Given the difficulty of moving MC 48 beyond theory, the Military Committee of NATO formally requested that the Council of Ministers initiate the studies in order to create a more coherent new text on “the minimum level of Atlantic forces” that took into account the
gradual arrival of “new weapons”\textsuperscript{23} and the possibility of “local” infiltrations, incursions, or actions, so as to repel them without drifting towards nuclear conflict.\textsuperscript{24}

\textbf{The stages of writing (December 1956—December 1957): the maximalism of the Pentagon overrode the flexibility recommended by the State Department}

MC 70 experienced a paradoxical fate. Unlike MC 48, it was not a NATO version of an internal directive of the American National Security Council. The new regulation stems only from the cogitation of SHAPE (Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe). The White House and the Pentagon considered it with suspicion at the outset because the Atlantic Staffs judged that it was necessary to temper the systematic use of atomic weapons and enhance the function of conventional forces. Note that Great Britain took a great interest in this doctrinal evolution, provided that the other states applied it in its place: to the Anglo-Saxons, nuclear fire—prestigious and reputedly inexpensive—to the continental allies, the traditional troops. In 1957, intervening in its turn, France, its Staff, and the “services des pactes,” attempted to persuade the United States to finance the upgrading of the conventional and nuclear shield in Europe, and especially the French army.

Finally, the Pentagon overrode these tendencies and imposed its radical views. For the first time since Hiroshima, American war plans coordinated the strategic war with the tactical battle. The American generals wanted to reinforce the tactical atomic component of European defense, because they realized that strategic bombing would require more than a month to bleed the USSR, its vast territory, and dispersed facilities. Meanwhile, it would have to hold. The Joint Chiefs of Staff drew directly from the lessons of World War II. Indeed, any current analysis, supported by the American Army, denounced the overconfidence that had hitherto been accorded to the strategic bombings on Germany. The American military also did not forget the classic victories in the battle of the Pacific that preceded the strategic destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The tactical war and the strategic war must thus support each other. The two, hand in hand, would lead to victory. Consequently, the Pentagon used MC 70 to reinforce the tactical nuclear weapons and to settle the unresolved problem of the conventional inferiority between East and West. The first consequence: in 1957, the war plans of SACEUR now rested on 1700 tactical bombs instead of 170, as in 1954.\textsuperscript{25}

\textbf{The final text and the essence of MC 70: in times of war, the European allies would handle tactical nuclear weapons on an equal footing with the American divisions, all under the command of SACEUR}

MC 70 is entitled: “The Minimum Essential Force Requirements 1958–1963”.\textsuperscript{26} It introduced a massive program to modernize the weapons and infrastructure of NATO: 28 Atlantic divisions in the first day of mobilization (M) and 50 divisions at M + 3. France, for example, had to maintain four divisions on M and mobilize 12 divisions on M + 3. In absolute terms, the increase in manpower did not exceed MC 48. The volume of troops even decreased due to the adaptation of the size of the divisions to nuclear war: more lightness and responsiveness. This also applied to tactical aviation.\textsuperscript{27}

The big innovation was the qualitative jump required of the allies, with the gradual introduction of atomic weapons in the units as the United States produced them:\textsuperscript{28}
MC 70 anticipated that not only 270 American units be equipped but also European short-range tactical aircraft. However, the Western divisions had to be able to fight with conventional weapons at the same time, or to launch their atomic weapons in the first hour of war. Atomic bombs were no longer reserved for the delayed battle and stopped at the Oder or the Rhine, but were also for the defense of national territories, behind the lines. This required providing the allied armies with short range tactical nuclear missiles with limited power, since the concerned countries (and benevolent allies) would bomb their own national territory. This measure primarily concerned the FRG, but could eventually also concern France or the Po valley. This makes it easier to understand why MC 70 remained classified until 2000. The successive plans no doubt inherited this drastic measure and would not have pleased these countries’ citizens.\(^{29}\)

The procedure of the “double key” governed the use of atomic warheads: in times of peace, the American forces kept the nuclear warheads in 147 principle depots and 161 other secondary stocks or in transit (very expensive indeed).\(^{30}\) During a conflict, American forces would immediately hand over the atomic warheads to the allied units, on the order of the president of the United States. The host nation would handle and maintain the vectors.\(^{31}\) This was a belated and inevitable consequence of the New Look and MC 48: the exact role of the conventional European divisions beside the nuclearized American units on the same battle field was ill-conceived (unless imagining an American division integrated in each French, German or Italian army corps). The inclusion of tactical weapons in European arsenals (Honest John, Nike, Hawk, and Sergeant missiles, with a range of 50–150 km) would multiply Atlantic firepower. This would lead, for France and the FRG, to considerable positive consequences, for example giving their F100 airplanes tactical nuclear capabilities.\(^{32}\) These two principal nations left behind the role of “foot soldiers” that MC 48 had assigned them—which should have pleased them, in theory.

The second objective of MC 70: to survive Soviet strikes and to win the second month of war, to reinforce the capacity to survive and to prepare for a considerable logistical effort, on land and on sea

Indisputably, MC 70 offered attractive prospects to the American allies. However, this new military regulation would also carry a heavy price for the Western economies, because of the intensification of the logistical and conventional aspects of MC 48. From then on, MC 70 planned the second month of war on the assumption that the tactical and strategic bombings against the Communist armies and territories would not in and of themselves bring victory. MC 70 renounced the old theory which postulated that a nuclear war would not last longer than a month (cf. the “concept of thirty days” of MC 48). After the first round of annihilation, NATO would reorganize the surviving units to reconquer lost territories. This is why MC 70 gave prominence to logistical questions and stressed the vital link between the protection of American industry and the rehabilitation of battered Europe.

MC 70 was thus logically interested in maritime communications.\(^{33}\) To preserve the vital link between North America and Europe, the directive ordered the evacuation of the entire European and British merchant fleet at the start of the war (3,500 ships), to be dispersed offshore of the United States and in the South Atlantic, in order to conserve the possibility of later sending reinforcements and supplies to the old continent.\(^{34}\) In this vein, MC 70 distributed considerable financial resources to the anti-submarine fight, at a
comparable level to investments on land, as well as an expensive increase in the power of American and British fleets under the orders of SACLANT (Supreme Allied Commander Atlantic). In parallel, SACEUR recommended financing and stocking 90 days’ worth of war reserves in Europe, a considerable immobilization of capital. All these accumulated factors made the cost of MC 70 skyrocket. For financial reasons, the European governments, led by France, initially supported the new directive in the hope of receiving subsidies from the United States, then rejected it when they understood that they had to pay their share.

The fantastic accounts of MC 70

From the start, the Eisenhower administration maintained MC 70 to impose a “Fair Share” on the Europeans and a rationalization of the costs of Western security. In fact, the trap closed almost immediately on the American budget: not only did the European allies continue to hide behind the American military presence in Europe, but the United States had to continue to increase their Atlantic contribution, in absolute and relative value.

After an initial setback in December 1957, from 15 to 17 April 1958 the NATO Council of Defence Ministers tried, and failed again, to adopt MC 70: one by one, the European ministers slipped away and hid their reluctance behind a veil of good intentions. For example, the Belgian government calculated that the execution of MC 70 would impose an increase of 35 percent of their military budget. On behalf of the FRG, Franz Josef Strauss worried about financing nuclear missiles while the Bundeswehr had not achieved the first stage of its rise to power, and had not yet received all of its conventional material. And yet, the tactical weapons of high technology necessitated even more land, infrastructure, engineers, not to mention constant revisions and updates.

The position of the United Kingdom was no more coherent than that of its neighbors. The British complained that MC 70 raised their defense budgets. For example, MC 70 required 100,000 additional troops be added to the 50,000 soldiers forced to remain in the FRG and to modernize them quickly. Her Majesty’s Government also quickly understood that a significant naval contribution was required in order to ensure that the sea routes between North America and Europe were secure. The new directive therefore directly contradicted the British Defence White Paper of 1957. Paradoxically, the United Kingdom, though originally in favor of MC 70, criticized the maximalist ambitions, including and especially the naval component. At the North Atlantic Council of December 1958, Duncan Sandys argued that MC 70 was not a minimum, but an ideal (whereas it is actually a “minimum” understood in “a spirit of strict economy”).

The logical outcome: at the Atlantic Council of December 1959, no one mentioned MC 70, which lasted in theory until 1963. Drawing lessons from the fiasco, the Secretary-General of the Organization, Paul-Henri Spaak, renounced the principal of the “long term Atlantic plan” and returned to the system of the “annual review.”

The technocratic and strategic bankruptcy of MC 70

On the whole, the nuclearization of the European armies is only now being understood (including the Luftwaffe), the price of the double key. On the whole, the nuclearization of the European Armies (with the double key system) has been the only concrete achievement of MC 70. In particular, the fracture between the military staffs and the
political authorities should be mentioned. The Military Committee of NATO and the
Standing Group, as the principal military leaders of the Atlantic Alliance wanted to
impose a vital minimum, which quickly appeared to civilian authorities as a deadly
maximum. The European governments, particularly France and Great Britain, but also
President Eisenhower only wanted to consider budgetary savings.

By refusing to finance the conventional section of MC 70 and by giving budgetary
priority to the welfare state, the European members of NATO refused the possibility of
conducting conventional combat initially and thus resolved to have nuclear war in the
case of a Soviet attack, even a limited one. The fact that World War III fortunately did
not break out does not prove the suitability of their position. European leaders had de
facto accepted the prospect of suicide: either the European continent was a lightning rod
of East–West conflict, sparing North America and Soviet Russia; or the president of the
United States would refuse to take any risks and would not authorize nuclear
fire in Europe, strategic or tactical, letting the Red Army crush the European armies; or, alternatively, the member states of NATO would behave collectively as a large Denmark in
1940: Amsterdam, Brussels, Rome, Paris … open cities!

Between these two options, life or death, the United States resigned itself to the riskiest
option. They maintained their divisions in the FRG on the frontline of a potential
conflict, if only a local one. The large American units voluntarily served as hostages for
European security. Yet the successive presidential administrations could have been much
more restrictive and coercive towards their allies, including and especially France, by
requiring them to actually finance the necessary defense.

Notes

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4 Statement by the Secretary of State to the North Atlantic Council Closed Ministerial Session; Paris,
5 For the stance of the French general staff: ‘Possibilités d’obtenir un meilleur rendement militaire des
6 The American origin of this is confirmed by the memo of the Service des pactes; 13/12/1955. Quai
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7 ‘Etude par le Conseil des ministres du rapport du Comité militaire sur le nouveau plan d’organisation
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8 ‘Système le plus efficace à adopter pour la force militaire de l’OTAN pendant les prochaines
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15 Ibid.


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