

Deterrence, Defense, and Detente in the Grey Area: Can Arms Control Talks on Theatre Nuclear Forces Succeed?

by
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Introduction

Arms control is a difficult business, even when the political climate is favorable, which is not the case at present. Multilateral arms control negotiations are especially problematic as the negotiators must deal not only the standard national internal bureaucratic bargaining process, but with allied negotiations as well before proceeding to discussions with the "other side." Thus, negotiations on medium and/or long range theatre nuclear forces (LRTNF), also known as Eurostrategic missiles, begin with two immediate problems. To those initial obstacles, can be added the attendant difficulties associated with the development of a NATO position on this particular issue and the customary problems associated with East-West negotiations.

Ally-to Ally Negotiations

For the allies, a unified NATO position is a fundamental prerequisite to meaningful and successful negotiations. Whether the ultimate structure is US-USSR talks with allied consultants or NATO-WTO talks, any attempt to negotiate from a fragmented, or less than consensual position, carries with it the implication of vacillating positions in the middle of negotiations and, ultimately, possible non-implementation of an agreement negotiated with the East.

NATO's difficulties in constructing a common position commence almost as soon as arms control comes under discussion. Although the internal bargaining process within each NATO country, as noted above, is important, that is beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, the main concern here is the development of a NATO position, once each member country has evolved its own policy. The primary difficulty in this regard is between the U.S. and Europe, the "transAtlantic" problem. For the sake of simplicity and convenience, then, the two will be considered separately, as single entities, even though there are many variations across and within European NATO countries and within the U.S. as well.

NATO's view of threat perception shall be considered first. All NATO members agree that strategic parity between the U.S. and the USSR has elevated the Eurostrategic, or LRTNF, to a new prominence.¹ All agree that the military balance at this level favors the East and poses a threat to the West.² However, the utility of the Soviet margin and its implications for the Alliance are more controversial.³ As David Jones, former Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff

noted, "... gaining a workable consensus among sovereign allies on the magnitude and proximity of a common threat falls into the 'easier said than done' category."⁴

Originally, the fears of the European governments were more involved with the potential weakening of deterrence and subsequent decoupling of U.S. strategic forces than with the political utility or military capability of the Soviet margin. This is not to say that the Europeans are unconcerned with the devastation which could be inflicted by the SS-20 and Backfire forces; they are, but this concern has become translated into worry regarding the U.S. commitment. There is a deeply entrenched commitment in Europe to deterrence more than to defence, based as it is on the probably accurate presumption that once World War III begins, the devastation of Europe is practically guaranteed. Therefore, the European members of NATO see in the theatre imbalance a threat to deterrence since that imbalance weakens one leg of the NATO defensive triad of conventional, tactical/theatre nuclear, and strategic nuclear forces.

Thus, on the one hand, there is a fear that the Soviet margin in LRTNF could severely weaken the linkage to U.S. strategic forces if left unchecked. On the other hand, if too many weapons are deployed by the U.S. in response, this could weaken deterrence by making it possible to fight a limited nuclear war, a prospect abhorred by the Europeans.

The United States is concerned with the Soviet advantage in LRTNF because it equates marginal military advantages to huge amounts of political influence. U.S. pre-occupation is with the potential for 'Finlandizing' attempts by the USSR which could politically and economically disengage Western Europe from the United States. Additionally in much the same fashion as Europe, America believes that a weakened deterrent makes aggression more likely; that is, after all, the logic of deterrence. However, the U.S. views this more as a problem in escalation dominance than as one of decoupling. The threat posed by a Soviet predominance in grey area, or long range theatre nuclear systems, lies in the lack of an effective deterrent. There is nothing with which to prevent Soviet escalation to a predominant level.

Further U.S. concern with the grey area imbalance revolves around 'war-fighting,' a luxury not affordable, because of their vulnerable position, to the Europeans. Calculating various strategies and their consequences in theatre nuclear warfare is the kind of analysis for which the United States is both famous and well-equipped. Unfortunately, to gain bargaining room during a European war carries with it the automatic implication of the destruction of Western and perhaps Eastern Europe as well. The U.S. attention with regards to 'war-fighting' stems more from trying to match the Soviets on their own ground rather than any real desire or belief that one could 'win' a theatre nuclear war. Lately, however, loose talk about the possibilities of theatre nuclear war by the Reagan administration has exacerbated Eu-

ropean fears in this regard. While the intent of such announcements may have been to enhance the credibility of deterrence *vis-a-vis* the Soviet Union, the result instead was to convince many Europeans that the U.S. does indeed intend to fight the next war on European soil.

Additionally, this particular issue reveals an interesting discrepancy in military thinking within NATO. While the Europeans tend to emphasize intentions—what the Soviets might or are likely to do—the United States tends to emphasize capability—what the Soviets could do. This reflects the European preference for diplomatic-political approaches and the U.S. preference for technological-quantifiable approaches. Given these differing approaches to threat assessment and perception, one finds that agreement between the two parties tends to be very general—a ‘threat’ exists, or very specific—the SS-20.

The lack of agreement on the scope and magnitude of the threat carries over into, and is complicated by, the ambiguities and differences of opinion on NATO’s ‘3-D’ policy: deterrence, defence and detente. Deterrence and defense in NATO are covered by the doctrine of flexible response (FR), adopted in 1967. FR essentially, is an ‘all things to all people’ kind of doctrine that was intended to replace the obviously obsolescent and wholly non-credible doctrine of massive retaliation. FR was designed to do two basic things. First, it recoupled the U.S. strategic deterrent by filling in the gaps, or levels, between troops and ICBMs. These various levels create an escalation ladder that serves to connect ground forces to strategic forces by incremental steps, thus making a U.S. strategic guarantee credible once again. Second, FR, as its name implies, was structured to give NATO more flexibility, more options between surrender or suicide. The same levels that recouple the U.S. strategic deterrent also acts as firebreaks or thresholds—levels at which war might be conducted without further escalation. Both the United States and NATO wished to be able to meet and to resist Soviet aggression at whatever level it was initiated, deterring or slowing escalation to the next level by the use of the existence of the level after that—thus achieving escalation dominance and intra-war deterrence.

These dual purposes are somewhat opposed to each other. The first implies almost automatic escalation to the strategic level, while the second clearly acknowledges that this may not necessarily be the case. Thus, there is a great deal of uncertainty built into flexible response which, allegedly, further increases the deterrent effect since the Soviets can never be sure exactly how NATO will respond. The obvious problem with this is that NATO does not know exactly how it will respond either. The Europeans want an automatic escalation to the top, wanting exactly what was deemed as ‘not credible’ under massive retaliation.⁵ The United States wants firebreaks, thresholds, escalation control and dominance, and bargaining room. This doctrinal discrepancy leads to acrimonious debate and recurrent quarrels over coupling every time military strategy is discussed or new weapons,

especially nuclear ones, are proposed. These divisions provide a wedge that the USSR can exploit to pull NATO even further apart. In many ways these quarrels over decoupling can become a self-fulfilling prophecy, much like the jealous husband who constantly nags his wife about cheating—eventually she probably will start seeing someone else just to get away from her husband's accusations.

When trying to assess the role that LRTNF play in deterrence and defense, one finds grey area systems assume the basic duality of flexible response. The Europeans want only enough LRTNF to provide a meaningful response to the Soviet threat that would, in turn, recouple U.S. strategic forces. The United States, or at least significant portions therein, would like the LRTNF to make 'war-fighting' an option at that level. Be that as it may, NATO has agreed on the TNF modernization program of 572 Cruise missiles (CMs) and Pershing IIs. This is clearly a political compromise as that number will hardly change the military balance. Deployment issues have not been settled yet. It will, in fact, be extremely difficult to try to negotiate systems such as these. If negotiations attempt to change the number or put restrictions on basing or deployment, NATO will have to go through bitter debates yet again. The United States cannot use the threat of increasing the numbers to be deployed as a bargaining chip because the Soviets know the Europeans would not accept more than have already been agreed to. More generally, the duality of flexible response creates a situation in which the specification of force structure goals—an important prerequisite to being able to negotiate forces—becomes an extremely difficult political as well as military task. This inability of NATO to figure out exactly what it is doing and where it wants to go (aside from the clear desire to reduce Soviet forces) and the subsequent impact on negotiations, can be seen in Mutual Balanced Force Reduction (MBFR), although MBFR has other problems as well. Another example of a confused doctrine with different interpretations creating negotiation difficulties is the U.S. strategic doctrine and SALT. If these two limited negotiations are any guide, negotiations on LRTNF are likely to be even more unsuccessful.

The question of how detente fits into all this is quite clear. It is reflected in the TNF-modernization decision which sets up the requirement that modernization proceed in parallel with arms control negotiations. This links a military program with a political process. The aim is to soften the impact of the TNF modernization program so that detente is not threatened by a new arms race at this particular level, thus it is hoped, encouraging the Soviet Union to curb its growth program. Although the United States agreed to this, there was a great deal of resentment at what was considered to be an unnecessary arms control restriction. The USSR had started the LRTNF build up, so NATO would be merely countering that move, not initiating a new arms race. As far as the United States was concerned, the Soviets wrecked detente so it is up to them to get it back on the track. To a large extent, the Europeans agreed that the Soviets have ruined de-

tente, but consider it the duty of all concerned to try to salvage what is left and rebuild it. Detente is also viewed by the U.S. as a political strategy, a strategy that has failed to be of significant or lasting value. The new policy is to build up militarily and then to negotiate from strength. Contrarily, for Europe—especially the Federal Republic—detente is a way of life that cannot be allowed to fail. Hence, Europeans are more willing to negotiate now so as to preserve detente, operating, as they are, under the much greater fear that the potential price of the new U.S. strategy is a renewed cold war.

These differences in interpretation of detente signal more difficulties in forging a cohesive NATO bargaining position. The Europeans will probably be more willing to make concessions, more willing to use proposed systems as bargaining chips, and more willing to live alongside a Soviet advantage (providing it is not too great) than the Americans. Therefore, whether one considers LRTNF talks as part of deterrence, defense, or detente, serious differences divide the NATO alliance. Some of the ambiguities, some of the disagreements, can be dealt with, but others cannot. A completely unified position at all stages of the negotiations is probably impossible, although some consensual positions are likely. For example, the initial US/NATO proposal at the preliminary talks was that only controls on long-range, land-based theatre nuclear forces be dealt with and that the ultimate balance be zero/zero. All NATO members could agree with this since those are the systems posing the greatest threat to the Alliance, even though the reasons for agreement differ from country to country, depending on how each assesses the threat of deterrence, defense or detente. It proved, however, an unrealistic position—the USSR rejected it immediately. The zero/zero option is also logically inconsistent with a war-fighting version of flexible response since it would eliminate a number of alternative strategies at that particular level. Further, it does not take into account the threat posed to the USSR by British, French and Chinese missiles.

Thus, however problematic the development of a coherent NATO position may be, finding common ground with the Soviets on which to build a meaningful agreement is likely to be even more difficult.

East-West Negotiations

There are several difficulties arising within East-West negotiations. First is the issue of Soviet doctrine. The West does not really know how the Soviets view deterrence and defense, or how theatre nuclear forces fit into their plans.⁶ From their force configuration and some of their writings, it would appear that the Soviets believe a preponderance of force at each level—i.e. the ability to win a war at any given level—is the best deterrent and that the best defense is a good offense combined with active air defense and civil defense. Nuclear forces appear to be relatively well integrated with conventional ones, at least in terms of planning.

Another problem arises if one considers what the Soviets might hope to gain from their advantage in LRTNF. They might hope to use it for political blackmail, for deterrence purposes only, for defense of the homeland by obliterating Western Europe should deterrence fail, or for all three. Depending on the goal or goals, Soviet willingness to make concessions will vary.

The West also does not know how important detente actually is to the USSR. The Soviets are probably fairly close to the Americans in viewing detente as a strategy which can be discarded if it does not work. However, detente has been working for them, especially in terms of trade and technology transfer from the West. Additionally, it seems to have some fundamental importance, if only from the Soviet perception that they would lose an all-out arms race with the United States. Therefore, they have implied some willingness to renegotiate parts of SALT II which they initially refused even to consider. They have also shown an incredible amount of restraint and flexibility over the Polish situation. Detente may not be quite so fragile as the West Europeans frequently perceive it to be.

Nonetheless, all this is speculative and will undoubtedly remain so. The lack of knowledge concerning Soviet doctrine will continue to make force planning and arms control negotiations slow and difficult.

A further obstacle in East-West negotiations is the question of what is to be included. The grey area, of which LRTNF are the upper end, encompasses a tremendous range of capabilities and missions, dual-purpose (conventional or nuclear) and dual-mission (strategic or theatre) forces. From the point of view of existing arms control forums, negotiations on theatre nuclear forces should cover everything between the men and tanks of the Mutual Balanced Force Reduction talks and SALT's strategic forces. That is easier said than done though, because MBFR occasionally deals in battlefield nuclear weapons, while SALT includes the Backfire and Cruise missiles. START will have to deal with forward based systems (FBS) if the TNF talks do not. Any attempt to carve out a particular type of system for consideration—such as long-range, land based TNF—denies the fact that there are numerous other systems capable of performing similar missions. To further claim that this particular type of system is 'destabilizing' brings into play all the doctrinal questions, both within NATO and between NATO and the USSR.

A third series of problems lies in the asymmetrical force structures and geography. From SALT and MBFR we know that tradeoffs between non-similar systems are very difficult to negotiate and even harder to obtain public acceptance for. Objectively, it might seem reasonable to assume that NATO could trade U.S.-Forward Based Systems or MRTNF for Soviet LRTNF. However, U.S.-FBS are needed to offset Soviet sea and air systems and MRTNF are needed for deterrence and defense at their own level and do not pose a threat to the USSR but only to Eastern Europe which is more or less expendable

in Soviet eyes. Geographical concerns intrude in two areas. NATO weapons have to cross Eastern Europe as a launching pad. Even if both sides agree to deploy only MRTNF, the Soviets can still threaten Western Europe, but Western Europe cannot threaten the USSR. If one considers redeployment as a possible option, another MBFR-related problem appears. The Soviets can redeploy, perhaps as far as behind the Urals, but where does NATO go? Three thousand miles across the Atlantic? Hardly an equitable situation.

Another set of difficulties arises regarding the non-US/USSR nuclear weapons, which include British, but especially French and Chinese systems. This may not be insurmountable. Like MBFR, the first round of talks could deal only with U.S. and Soviet systems, though this raises questions of the linkage with SALT and questions over the propriety of the U.S. negotiation of European security without sufficient consultation. NATO-wide negotiations could bring in the British and, by a leap of faith, the French, yet the Chinese are forever on the outside. As long as the Soviets wish to maintain sizeable TNF deployments against China, simple numerical limits, such as equal ceilings at low levels, are probably out of the question, unless completely restricted to the European theatre.

Negotiating Counters

Stated simply, the Soviets are not going to give up something for nothing. They achieved superiority in numbers of Strategic Land Based Missiles (SLBMs) and have been unwilling to lower significantly the ceiling there; they adamantly refuse to give up their superiority in heavy missiles and throw-weight. At the Mutual Balanced Force Reduction talks, they have been very reluctant to give up their superiority in men and tanks. Thus, without a strong incentive, the Soviets are unlikely to give up their superiority in land-based, long range theatre nuclear forces. NATO has to find some kind of counter-leverage, some area in which it can make concessions without endangering its deterrent or defensive policy and, simultaneously, maintain detente.

One possibility is no-first-use of nuclear weapons' pledges. The Soviets have been offering this for years, but NATO has treated it as a non-starter. The whole illusory fabric of flexible response that NATO has built over the years is inextricably twined with the option to use nuclear weapons if a Soviet conventional assault cannot be halted quickly. NATO cannot suddenly reverse its stand on this issue, but subtle hints can be made indicating that this is an item up for discussion.⁸

Similarly, no-use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states is another possibility. This does pose difficulties over what constitutes a nuclear state—the 'deployment v.s. possession' problem—but could certainly be used as a lure to get the Soviets talking.

Another avenue of approach lies in confidence-building measures (CBMs). CBMs are harder to define for the grey area than for the

conventional forces—pulling missiles back a couple of hundred of miles does not carry the same significance as pulling back tanks but, as a show of good faith, it could have some merit. Undeniably, prior notification of tests and manoeuvres provide possible CBMs. Since such measures have already been negotiated for the strategic level and the conventional level, all that would be required would be an explicit statement that theatre systems were also covered.

Redeployment of aircraft and ships is confounded by the geography problem, but certainly cannot be dismissed out of hand. The Mediterranean might offer some opportunities here.

An explicit disavowal of linkage between political and military events could be considered a CBM. The recent attempt by the Reagan administration to link the situation in Poland and TNF talks created anxiety for the Europeans. Divorcing the two events would help smooth Alliance relations as well as aid the talks.

A geographically defined negotiation, such as MBFR, offers other possibilities with its main difficulty being the mobility of the Soviet forces. Although the missiles might be stationed in the Far East on a permanent basis, they could be moved back to the European theatre in a crisis. Here, Japan becomes a complicating factor. Soviet missiles which can strike deep into China can also strike Japan. Thus, the U.S. seems faced with a genuine dilemma: to have missiles threatening the Europeans or to have missiles threatening the Japanese. This may be the primary reason why the U.S. has been reluctant to back away from the zero/zero option; zero/zero is the only way to completely eliminate the threat. If there were geographical subceilings within a global ceiling, or European reductions were treated as a first step in eventual global reductions, *this approach could offer some negotiating potential*. Currently, the Soviets have proposed that they reduce the total number of their missiles to the combined French and British total of one hundred and sixty-two. This has been rejected by the U.S. as well as Britain and France, on three basic grounds. First, the negotiations are between the U.S. and the USSR; the U.S. has no authority over these missiles. Second, the Soviets would retain a warhead advantage since the SS-20 carries three warheads while the British and French equivalent houses only one. Third, the British and French missiles are strategic weapons designed for British and French defense; they are not NATO theatre weapons. Nonetheless, this offer does show some movement on the Soviet part. If there were an equal warhead ceiling set at 486 (162 x 3 warheads), for example, then the U.S. could deploy 486 minus 162 or 324 Cruise and Pershing missiles. This would be a substantial reduction in the 572 scheduled for projected deployment. With only 162 SS-20s and assuming that one third of the force is deployed in Asia, the Soviet threat to Europe would be substantially reduced while the threat to Japan would be more manageable.

Finally, doctrinal discussions on the role of the TNF in deterrence and defense in Europe might be useful. If rhetoric and propaganda can be minimized, then there is some value in communication, even

if it does not produce immediate, tangible results. Such a discussion could be easily broadened to include detente, since that is clearly a part of the security of Europe. Under such auspices, one could explore the feasibility of economic and technological concessions by NATO and balanced by military concessions by the Soviets. If the Russians do want Western technology, grain, and consumer goods, they just might be willing to pay with SS-20s.

Conclusion

In short, East-West arms control talks on theatre nuclear forces have little chance of success until NATO members can agree upon a reasonable, realistic, cohesive position and can find some indirect approach which will provide a position of strength sufficient to counter the Soviet military advantage.

Footnotes

1. Helmut Schmidt is generally credited with having raised the issue in his 1977 lecture to the International Institute of Strategic Studies, London; published in *Survival*, XX (January/February, 1978), 2-10.
2. On the TNF balance, see: Robert Kennedy, "Soviet Theatre Nuclear Forces," *Air Force*, 64 (March 1981), 78-83; Raymond L. Garthoff, "Brezhnev's Opening: the TNF Tangle," *Foreign Policy* (Winter, 1980-81), 82-94; Justin Galen, "Theatre Nuclear Forces," *Armed Forces Journal/International* (November, 1979); and, "The Balance of Theatre Nuclear Forces in Europe," in *The Military Balance 1981-82* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1981), pp. 134-7.
3. On TNF and Alliance doctrine, political implications, etc., see: H.J. Neuman, *Nuclear Forces in Europe* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1982); L. Eagleburger, "U.S. . . . INF," *NATO Review*, 30 (February, 1982); P. Dyer, "Tactical Nuclear Weapons and Deterrence," *Political Science Quarterly*, 92 (Summer, 1977); S. Hoffman, "Nato and Nuclear Weapons," *Foreign Affairs*, 60 (Winter, 1981-82); M. Halperin, "NATO and Theatre Nuclear Forces," *Orbis*, XXVI (Spring, 1982); L. Freedman, "Limited War," *Orbis*, XXVI (Spring, 1982); J.J. Martin, "Nuclear Weapons and NATO," *Orbis*, XXII (Winter, 1979); C. Kelleher, "Europe and Theatre Nuclear Modernization," *International Security*, 5 (Spring, 1981); U. Nerlich, "Theatre Nuclear Forces in Europe," *Washington Quarterly* (Winter, 1980); R. Garthoff, "Brezhnev's Opening: The TNF Tangle," *Foreign Policy* (Winter, 1980-81); K. Lautenschlager, "TNF and Grey Area Weapons," *Naval War College Review* (September/October, 1980); P. Buteaux, "TNF Modernisation," *NATO Review*, 28 (December, 1980); K.N. Lewis, "Intermediate Range Nuclear Weapons," *Scientific American*, 243 (December, 1980); "Forum on TNF," *Orbis*, 26 (Spring, 1982); A. Frye, "Nuclear Weapons in Europe," *Survival*, XXII (May, 1980).
4. General David Jones, "Introduction to annual U.S. Military Posture Statement, as delivered to Armed Services Committee of the House of Representatives, 4 February 1981," as printed in *ICA Official Text*, 6 February 1981 (London, p. 9).
5. Whether the Europeans actually want immediate escalation or merely the commitment to do so is open to question. Given their fears of a limited nuclear war, one could argue that they want a clear commitment to enhance deterrence but, should deterrence fail, they would prefer the war to be fought "over their heads," i.e. a strategic exchange between the U.S. and USSR.

6. This ignorance is partially due to contradictory and obfuscatory writing by the Soviets, partially due to an inability of Soviet specialists to agree on the interpretation of known facts, and partially due to the inability of ever knowing what exactly is going on in a given country, especially a closed society like the USSR. On Soviet Forces and doctrine, see: D. Ross "Rethinking Soviet Strategic Policy," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, (May, 1978); F. Ermarth, "Contrasts in Soviet and American Strategic Thought," *International Security* (Fall, 1978); R. Garthoff, "Mutual Deterrence . . . Soviet," *International Security* (Summer, 1978); R. Lambeth, "The Political Potential of Soviet Forces," *International Security*, 5 (Winter, 1980); S. Kime, "The Soviet View of War," *Comparative Strategy*, 2 no. 3 (1980); D. Finley, "Conventional Arms in Soviet Foreign Policy," *World Politics*, XXXIII (October, 1980); S. Kaplan, *Diplomacy of Power-Soviet Armed Forces* (Brookings); M. Miller, "Soviet Strategic Thought," *International Security Review*, 5 (Winter, 1980/81); A. Vick, "Soviet Military Forces," *Air University Review*, 32 (January/February, 1981); R. Strode, "Soviet Strategic Style," *Comparative Strategy*, 3, no. 4 (1982).
7. For various discussions and alternatives in TNF negotiations, see: K. de Vries, "Responding to the SS-20," *Survival*, XXI (November/December, 1979); R. Metzger, and P. Doty, "Arms Control Enters the Grey Area," *International Security*, 3 (Winter, 1978-9); R. Burt, "Cruise Missiles and Arms Control," *Survival*, 23 (January, 1976); L. Davis, "Theatre Nuclear Forces and Arms Control," *Survival*, 23 (November, 1981); W. Hyland "Soviet Theatre Forces and Arms Control," *Survival*, XXIII (September, 1981); L. Freedman, "Theatre Nuclear Arms Control," *Survival*, XXIII (January, 1981); Jane Sharp, "Four Approaches to an INF Agreement," *Arms Control Today*, 12 (March, 1982).
8. A very lucid statement of NATO's position can be found in Vincenzo Torretta, "The Nuclear Strategy of the Atlantic Alliance and the 'no first use' Debate," *NATO Review*, 30 (December, 1982), pp. 1-7.