

Conventional weapons & wisdoms: a NATO dilemma for Canada

by Michael Tucker

At its first heads of government meeting in Paris in December 1957, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization adopted military plan MC-70. Under this plan alliance members reaffirmed their joint ministerial decisions of December 1954 and December 1955 to equip NATO forces in Europe with battlefield or "tactical" nuclear weapons. These systems, which included an air strike capability to interdict the adversary's land forces, artillery for the direct support of NATO land forces, and air-to-air missiles, were designed to give the alliance a counterforce capability against Warsaw Pact conventional forces. Effectively, NATO military authorities were given the hardware by which they could plan for the contingency of a limited nuclear war in the European theatre, in the event of aggression from the east.

The stated rationale for MC-70, and for the alliance's subsequent heavy reliance on nuclear weapons for its defence, was the need to offset the at least numerical advantage in troop strength and conventional armor which the Warsaw Pact clearly enjoyed. It was recognized that for compelling economic, political and social reasons the alliance could not hope to match Soviet conventional superiority. Yet another and equally cogent reason for MC-70 was the perceived and increasingly real need to strengthen the American nuclear commitment to Western Europe.

With the deployment of its long-range bomber in 1954 and then its intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) in 1957, the Soviet Union clearly demonstrated an ability to reach the United States with nuclear weapons. As a consequence of these developments, doubts began to surface in NATO Europe that Washington would risk the destruction of the American homeland merely for the sake of its beleaguered allies. By 1957, thus, two closely linked problems had emerged which continued thereafter to perplex if not bedevil the alliance: Soviet-American parity in their central strategic systems (the mainstay of the nuclear balance of power), and the question of the credibility of the American nuclear guarantee to NATO Europe.

Double quick fix

In hindsight at least, it seems that MC-70 was designed to perform a double duty as a hardware quick-fix for these new dilemmas facing the alliance. First, by providing for the contingency of an allied nuclear war-fighting capability at the theatre level rather than an automatic American strategic response to a Warsaw Pact attack, the plan was to offset American fears that NATO represented an all-too-dangerous entangling alliance. Second, should NATO face imminent defeat on the battlefield, then the use of tactical

nuclear forces by the alliance would serve as a trip-wire unleashing the American strategic arsenal. Tactical weapons were thus seen to serve both as a firebreak between alliance theatre and American strategic systems in the event of war and, paradoxically, as a coupling link between these systems.

Even as the positioning of NATO's tactical nuclear systems continued apace in the early-mid-1960s, however, the apparent willingness of the Soviet Union to respond in kind to Western hardware decisions compelled some rethinking in alliance capitals and councils about the logic of a virtually exclusive reliance on nuclear weapons. If and as the Soviet Union continued to deploy its own tactical nuclear weapons in Eastern Europe, the question arose as to what confidence the alliance could have in its nuclear war-fighting ability to repel a Soviet attack. Rather than return to a reliance upon the discredited doctrine of massive retaliation, the alliance, in December 1967, adopted a strategy of flexible response which promised a deliberate but controlled escalation of any conflict in Europe — from a conventional to the tactical nuclear level, and ultimately to the strategic nuclear level if need be. Uncertain of NATO's likely response (the level or threshold to be of the alliance's own choosing), the Warsaw Pact was thus to be deterred from initiating hostilities in Europe by a "seamless web" of potential threats, including NATO's possible first use of nuclear weapons.

Early push for conventional forces

The strategy required, of course, the appropriate weapons systems to sustain it, and that year the alliance agreed in principle to augment its nuclear arsenal with modernized and strengthened conventional forces. However, this agreement in principle was not to be put into practice, at least not at that time. For the next decade or so the hard issue of alliance conventional force upgrading was effectively shelved as a consequence of the emergence of a number of mitigating factors: superpower détente, cost considerations, which became all the more compelling as economic problems beset Western nations during the 1970s, and NATO's own earnest quest for détente with the East following upon the recommendations of the Harmel Report in 1967. Not the least of these recommendations was that the alliance should pursue the desideratum of

*Michael Tucker teaches Political Science at Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick. He was a NATO Fellow during 1981-82, and is the author of *Canadian Foreign Policy: Contemporary Issues and Themes* (1980).*