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THE NATO NUCLEAR PLANNING GROUP

by Jocelyn Coulon

Of all the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's institutions, committees and commissions the Nuclear Planning Group (NPG) is without a doubt the least well known. Apart from rare references to its activities in alliance publications and from the press communiqué which is released after each NPG meeting, little information is to be had about the work of the Group, although the future of the West may depend on what it does.

The members of the NPG work on the nuclear plans for the alliance. They analyze the proposals put forward by political and military officials for the development, deployment, modernization or withdrawal of nuclear weapons from the European theatre. Their debates, which are held *in camera*, are subject to review by the defence ministers who, in the final analysis, make the decisions.

The last important meeting of the NPG took place in Stavanger, Norway, on 14 and 15 May 1987. The object of the meeting was to examine the "double-zero" option for the elimination of short- and intermediate-range nuclear missiles, an option to which the two superpowers had agreed in principle at their meeting in Moscow in April. The NATO defence ministers, except for those of France and Iceland (the latter has only observer status), spent their time considering the practical results which the withdrawal of these nuclear weapons could have and how this would affect the strategic situation in Europe.

NUCLEAR WEAPONS IN EUROPE

Nuclear arms were not introduced into Europe until well after the signing of the treaty which gave birth to NATO in 1949. Even if this agreement implied that the

alliance could rely on being defended by nuclear weapons if necessary, it was only the United States which then possessed such arms and initially it had no intention of deploying them in Europe. On the one hand, the United States did not attach any great priority to producing such weapons, and on the other, it was the intention of the alliance to build up an adequate conventional defence which would allow it to stand up to the Soviet Union and its allies in Eastern Europe. At the Lisbon meeting in 1952, which adopted a plan for reorganizing the structure of NATO, member countries expressed their eagerness to rapidly build up their conventional defence by increasing the number of divisions from twenty-five to ninety-six in two years.

The question of nuclear weapons had not yet arisen. However, the allies, especially the strategists at the Supreme Headquarters of the Allied Powers in Europe (SHAPE), soon realized that the Lisbon objectives would never be achieved and that it would be necessary to make up for NATO inadequacies in conventional weapons by resorting to nuclear arms. The Eisenhower administration decided to equip the US army with nuclear weapons in 1953, and the following year nuclear weapons were deployed for the first time in Europe. It was not, however, until 15 December 1955 that NATO officially ratified this decision and gave orders that the NATO forces should receive nuclear arms.¹

The "nuclearization" of the alliance took place in two phases: 1) France and Britain acquired nuclear arms — this paper does not deal with that aspect of the issue; and, 2) the US forces in Europe were equipped with nuclear arms as were the forces of certain members of NATO. Starting in 1954 the United States began equipping its units in Europe with nuclear weapons of various kinds: atomic land-mines, nuclear-

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capable artillery, short-range ballistic missiles, airborne nuclear bombs and missiles, and anti-submarine weapons. As for the allies, their forces have received nuclear warheads for use with their own delivery vehicles. These nuclear warheads remain the property of the United States and they are provided under cooperation programmes and bilateral agreements between the United States and the host country.²

The cooperation programmes outline the way in which nuclear weapons will be used in the event of a conflict. The nuclear warhead belongs to the United States, while the launcher usually belongs to the country where the warhead is deployed. Both parties must agree before the missiles can be launched. This dual-key system defines each country's responsibilities and allows either of them to exercise a veto. When the launcher belongs to the United States, however, the host country no longer has any veto.

The United States introduced nuclear weapons into Europe in three stages. Between 1955 and 1958 the *Honest John*, *Sergeant* and *Nike-Hercules* missiles were all deployed in Europe as were nuclear-capable artillery and atomic land-mines. During the mid-sixties the *Pershing IA* missiles were installed in West Germany and nuclear-capable aircraft such as the F-4, F-104 and F-111 became operational. Finally, since the beginning of the eighties these planes are gradually being replaced by the *Tornado*, F-15 and F-16. The first missiles have been dismantled and replaced by the *Hawk* and the *Patriot*, which are armed with conventional charges. The artillery is being modernized and the atomic land-mines have been removed. One also must not forget to mention the deployment of 572 *Pershing II* and cruise missiles which began in 1983. All these will shortly be withdrawn in accordance with Euromissile agreement of 8 December 1987.

Those allies which station US nuclear weapons are Greece, Turkey, West Germany, Italy, Belgium, Great Britain and the Netherlands. According to the latest estimates they are host to about 4,600 nuclear arms of which one-third are under the dual-key system. All this huge arsenal is under the command of the Supreme Allied Commander in Europe (SACEUR) and is managed in accordance with the Plan for Nuclear Operations.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE NUCLEAR PLANNING GROUP

It was only after numerous discussions and demands on the part of their allies that the United States finally

accepted the idea of forming a Nuclear Planning Group within NATO. In fact it was not until 1967 that the Atlantic alliance officially established the NPG, at the same time that it accepted the new nuclear policy of "flexible response." The NPG was the product of a long maturing process in US nuclear strategy and reflected the need for the US to consult and inform those European and Canadian allies which were accepting the deployment of nuclear weapons in their territory.*

During the three years that the Korean War was going on the members of NATO gave some thought to the defence of Europe. The Lisbon meeting had set objectives for conventional defence which proved impossible to meet, and from 1954 onwards NATO had decided to arm itself with nuclear weapons in order to confront the Soviet threat. At the same time the US introduced the doctrine of "massive retaliation" to deter an attack on Europe. President Dwight Eisenhower and his Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, assured the allies that, in the event of conflict with either the Soviet Union or China, the United States would not confine the war to conventional weapons, but would use all the means at its disposal (including nuclear weapons if necessary) to repulse aggression, no matter where in the world it occurred. As far as the European theatre was concerned this commitment would allow "the NATO forces to use atomic weapons in the event of any significant attack, even if the latter involved only conventional weapons."³

Until the early sixties it was relatively easy for the military to profess this doctrine of massive retaliation and for the politicians to support it. Until then the United States had enjoyed overwhelming superiority in nuclear weapons, and it had developed a worldwide network of alliances which enabled it to keep the Soviet Bloc contained. Moreover, the Soviet Union had barely any means of attacking the United States directly. This strategic situation, and all the policies and doctrines founded on it, changed the moment that Moscow acquired intercontinental ballistic missiles. Now the United States was no longer impregnable. Americans began to ask themselves if they were ready to sacrifice New York for the sake of defending London and Berlin. "Faced with the alternative of all or nothing, the United States would risk choosing nothing for fear of the consequences of choosing all."⁴ Slowly, strategy changed. On each side of the Atlantic both the military and the politicians realized that the old doctrine was no longer either tenable or credible. In France, General

* Since 1984 Canada no longer possesses nuclear weapons of any kind.

Charles de Gaulle had already understood this; the French nuclear programme, begun in 1954, continued to swell France's independent nuclear arsenal.

Discussions within the alliance led to the development of a new policy which allowed those in command more leeway concerning the use of nuclear weapons. In 1967 NATO acknowledged the changed conditions by adopting "flexible response." "If the level of defensive action taken initially did not achieve success, then the strategy of flexible response required a gradual progression to more advanced types of defence, while maintaining control of the situation."⁵ This new doctrine applied to both conventional and nuclear warfare.

Apart from these strategic and military problems, one of the most important factors which led to the formation of the NPG was the need for the allies to be consulted and to have a voice in decisions concerning the use of nuclear weapons. The deployment of these weapons in Europe, whether as part of the equipment of the US forces or of other national forces, posed problems concerning their use in time of war. As was noted above, in some instances the European NATO members possess the launchers while the warhead itself remains under US control. In the event of a crisis any decision to launch should, in principle, be taken bilaterally. In fact, it quickly became apparent that, because the Supreme Allied Commander in Europe (SACEUR) is also Commander-in-Chief of the US forces in Europe (CINCEUR), the United States would be able to take any such decision alone.

There have been many attempts to place NATO's nuclear forces under joint control so that the allies could take part in collective decision-making, and would have greater control over these forces; all these attempts have come to nothing. Among the numerous proposals put forward it is worth noting the one made by General Charles de Gaulle in 1958. He sent a memorandum to the United States and Britain proposing that a directorate comprised of representatives from each of their three countries be put in charge of NATO;⁶ this suggestion was rejected. In 1960 General Norstad, then Commander of the Allied Forces, put forward the idea that NATO should become the "fourth nuclear power" in the West, by setting up a multilateral authority to be in charge of nuclear warheads.⁷

Later the same year this recommendation was overtaken by another US proposal, this one suggesting the creation of a multilateral nuclear force which would

consist of five ballistic missile submarines. This scheme was rejected but reappeared in 1962 under the name of the Multilateral Force (MLF). This time it was to consist of twenty-five surface ships armed with two hundred missiles which would be under the joint ownership and control of those who participated.⁸ President John F. Kennedy and British Prime Minister Harold MacMillan discussed this plan at the Nassau Meeting in 1962. However, this offer was rejected by France in January 1963 and the matter was shelved until 1965. It had foundered on the problem of who should control the warheads and on the question of the US veto. "The failure of this project brought to light the inherent contradiction between nuclear logic and national sovereignty, and the impossibility of reaching a decision on the use of nuclear weapons unless this took place in a national context."⁹

In May 1962, while all this was going on, NATO adopted a series of measures concerning the circumstances in which the alliance should resort to the use of nuclear weapons. In a speech which he made at the time of the NATO Ministerial Meeting in Athens, the US Secretary of Defense, Robert MacNamara, presented to his colleagues what is now known as the Athens Guidelines on Nuclear Defence.

In general these guidelines described NATO's nuclear commitments in the event of aggression as well as the degree of political consultation which should occur in such circumstances. They also laid down procedures for an allied exchange of information on nuclear matters and stipulated that this should take place in a Nuclear Committee, which was to be the precursor of the NPG. The Athens Guidelines, combined with the memory of earlier setbacks, encouraged the United States to be more cooperative with its allies. In June 1965 at the time of the defence ministers' meeting it was agreed that the allies should have more say in nuclear planning and a special committee spent a year studying how this could best be achieved. In December 1966 NATO announced the creation of the Defence Planning Committee and the Nuclear Planning Group.

THE FUNCTIONS OF THE NPG

Robert MacNamara's main idea in initiating the NPG was to allow the allies to take part in discussion concerning nuclear weapons. At the NPG's first meeting on 6 April 1967 he enumerated the various attempts which had been made over the previous decade in an effort to determine how "the non-nuclear allies might have a greater voice in assessing the nature of the nuclear threat to the alliance, in determining

what forces were required to meet that threat, and in working out how and under what conditions these forces would be employed.”¹⁰ The advent of the NPG marked a turning point in the way in which the members of NATO could deal with nuclear arms. The idea of allowing member states to have some sort of physical control over nuclear weapons had been supplemented by the creation of a political institution which would hold consultations and work out decision-making procedures. This new organization would allow all members of NATO, not just the nuclear ones, to participate in these debates; this would not have been the case had either the multilateral force or the fourth nuclear power been established.

**Countries belonging to the NATO
Nuclear Planning Group**

Belgium	Luxembourg
Canada	Netherlands
Denmark	Norway
Federal Republic of Germany	Portugal
Greece	Spain
Iceland (Observer)	Turkey
Italy	United Kingdom
	United States

The Nuclear Planning Group, which at present consists of fourteen countries and one observer (Iceland), has the task of discussing the nuclear questions which affect the alliance. It undertakes studies which lay the groundwork for an overall nuclear strategy and it drafts the policies and procedures to be followed for the use of nuclear weapons. Among the various studies which the NPG has prepared is the one which gave rise to the 1979 “two-track decision” concerning the deployment of intermediate-range nuclear weapons in Europe. This study was the work of the High Level Group which was specially set up for this purpose. The NPG was also given the task of implementing the decisions taken at Montebello in 1983 to withdraw and modernize some of the tactical nuclear weapons which were then deployed in Western Europe.

However, although the NPG has been in existence for twenty years, and despite the fact that in 1969 it adopted a working paper entitled “Provisional Political Guidelines,” there are still no clear-cut political procedures governing the use of nuclear weapons. According to Morton Halperin “the NATO Defence

Ministers . . . have agreed that the first use of such devices should be a demonstration shot designed to indicate to the Kremlin that the war is getting out of hand. There is no agreement beyond that.”¹¹

Analysts maintain that nothing has replaced or modified the NATO working paper and that the NPG now confines its attention to the size and structure of the nuclear arsenal. According to Daniel Charles, the NPG “never did resolve the baffling question of how an initial use of nuclear weapons could or should be accomplished.”¹²

The NPG operates at two different levels. The permanent representatives of the members of NATO meet regularly to discuss nuclear problems, and twice a year the defence ministers meet to be briefed on these discussions and to make the necessary decisions. The NPG has an administrative team which is “responsible for working out NATO’s defence policy in the nuclear field and for the preparation of background material.”¹³

The NPG is not the only section of NATO to have a say in shaping nuclear policy. It works in close collaboration with the Military Committee (the senior military group in NATO), the special Consultative Group, the Defence Planning Committee, the International General Staff, the various military commands and the Nuclear Planning Directorate of the Secretariat. In the last analysis every decision it takes must be referred back to the North Atlantic Council which consists of the permanent representatives of the sixteen NATO members, and which is the ultimate decision-making and consultative body within the alliance.

According to Paul Buteux, the NPG has four important political functions in addition to the purely administrative and technical tasks allotted to it: 1) it helps the United States to explain its nuclear policy and attract the support necessary for carrying it out; 2) it distinguishes nuclear problems from the other difficulties which confront the alliance; 3) it encourages member states to cooperate on other matters; and 4) it prepares joint studies which help to resolve differences over nuclear policy.¹⁴

Finally, it is important to note that even if the *raison d’être* of the NPG is to take collective decisions concerning nuclear arms, it clearly has nothing to do with operational planning for the use of such weapons; this remains the responsibility of the political and military authorities in the alliance, and of its members.¹⁵

CONSULTATION

Since 1967 the NPG has drawn up guidelines as to the kind of consultations which should take place in the event of a crisis. According to Daniel Charles, however, the Group has never outlined precise procedures for the use of nuclear weapons.¹⁶ In the event of armed conflict in Europe the NPG could do nothing. Both consultations and decisions would be the responsibility of the executive branches of the alliance, such as SACEUR and the Defence Planning Committee where the ambassadors of the member governments would conduct their own internal deliberations and would also consult with their allies as to the need to employ nuclear arms.

NATO's cohesion depends entirely on having its members reach a consensus through the process of consultations. This requires meetings at every level and an adequate exchange of information. The NATO countries seem to be satisfied with the procedures which have been set up for carrying out this process. However, the most important question does not concern the type of consultations which will take place in advance of hostilities but rather what will happen once hostilities actually start. Most analysts agree that consultations between those involved will be limited, not only because of the time they would require but also because the United States directly controls most of the nuclear weapons deployed in Europe and would thus be able to use them unilaterally.

If war were to break out on the Central European front, NATO would not necessarily resort to using nuclear arms from the outset. However, it is generally agreed that once the conflict had gone on for several days the military leaders could ask for permission to use them.¹⁷ According to most scenarios, between twenty-four and sixty hours might elapse between the time SACEUR received permission to use such weapons and the moment that they became operational.¹⁸ If one adds to this the preceding period, when the conflict remained at the conventional level, one is led to the conclusion that the allies might have one or two weeks in which to reach a decision as to whether nuclear weapons should be used. Consultation seems, therefore, to be a genuine possibility. Nonetheless, NATO documents do state that SACEUR has the right to authorize the use of nuclear weapons if "neither the time or the circumstances allow for consultations at the national level."¹⁸

More and more analysts believe that the period of conventional warfare might last longer than the few weeks envisaged by officials. Thus Joshua Epstein even

reckons that NATO is capable of withstanding an attack by the Warsaw Pact forces for at least 136 days without losing any territory.²⁸ Such a lapse of time would allow the political authorities to give the matter more careful consideration before deciding on the use of nuclear weapons.

THE DECISION

The NPG cannot decide whether nuclear weapons are to be used in time of conflict. "Consultation, both in the Nuclear Planning Group and elsewhere in the alliance, may serve to prepare the group for collective agreement to the use of nuclear weapons, but, in the final analysis, each individual government will have to decide for itself how it will respond to the possible use by the alliance of nuclear weapons."²¹

The train of events which would lead to the authorization and the use of nuclear weapons would be the following: "SACEUR, on his own or at the request of a subordinate military commander or member state, asks approval from the NATO Military Committee through the Defence Planning Committee. A formal request for weapon release is then forwarded to the United States (and in a few instances to the United Kingdom). A positive answer reflects the national decision that releases control of the weapons to the forces involved (US and allied) and gives the authority to arm the weapons and use them in packages or otherwise. This authority presumably covers initial use and follow-on use. A second chain involves requests by SACEUR for launcher release to all national authorities that control nuclear-capable delivery systems."²²

Since the nuclear warheads belong to the United States which is bound by specific accords with each of the host countries (the Programmes of Cooperation), the state with the warhead and the state with the delivery system are the only ones which can authorize the use of these weapons. Certainly the elaborate procedures for consultation which have been worked out in the NPG would be employed and officially all members, even the non-nuclear ones, would be kept informed about what was going on. However, there is no obligation to consult the others before ratifying any decision to use the weapons. "National decisions are required; allied consultation is only desirable."²³

But the country with the warhead and the host country on whose territory the launcher is deployed may be faced with two kinds of situation before they can decide to use nuclear arms. The allied country is usually host to two types of weapons: those for which it

controls the delivery vehicle and the United States owns the warhead, and those for which both warhead and vehicle are under US control. In the first case, both allies must agree on a decision to launch because the host country has the right to veto the use of the launcher; it can physically prevent the nuclear weapon from being assembled and launched from its territory. In the second instance, the United States, theoretically, requires the host's permission to launch the weapon, but of course in practice there is nothing the host country can do if the US wants to resort to nuclear arms unilaterally.

This situation arises from the fact that SACEUR has a dual role; he is also Commander-in-Chief of the US forces in Europe (CINCEUR). "SACEUR could order committed forces (the West German forces) and perhaps assigned forces (the rest) to use nuclear weapons if time and circumstances did not permit national consultations, and if de facto national rights to deny the use of national delivery vehicles were not exercised. As CINCEUR, of course, he would be fully empowered to immediately authorize American units to use nuclear weapons."²⁴

It seems then that the US could well decide unilaterally to use nuclear weapons. The so-called dual-key system would not necessarily prevent US forces from justifying their lack of consultation by invoking the proviso: "time and circumstances permitting."²⁵

CONCLUSION

According to analysts the creation of the NPG was a political response to a military problem. Since no agreement could be reached about the means of physically controlling nuclear weapons (Whose finger would be on the button?) the United States proposed a compromise solution which allowed the allies to take part in discussions concerning the use of nuclear arms without actually permitting them to intervene directly.

Despite the creation of the NPG there remains several points which are unclear about the procedures for consultation and decision. The first, and most important, concerns the nuclear cooperation agreements which are inevitably kept secret because of their technical nature and because they outline the defence plans and military intentions of the states concerned. All that is known about these agreements is that they cover the following issues: the exchange of secret information about weapons; the number and type of these weapons; where they are deployed; security and control procedures; their dispersal; and the procedures

to be followed for installing the warheads on the launchers and authorizing that they be fired. According to Paul Bracken these agreements are very imprecise about who exactly is in charge of these weapons.

The second point which is unclear concerns the double role of SACEUR, who is also CINCEUR. Several writers have pointed out that the US officer who takes on these two roles may well have difficulty in discharging his responsibilities. According to Daniel Charles the US president can unilaterally command the officer to use nuclear weapons without obtaining the consent of the Europeans. This poses a problem of authority and divided responsibilities.

The third ambiguity concerns the type of consultation possible and the amount of time available for any reaction if there were a conflict. Certainly, as has been noted above, the allies would have from a few days to a few weeks to agree whether nuclear arms should be used in the event of defeat at the conventional level. However, according to most analysts, there are still problems about the deployment, preparation and use of such weapons. For example, should they be dispersed during the period of crisis which would precede hostilities or only after hostilities have actually started? Should the military be able to ask for permission to use nuclear weapons and then make use of them when they judge the moment has come? If the lines of communication have broken down should the military be free to act as they see fit? Could the US president take a decision without consulting his allies? Would the political authorities in NATO have enough time to discuss and approve all these and the many other decisions which they will have to take.

It seems likely that any consultation among the allies will be very limited in a time of conflict and that in one way or another what will count for most in making a decision will be specific agreements between the United States and the individual member of NATO, rather than the operation of the Council. Catherine McArdle Kelleher has summed this up very nicely: "Preconflict decisions on specific operational plans or timetables are taken within SHAPE or within the stronger bilateral military and political relations (United States-Britain, etc.) as well as within Programs of Cooperation. The Nuclear Planning Group, the Defense Planning Committee, and the North Atlantic Council are all quite formal and ineffective arenas for decision-making on the specific terms and timing of nuclear use, even at the highest levels of abstraction."²⁷ If that is true in peacetime, it seems clear that the tension and confusion which would arise in the event of a conflict could only make matters worse.

NOTES

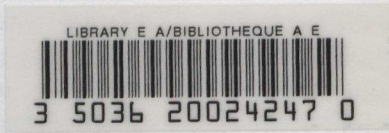
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