

Evgeny Kustnetsov, The Multilateral Force debates

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Multilateral Force debates

Consisting in ships carrying 'Polaris' intermediate-range ballistic missile and manned by international crews, including Germans, the Multilateral Force (MLF) was the most ambitious project for European integration in the military field after the failure of the European Defence Community.

In December 1960 at the NATO ministerial meeting in Paris, Secretary of State Christian Herter had recommended that the United States should commit five nuclear submarines, armed with eighty 'Polaris' missiles to the seaborne NATO multilateral nuclear force on condition that the Europeans come up with some system to manage them.

The MLF proposal introduced to the State Department by Harvard Professor Robert Bowie was only a part of a much larger report, which was supposed to deal with a set of problems concerning the Atlantic Alliance. First, there was the growing concern among the Europeans about the reliability of the US nuclear deterrence. The launch of Sputnik in 1957 and the deployment by the USSR of nuclear missiles that directly threatened Europe seemed to prove the Soviet superiority in the arms race. At the same time the Suez crisis had shown that the United States would not necessarily use the nuclear weapons to back Europeans in matters of less than vital importance to them.

Second was the concern with the emergence of independent nuclear capabilities. Following the United Kingdom, France started her own nuclear program and in 1960 joined the nuclear club. Both countries defended publicly that a nation could not possibly be secure unless possessed its own nuclear capability. After the successful test of first French atomic bomb in 1960 some analysts both in Europe and the United States feared that it also might push Germany to create her own nuclear weapons.

The primary purpose of the MLF was not military, to enhance defence capability of the Alliance since the United States would still have the 95 % of all nuclear weapons in NATO; but political to address the problem of confidence and concern on the part of the Europeans vis-a-vis their American partners. France, Italy, Belgium and the Netherlands reacted favorably to American proposal, considering it as a first step to 'nuclear sharing' in NATO. Germany accepted the idea and stressed the need to create a political union with the participation of Great Britain to control the use of nuclear weapons. British attitude was more reserved. France opposed the principle of multilateral political control.

President Kennedy, who came into power in the beginning of the 1961, in his address before the Canadian Parliament in Ottawa in May 1961 committed himself to the project. At the same time, Kennedy emphasised the need to develop conventional forces in Europe, while considering that there was no urgent military need to create of the MLF. The strongest supporters of the MLF in the Kennedy administration were to be found in the State Department under the leadership of George Ball, whereas the Pentagon officials were sceptical to the idea of the mixed-manned European nuclear fleet.

The first serious impetus to the MLF was given in December 1962 during the Nassau meeting between Kennedy and Macmillan. The United States promised to supply the United Kingdom with Polaris missiles, under the condition that they would become a part of NATO's multilateral force. On the same conditions, the Polaris missiles were offered to France on similar conditions. In the American point of view this was intended to soften De Gaulle's position toward the British entry to the Common Market.

At the press conference on January 14th 1963 French president de Gaulle rejected both Britain's entry into EEC and the American MLF proposal. As an alternative to the MLF he offered Germany to take part in French 'force de frappe', or French strike force. From de Gaulle's point of view, this structure built around the French nuclear arsenal with the contribution of German conventional forces could fulfil the protection of Europe without American help.

With the French rejection of the MLF and British entry into the EEC, the proposal of the Multilateral Force took on new significance for the United States in countering de Gaulle's ambitions of European hegemony by distracting Germany away from entering into a close military union with France. From an American

perspective, be it in a Franco-German or in a broader framework, European military forces threatened to weaken American control over Europe and could lead to a crisis in NATO and Transatlantic relations.

In the late January 1963 Kennedy agreed to start negotiations on the MLF and appointed Livingston Merchant a Special Ambassador with the task carrying of the proposal to Europe. The Merchant mission was authorized to propose the negotiation of a preliminary agreement if two or more governments showed interest in the MLF.

Guidelines from the President included an idea to use surface ships instead of submarines and a proposal for establishing a committee that would fire MLF weapons only by unanimous vote.

The negotiations showed a different attitude of the European countries towards the creation of the MLF. The French strongly opposed the proposal. Italian Prime Minister Amintore Fanfani declared himself to be favourable to the MLF in principle but indicated that the final decision could be taken only after Italian parliamentary elections in May.

The Belgian Foreign Minister Paul-Henri Spaak said he was personally in favour of the proposal but also pointed out that the Belgian Senate and Defence Ministry were strongly opposed to Belgian participation in the MLF and was unwilling to increase the defence budget. The United Kingdom evidenced a tepid attitude to the MLF, but expressed the willingness to provide nuclear warheads for continental Europe and share 10 % of all the financial costs. From the beginning of the project Sweden, Norway and Denmark refused to take part in the negotiations. Greece and Turkey showed their interest in the MLF, but decided to participate only if the United States could provide the financial assistance for it.

German–American negotiations were more detailed and intensive than in any other place. While Bonn very positively accepted the Nassau agreement as a basis for future NATO nuclear forces, the talks revealed the scepticism over the choice of surface ships. Germans were worried about the veto over use the nuclear weapons on the German territory which other European countries would be able to exercise. However, at the end of April 1963 Chancellor Adenauer wrote Kennedy speaking officially for the German Federal Government and accepting the provisions of the MLF proposal, including the surface-ship configuration and the control principle, which envisaged the consent of the United States to fire the MLF weapons.

The change of the power from Konrad Adenauer to Ludwig Erhard in West Germany in October 1963 strengthened the government's backing of the MLF project. Contrary to his predecessor, Erhard had less close contacts with de Gaulle and was less attracted to the French proposal of nuclear cooperation. Erhard and the other so-called 'Atlanticists' represented by Defence Minister Kai-Uwe von Hassel and Foreign Minister Gerhard Schröder were far keener on cooperation with the Americans than with de Gaulle. They considered the MLF to be an important instrument to improve political-military integration within NATO and relations with the USA. At the same time, former Defence Minister Josef Strauss represented the opposite 'Gaullist' fraction. He openly opposed the government's policy regarding the MLF. For Strauss, the MLF was in conflict with his and de Gaulle's foreign policy conception, aimed at decreasing the Soviet-American joint ownership of Europe, by creating a strong Europe united around France and Germany.

The Action Committee for the United States of Europe fully supported and promoted the MLF project in the European arena after De Gaulle's veto to British entry. The head of the committee Jean Monnet encouraged the idea of a creation of the European Navy force and considered it as a suitable means to promote both European unity and Atlantic partnership.

On 11 October 1963 MLF working group consisting of the permanent representatives to NATO of the United States, the United Kingdom, Italy, Belgium, Greece and Turkey began work in Paris. The Netherlands joined the group next year. It was planned that the group would be able to draft the MLF charter until October–November 1964.

Shortly before his death, President Kennedy ordered to conduct the experimental operation of mixed-manned international crews. In July 1964 the American ship 'U.S.S. Biddle', later renamed the 'U.S.S.

Ricketts', gathered 20 officers and 316 marines from the UK, West Germany, the Netherlands, Turkey, Italy and Greece who constituted 50 % of the ship crew along with the US personnel. The 'Biddle' took part in the military exercises in the Mediterranean sea and until December 1965 toured the ports of those nations taking part in the experiment, showing good cooperation of the personnel.

Lyndon Johnson became president knowing virtually nothing about the MLF. His ignorance, however, was compensated by his will to continue all of Kennedy's initiatives. Lending his support to the MLF, Johnson stressed the need of giving equal rights to Germany while controlling her: 'Germans have gone off the reservations twice in our lifetime and we've got to be sure that this doesn't happen again.' At the meeting with Johnson on 30th September 1964, Erhard confirmed the support of the West German government to the MLF and the rejection to participate in French 'force de frappe'. However, the perspective offered by Bonn of solely German-American union did not satisfy the American government, which tried to involve Britain into the project.

London initially had a negative attitude to the MLF. In British eyes, the MLF represented a costly venture that was designed to deal with a German threat, which in their opinion did not exist. The British government argued that even the limited participation of West Germany in a multilateral nuclear force was more likely to encourage interest in nuclear power rather than to satisfy German dangerous aspirations of nuclear weapons' possession. Moreover, the lack of financial and manpower resources made it very difficult for Britain to contribute its part to the creation of the MLF.

However, for the British policy-makers the consequence of Britain's failure to participate in the discussion on the MLF would weaken British influence in the Alliance as a whole and put the country into isolation. Being able to take part in the MLF on the conditions proposed by the United States, Britain tried to promote an alternative to the American proposal of the mixed-manned MLF.

The British plan of an Atlantic Nuclear Force (ANF) entailed British 'Vulcan' strike aircrafts, already deployed in Germany, British and American 'Polaris' submarines, a mixed manned element of the surface fleet on the lines of the present MLF and possibly some American 'Minuteman' intercontinental ballistic missile which might also be mixed manned. From the British point of view, the ANF would bring the Atlantic Alliance together and allow the Germans to participate in something bigger and more effective military.

Even though the time required for the creation of the ANF would be much less than for the MLF, the process of discussion of the British proposal among the allies took more than one year, at the same time complicating and postponing the final decision about the MLF.

Serious damage to the Multilateral Force was made by the Soviet Union. Soviet propaganda considered the West German participation in the NATO nuclear force as a way to satisfy Bonn's nuclear ambitions. After the signing of the test-ban treaty Moscow proposed to the United States to sign a non-proliferation treaty, which would prevent West Germany from gaining any kind of access to nuclear weapons.

The advocates of the non-proliferation treaty with the Soviet Union were to be found both in the British and in the American government and their number grew after the test of the first Chinese nuclear bomb. From their point of view, along with the MLF, it would give the same opportunity of avoiding the West German own nuclear program and reduce the East-West tensions. Furthermore, some American policy planners believed that Germany could have used the nuclear weapons in the bargaining with the Soviet Union and made a deal of the denouncing future nuclear weapons in exchange for the reunification of the country.

At the same time, the French, while rejecting the MLF, had previously taken an officially tolerant attitude toward German participation. In 1963, upon the conclusion of the Franco-German Elysee treaty, the French government had informed the Germans that they would understand if the Federal Republic pursued the project. This tolerance lasted until late October 1964, when the approaching meeting of Lyndon Johnson and British Prime Minister Harold Wilson made the MLF agreement close to fruition.

Then the French began to oppose the MLF categorically and put enormous pressure on the Germans to back off from their commitment. Prime Minister Pompidou made speech on behalf of de Gaulle in Paris, in which he made it quite clear that Germany joining the MLF would mean the end of cooperation under the Franco-German Treaty. The French bluntly asserted that German participation in the force would be considered an act unfriendly to France, and they threatened all manner of retribution including leaving NATO and disrupting the Common Market if their warnings were ignored.

The difficulties in Franco-German relations were further complicated for Erhard by the fact that he faced a second deadline in December over a grain price agreement for the Common Market. For the highly priced, highly protected German agriculture the abolition of the national protectionists barriers would make a serious damage. Erhard would have vastly preferred to get through the approaching elections before granting the price concessions, but he was under very strong pressure from the French, who would be the main beneficiaries, to come to terms earlier. Chancellor had promised to make some decision by December 15. Though Erhard tried to keep the two issues separate, the MLF and the grain price agreement quickly merged in the minds of most observers into a single Franco-German, and indeed a larger European crisis.

The anxiety about the deterioration of the Franco-German relations along with the French opposition, British reluctance and the ambivalent attitude of the other European NATO members to join the MLF were crucial factors for Lyndon Johnson's decision to delay the creation of the Multilateral Force. In December 1964 several days before the meeting with the British Prime Minister Harold Wilson President Johnson made the decision to remove the established deadline and stop the pressure on the European countries for the MLF.

However, the MLF project remained for more than one year on the international agenda, mainly in the German-American negotiations. The Johnson administration thought that the prolongation of the MLF negotiations could help Erhard to resist the pressure of de Gaulle and 'Gaullists' in the German government.

After giving up the MLF concept, the United States nevertheless acknowledged the right of European NATO members to have access to nuclear planning in the Alliance. At the end of 1966 Nuclear Planning Group was created as a forum for the nuclear consultation in NATO. One year later the non-proliferation treaty was signed by most of the European countries, excluding France.

Although, it never became a reality, the Multilateral Force represented an important stage in European military integration. The debates over the MLF showed the preference of most of European countries for either American or national nuclear deterrence over European cooperation in the nuclear field.

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