

NATO press communiqué on the ‘Double-Track’ Decision on theatre nuclear forces (Brussels, 12 December 1979)

Caption: On 12 December 1979, at a North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) special meeting of Foreign Affairs and Defence Ministers, a press communiqué is issued outlining the security threat posed by the Warsaw Pact military build-up and the recent deployment of the SS-20 missile. In order to maintain the credibility of its strategy of flexible response in light of the quantitative and qualitative improvements to Soviet long-range nuclear capability brought about by the modernisation and expansion of Soviet theatre nuclear forces (TNF), the Alliance decides to pursue two parallel and complementary approaches of TNF modernisation and arms control (known as the ‘Double-Track’ Decision on TNF). The Ministers decide to modernise NATO’s long-range theatre nuclear forces (LRTNF) by the deployment in Europe of US ground-launched systems comprising 108 Pershing II launchers. The communiqué also emphasises the need for negotiations on arms limitations regarding LRTNF in order to contribute to a more stable military relationship between East and West and advance the process of détente.

Source: The National Archives of the UK (TNA). Foreign Office, Western Department and Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Western European Department: Registered Files (R and WR Series). WESTERN EUROPEAN UNION. Western European Union Assembly recommendation 360: Strategic Arms Limitations Treaty (SALT) and the British and French nuclear forces. 01/01/1981-31/12/1981, FCO 33/5237 (Former Reference Dep: WRU 83/1).

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COMMUNIQUE

1. At a special meeting of Foreign and Defence Ministers in Brussels on 12th December 1979:
2. Ministers recalled the May 1978 Summit where governments expressed the political resolve to meet the challenges to their security posed by the continuing momentum of the Warsaw Pact military build-up.
3. The Warsaw Pact has over the years developed a large and growing capability in nuclear systems that directly threaten Western Europe and have a strategic significance for the Alliance in Europe. This situation has been especially aggravated over the last few years by Soviet decisions to implement programmes modernizing and expanding their long-range nuclear capability substantially. In particular, they have deployed the SS-20 missile, which offers significant improvements over previous systems in providing greater accuracy, more mobility, and greater range, as well as having multiple warheads, and the Backfire bomber, which has a much better performance than other Soviet aircraft deployed hitherto in a theatre rôle. During this period, while the Soviet Union has been reinforcing its superiority in Long Range Theatre Nuclear Forces (LRTNF) both quantitatively and qualitatively, Western LRTNF capabilities have remained static. Indeed these forces are increasing in age and vulnerability and do not include land-based, long-range theatre nuclear missile systems.
4. At the same time, the Soviets have also undertaken a modernization and expansion of their shorter-range TNF and greatly improved the overall quality of their conventional forces. These developments took place against the background of increasing Soviet inter-continental capabilities and achievement of parity in inter-continental capability with the United States.
5. These trends have prompted serious concern within the Alliance, because, if they were to continue, Soviet superiority in theatre nuclear systems could undermine the stability achieved in inter-continental systems and cast doubt on the credibility of the Alliance's deterrent strategy by highlighting the gap in the spectrum of NATO's available nuclear response to aggression.

6. Ministers noted that these recent developments require concrete actions on the part of the Alliance if NATO's strategy of flexible response is to remain credible. After intensive consideration, including the merits of alternative approaches, and after taking note of the positions of certain members, Ministers concluded that the overall interest of the Alliance would best be served by pursuing two parallel and complementary approaches of TNF modernization and arms control.

7. Accordingly Ministers have decided to modernize NATO's LRTNF by the deployment in Europe of US ground-launched systems comprising 103 Pershing II launchers, which would replace existing US Pershing I-A, and 464 Ground Launched Cruise Missiles (GLCM), all with single warheads. All the nations currently participating in the integrated defence structure will participate in the programme: the missiles will be stationed in selected countries and certain support costs will be met through NATO's existing common funding arrangements. The programme will not increase NATO's reliance upon nuclear weapons. In this connection, Ministers agreed that as an integral part of TNF modernization, 1,000 US nuclear warheads will be withdrawn from Europe as soon as feasible. Further, Ministers decided that the 572 LRTNF warheads should be accommodated within that reduced level, which necessarily implies a numerical shift of emphasis away from warheads for delivery systems of other types and shorter ranges. In addition they noted with satisfaction that the Nuclear Planning Group is undertaking an examination of the precise nature, scope and basis of the adjustments resulting from the LRTNF deployment and their possible implications for the balance of rôles and systems in NATO's nuclear armoury as a whole. This examination will form the basis of a substantive report to NPG Ministers in the Autumn of 1980.

8. Ministers attach great importance to the rôle of arms control in contributing to a more stable military relationship between East and West and in advancing the process of détente. This is reflected in a broad set of initiatives being examined within the Alliance to further the course of arms control and détente in the 1980s. Ministers regard arms control as an integral part of the Alliance's efforts to assure the undiminished security of its member States and to make the strategic situation between East and West more stable, more predictable, and more manageable at lower levels of armaments on both sides. In this regard they welcome the contribution which the SALT II Treaty makes towards achieving these objectives.

9. Ministers consider that, building on this accomplishment and taking account of the expansion of Soviet LRTNF capabilities of concern to NATO, arms control efforts to achieve a more stable overall nuclear balance at lower levels of nuclear weapons on both sides should therefore now include certain US and Soviet long-range theatre nuclear systems.

This would reflect previous Western suggestions to include such Soviet and US systems in arms control negotiations and more recent expressions by Soviet President Brezhnev of willingness to do so. Ministers fully support the decision taken by the United States following consultations within the Alliance to negotiate arms limitations on LRTNF and to propose to the USSR to begin negotiations as soon as possible along the following lines which have been elaborated in intensive consultations within the Alliance:

A. Any future limitations on US systems principally designed for theatre missions should be accompanied by appropriate limitations on Soviet theatre systems.

B. Limitations on US and Soviet long-range theatre nuclear systems should be negotiated bilaterally in the SALT III framework in a step-by-step approach.

C. The immediate objective of these negotiations should be the establishment of agreed limitations on US and Soviet land-based long-range theatre nuclear missile systems.

D. Any agreed limitations on these systems must be consistent with the principle of equality between the sides. Therefore, the limitations should take the form of de jure equality both in ceilings and in rights.

E. Any agreed limitations must be adequately verifiable.

10. Given the special importance of these negotiations for the overall security of the Alliance, a special consultative body at a high level will be constituted within the Alliance to support the US negotiating effort. This body will follow the negotiations on a continuous basis and report to the Foreign and Defence Ministers who will examine developments in these negotiations as well as in other arms control negotiations at their semi-annual meetings.

11. The Ministers have decided to pursue these two parallel and complementary approaches in order to avert an arms race in Europe caused by the Soviet TNF build-up, yet preserve the viability of NATO's strategy of deterrence and defence and thus maintain the security of its member States.

A. A modernization decision, including a commitment to deployments, is necessary to meet NATO's deterrence and defence needs, to provide a credible response to unilateral Soviet TNF deployments, and to provide the foundation for the pursuit of serious negotiations on TNF.

B. Success of arms control in constraining the Soviet build-up can enhance Alliance security, modify the scale of NATO's TNF requirements, and promote stability and détente

in Europe in consonance with NATO's basic policy of deterrence, defence and détente as enunciated in the Harmel Report. NATO's TNF requirements will be examined in the light of concrete results reached through negotiations.