

'Western alliance faces worst crisis' from The Observer (1 November 1964)

Caption: Following the French Government's refusal to create a multilateral force (MLF), which would have provided the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) with an integrated strategic nuclear force, the British weekly newspaper The Observer reports on the very serious Euro-Atlantic crisis surrounding the MLF in its issue of 1 November 1964.

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Western alliance faces worst crisis

by ROBERT STEPHENS, our Diplomatic Correspondent

THE Foreign Secretary, Mr Gordon Walker, will begin this week an urgent review of British policy in Europe in the light of growing Anglo-American suspicions that President de Gaulle may soon plunge the Western alliance into its deepest crisis so far.

The recall to London of Britain's Ambassadors in the leading Western European capitals, Washington and Moscow, coincides with reports that the French President is now seriously considering taking France out of both the European Common Market and Nato, possibly before the end of this year.

The expected crisis may reach its peak in mid-December when the Common Market Ministers meet to discuss farm policy and the disputed cereal prices, and the Nato foreign and defence Ministers hold their annual meeting in Paris.

But Mr Gordon Walker will want to have some agreement from the Cabinet on the broad lines of British policy towards Europe and Nato, especially the control of nuclear weapons, before he goes to Bonn on November 15 for talks with the West German Foreign Minister, Dr Gerhard Schroeder, and the meeting of the Council of Western European Union.

British and American officials are not yet certain whether the warning signals coming recently from Paris are simply part of a nerve war by President de Gaulle. But there is now evidence that they should be taken seriously.

It is also believed that if he finally makes up his mind to withdraw from the Common Market and Nato, it will be his personal decision taken against the advice and in spite of the forebodings of some of his most senior advisers.

In addition to the French Government's public ultimatum to West

Germany over cereal prices, French officials recently began giving private warnings to their West German colleagues that President de Gaulle would object strongly to German membership of the M.L.F., the Nato mixed-manned nuclear fleet. They hinted that German participation in the M.L.F. would mean the end of the Franco-German treaty and of French co-operation in Nato.

This marks a change in French policy. President de Gaulle has always himself rejected the M.L.F. idea, as he rejected the American offer to share in the Nassau agreement by which Britain bought Polaris nuclear missiles in return for a promise to pool her nuclear weapons in Nato. But hitherto de Gaulle had raised no objection to West Germany's participation in the M.L.F.

Market veto

Since the Americans never concealed that part of the purpose of the M.L.F. was to neutralise de Gaulle's influence on Germany, it is indeed rather surprising that de Gaulle waited so long before making any counter-move. It may be that he was waiting to see whether the M.L.F. project would collapse of its own accord, possibly with the help of a new Government in Britain.

But it now looks as though, even if Britain's Labour Government does succeed in watering down the original M.L.F. plan, a new Atlantic nuclear force will emerge next year.

This force will bind Western Germany to Britain and America in an integrated political and military command to which France will not belong.

France will thus have no part in the main strategic defence of Western Europe and the Nato area. Her only remaining contribution to Nato would be two under-strength divisions in Western Germany and some planes in the Tactical Air Force.

Faced with this prospect, President de Gaulle may choose to withdraw these remaining forces from Nato

command and sever France's connection with Nato entirely.

It was Britain's signature of the Nassau agreement, linking her in a closer nuclear partnership with America, that precipitated de Gaulle's veto on British entry into the Common Market in January of last year.

Now, as a result of Mr Gordon Walker's visit to Washington last week it looks as if the kind of Atlantic nuclear force that will eventually emerge will bear a startlingly close resemblance to that outlined in the original Nassau agreement.

But it will be even worse from de Gaulle's point of view because it will not only keep the Anglo-Saxons lined up together, but also bring in the Germans, too.

The United States Government is also clearly using the threat of an Atlantic crisis for a nerve-war of its own to urge Britain to support the M.L.F. as the best counter to President de Gaulle's plans.

Mr Gordon Walker is believed to have agreed in Washington that an Atlantic nuclear force should include a mixed-manned element. But the British Government has yet to make up its mind whether its own contribution to the force would be limited to its existing nuclear weapons and possibly to nationally manned Polaris-carrying submarines, or whether it would also take part in a mixed-manned surface fleet.

Legally there is no provision for withdrawal from the Common Market. In the case of Nato, de Gaulle might choose to wait for formal action until the Atlantic Treaty comes up for renewal in four years' time.

But a French refusal of all practical co-operation in Nato could be a serious matter as regards the planning and organisation of Western Europe's conventional defences.

Part of de Gaulle's purpose in provoking a crisis within the alliance might be to force a top-level Western meeting to discuss his own proposals for the reorganisation of Nato.