


The nuclear question

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The dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki on 6 and 9 August 1945 began a new era in international relations. For more than four years, the United States imposed itself as the only nuclear power capable of producing and deploying weapons of mass destruction. The Soviet Union exploded its first A-bomb in Kazakhstan on 29 August 1949. The United Kingdom joined the nuclear club on 3 October 1952 after its first nuclear test off the coast of Australia. France, meanwhile, joined the ranks of the nuclear powers on 13 February 1960 after successfully exploding its first atomic bomb in the Algerian Sahara.^[1] Against the international background of the developing Cold War, nuclear deterrence became the main organising principle behind the national security policy of the western bloc states and the Soviet Union.^[2]

It was the United States and the Soviet Union, however, which set the pace for discussions in this area. The United States' influence was particularly marked in the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO).

In the early 1950s, British views on the attitude to be adopted towards Soviet threats were taken up by NATO: NATO's MC/48 strategy of November 1945, which developed out of the Global Strategy Paper adopted by the United Kingdom in June 1952,^[3] advocated a principle of massive retaliation against the Soviet Union. This strategy was not supported by the Americans. They, in fact, at the time, defended the principle of a 'modulated response'. This strategy was finally adopted by NATO in 1956 (MC 14/2) with its military application, MC 48/2.^[4] The effect of de Gaulle's return to power in May 1958 was that France applied a policy which was independent in matters of defence; the differences with its American and British allies grew wider and wider. Thus, the French memorandum of 17 September 1958 to Prime Minister Macmillan of Britain and President Eisenhower disputed the United States' nuclear monopoly and its power of decision over matters of Western defence. It proposed a political directorate with London and Washington.

In 1962, the concept of mutually assured destruction (MAD), which precluded the possibility of a first strike, began to play a significant part in the defence policy advocated by the Kennedy Administration's Secretary of Defence Robert McNamara, who first put forward the 'flexible response' theory.^[5] Escalating tension and the arms race reached their apogee in October 1962 with the Cuban missile crisis.^[6] After the Cuban crisis, the two powers set up a direct line — the red telephone — between Washington and Moscow, in June 1963, so as to be able to react more rapidly to any future crises.

The differences of opinion between Paris, on the one hand, and London and Washington, on the other, became more marked during this period, particularly following the Nassau Agreement and the Polaris missiles affair. The United States wanted to retain control over nuclear arms and technology while limiting their proliferation in Europe.^[7] They unilaterally decided to halt production of Skybolt ground-to-air missiles with nuclear warheads, which were to have gone into service in both the United States and the United Kingdom; Britain's nuclear independence was directly compromised.^[8] Britain then succeeded, at the Nassau conference of 19–21 December 1962, in obtaining from the Americans Polaris missiles which were, however, to be included in NATO's Multilateral Force (MLF),^[9] except in situations where 'supreme national interests are at stake' (cf. Article 8 of the Nassau Agreement). In 1960, however, at a ministerial meeting of the Council of WEU, Harold Watkinson, the British Defence Secretary, refused to place the British nuclear deterrent force under joint control, as was envisaged in a recommendation from the Assembly of WEU: the country would then have had no way of guaranteeing that a rapid decision could be taken to use it.^[10] Washington made a similar offer to

General de Gaulle. The General rejected it, as he was anxious to press ahead with his policy of nuclear independence and was opposed to the 'flexible response' doctrine. France wished to preserve its strategic independence and the political usefulness of an independent strike force.^[11] The French President was completely opposed to the idea of establishing a multilateral NATO nuclear force and showed no inclination to relinquish his right to take decisions on the use of atomic weapons.^[12]

Following the Cuban crisis, there was a shift in favour of negotiations for the reduction and non-proliferation of nuclear weapons. On 5 August 1963, the treaty banning nuclear weapon tests in outer space and under water was signed. France, which was in the middle of developing its nuclear arsenal at the time, did not sign the treaty. France also left NATO's military structures in March 1966.^[13] The official adoption of the 'flexible response' by NATO (document MC 14/3)^[14] in January 1968 helped to distance France still further from NATO.^[15]

Once the move towards détente between the two blocs had been started, efforts towards disarmament continued. They took official form in the signing of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty (NPT) by the USSR, the United States and the United Kingdom on 1 July 1968. The object of the treaty was to reduce the risk of nuclear war by keeping the number of states holding nuclear weapons under control. It included three objectives: non-proliferation, disarmament and the right to use nuclear technology for peaceful purposes.^[16] Adhering firmly to its 'massive retaliation' policy, France did not sign the treaty, although it did stand by the principle of non-proliferation.^[17] The United Kingdom pursued a policy of interdependence with the United States and, following the White Papers of 1967, 1968 and 1969, it withdrew from east of Suez, placing its nuclear force at the service of NATO.^[18]

The movement towards disarmament continued and, in 1970, the United States and the Soviet Union launched talks on strategic arms limitation (SALT I) and anti-ballistic missile systems (ABM) reduction. The negotiations culminated on 26 May 1972 in the signing of two treaties whereby the United States and the Soviet Union undertook not to manufacture strategic arms for five years, to reduce the number of anti-ballistic missiles and not to build any more ground-based missile launchers. The French and British nuclear arsenals were not included. As part of these moves, and taking advantage of the improvement in their relations just before the beginning of the Yom Kippur War (6–24 October 1973), the Soviet Union and the United States signed an agreement on the prevention of nuclear war in 1973. The United States' allies were not consulted, which heightened the feeling among European governments that they had been overlooked, especially in Bonn.^[19] The Ottawa Declaration on Atlantic Relations of 19 June 1974 acknowledged the contribution made to NATO's global deterrence by the British and French nuclear forces and, at France's request, explicitly mentioned the existence of a second centre of decision-making on deterrence.^[20]

Despite indirect clashes in various parts of the globe, there was an improvement in East–West relations in the 1960s and 1970s. In this connection, the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) was a new milestone in détente and the disarmament movement. The Conference, which opened in Helsinki on 3 July 1973, brought together 35 participants, including representatives of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact countries. It concluded with the signing of a Final Act whose provisions were not binding. This improvement in East–West relations came to an end with the Euromissile crisis. On 28 October 1977, the West German Chancellor, Helmut Schmidt, gave a speech at the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London in which he condemned the threat posed to Western Europe by the deployment of Soviet SS-20 missiles in Eastern Europe.^[21] In the face of the military superiority of the Soviet Union, which was still pursuing its arms race, and the scaling down of the American advance since 1969,^[22] on 12 December 1979 the North Atlantic Council decided to deploy 572 cruise and Pershing II missiles in Europe (the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Belgium, Italy and the FRG), despite the signing of the SALT II Treaty with the United

States on 18 June 1979. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan on 24 December of that year marked the end of détente and the revival of tension between the two blocs, as well as a ratcheting-up of the ‘arms race’.^[23]

The nuclear question accounted for a significant share of the efforts put in by the WEU in terms of coordinating Western defence policies, despite its having no powers in that field, except for the monitoring of nuclear weapons on the European mainland and belonging to the Member States.^[24] National nuclear policies and their role in the defence of the West, as well as the negotiations on the various treaties and initiatives which contributed to disarmament, were discussed in the Council of WEU (the Committee on Defence Questions was also very active).^[25] France and the United Kingdom had a major influence on the discussions, as both countries had nuclear weapons.^[26] That sometimes led to a split between those who possessed atomic weapons and those who did not.^[27] While Paris and London shared certain concerns, there were differences of opinion, especially when it came to the practical arrangements for the implementation of their nuclear policies.^[28] They were also proactive in contributing to the Assembly’s many reports and recommendations.^[29] The Assembly sometimes clashed with the attitude of the Council, which viewed these issues as the Member States’ ‘private domain’ and avoided either giving specific answers or giving any response at all to the Assembly’s recommendations and written questions.^[30] Furthermore, many of the Assembly’s requests for information were incompatible with the powers of the Council of WEU with regard to defence and arms: in accordance with Article VIII of the Modified Brussels Treaty, these were confined ‘to the level of forces of member States under Protocol No II of the Paris Agreements, to the maintenance of certain United Kingdom troops on the continent of Europe, to the control of armaments and to some aspects of arms standardisation’.^[31] In this context, as the draft British reply to Question No 6 of the Assembly shows, tactical nuclear weapons were a matter for the North Atlantic Council.^[32] This circumstance did not prevent the French and British Foreign and Defence Ministers presenting and tabling for discussion before the Assembly or in a parliamentary committee their national policies and their concerns in relation to the defence strategies to be pursued at the height of the Cold War, particularly at the time of the Euromissile crisis.^[33]

[1] PIERRE, Andrew J. *Nuclear Politics. The British experience with an independent strategic force 1939–1970*. London: Oxford University Press, 1972, p. 57. ISBN 0192129554

[2] HEUSER, Beatrice. *NATO, Britain, France and the FRG. Nuclear Strategies and Forces for Europe, 1949–2000*. Basingstoke, New York: MacMillan and St Martin’s Press, 1997. pp. 33–38. ISBN 0312174985; HOLLOWAY, David. Nuclear weapons and the escalation of the Cold War, 1945–1962. In: LEFFLER, Melvyn P. and WESTAD, Odd Arne (eds). *The Cambridge History of the Cold War (Volume 1: Origins)*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, esp. p. 385.

[3] Ibid., p. 87.

[4] The new strategy recognised the need for a non-nuclear option for ‘limited Soviet operations’ and, in the event of attack, no automatic nuclear response. These were the forerunners of the flexible response adopted in the 1960s. HEUSER, Beatrice. *NATO, Britain, France and the FRG. Nuclear Strategies and Forces for Europe, 1949–2000*. Op. cit. pp. 38–41.

[5] US Secretary of Defense from 1961 to 1968. Assured destruction meant that if the Soviet side launched an attack on the United States, all nuclear resources which had not been destroyed would then be used in response in order to ensure the destruction of the Soviet Union. Under the flexible response doctrine, an enemy attack would be countered with a response of the same kind, a response which could lead to an escalation culminating in the use of strategic weapons. BURR, William and ROSENBERG, David Alan. Nuclear competition in an era of stalemate, 1963–1975. In: LEFFLER, Melvyn P. and WESTAD, Odd Arne (eds). *The Cambridge History of the Cold War (Volume 1: Origins)*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, p. 93 (pp. 88–111); CASTELLA (de), Tom. How did we forget about mutually assured destruction? *BBC News Magazine*, [consulted on 3 April 2015], 15 February 2012. Available at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-17026538>

- [6] In 1962, the United States had 203 intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and 144 submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), while the Soviet Union had 36 and 72 respectively. HOLLOWAY, David. Nuclear weapons and the escalation of the Cold War, 1945–1962. *Op. cit.* p. 387. For further information on the escalation which led to the Cuban missile crisis, see: HORNE, Alistair. La crise des missiles cubains. *Histoire, économie et société* [online]. No 1 (La France et la Grande-Bretagne devant les crises internationales) [consulted on 2 April 2015], 1994, 13th year, pp. 171–184. Available at: [/web/revues/home/prescript/article/hes_0752-5702_1994_num_13_1_1739](http://web.revues/home/prescript/article/hes_0752-5702_1994_num_13_1_1739)
- [7] KOŁODZIEJ, Edward A. *French international policy under de Gaulle and Pompidou. The politics of grandeur*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1974, p. 107. Mention should be made here of the fact that as far back as 1946 the McMahon law adopted by Congress prohibited the divulging of any nuclear information, even to allies.
- [8] PIERRE, Andrew J. *Nuclear Politics. The British experience with an independent strategic force 1939–1970*. *Op. cit.*, pp. 224–231.
- [9] To which President Eisenhower assigned five Polaris submarines.
- [10] Council of Western European Union. *Secretary-General's note. Summary report of the meeting of the Assembly's Committee on Defence Questions and Armaments with Mr Watkinson, United Kingdom Defence Secretary, on 21 March 1960*. London: 28.03.1960. C(60)59. Copy No 60. 8 p. National Archives of Luxembourg (ANLux). <http://www.anlux.lu>. Western European Union Archives. Secretariat-General/Council's Archives. 1954–1987. Organs of the Western European Union. Year: 1959, 01/11/1959–30/11/1960. File 202.001. Volume 1/2.
- [11] KOŁODZIEJ, Edward A. *French international policy under de Gaulle and Pompidou. The politics of grandeur*. *Op. cit.* pp. 108–110.
- [12] GUTMANN, Francis. *Interview. Excerpt: Franco-British relations in the field of defence*. [Interviewed by MARTINS, Véronica; camera: GERMAIN, Alexandre.] Paris: CVCE [prod.], 10.09.2014. CVCE, Sanem. Video (00:06:45, Colour, Original sound).
- [13] Mr Couve de Murville, Minister of Foreign Affairs, to Mr Chodron de Courcel, French Ambassador to the UK: Paris, 10 March 1966, 6.49 p.m., T. Nos 542 to 546. Reserved, Top Secret. In: French Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Committee for the Publication of French diplomatic documents. *Documents diplomatiques français: 1966*, Volume I, 1 January–31 May. Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 2006. Document No 165. pp. 418–419.
- [14] North Atlantic Military Committee. *Final decision on MC 14/3. A report by the Military Committee to the defence planning committee on an overall strategic concept for the defense of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization area*. MC 14/3(final), 16 January 1968. Available at: <http://www.nato.int/docu/stratdoc/eng/a680116a.pdf>, consulted on 7 April 2015.
- [15] HEUSER, Beatrice. *NATO, Britain, France and the FRG. Nuclear Strategies and Forces for Europe, 1949–2000*. *Op. cit.* p. 105.
- [16] Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). [Online] Available at: <http://www.un.org/disarmament/WMD/Nuclear/NPT.shtml>, consulted on 1 October 2014.
- [17] It did not sign it until 1992. Council of Western European Union. *Draft reply to recommendation 264*. 21.11.1975. 2 p. National Archives of Luxembourg (ANLux). Western European Union Archives. Secretariat-General/Council's Archives. 1954–1987. Organs of the Western European Union. Year: 1969, 01/12/1969–16/10/1985. File 202.413.999.06. Volume 1/1.
- [18] HEUSER, Beatrice. *NATO, Britain, France and the FRG. Nuclear Strategies and Forces for Europe, 1949–2000*. *Op. cit.* pp. 38–41.
- [19] HEUSER, Beatrice. *NATO, Britain, France and the FRG. Nuclear Strategies and Forces for Europe, 1949–2000*. *Op. cit.* p. 21.
- [20] HEUSER, Beatrice. *NATO, Britain, France and the FRG. Nuclear Strategies and Forces for Europe, 1949–2000*. *Op. cit.* p. 106.
- [21] ‘Even if they are stationed beyond the Urals, SS-20s can still deliver their warheads over part of Western Europe and the Middle East.’ RUEHL, Lothar. Le défi du SS-20 et la stratégie soviétique à l’égard de l’Europe. In: *Politique étrangère* [online]. No 3. 1979, 44th year [consulted on 20 September–October 2014], pp. 427–444 (p. 437). Available at: [/web/revues/home/prescript/article/polit_0032-342x_1979_num_44_3_1576](http://web.revues/home/prescript/article/polit_0032-342x_1979_num_44_3_1576)
- [22] RUEHL, Lothar. Le défi du SS-20 et la stratégie soviétique à l’égard de l’Europe. *Op. cit.* pp. 427–428.
- [23] In the US, this arms race took the form of the announcement of the ‘strategic defence initiative’ programme (which was never actually implemented). On the Russian side, the financial cost pushed the country to the verge of ruin. In 1985, the advent of Gorbachev and his desire for a rapprochement with the West put the brakes on rearmament and negotiations on medium-range nuclear forces began, leading to the signing of a treaty on 8 December 1987.
- [24] It has to be said, however, that the ACA was not in a position to exercise those powers. Its powers in relation to the use of atomic power for military purposes were recapitulated in a note drafted by Admiral Emilio Ferreri, the Director of the Agency, in November 1956, which to a certain extent established the division of powers between the Agency and Euratom, despite the fact that relations between the two organisations had not yet been regulated by international treaty, a fact which would require some adjustments on both sides. Agency for the Control of Armaments. *Note on the*

supervisory powers of WEU (Agency for the Control of Armaments) in the atomic field in relation to military purposes. Annex to Letter No D/1605 of 14 November 1956. Paris. C(56)209. 6 p. National Archives of Luxembourg (ANLux). <http://anlux.lu/>. Western European Union Archives. Secretariat-General/Council's Archives. 1954–1987. Organs of the Western European Union. Year: 1956, 01/06/1956-30/09/1957. File 202.415.10. Volume 1/1: Council of the Western European Union. *Secretary-General's note. Statement by M. Pierre Messmer, Minister for the Armed Forces, before members of the Assembly Committee on Defence Questions and Armaments — Paris, 30th May 1960.* London: 07.06.1960. C(60)89. Copy No 68. 21 p. National Archives of Luxembourg (ANLux). <http://www.anlux.lu>. Western European Union Archives. Secretariat-General/Council's Archives. 1954–1987. Organs of the Western European Union. Year: 1959, 01/11/1959-30/11/1960. File 202.001. Volume 1/2.

[25] The various issues linked to disarmament were generally dealt with as part of the broader question of East–West relations. For example: Council of Western European Union. *Extract from minutes of 234th meeting of WEU Council held at ministerial level in The Hague on 25th and 26th October 1963.* II. Political consultation. CR(63)20. Part I. pp. 8–10; 12–14. National Archives of Luxembourg (ANLux). <http://www.anlux.lu>. Western European Union Archives. Secretariat-General/Council's Archives. 1954–1987. Foundation and Expansion of WEU. Year: 1963, 01/10/1963-30/11/1965. File 132.15. Volume 1/7.

[26] A survey of reports (and associated recommendations) shows that the parliamentarians from both countries were very active in drafting the reports, particularly the British. For example: Assembly of Western European Union. Recommendation 97 on the state of European security. Disarmament and the nuclear force (Paris, Eleventh sitting, 4 December 1963). In: *Proceedings: Ninth Ordinary Session, Second Part, Volume IV: Minutes: Official Report of Debates.* Paris: Assembly of WEU. December 1963, p. 30.

[27] Council of Western European Union. *Secretariat-General note. Written question 160 put to the Council by a member of the Assembly.* London: 10.07.1975. WPM(75)24. Copy No 54. 2 p. National Archives of Luxembourg (ANLux). <http://www.anlux.lu>. Western European Union Archives. Secretariat-General/Council's Archives. 1954–1987. Organs of the Western European Union. Year: 1975, 01/05/1975-30/04/1976. File 202.413.22. Volume 1/1; Council of Western European Union. *Extract from minutes of 501st meeting of WEU Council held on 17th December 1975.* 17.12.1975. CR(75)14. 1 p. National Archives of Luxembourg (ANLux). <http://www.anlux.lu>. Western European Union Archives. Secretariat-General/Council's Archives. 1954–1987. Organs of the Western European Union. Year: 1975, 01/05/1975-30/04/1976. File 202.413.22. Volume 1/1.

[28] This was the case, for example, with the reply to Recommendation 264 on nuclear weapons proliferation. The British delegation took the opportunity to point out in its draft reply that France was the only country not to have signed the nuclear non-proliferation treaty.

[29] For example: Council of Western European Union. *Amendments proposed by the British delegation to the draft reply to Recommendation 238.* London: 19.09.1973. Copy No 33. 6 p. National Archives of Luxembourg (ANLux). <http://www.anlux.lu>. Western European Union Archives. Secretariat-General/Council's Archives. 1954–1987. Organs of the Western European Union. Year: 1973, 01/06/1973-30/11/1973. File 202.413.20. Volume 1/1.

[30] Council of Western European Union. *Extract from minutes of 224th meeting of WEU Council held on 2 May 1963.* CR(63)10. 2 p. National Archives of Luxembourg (ANLux). <http://www.anlux.lu>. Western European Union Archives. Secretariat-General/Council's Archives. 1954–1987. Organs of the Western European Union. Year: 1962, 01/05/1962-30/10/1963. File 202.413.09. Volume 1/1; CR(75)14. *Op. cit.*

[31] Council of Western European Union. *Secretary-General's note. Joint meeting of the Council and the Committee on Defence Questions and Armaments.* I. Draft Introductory Statement. London: 19.10.1960. C(60)147. Copy No 64, 5 p. (p. 3). National Archives of Luxembourg (ANLux). <http://www.anlux.lu>. Western European Union Archives. Secretariat-General/Council's Archives. 1954–1987. Organs of the Western European Union. Year: 1960, 01/20/1960-28/11/1960. File 202.413.06. Volume 1/1.

[32] Council of Western European Union. *Secretary-General's note. Draft replies to the Assembly's questions on defence matters.* London: 22.10.1958. WPM(120). Copy No 55. 3 p. National Archives of Luxembourg (ANLux). <http://www.anlux.lu>. Western European Union Archives. Secretariat-General/Council's Archives. 1954–1987. Organs of the Western European Union. Year: 1956, 01/10/1956-30/11/1958. File 202.413.41. Volume 1/1.

[33] For example: Council of Western European Union. *Secretary-General's note. Summary report of the meeting between Mr. Watkinson, United Kingdom Minister of Defence, and the Assembly Committee on Defence Questions and Armaments, 21st March 1960.* London: 28.03.1960. C(60)59. Copy No 62. 8 p. National Archives of Luxembourg (ANLux). <http://www.anlux.lu>. Western European Union Archives. Secretariat-General/Council's Archives. 1954–1987. Organs of the Western European Union. Year: 1959, 01/11/1959-30/11/1960. File 202.001. Volume 1/2.