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U.S. Planning for War in Europe, 1963-64

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The release of Cold War-era Soviet and East European documents on war plans and nuclear planning raises questions about U.S. war planning during the same period. A central issue is the degree to which U.S. and NATO planning posited early or initial use of nuclear weapons like the 1964 Warsaw Pact plan from the Czech archives. Certainly, by the 1950s, NATO war plans assumed early use of nuclear weapons, even immediate use under some circumstances.[1] By the 1960s, however, the situation began to change as the Kennedy and Johnson administrations began to push for contingency planning for conventional and limited nuclear war. Moreover, U.S. presidents would make final decisions on nuclear weapons use (unless the president was out of action and predelegation arrangements kicked in). Nevertheless, as shown by the documents that follow, high-level U.S. officials assumed that a Warsaw Pact conventional or nuclear attack on NATO Europe would invite a U.S. nuclear response (unless the Soviets agreed to limit fighting to conventional weapons). Rejecting the idea of "no first use," senior U.S. officials took it for granted that a massive Warsaw Pact conventional attack on Western Europe would prompt a nuclear response from outnumbered Western forces.

The following documents, a sampling from the 1963-64 period, were selected to invite comparison and contrast with the 1964 Warsaw Pact war plan and related documents that are now available on the website of the Parallel History Project on NATO and the Warsaw Pact. The U.S. documents suggest how senior civilian and military officials in the Kennedy-Johnson administrations thought about nuclear war and nuclear weapons use in European and intercontinental military operations. The theater and strategic war plans that they approved, however, remain classified. Yet, basic planning concepts and nuclear targeting options in U.S. war plans come across as does the political context that shaped military planning.

Not surprisingly, just as the Soviet and Czech documents imputed the most aggressive purposes to NATO, the U.S. documents ascribed comparable aggressive purposes to the Warsaw Pact side. Interestingly, however, some of the U.S. material partially validates Soviet fears of first strikes and surprise nuclear attack. Yet, when American war planners thought about striking first, they believed that it would be in response to certain information that the Soviet military was planning to strike American and European targets. In this way, American leaders thought it possible to preempt a Soviet attack.

One wonders if comparable Soviet-era material exists, whether in Politburo, Party, or Defense Ministry archives. The new documents were produced by the military but given that "politics was in command" during the Soviet era, one wonders how military and civilian leaders thought about and discussed the problem of nuclear weapons use in private. Is there a record of a comparable Politburo or high command discussion where top officials argue that they have deterred the Americans from undertaking rash actions in Central Europe? Is

there a record of Communist party leaders suggesting that they had any doubts about first use of nuclear weapons? In this connection, documents that elucidate Soviet-era procedures and policies for nuclear weapons use would be especially significant.

Document One: U.S. National Security Council, Net Evaluation Subcommittee, "The Management and Termination of War With the Soviet Union," 15 November 1963

Location of original: National Archives, Record Group 59, Department of State Records, Records of Policy Planning Council, 1963-64, box 280, file "War Aims"

This 79-page document is divided into sections below for easier navigation:

Document One-A: Memorandum from William Y. Smith to Maxwell Taylor, 7 November 1963

Location of Original: National Archives, Record Group 218, Records of Joint Chiefs of Staff, Maxwell Taylor Papers, Box 25, file "Net Evaluation" also available as document 395 in National Security Archive published microfiche collection, U.S. Nuclear History: Nuclear Weapons and Politics in the Missile Era, 1955-68, Washington, D.C., 1998)

The Net Evaluation Subcommittee (NESC) was a highly secret National Security Council Subcommittee that was active between the mid-50s and the mid-60s.[2] Its original purpose was to prepare annual studies analyzing the net effects--in terms of overall damage, human losses, and politico-military outcomes--of a U.S.-Soviet strategic nuclear war. When preparing these analyses, the NESC would factor in different circumstances for the outbreak of war, e.g., a Soviet or U.S. first strike. None of these analyses have been declassified but they presented a uniformly grim and disturbing picture of the destructiveness of nuclear war. When, following a presentation on the effects of nuclear war, President Kennedy said "and we call ourselves the human race!", it may have been after receiving a NESC briefing.[3]

During its last few years, the NESC prepared special studies that supplemented the annual net analysis. The document that follows was one of those studies, the first U.S. government effort to study systematically the problem of nuclear war termination. Worried about the danger of nuclear war and the inflexibility of U.S. nuclear strategy, the Kennedy administration had begun to look closely at "flexible response" and "controlled response"

strategies for fighting non-nuclear conflicts in Europe and controlling nuclear warfare. Consistent with that, the NESC took up the chilling task of considering whether it was possible to fight a nuclear war in a "discriminating manner" so that it ended on "acceptable terms" to the United States while avoiding "unnecessary damage" to adversaries. To illustrate the problem of war termination, the NESC presented several scenarios of U.S.-Soviet nuclear war, drawing conclusions and recommendations from them. Comments on a nearly final draft of this study by Col. William Y. Smith, then assistant to JCS Chairman Maxwell Taylor, summarized this complex study.

The scenarios that the NESC presented drew upon major targeting options in the still-secret U.S. strategic nuclear war plan, the Single Integrated Operational Plan (SIOP) that went into effect in fiscal year 1963. For example, SIOP-63 included a counterforce option designed to limit a major nuclear attack to Soviet bloc nuclear weapons targets only--virtually a first strike option--which senior officials wanted available when a Soviet attack seemed imminent. At several points in the scenarios in this report the decisionmakers ordered counterforce attacks; for example in the one for a European conflict, they ordered a "limited counterforce attack" that would supposedly have been "carefully constrained to reduce urban-industrial damage." Other options in SIOP 63 were for attacks on cities/industrial targets only, attacks on non-nuclear military targets, combinations of those target categories, as well as "withholds" for China and Eastern European countries. Even though the Kennedy administration was looking for alternatives to Truman-Eisenhower era "massive retaliation", SIOP options nevertheless stipulated enormous nuclear attacks.[4]

Document Two: "USAFE", 26 May 1964, possibly prepared by Seymour Weiss, Bureau of Politico-Military Affairs, Department of State

Location of original: Record Group 59, Department of State Records, Records of the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Politico-Military Affairs, Subject Files, 1961-63, box 3, Johnson-European Trip May 1964 (also available as document 992 in National Security Archive published microfiche collection, U.S. Nuclear History: Nuclear Weapons and Politics in the Missile Era, 1955-68, Washington, D.C., 1998)

This document records a briefing at headquarters United States Air Forces Europe (USAFE) directed by CINCUSAFE General Gabriel P. Disosway to Deputy Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs U. Alexis Johnson who was completing a tour of U.S. bases and embassies in Western Europe. The briefing disclosed the Air Force's assumptions that the United States could only win a nuclear war in Europe because the "side that hits first will win"; moreover, the Soviets were "not thinking in terms of conventional war." Significantly, Johnson raised a central problem: "the understandable reluctance of responsible officials to agree to a general release of nuclear weapons." This is a reference to what became known as the "nuclear taboo"--the idea that because of their disproportionate effects nuclear weapons were virtually unusable.[5]

Document Three: Memorandum for the Secretary from Deputy

Under Secretary U. Alexis Johnson, "Meetings in Paris with Bohlen, Finletter, Lemnitzer, and McConnell," 27 May 1964, with cover memo and detailed report attached

Location of original: Record Group 59, Department of State Records, Records of the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Politico-Military Affairs, Subject Files, 1961-63, box 1, Memoranda (file 1 of 5) (also available as document 993 in National Security Archive published microfiche collection, U.S. Nuclear History: Nuclear Weapons and Politics in the Missile Era, 1955-68, Washington, D.C., 1998)

Also prepared by Seymour Weiss, this document records discussions during April 1964 between Deputy Under Secretary Johnson and key U.S. officials based in, or then visiting, Paris, including Ambassador to France Charles E. Bohlen, U.S. ambassador to the NATO Council Thomas Finletter, Commander-in-Chief Europe (CINCEUR)/Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) Lyman Lemnitzer, and Deputy Commander-in-Chief USAFE John P. McConnell. Their conversations focused on a variety of problems, including the use of tactical nuclear weapons, command-and-control of nuclear weapons, threat assessments, and proposed force withdrawals from Europe.

The discussions on tactical nuclear weapons and threat assessment raised important questions. While Lemnitzer assumed early use for nuclear weapons, especially anti-demolition weapons (ADMs), his State Department interlocutors questioned that assumption in part because a decision to use nuclear weapons "would be the most crucial one any president could make" and might not be made "quickly or easily." The discussion of threats revealed interesting differences between Lemnitzer and McConnell over whether Warsaw pact forces could "easily overrun" NATO forces, as the latter believed. Johnson, however, argued that the probability of a large Communist invasion" was a "rapidly diminishing" one, arguing that it was more important to plan for more likely contingencies such as an East German revolt or Greek-Turkish conflict over Cyprus.

Document Four: Department of State Airgram enclosing "Secretary McNamara's Remarks to NATO Ministerial Meeting, December 15-17, 1964," 23 December 1964

Location of original: Record Group 59, Department of State Records, Formerly Top Secret Foreign Policy Files, 1964-66, box 22, NATO

Beginning with his famous May 1962 "Athens Speech", Secretary of Defense McNamara began an effort to "educate" European NATO leaders on the realities of nuclear warfare and the necessity for a flexible response military strategy. This speech, delivered at one of the semi-annual NATO defense and foreign ministers meeting, represented another step in that effort. As in other speeches, he emphasized the high costs of nuclear war, the problem of escalation control, and the need to plan for contingencies other than a massive invasion. What is especially striking about this speech, however, is McNamara's confidence that NATO nuclear and conventional forces had deterred the Soviets from strategic and theater nuclear attacks as well as from massive conventional attack. Interestingly, McNamara treats the latter as a "substantial" threat although he may have privately agreed with State Department officials that the risk was diminishing.

Document Five: Ambassador-at-Large Llewellyn Thompson to Seymour Weiss, Bureau of Politico-Military Affairs, "Implications of a Major Soviet Conventional Attack in Central Europe," 29 December 1964

Location of original: National Archives, Record Group 59, Department of State Records, Records of Ambassador-at-Large Llewellyn Thompson, 1961-70, box 21, Chron-July 1964

The State Department's most influential Soviet expert of the 1960s, Llewellyn Thompson was then chairing a special State-Defense committee on politico-military planning (the "Thompson Committee"). In this paper, Thompson joins U.A. Johnson in agreement that the chances of a Soviet conventional attack in Central Europe were "remote." If, however, the Soviets did make a "grab for Europe," Thompson argued that Washington should reply with a strategic first strike against the Soviet Union. Admitting that the United States "might also lose", Thompson argued that a first strike, including immediate use of tactical nukes, would be necessary because the Soviets would otherwise take the same course.

Many historians have described Thompson as a voice of sanity on U.S.-Soviet relations during the 1960s; for example, he played a key role in encouraging President Kennedy to take a moderate course during the Cuban missile crisis. His willingness, at least on paper, to support first strikes and first nuclear use suggests that a nuclear taboo was then far from pervasive. If Thompson had the responsibility, however, one wonders if he would have readily ordered a first strike in an "ambiguous situation"?

Glossary

ACE - Allied Command Europe
ADM - atomic demolition munitions
ASW - antisubmariine weapons
ECM - electronic countermeasures
LOC - lines of communications
MAAG - military assistance advisory group
MLF - multilateral force
MRBM - medium range ballistic missile
PAL - permissive action links (safety locks on nuclear weapons)
POLAD - political advisers
special ammunition - possibly a reference to depleted uranium ammunition

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Notes

1. See, for example, Robert A. Wampler, NATO Strategic Planning and Nuclear Weapons 1950-57, Nuclear History Program Occasional Paper 6 (College Park, Center for International Security Studies, 1990).

2. A history of the NESC would be most useful but difficult to write until its major studies have been declassified. Some materials on NESC, including its charter, and summaries of some of its reports can be found in the volumes on national security in the State Department's Foreign Relations series. Some writes have argued that the NESC had war planning responsibilities

but its role was strictly analytical, although no doubt war planners studied its reports closely.

3. Dean Rusk, As I Saw It (New York, 1990), 247.

4. For a discussion of SIOP-63, see Desmond Ball, "Development of the SIOP, 1960-1983," Desmond Ball and Jeffrey Richelson, eds., Strategic Nuclear Targeting (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1986), 62-70.

5. For thoughtful explorations of the notion of "nuclear taboo" see Thomas Schelling, "The Role of Nuclear Weapons," in L. Benjamin Ederington and Michael J. Mazar, Turning Point: The Gulf War and U.S. Military Strategy (Boulder, Westview Press,1994), 105-115; Peter Gizewski, "From Winning Weapon to Destroyer of Worlds: The Nuclear Taboo in International Politics," International Journal LI (Summer 1996):397-418; and Richard Price and Nina Tannenwald, "Norms and Deterrence: The Nuclear and Chemical Weapons Taboos," in Peter J. Katzenstein, The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics (New York, Columbia University Press, 1996), 116-152.