



FROM THE ARCHIVE

This issue's "From the Archive" section brings a part of a transcript from a 1977 Los Alamos meeting on the problem of tactical nuclear weapons in Europe. The section features Professor Colin Gray's prescient thoughts on the problem of the United States willingness to run the risk "on behalf of foreigners abroad" that "may at some time in the future be felt to be incompatible with American well-being." Anticipating what will become a major U.S. foreign policy debate decades later, Gray argued that "it is unreasonable to believe there will always be American governments prepared to take the kind of risks that they appear to be taking today." Even if the context is much different, the transcript is a testament to the lasting value of sound analytical thinking derived from a deep understanding of lasting international relations principles.

B.A. Wellnitz, Los Alamos Scientific Laboratory panel on tactical nuclear warfare. Report of the fifth meeting (short title: TAC-5), April 5-6, 1977¹

The European View

Gray said that one very explicit strategic doctrinal linkage between the US [United States] and Western Europe, between theater and strategic levels of force, is the notion that if NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] gets into very serious trouble in Europe the US has a doctrine which says we think we are prepared to engage in a certain number of LSOs [Limited Strategic Options]. Looking out over the next ten years, the way the strategic balance may move and the way SALT [Strategic Arms Limitation Talks] may or may not energize certain defense reactions here, he sees various problems with LSOs. The principal criticism is that LSOs probably would not work as a linking device. We could not pressure the Soviet Union to return to its starting lines given the current and predictable state of the strategic balance at any time out over the foreseeable future. If we are really serious about LSOs, we must back them up with a major war-waging capability; otherwise we will be licensing a Soviet response that we have not really anticipated.

Central to much of the discussion at TAC-5 has been the fundamental political question Americans should ask themselves. How important is Western Europe to the US and in what particular ways? Until the US has seriously addressed this question, thought it through in a very rigorous fashion, sound conclusions cannot be drawn about the risks that various military strategies pose. The NATO Alliance, being an oceanic alliance, has a curious geography in that the principal security producer is an ocean away from the principal potential battlefield. This was all right before the North American homeland became vulnerable to direct attack from the USSR [Union of Soviet Socialist Republics], but over the medium to long term it is unreasonable for Western Europeans to expect the US to pick up

¹ Available at <https://www.osti.gov/servlets/purl/7091279>, pp. 73-78.



the kind of security check it is picking up at this time. Even aside from American calculations of self-interest, the problems of how to relink the theater to the strategic level or the credibility problems with regard to promising strategic use in response to damage in Europe will endure. At some point in the 1990s or perhaps 2000, some type of Mansfield amendment^[2] will succeed such that the West Europeans will have to face seriously the problem of how they live with a major superpower actually in Europe itself. In other words, the American security commitment is a temporary one; most Europeans, if they really think it through, would probably agree with that. The years since 1945 have been an extraordinary period. The kind of risks that the US runs on behalf of foreigners abroad, even though the American interest obviously is very substantial in Western Europe, may at some time in the future be felt to be incompatible with American well-being. This would be a very grave miscalculation on the part of the US but it is unreasonable to believe there will always be American governments prepared to take the kind of risks that they appear to be taking today.

Europe's Choices. Gray then turned to the three elementary choices that Europe faces. The first is the head-in-the-sand reaction, that is, Europeans are living in the best of all possible worlds and they cannot conceive of any preferred alternative to the US maintaining the kind of security connection it has today, so they just assume that NATO will continue forever more or less as it is. The US will pick up the principal check in terms of providing the theater and strategic nuclear resources to back up the conventional forces, and the transoceanic security connection and the notion of a reasonable equality of risk will continue forever. That is unreasonable; most Europeans would accept that at some point they will have to face the fact that the USSR is there and the US, in a geographical sense, is not.

The second alternative is for NATO Europe to accept the geopolitical reality that the USSR is there and the US is not and try to provide an in-theater balance for themselves. However, they cannot provide an in-theater military balance without providing a prior political structure. That is why there are discussions about pooling nuclear forces. A European defense community is impossible unless there is a single political authority; this is prerequisite to any really sensible and major military development. The major problem with this alternative is that the USSR does not look with favor upon the growth of a West European superpower armed with nuclear weapons. It certainly would have to be a major nuclear power; there will be no cut-price ways to provide a genuine in-theater balance in Europe, unless a West European superstate really were up to a superpower standard in terms of levels and types of armament.

Third is the Finlandization alternative, the notion that NATO European countries, in the context where the US decides it has run these risks and borne these burdens long enough when Europeans could do it for themselves, decide they would much rather seek the best terms they can from the USSR which has a long-term and fairly fixed determination to

² The 1971 amendment to the Selective Service Bill (HR 6531) introduced by Senator Mike Mansfield, would half the number of U.S. troops deployed to Europe.

secure hegemony over Western Europe. In other words, the Europeans just come to terms. The term “Finlandization” is inappropriate in this context because the peculiar security condition of Finland is determined substantially by the fact that neutral Sweden and heavily armed NATO are behind it. If there were nothing behind a Finlandized Western Europe, terms like “East Germanization” or “Polandization” might well be more appropriate; there would not be the local discipline on Soviet action that Finland, as a litmus-paper state, has in its favor.

The problem is that Europeans have a dilemma, when thinking about their military security and the political requirements to put together a sensible military structure to defend themselves, and that is that looking to a long term there is obviously a permanent geopolitical problem. At any point, which cannot be predicted, the US in a security sense may substantially “go home,” leaving the Europeans to cope as best they can. The implication is that they should face facts and get on with building something sensible in Western Europe to be phased in as the US phases out. The trouble is that this pessimistic prognosis may be out by some 30, 40 or 50 years; who knows how long sensible Americans are going to continue the existing security connection? And by tinkering and experimenting seriously with political and consequent military structures in Western Europe, the Europeans may well be hastening the very thing which they are trying to provide an answer for, that is, hastening American reconsideration.

A situation is conceivable where, as an alternative to NATO, one might have a genuinely politically united Western Europe—a single military power, but a power strong enough to resist American policy advice and be a nuisance to American policy managers. However, this state for a number of years would not be strong enough to resist the USSR if they really became unpleasant. Europeans are aware of this possibility and the present situation suits them fine. But they are also aware that at some point they have to face geopolitical reality, that the Soviet Union is there forever and has to be coped with substantially on an in-theater basis. The problems such as whether the Americans will suffer the risk of loss of American cities on behalf of Frankfurt will eventually be solved by geopolitics.

SALT. There are some serious definitional problems which impede our understanding of genuine defense issues and have a deleterious and unfortunate effect on the way in which we conduct ourselves in SALT and MBFR [Mutual and Balanced Force Reductions]. In fact, our defense terminology has become distinctly counterproductive for Western security as a whole. The distinctions between the theater and central systems, between strategic and tactical systems, are as flawed philologically as they are unhelpful to our security. The definition of a strategic weapon as being one which is able to strike a superpower’s homeland should not be acceptable. Many officials in the American and other governments do not find it acceptable but it is au courant and it has a certain functional authority in the SALT context.

The Soviets are sensible indeed to insist upon including American FBS [forward based systems] on the agenda for follow-on SALT negotiations but the Soviet deep-theater strike systems, SS-20, older M/IRBMs [medium/intermediate-range ballistic missiles], Backfire (if

not in SALT II) and certainly Fencer, should also be on the SALT III agenda. Gray is not worried about the Flogger; only the Fencer can reach London.

The central point of Gray's argument is that people should recognize in a more explicit fashion than they do that there is not a set of strategic problems distinct from theater problems. Under American strategic doctrine as it exists today, the US strategic forces are supposed to be relevant to defense and security problems in the European theater. Both pragmatically and logically we should design the strategic forces, and design arms control arrangements pertaining to them, taking full account of the threats to the West's assets in Europe. To pretend that there is a set of SALT central problems and also separate problems in Europe is intellectual nonsense and is going to cause grave problems over the decade ahead, given the substantially adverse trends in the various military balances. We should not design SALT regimes that either roughly or imperfectly balance the strategic forces of one side against the other.

Any sensible strategic arms control arrangement has to take proper account of the genuine and substantial geopolitical differences between the rival alliances. One side is an oceanic alliance, the other is a continental alliance; projecting power over 3000 miles of ocean is an exercise the Soviets do not have to face. If we try to design toward a fairly strict parity, we ignore some important political, particularly geopolitical, problems. The US strategic forces, with as much assistance as is manageable from the forward Allies, should offset SS-20s, Backfires and such frontal aviation systems as are offensive.

The fashionable handwringing over gray-area systems is nonsense in terms of Western security. The cruise missile has many varied applications, it raises a set of fairly novel problems and, from a strict technical arms view, it possesses horrific problems of verification, but, so what? Arms control is supposed to be instrumental; it is supposed to be about security. The fact that something poses problems for arms control is unfortunate, but in a way it is putting the cart before the horse. We have a gray-area problem because the SALT structure is grossly inadequate for managing the kind of weapons traffic that should be managed. In terms of the security of the US and its forward Allies in Europe, we should probably welcome the gray-area problem as helpfully eroding the forced, useless distinctions that should be eroded. Distinctions between theater and strategic systems are political conveniences; they are fashionable, we grew up with them, but if such usage ceases to speak to our security needs then it is time to re-examine the intellectual content of our ideas and categories rather than try to force weapons into categories where they do not fit in a security sense. In 75 other words, the distinctions between theater and strategic are totally outworn and should be eroded.

In an arms control forum it is difficult to suggest that the political reality of the geographical dispersion of the members of the NATO Alliance should be matched by, say, a numerical compensation on the part of the Soviets, although the history of SALT thus far has not shown the Soviets to be backward in claiming that their peculiar geography should be reflected in due compensation in SLBM numbers, for example. The US with a straight face and in a very serious arms control sense could claim interest in the excellent Soviet

concept of equal security and so the US should obtain numerical compensation for the very asymmetrical geographies of the rival alliances.

If the US really is serious about the defense of Western Europe, does the US also accept the proposition that the loss of Western Europe would be almost tantamount to the defeat of the US itself? If the Soviets either acquire, or acquire hegemony over, Western Europe, everything thereafter becomes possible around the globe. The consequences for American society of being in a fortress condition, the meaning this would have for the correlation of forces if the Soviets could mobilize the sources they had acquired, are such that there would be a monumental historical change in the correlation of forces between East and West. So it is not a case of Americans taking enormous risks with “those foreigners” who are not putting their lives and their money on the line for Western defenses, but it is of vital interest to the US indeed. The defense of Western Europe should be viewed by Americans as being the functional equivalent of the defense of California or Maine. If that is true, then US officials should accept the logical intellectual implications, in terms of their strategic theory, and should seek consciously to try to erode the theater/strategic distinction. The best place to begin trying to erode that distinction would be in the initial studies leading up to SALT III and preferably in SALT III itself. Obviously we would have to retitle the exercise.

Gray is aware of most of the difficulties facing his proposal that we erode this distinction and reorganize the way we go about negotiating on arms control, and is also aware that SALT is in trouble enough without increasing the agenda of weapons and increasing the national membership around the table. These are real problems but for once we would be addressing real security problems. If they cannot be solved through arms control, we will solve them through unilateral means. We cannot get away from the gray-area problem but Gray would force that down to the issue of how to count aircraft that have an operating radius of 500 or 600 miles. There would always be a threshold below which the arms control forum should not be concerned but the virtue of having a single arms control forum to get hold of these gray-area problems as well as the traditional strategic problems and also the deeper theater strike systems is that at least we could get hold of the total threat spectrum and the total set of Western assets that we wish to defend. Arms control and our security interests would be meshed for a change.

Of course, there would be major arms control problems in getting hold of theater strike systems, many of which can be configured alternatively for nuclear or conventional use. This gets away from strategic arms control issues in the strategic arms control forum, but it would be well worth attempting.

Alternatively, if the official American arms control community and the Soviets balk at this proposal to lump together the deeper theater strike systems and the strategic matters of SALT, and if we decide that we cannot make any mileage in the arms control forum by trying to incorporate FBS and Soviet strike systems, there is another route that could be taken. Going into SALT III (presuming SALT II is happily concluded) we say that we are not going to discuss FBS. Obviously if we have already written some kind of commitment to discuss FBS in SALT II, either in the treaty or in some protocol attached thereto, then clearly we have forsworn an opportunity. Nevertheless, we could say we are not going to

discuss FBS in SALT III but what we are going to do is for the first time take very seriously those deep Soviet theater strike systems. We are going to try to give the Soviets some incentive to talk seriously in an arms control forum about them. We are going to pose a major threat to the survivability of the Backfire, the SS-20, the Fencer and the IRBMs [intermediate-range ballistic missiles] of older vintage that the Soviets would retain. Many people who favor arms control fail to understand that one really has to arm in order to provide the other side with a reasonable incentive for striking a bargain.

Regardless of how we tinker with arms control processes, our whole military posture should have an integrity of itself; if we have a military posture that has integrity we will also have arms control leverage. We may not get arms control agreements for a variety of reasons, but we certainly will not get it if we do not have a military posture that makes sense quite aside from arms control criteria.

The Western Alliance needs to purchase extended-range land-based IRBMs for mobile deployment in Europe and we should deploy longer range cruise missiles in the European theater; these could be held to be usefully coupling in the political sense and they could give the West European Allies the ability to punish the Soviet Union itself—rather than Poland, East Germany or Rumania—for the sins of the Soviet Union. In the European perspective, although not in the American perspective, any collateral damage deliberately or otherwise imposed on Western Europe should be paid for in terms of dead and irradiated Russians and not in terms of hostage Poles, East Germans and Rumanians. Gray can see the American problem in vibrating to escalation control and not inviting the Soviets to take direct action against North America, but in terms of equality of risk throughout the NATO Alliance the Western Europeans would be unhappy with trying to match the SS-20s with shorter range systems. We need to get a matching theater capability—long-range cruise missiles and land-mobile IRBMs—a capability that would give what in previous days would have been termed a clear strategic capability. Soviet interests in expanding the terms of SALT and discussing their theater strike systems should increase markedly in a context where they see long-range cruise missiles and IRBMs appearing on the other side.

Gray noted that these are not really alternatives but they are synergistic and one should aid the other very substantially.

MBFR. In distinction to the above, one could suggest that the FBS, the Soviet medium and intermediate range ballistic missiles, Backfire and Fencers be added to the agenda of the MBFR. However, Gray feels that the West's hand is already weak in MBFR without adding new categories wherein we lack real leverage. It is just possible that we might be able to get a hand on constraining SS-20 deployments in MBFR, but what kind of leverage do we have in an MBFR context expanded to include the FBS? We could certainly develop and purchase it, but as of this moment our bargaining leverage is extremely weak indeed. Historically the Soviets have shown very little interest in measures of unilateral Soviet disarmament, and this is how they would regard expanding MBFR, given the current European balance and the way it apparently will move, unless we do something serious with regard to land-mobile cruise missiles and land-mobile IRBMs. If we think in terms of trading to get a handle on the SS-20, what incentive could we give them to show diminished

interest in deployment of that system? The Soviets would view our nuclear-capable, moderately obsolescent F-4s as being a rather unhealthy trade and Gray feels we just do not have the leverage to get hold of the SS-20 at the moment.

The real arms control problem is an American and West European military postural problem, not a case of tinkering with arms control structures or seeking new designs or coming up with new proposals. It is a simple matter that in arms control, as in many other things, you get what you pay for. If we have not paid for the requisite military muscle, here or credibly about to be here, we are not going to get balanced and noncosmetic arms control agreements. The Carter Administration has probably abrogated the sense in that point over the past few weeks. Gray has difficulty seeing what value MBFR is to the West, or even to the East, and he has found few people who share any contemporary enthusiasm for MBFR. In other words, if MBFR did not exist, he doubts that we would go to very great lengths to create it. On the other hand, MBFR does exist and obviously in a general way its fate is linked to East/West relations in Europe and elsewhere, and if SALT is in very serious trouble this cannot help MBFR. However, it is difficult to see what can be accomplished through MBFR; all Gray sees coming out of the exercise is a fairly token agreement to make token bilateral cuts which will have zero military effect. But in terms of any of the traditional hopes for MBFR, that it will lead to other things in the political realm or that something will really be done for European military stability—the Soviets are just too smart for that.

Nuclear Proliferation. Gray dismissed the nuclear proliferation issue on the grounds that it bears not at all on theater nuclear postures for NATO unless the US begins to take seriously the doctrinal problem of no first use, in which case interests in Europe and elsewhere in developing national nuclear arsenals might be considerably augmented. There are few, if any, substantial nuclear proliferation consequences of theater nuclear force issues in Europe. Even if there were, so what? Distinctly American interests in European security are such that we should do what is sensible in terms of West European security in the region. If Brazil or someone else is marginally encouraged to go nuclear, too bad; Gray is too concerned about security in Europe to take account of highly improbable scenarios wherein others are mildly encouraged to go nuclear as a consequence.