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Political Exercise
Extex - Detex - Exercises in Deterrance 1963-64

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FROM: Lincoln P. Bloomfield

SUBJECT: DETEX III on MLF and NATO - Some Preliminary Observations

For whatever value they may have, there follow some points of possible general interest emerging from the unclassified political-military exercise conducted by the M.I.T. Center for International Studies at Endicott House on November 27-28, 1964 under the sponsorship of Project Michelson of the U.S. Navy, and participated in by senior government officials, military officers, and academic experts. The game sought to create an artificial environment characterized by four nuclear forces in existence in the West (U.S. and British forces, the force de frappe, and the MLF) in which a hypothetical crisis involving the MLF and entailing some strains within the Western alliance would arise shortly before anticipated renegotiation of the North Atlantic Treaty.

It is not particularly important for purposes of this memorandum to describe in detail the exact nature of the crisis or how it came out. In brief, the game started with the destruction by one of two tracking Soviet submarines in the Bay of Biscay of the S.S. Victory, one of the 10 MLF mixed-manned Polaris-firing surface ships assumed to be in existence in May 1968. The ship, captained by a German officer, had assumed a firing configuration after signalling that it was starting a routine drill. (It remained ambiguous whether the captain had gone beyond his standing instruction; intelligence uncertainly linked him with some German right-wing activity. It also remained ambiguous whether the Soviet submarine commander had exceeded his instructions, against the background of a continuing power struggle within the Kremlin between hard and soft line factions.) The Western powers responded with an alert that was quickly matched by the Soviet Government. In accordance with special game objectives it was postulated that the French Government under an aging de Gaulle reacted directly by sinking one of the two tracking Soviet submarines. The Soviets reciprocated by sinking a French destroyer in the Atlantic. The crisis subsequently de-escalated, and the last part of the exercise simulated a period of planning for the North Atlantic Council meeting in late 1968 against the background of the Victory crisis.

Some observations of possible policy interest can be set forth under four headings.

MLF. In the exercise the United States team did not respond at once with force to the sinking of the MLF ship, chiefly in order to assess Soviet intentions in terms of any additional acts (which were not forthcoming). The initial Soviet objective was to exploit the situation in order to "ground" the MLF.

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The more substantive reactions were in the two lesser teams. The West German team reacted with a loss of confidence in the credibility of the MLF to what it deemed a demonstration by the Soviet Union of what a weak reed the MLF in fact was. It concluded that in an escalating crisis the MLF was not really relevant to the basic strategic problem, and at the end of the game was even unwilling to see the remaining MLF ships built. The UK team wound up even more lukewarm about the MLF. The Victory sinking persuaded it that the MLF fleet needed escort vessels; in addition it saw need for a new doctrine concerning MLF reactions to the sinking of a single MLF ship, and the role the MLF might play in any tit-for-tat retaliatory exchanges in the future (such as took place in the game).

The United States team in its post-crisis estimates concluded that in any subsequent crisis involving the MLF the U.S. should plan to go beyond one-for-one exchanges. It also felt that the MLF had come through the crisis surprisingly well. The United States team registered the lessons it had learned in the Victory crisis by recommending that the MLF force be placed under a NATO Commander in Chief along with UK and French forces (see below).

By the end of the game the Soviet Union team had come privately to see the MLF as the lesser of several possible evils. While it clearly wanted to get rid of the MLF, it had some new reservations about what might take its place as the various alternatives to MLF--particularly a European force--began to become more visible. In tactical terms it also found the MLF useful as a continued apple of discord among the NATO powers. In general it believed it could still count on political processes to atrophy MLF.

It was striking that in this particular game no one of the Western teams appeared willing to take full parental responsibility when the MLF was under attrition. Under the circumstances we posited, no one seemed particularly concerned or cared deeply enough about the matter to respond with great vigor (or indeed saw any particular use for the MLF in coping with the crisis). The U.S. team made the distinction at the outset between a direct attack on the ground and an attack on an MLF ship; the German team decided also that this was not similar to an attack on German soil. In any event, the conflict-resolution process was considerably more diffused than if it had been a national force, or tied more securely to NATO, and the Soviet advantages from fractionalization or diffusion of Western nuclear power were obvious.

This leads to the speculation that the MLF may in fact offer an option--if we want such an option--of possibly being disavowable, at least to the extent that one is perhaps not as obligated to respond to an incident concerning the MLF ship as one would be if it were a purely national ship (though, as both Soviet Union and U.S. team contingent plans suggested, this would no longer be true after a second one was attacked).

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It should finally be said that nothing about the place of the MLF in this crisis seemed to change such negative opinions about the MLF as some of the players brought to the game.

NATO. In its preparations in the latter part of the game for the North Atlantic Council meeting to be held in the wake of the Victory crisis, the United States team came up with some revised command arrangements for NATO. These centered around the notion of a NATO "Commander in Chief" who would report directly to the North Atlantic Council, and who would be distinct from SACEUR and SACLANT. SACEUR would no longer be both military adviser on policy to the NAC and field commander as well. Under the proposed arrangement the two supreme field commanders, the MLF, and the force de frappe would report directly to the NATO Commander in Chief, who would be an American. The European sentiment for a European field commander could then be satisfied by making SACEUR a European, and the top staff for the Commander in Chief a triad consisting of Germans, French and British. (The U.S. did not envisage SACEUR as a German, but in the game implied the possibility to sober de Gaulle.) The MLF Council would be abolished and the whole operation integrated into NATO.

The German team, however, opposed any shift in NATO structure or organization that did not clearly move matters toward reunification of Germany with adequate security. Specifically it opposed any changes in the command structure that might at any time lead to a non-American Commander in Chief.

The Soviet team, while it wished to see NATO disrupted, found that in a pinch it also wanted to be able to rely on U.S. restraint over the other NATO powers. In broad terms, it might be said that, in view of the less desirable alternatives, the Germans and the Russians shared a desire to keep American forces engaged in Europe, and the Russians were thus somewhat ambivalent about NATO.

Disengagement. One curious feature of the game was the rather natural way in which the European teams moved toward renewed interest in disengagement of Allied and Soviet forces in central Europe, as they appraised the positions in which they found themselves prior to the renegotiation of the North Atlantic Treaty in the wake of the MLF crisis.

The German team found itself dismayed to discover how little political leverage it had in the situation. The Victory incident forced the Germans to face up to their ambiguous position in Europe and think very hard about basic realities as they saw them. Their real preference was to be able to play the French game under the U.S. strategic nuclear umbrella, and as they considered the alternatives to this, specifically the possibility of a

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national German nuclear force, they very quickly came to appreciate the dead-ends of such policies. However, their basic mood was one of profound weariness of continued dependence on the United States, based largely on disappointment with the unchanged negative prospects for reunification. Like their neighbors, they began to look again at the revised Rapacki plan, concluding that, if the Soviets made the Rapacki plan their own, as Germans they would definitely be tempted. Their strategy was to watch closely for signs that the U.S. might be ready to accept some form of disengagement without lessening its security guarantee. They were fairly optimistic over the long run that reunification might come this way, given the basic U.S. interest in keeping Soviet power behind the Elbe. In any event, they felt strongly that the previous holdfast policy was unproductive for them.

The British were bothered throughout the game by not being hooked into the Hot Line. (The U.S. dealt with this by setting up an Ambassadorial Council in Washington.) Also, like the Germans, they were dismayed at how few options they in fact had during a major alliance crisis (apart from trying to keep the U.S. calm and de Gaulle isolated from the West Germans). As a consequence, the British team found itself increasingly listening with interest to something resembling the Rapacki plan aimed at the demilitarization of Germany. In their words, as socialists and politicians they were for it; as realists they wanted someone else to make the decision. Their basic goal continued to be the maintenance of Western unity, but they nevertheless were stimulated by the crisis to feel that possibilities of disengagement in central Europe must now be explored seriously.

The Americans at that stage had, on the contrary, concluded that the Rapacki plan looked no better in 1968 than it had in the early 60's, still leading in time to a total U.S. withdrawal from Europe, and possibly even of the U.S. strategic nuclear shield from Europe. They were, however, prepared to make certain withdrawals and redeployment that even they informally characterized as "the beginnings of disengagement." These were along the lines of thinning-out of forces, on condition that a net of militarily defensible major U.S. bridge-heads could be established at such places as Hamburg, St. Nazaire, Northern Italy, and Norway in substitute for the obsolescing linear defense design that dated back 20 years. But as a quid pro quo the minimum requirements included removal of the Berlin wall and control and inspection posts in central Europe manned on an adversary basis. They opposed consideration of any deeper zones except within the staged process adumbrated in the U.S. GCD proposal. They still felt that any proposals for nuclear-free zones in Europe were generally unacceptable, as foreclosing any flexible response other than the strategic nuclear option.

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Submarines. Curiously, this game (like the DETEX II game), although not designed with any specific arms control interest in mind, at a crucial stage posed as the relevant problem with respect to submarine deployment and communications the need for arrangements to surface the submarines involved in order to engage in a form of high-speed arms control. (In this particular case the proposal was made by the U.S. for certain Soviet subs in the area of the sinking of the Victory to surface.)

Proliferation. In this game the Soviet team increasingly used the crisis atmosphere as a means of implementing its desire to find ways of combining with the U.S. against the possibility of nuclear proliferation on the part of Nth powers.

(A more detailed report is under preparation and will be available through Project Michelson, U.S. NOTS, China Lake, California.)

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