

THE HERITAGE LECTURES

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the NATO Nuclear
Debate**

By Jay Kosminsky



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Washington, D.C. 20002
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202/546-4400

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NATO's nuclear debate is calm for the moment, but only because we have entered the eye of the storm. Alliance decisions on the two major points at issue have not been resolved, only deferred. NATO has put off until the December 1990 German elections the contentious issue of whether or not to replace the obsolescent *Lance* short-range nuclear missile. The Alliance has reached a temporary consensus against opening negotiations with Moscow on short-range nuclear forces (SNF), but this debate too is likely to be rejoined, probably within a year. This respite provides an opportunity to review the critical interests at stake for America in this debate, and to assess potential courses of action.

During a recent trip to Germany I was struck by the wholly different nature of the nuclear debate there and in the United States. In Germany, unlike America, the debate has taken on strong emotional and national overtones. Clearly and overtly in Germany nuclear issues are being framed in terms of German national interests. And these are being defined increasingly in opposition to American policy. The crude but popular slogan of the anti-*Lance* coalition — “the shorter the range the deader the German” — may not reflect any philosophical or strategic logic, but it does reflect fairly well the German mood. A young reporter for a major, mainstream German newspaper went so far as to tell me, “What this whole debate really is about is one ally trying to regain its self-respect while another is trying to prevent it from doing so.”

While Americans and probably most Germans would consider this characterization exaggerated to the point of being laughable, it is indicative of an underlying current in German thought that warrants at least an investigation into what Americans may be up against in coming months and years.

Questions of National Interest. While Americans tend to frame the nuclear debate in terms of the requirements of deterrence and potential combat, in Germany and much of Europe underlying issues — many of which do concern basic questions of national interest — always have been closer to the surface. Today in Germany these issues increasingly are being argued directly. A series of issues including “low flying” NATO aircraft, NATO maneuvers on German soil, and most saliently, the nuclear issue, have become intertwined under the general heading of the “sovereignty question.”

If the nuclear debate is now to be framed in terms of national interests, it will be important for Americans at least to review and understand what interests the United States has at stake in NATO's nuclear policy. German soul-searching is not necessarily a bad thing for the Alliance, and Americans should be prepared, within limits, to accommodate whatever new German policies may emerge. However, we also must understand at what point our own highest interests could be placed in jeopardy by decisions made in Bonn.

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He spoke at The Heritage Foundation on July 13, 1989.

ISSN 0272-1155. ©1989 by The Heritage Foundation.

NATO on the Cusp

Western Europe, particularly West Germany, and the U.S. are engaged in a dependency relationship that neither side considers ideal and which each would change if conditions permitted. While U.S. protection affords security to European-NATO states and permits them defense on the cheap, it also breeds resentment through implied and sometimes overt limits on their freedom of action. Americans also are ambivalent about the trans-Atlantic relationship, from which the U.S. gains strong allies to hold Moscow at bay far from its shores, but at the price of entangling and potentially dangerous commitments. Historically, the struggle to forge common alliance nuclear policies has stoked fears and suspicions on both sides of the Atlantic as few other issues.

If we define politics among states as the need to reach a common ground in instances where national interests conflict, then nuclear politics is politics of the highest order, because questions regarding nuclear weapons policy invoke issues of ultimate political import concerning the sovereignty and survival of states. Naturally, peoples and their governments would like to reserve to themselves the power to decide these issues, to maximize their control over their national destinies. In NATO, nuclear responsibilities are shared. Each state must respond not only to its own needs, but to those of its allies. This requirement is most apparent in relations between West Germany, NATO's Front Line state barred by treaty from possessing nuclear weapons of its own, and the United States, nuclear guarantor of the Alliance.

Assymetry of Risk. The dictates of geography and Soviet force deployments combine to create a profound asymmetry of nuclear risk between West Germany and the United States in the event of Soviet aggression in Europe. Under such circumstances, the threat of escalation to strategic nuclear warfare between the superpowers would, objectively, present the gravest danger to American survival; for Germans that same threat might represent the last chance to avert both a devastating war confined to their continent and defeat.

The doctrinal compromise of "flexible response," adopted by NATO in 1966, delicately balances the American preference for "direct defense" of European territory at the lowest possible level of conflict with German desires to codify the concept of shared risk by holding open the threat of deliberate nuclear escalation. Nuclear deployment decisions and employment policies designed since 1966 have been founded on this paradigmatic compromise.

The current debate over nuclear modernization and SNF negotiations reflects more, however, than the Alliance's usual menu of geographically, politically, and psychologically induced tensions:

◆ ◆ The 1987 Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty has brought U.S.-German differences over the question of nuclear risk-sharing into sharp relief. Despite the fact that NATO's negotiation "track" on INF was embarked upon largely at German insistence, the U.S. now is blamed by all parties in Germany for the resulting treaty which left only short-range nuclear weapons on German territory.

◆ ◆ Mikhail Gorbachev's December 7, 1989, United Nations speech promising major European force reductions and the opening of Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) negotiations in Vienna hold out to Western Europe the prospect of a radically diminished military threat. While so far unrealized, this hope has been the overriding factor in conditioning the nuclear security debate within the Atlantic Alliance in recent months.

Politics in the Federal Republic

Public opinion polls in West Germany tend to demonstrate little except that Germans are confused about how to interpret their current situation. On the one hand, there is optimism: at least three-quarters of West Germans have ceased to consider Moscow a threat. On the other hand, not many of those holding this opinion are so convinced of its validity that they are prepared to see American troops go home: about three-quarters of West Germans want them to stay.¹

This shift in attitudes toward the East is more pronounced and has progressed faster in West Germany than in the other major European NATO countries or the U.S. In Britain and particularly in France, attitudes toward Moscow's intentions are far more skeptical. While fascination in Germany with Gorbachev has not manifested itself as overt opposition to NATO or the U.S. military presence, it has meant, in the words of political analyst Ronald Asmus, a growing estrangement from the content of Alliance policies, particularly regarding nuclear issues.

On both the German Left and Right, there is increasing attention to the potential nuclear "singularization" of Germany. The concern underlying the "singularization" debate is not new: in the event of a war in Europe, U.S. decision makers would prefer that U.S. territory remain unscathed. New to the debate is an apparently heightened German conviction that this desire is certain to guide American decision makers during wartime, resulting in the destruction of Germany. In this context the U.S. nuclear guarantee comes to be perceived as a threat to German interests rather than a means of defending those interests against a military threat from the East.

"Denuclearizing" Central Europe. Encouraged by Gorbachev, the West German Left would replace existing nuclear arrangements with a denuclearized Central Europe, confident that Western peace efforts would be matched by joint NATO-Warsaw Pact movement toward "structurally non-offensive defense," or other "mutual security" structures. Consistent with this approach, the *Lance* modernization issue has been linked in legislation introduced by the Social Democratic Party (SPD) in the Bundestag to the broader question of "equality" within the Alliance. Along with the issues of low-flying aircraft and NATO maneuvers on German soil, the SPD's broader point is that German interests are not met within the context of current Alliance defense arrangements and this is an unacceptable infringement on German sovereignty.

For those on the West German Right, such as Bundestag Group Chairman Alfred Dregger, the impetus toward denuclearization comes not from faith in Gorbachev, but from the INF Treaty, which is viewed as having already fatally undermined Alliance nuclear policy by decoupling German defense from the U.S. strategic nuclear arsenal. Like the Left, the Right too looks to the elimination of the shortest range nuclear systems, particularly nuclear artillery, and to new relations with the East and with the West European nuclear powers to replace a flawed defense relationship with the U.S.

1 Poll data from Josef Joffe, "Rocks in the Stream of Opinion; Results of Opinion Poll on Security Issues," *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*, February 28, 1989, p. 6 (English translation in Foreign Broadcast Information Service Daily Report [FBIS] West Europe, March 1, 1989, pp. 11-12); John G. Roos, "Europeans Trust U.S. Conventional Shield but Would Favor "Euro-nuclear" Force," *Armed Forces Journal International*, September 1989.

Perhaps no one has exploited the national theme as well as Foreign Minister Hans Dietrich Genscher, who in an impassioned speech to the Bundestag rejected *Lance* modernization on the grounds of his responsibility toward all Germans, including “the other part of our fatherland.”

Caught between Left and Right and under pressure from his own Foreign Minister, Chancellor Kohl and other Atlanticist-oriented German leaders seem to have lost their voice, and their will. Perhaps the most telling of the recent polls in Germany shows that while 86 percent of West Germans support continued participation in NATO, nearly 80 percent want to see all nuclear weapons removed from Europe. It is understandable that German politicians are unwilling to explain the inherent contradiction between these positions. It is not excusable.

U.S. Interests in the Nuclear Equation

Under existing military conditions and treaty obligations, the U.S. requires at a minimum a theater nuclear force and doctrine capable of: a) providing a credible deterrent to war; b) conducting nuclear strikes able to influence the European theater military situation in the event of war; and c) providing a multitude of options below the level of strategic nuclear war involving American cities. Under flexible response these basic requirements have been upheld, along with European requirements for a nuclear force and doctrine that at least threatens quick escalation to involve Soviet territory early in a war.

There seems to be little understanding in Germany that the nuclear policies increasingly rejected are based on compromises that define the essence of the American-German defense relationship. To reject U.S. nuclear weapons in Europe implicitly is to reject the grand bargain undergirding the U.S.-West German defense relationship. If Germans begin to define their own sovereignty and interests outside of this framework, there are bound to be repercussions on this side of the Atlantic as Americans review their own security interests in light of changed circumstances.

NATO Nuclear Policy: Where We Stand Today

Since NATO adopted “flexible response,” over twenty years ago, the Alliance has made a series of decisions regarding nuclear use and deployment that have satisfied essential U.S. and European requirements for deterrence and defense.

In developing its 1970 “provisional” guidelines for nuclear use, and its 1986 “general political guidelines,” NATO agreed on a strategy satisfying U.S. requirements for war-limiting options against military targets with European requirements for “escalation” of conflict by striking “political” targets deep in Soviet territory. In essence, NATO was to strike deep, at least against Soviet targets on other Warsaw Pact territory, where military targets *de facto* would become political targets. Operational plans exist for shorter-range battlefield use, which cannot be ruled out even as part of an initial package that includes deep strikes.

As NATO moved along a “deep-strike” track in its intra-Alliance negotiations in the early 1980s, it was moving along a wholly contradictory track in East-West negotiations, in 1981 proposing a “zero option” to eliminate the very weapons upon which its emerging “general guidelines” would rely most heavily. When the negotiations track came to fruition in December 1987, eliminating not only ground-launched cruise missiles (GLCM) and *Pershing II* missiles, but any ground-launched missiles with ranges between 500 and 5500

kilometers, NATO was left with a nuclear arsenal singularly unsuited to its doctrinal requirements.

As a result of the INF Treaty, what was intended as a modernized force balanced between short-, medium-, and long-range forces, by 1991 will be an aging force heavily oriented toward short-range systems and dual-capable aircraft with gravity bombs. The mix of short-, medium-, and long-range systems in this force will be similar to that of NATO's pre"-dual track" force, only smaller almost by half.

**Land-Based NATO Nuclear Warheads
(by launcher range)**

	1979	1991 (expected)	1991 (no INF Treaty)
Total:	6,845	3,873	4,445
Long-range	420 6%	420 11%	992 22%
Medium-range	1,610 24%	980 25%	980 22%
Short-range	4,815 70%	2,473 64%	2,473 55%

Long-range: includes where relevant U.S. F-111 stationed in Great Britain (assumes 3 warheads per plane), *Pershing II* and GLCM. *Medium-range:* aerial bombs assigned to Dual Capable Aircraft other than F111. *Short-range:* where relevant nuclear artillery shells, Lance, Honest John, Nike-Hercules, and Atomic Demolition Mines. Figures extrapolated from Richard Halloran, *New York Times* November 15, 1983, adjusted for NATO's 1983 Montebello Decision (assumes phase-out of 600 Nike-Hercules, 400 atomic demolition mines, and 400 other warheads) and the INF Treaty.

As this chart shows, the INF Treaty prevented a shift of NATO's nuclear force that would have been preferable from a European, particularly German, perspective because of its ability to strike deep into Soviet territory from European soil.

Still, NATO is not without long-range theater nuclear options. These consist primarily of 140 F-111 bombers based in Britain and 400 *Poseidon* sea-launched ballistic missiles assigned to the Allied Supreme Command (SACEUR). Each of these has evident disadvantages: airbase vulnerability and penetrability issues for the twenty-year-old F-111s and lack of flexibility for SLBMs. NATO could compensate for these shortcomings by assigning additional sea-launched cruise missiles (SLCM) to NATO, or moving FB-111s, or conceivably even air-launched cruise missile-equipped B-52s to bases in Britain or elsewhere in Western Europe.

NATO Nuclear Modernization: Is Compromise Possible?

NATO has three nuclear modernization programs planned or ongoing. These programs, in order of importance as listed by SACEUR, are: 1) a tactical air-to surface missile (TASM); 2) a follow-on to the short-range *Lance* missile (FOTL); and 3) modernized nuclear artillery.

The only nuclear modernization option underway is nuclear artillery. Under a congressionally-imposed ceiling, the U.S. is producing 925 modernized 8 inch and 155 millimeter nuclear artillery shells, although SACEUR has requested Congress to raise the ceiling. Remarkably, nuclear artillery modernization is being carried out with almost no opposition in Germany, despite the fact that the new rounds, even with their extended ranges of roughly 30 kilometers, could conceivably be detonated only on German territory.

The major modernization controversy surrounds a replacement for the 110 kilometer range *Lance* surface-to-surface missile, scheduled to be retired in the mid-1990s by a more accurate missile with a range over 400 kilometers. SACEUR strongly supports *Lance*

modernization as an essential element of “flexible response.” Because of its mobility, *Lance* is far more survivable than air-launched systems, which are limited to deployment on a fixed number of air bases. Because it is a ballistic missile, it is better able to penetrate Soviet air defenses. And unlike nuclear artillery, its range enables it to strike second-echelon and rear area targets, important to both the military and political/psychological requirements of NATO’s nuclear deterrent.

Of the modernization programs now planned, only TASM can help replace the *Pershing II* and cruise missiles banned by the INF Treaty. A TASM such as a tactical version of the U.S. Short Range Attack Missile (SRAM T) or an improved French Air-Sol a Moyenne Portee (ASMP) would have a range of about 450 kilometers.

These missiles could extend the range of NATO aircraft to targets in the Soviet Union if launched on “penetrate and shoot” missions from planes over Warsaw Pact territory. Further, nothing in the INF Treaty prevents NATO from developing and deploying in Europe a longer-range tactical air-launched cruise missile (ALCM), for a full stand-off capacity. In addition to its ability to reach Soviet territory, the TASM could be based advantageously at least in part outside German territory, thereby alleviating Bonn’s ostensible fears of “singularization.”

Technical Fixes. Despite the INF Treaty, there is no shortage of technical fixes available to design a compromise NATO nuclear modernization plan that meets U.S. requirements for sufficient options below the strategic nuclear level and expressed German fears of “singularization.”

Some combination of TASM and *Lance* would seem to meet the requirements. *Lance* would provide the survivability and targeting flexibility required to maintain deterrence well into the next century. TASM would be able to strike Soviet territory and be stationed outside German territory, upholding the principle of shared nuclear risk within the Alliance.

Within the context of flexible response, such a compromise makes perfect sense. In the late 1960s, 1970s, and through most of the 1980s a compromise along these lines probably would have been reached. But after the INF Treaty and Gorbachev’s accession to power, the nuclear debate within NATO has shifted. No longer is it about fulfilling the requirements of flexible response, but about flexible response itself. As such, the nuclear debate in Germany increasingly is about the basic structure of the U.S.-West German defense relationship.

What Happens Next?

Konrad Adenauer led West Germany into NATO in 1955 in order to establish sovereignty. The London and Paris accords under which Germany acceded to NATO membership also ended the post-war occupation regime. The question facing Germany today is whether NATO will cease to be viewed as a means to achieve sovereignty in the face of a military threat. Will NATO — and the nuclear strategy that lies at the heart of the Alliance relationship — come instead to be seen primarily as an obstacle to the realization of national sovereignty and national interests?

Henry Kissinger describes a revolutionary period in history essentially as one in which the existing pattern of obligations has been challenged. Within Germany today questions are being raised about Bonn’s fundamental obligations as a NATO ally and about basic attitudes toward presumed-adversaries. With this debate now underway, conventional

wisdom has it that no German government could invite the U.S. to deploy any new nuclear weapons on German territory and survive.

Twice last spring Germany sought unilaterally to break out of NATO's nuclear consensus, first by opposing *Lance* modernization and then by demanding immediate SNF negotiations. Both times the Alliance effectively delayed action because it was unable to reach a common position. The delay was pinned on the hope that within a few months or a year the situation within Germany, and with East-West relations, would be clarified enough again to make consensus possible. Two scenarios might promote this consensus:

◆ ◆ NATO and the Warsaw Pact reach a Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) agreement. Because this agreement could bolster NATO's conventional defense, raising the nuclear threshold in Europe and decreasing nuclear risk to the United States, U.S. decision makers could afford to relax their position on nuclear modernization and would be free to move toward an SNF agreement. On modernization, for example, TASM and nuclear artillery might reduce the need for a *Lance* follow-on if Soviet preemptive capabilities against NATO airbases were reduced through CFE. Or alternatively, an SNF agreement enabling each side to deploy a given number of launchers could pave the way in Germany for a limited *Lance* deployment.

◆ ◆ The Soviet Union reverts to a more openly militaristic posture, shoring up German will to reestablish a strong nuclear deterrent. If by December 1990 it becomes clear that Moscow is not interested in a CFE agreement, and has not undertaken serious force withdrawals from Eastern Europe, Bonn may become more inclined to support SNF modernization.

These are the more clear cut scenarios. More ambiguous ones easily are envisioned. Some examples:

◆ ◆ NATO's six- to twelve-month self-imposed deadline for a CFE accord is not met. Seeing a political opportunity for his Free Democrats to ensure representation in the Bundestag, Foreign Minister Genscher again demands immediate negotiations on SNF, perhaps even opening his own negotiating channel with Moscow.

◆ ◆ NATO manages to make it through the 1990 German elections without a major rift over SNF, but continuing ambiguity in the East-West relationship makes a decision on nuclear modernization impossible in Bonn regardless of who wins the election. Moscow easily could exacerbate the situation by blaming lack of progress on CFE on NATO's refusal to open SNF negotiations.

◆ ◆ CFE accord or no-CFE accord, an SPD Green coalition comes to power in Germany and announces its intention to seek a "third zero" ridding Europe of all nuclear weapons.

Asserting U.S. Interests in the Nuclear Debate

In the absence of a change in the conventional balance, the U.S. cannot abandon its plans for nuclear modernization geared toward ensuring a survivable, flexible theater nuclear force. Nor can it risk negotiations that could eliminate that force or substantially reduce its effectiveness. Either of these decisions could threaten the viability of flexible response, which ensures that American interests are upheld in the making of Alliance nuclear policy.

If Germany chooses unilaterally to move outside the flexible response framework, for example, by moving toward denuclearization, the U.S. will have to choose between two

frightening visions: leaving American forces in Germany without the weapons they need to deter war and control its consequences should deterrence fail; or a divided Alliance.

Germans' attachment to NATO, despite their opposition to its policies and attitudes toward Gorbachev, indicates that most still are not prepared to see the Alliance divided and Americans perhaps on their way home. They may well believe, however, that the U.S. commitment to German defense, including its large ground force commitment, is not sensitive to German nuclear policy decisions, even an attempt to change NATO nuclear policy by *diktat*. While I have not seen any polling data on the question, my own informal poll of German political and military leaders indicates that this perception in fact is widespread.

The first responsibility of U.S. policy makers is to clarify to Bonn that unilateral attempts to set NATO nuclear policy will bear consequences. Even if an American administration were to accept a unilateral German decision on nuclear weapons, German intransigence on nuclear modernization is likely to be seized upon by a Congress eager to find excuses to reduce the U.S. commitment to NATO.

A professional pollster with whom I spoke recently described the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Europe as "an issue waiting for a catalyst." Discussions with key congressional aides on both sides of the aisle have convinced me that German unilateralism on NATO nuclear policy would provide the needed spark.

Dangerous Silence. So far, the anti-nuclear coalition has been permitted to link its issue firmly to the question of German sovereignty and national interests. No major German politician has challenged this link by explaining that ultimately Germany's road to sovereignty and the fulfillment of national interests lies in a strong defense relationship with the United States and that this relationship will be impossible if Germany drifts unilaterally toward denuclearization. The longer the pro-American, Atlanticist-oriented center in Germany waits to find its voice, the more difficult its task will be.

Those who are silent today may hope that Germany, and NATO, may be spared a showdown in the nuclear debate either through a quick CFE agreement, or because the Soviet leadership reverts to form and starts adopting a less conciliatory tone. Either way they render the future of the U.S.-German defense relationship vulnerable to decisions made in Moscow. Those decisions are not likely to be made with the West's best interests at heart.

