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The Failure of Alliance Politics: the United States, Europe and the NATO Multilateral Force

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During the 1960s, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) embarked on unusual and controversial negotiations examining proposals for a new naval force. The Multilateral [Nuclear] Force (MLF) would comprise some 25 destroyers, each armed with six Polaris missiles under the control of the Strategic Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) in NATO, and patrol friendly waters of the North Atlantic and Mediterranean area. What made the proposal both unique and contentious was that the force was to be jointly built, owned and manned by the various participants, a fact that both politicians and militarists often hard to stomach. Each country would directly contribute what capital they could afford with sailors of different nationalities working alongside each other on board any given ship. It was intended to be a truly integrated flotilla.

At its zenith in 1963 and 1964, the MLF proposal looked as though it could come into existence at any moment. It occupied a prime position on the US foreign policy agenda, backed by many prominent figures in the US State Department, and an American destroyer was even made available for a highly successful joint manning exercise in 1964 and 1965. By the end of 1965, however, the MLF was an obsolete political concept, almost totally obliterated from the political landscape. This article gives an overview of the MLF's short history and argues that its failure was not due to impracticability on the military level, but a general lack of political will and grass roots support. Despite the misgivings of some military men, the success of the naval exercise indicated that at a practical level it could be made to work, even if it would have required a great deal of effort. But nuclear sharing was not a practical military problem, it was a political one. MLF protagonists could not overcome the issues of control, which the US was unwilling to relinquish to the Europeans. The belief that the MLF could transcend political differences within the alliance and provide cohesion was entirely unfounded, as the military benefits the force could bring simply did not outweigh the political and economic costs its creation would entail.

Balancing political and military requirements haunted the MLF from its origins. The MLF was officially created to counter the military problem of a perceived missile gap in Europe, especially as the launch of Sputnik in October 1957 appeared to indicate that the Soviets were winning the missile race. The US believed that Europe was deficient in the realm of medium range ballistic missiles (MRBMs) and so, under the shadow of Sputnik, President Eisenhower introduced the stockpile concept to the NATO Council in December 1957. Jupiter and Thor medium and intermediate range ballistic missiles (IRBMs) were installed in Britain, Turkey and Italy. More important than plugging any gap, this development hinted at nuclear sharing. Britain benefited hugely from this in the sharing of nuclear secrets and Harold Macmillan and Eisenhower began to espouse interdependence as the way forward in world affairs.

This sort of arrangement was a double-edged sword for Britain. They gained a great deal in defence from their closest ally, but were forced to recognise that they were no longer a great power and unable to fend for themselves in the costly nuclear race. Their search for an independent deterrent provided a series of embarrassing failures, leaving them subservient to their American counterparts. As the British Blue Streak program was abandoned at the end of the 1950s they were forced to rely on the US to develop Skybolt, a hugely expensive and cumbersome missile project, which took so long to develop it was obsolete before completion. Subsequently it was scrapped over the heads of the British in 1962, much to Macmillan's annoyance. He saw that the British deterrent was certainly no-longer independent, if it was even a deterrent.

Watching from across the Channel, the apparent failure in Britain's search for an independent deterrent convinced French President De Gaulle of two things. Firstly that a truly independent nuclear deterrent was essential to a modern developed country's defence program. To De Gaulle, the nuclear club appeared to be an exclusive two-man affair, to which the French were denied admittance. He required a deterrent where he was not reliant upon a superior ally to provide information and technology when it chose to. Second, Britain could not become a part of the newly formed European Economic Community (EEC)

because of its inextricable links with the US. Britain, for example, gained greatly under amendments to the 1946 (McMahon) Nuclear Act during the stockpile development. In reaction, De Gaulle refused to participate in the stockpile program, as the French would not have control of the weapons, and he advanced the French nuclear program as swiftly as possible.

Completing the European triangle was West Germany, which neither France or Britain wished to see as the possessor of nuclear weapons only fifteen years after the end of the Second World War. West Germany's accession to NATO in 1954 was on the understanding that they would undertake no nuclear program on their territories. Any notion of Germany acquiring control of nuclear weapons was anathema to many in the Atlantic partnership, while many within Germany were fearful of the exposure to international scrutiny that a deterrent would bring. As the 1950s progressed, however, West Germany's economic and political resurgence in an increasingly prosperous Europe highlighted to many in NATO that it was only a matter of time before Germans began to take more of an interest in their nuclear defence program.

These factors combined to signify crisis in NATO by the beginning of the 1960s. The partnership seemed unable to progress in its present form. The gradual withdrawal of the French from the organisation was particularly difficult to reconcile with NATO ideals. On entering office in 1960, President Kennedy commissioned Dean Acheson, the legendary American statesman, to undertake a thorough review of NATO. A flagging institution was revealed, with low morale and little direction. Acheson saw cracks in the European defence structure, with an over-reliance on nuclear weapons. His report became influential in the move towards the doctrine of flexible response, as espoused by Kennedy's Defence Secretary Robert McNamara. Flexible response required an expansion of European conventional forces to delay nuclear conflict until the last possible moment, a significant shift away from the Eisenhower strategy of massive retaliation. Despite this, the Kennedy Administration continued to expand its own nuclear arsenal at a frightening rate, deploying more tactical nuclear weapons (TNWs) in Europe throughout the 1960s.

Here was the rub: building up conventional forces was unlikely to satisfy Europeans, who still placed their belief in nuclear defence. Yet there was increasing dissatisfaction with the stationing of US-controlled weapons on European soil. The truculence of the French illustrated to the US that many European powers, including West Germany, were soon likely to demand a say in their own nuclear defence. And so another theme began to develop in US defence policy, the collective force. It originated in the US State Department during the late-1950s, when Robert Bowie, a policy planning official, began to examine the tension between the natural development of national forces and the need for international co-operation in a modern defence environment. Bowie believed that, if a nuclear sharing arrangement could successfully be reached, it was likely to encourage European integration, as opposed to the schisms which he believed partisan nuclear politics heralded. He developed a sea-based (submarine) Polaris force, with joint ownership and control. Through this, he hoped to engender a sense of nuclear control for the nations involved, while preventing any one country's withdrawal with a complete weapons system. Implicit in this was a related build-up of European conventional forces.

Although Bowie believed in the efficacy of an Atlantic collective force, he simultaneously recognised its limitations and the difficulty of implementation for the Europeans. All in all, the collective force required collective responsibility and a sea change in the European defensive outlook. In addition, France seemed almost certain not to join and Britain had little reason to. In other European countries, including West Germany, nuclear sharing was not a primary issue and it would be difficult to encourage the necessary changes to make the force work. As Bowie stated later to the Committee on Foreign Relations:

"I proposed we should first start with trying a consulting arrangement to see whether this would satisfy the Europeans. Only later would I have moved to some kind of collective force if necessary."

Initial impressions indicated that Europeans were unprepared for such a commitment and unwilling to provide a concurrent expansion of their conventional forces to make the proposal credible.

Yet Bowie had provided a spark and others soon began to fan the flames. His idea was taken and expanded by officials, who fought on its behalf with a zeal unanticipated by the creator. It was presented to the NATO Council by the outgoing Secretary of State Christian Herter in December 1960, who altered it to a Polaris surface ship force, as mixed-manning appeared too complex and prone to miscalculation to be practical on board submarines. Many in the incoming Kennedy administration also embraced the force and it was here that the idea became fully fledged. At a NATO Council meeting in Ottawa in May 1961, Kennedy promised five nuclear submarines under US control to NATO and proposed that a NATO sea-borne force be formed.

The proposal was explored further at the Nassau Conference between Britain and the US in December of 1962. Still smarting over the Skybolt furore, Macmillan confirmed McNamara's suspicions that he wanted

an assurance of American commitment to British defence. The Prime Minister was unwilling to accept any more sub-standard missile systems for fear of exposing the hollow nature of the British deterrent. As the Americans were prepared for this development, they already seemed to have decided to acquiesce. In the event, British obstinacy paid off and they received a better deal than even they could have expected. In a hastily drawn up agreement (apparently drafted in only a few hours, with no defence specialists present), the President and Prime Minister stated that the US government would make Polaris missiles available to the UK, with the British constructing the submarines and supplying warheads. The British had pulled off a major political coup, procuring a prime defence instrument at a fraction (somewhere around 5%) of the development cost. The only real proviso was their promise to pursue 'the development of a multilateral NATO nuclear force in the closest consultation with other NATO allies.' But this promise was couched in the vaguest, sometimes contradictory, political terms. The British were to assign their Polaris weapons to a multilateral force, except when 'supreme national interests' were at stake. As the missiles would only have been used when supreme national interests were at stake, this appeared a little odd. There also appeared to be some confusion in the wording of the agreement and whether the missiles would be assigned to a multinational, i.e. independent national units operating together, or a fully integrated multilateral force.

The multilateral force had now been firmly placed on the Atlantic political agenda, from where it began to gain impetus. Events in Europe at this time became crucial to the formation of the proposal. France's continued insistence on the development of an independent nuclear deterrent, which had resulted in the detonation of its first atomic bomb in February 1960, had intensified tension between France and the US. While negotiating with the Americans over their deterrent, the British were simultaneously making overtones towards Europe in a bid to join the EEC, which De Gaulle naturally saw as attempted Anglo-American infiltration. France seemed to be moving towards West Germany, as epitomised by the Franco-German Friendship Agreement of 22 January 1963, hinting at possible nuclear co-operation. A few days previously, the Americans had had to sit back and watch as De Gaulle blocked the British entry to the EEC, when he simultaneously rejected the Multilateral Force proposal. With the French out of the way, however, the Americans had an excuse to proceed with the force.

Before the end of January, the American Special Ambassador to NATO Livingston Merchant began to visit European cities sounding out opinion on the MLF proposal. What he encountered summarised prevailing attitudes towards the MLF throughout the period from 1963 to 1965. Generally, opinion in the countries he visited was, at best, lukewarm. German support for the force was stronger than in either Britain or Italy because of the apparent nuclear gains for Germany and a fear that Britain and the US were drawing closer again. On the other hand, British support was qualified. Conservative Defence Secretary Peter Thorneycroft rejected the MLF and, although there was some support in the Foreign Office, the British government was determined not to give any assurance that they would join. Although the Italian government also expressed some interest in the force, the weak left-wing government coalition did not augur well for NATO. A corresponding decline in support for the dominant Christian Democrats indicated a shift to the left in Italian politics which did not sit easily with the establishment of the force.

Despite these objections, the US State Department seized the initiative and pushed the proposal on the Europeans with an almost religious zeal. Prominent officials such as George Ball, Walt Whitman Rostow and McGeorge Bundy (often collectively known as the Theologians), saw the MLF as an ideal agent of cohesion in Europe. National Security Council Director Rostow, in particular, foresaw unifying benefits in Europe if the force came to fruition. A strong Atlantic Alliance could, in his opinion, only benefit the nascent European Economic Community. It also appeared to offer NATO a new opportunity to assert its authority in the Atlantic area. Often known as the "New NATO Sword," it was a new military weapon designed to solve political problems. A country's entry to the MLF would cement relations with fellow nations, primarily through the substantial economic and political commitment involved. By requiring the European members to take collective responsibility for half of the material and manning costs (the US committing the other half) it seemed that Europe would finally be paying its own way in defence terms.

Kennedy himself often stated how much he valued a united Europe as a strong buffer to the Soviet threat. But while the MLF appealed to Kennedy's belief that he was a progressive, he was less keen on the potential loss of presidential control. As John Steinbruner states:

'...Kennedy was not prepared in his own mind to weaken presidential command authority over nuclear weapons, and accordingly he was less responsive to the collective force idea than to overarching concepts of Atlantic partnership and European unity."

Primarily, the US wanted Europe to expand its conventional forces as part of the NATO strategic review and Kennedy refused to acknowledge that they might one day gain control of a nuclear deterrent.

The primary issue of control in the MLF was never properly resolved for this very reason. European interest centred on the notion that the locus of power could successfully be shifted to Europe, but, as Kennedy seemed unwilling to sanction this, it seemed unlikely to occur. The US would not allow the placing of nuclear warheads on jointly controlled ships without an American veto and the MLF advocates were being somewhat idealistic if they believed the Europeans would accept a half-baked promise to gain control sometime in the future. To the pro-MLF lobby an American veto appeared to go against the overriding purpose of the force, yet it was difficult to imagine that a deterrent could have all participants with a finger on the trigger or any one member able to veto an attack. As a contemporary commentator noted, why could one nation in the group not veto a decision to fire a missile under a "why die for Turkey?" situation? The issue of control was continually skirted for fear of losing support. Too many concessions were required on both sides of the Atlantic to make it viable and there appeared to be a belief that the problem could be overcome when the force came into existence, something which was clearly unacceptable to both sides.

Regardless of whether the MLF could be made to work on the surface of the ocean, it was designed as a political compromise not a military necessity. The force could not hope to plug the entire missile gap with less than 200 MRBMs and it appeared to be developing only in order to tie Germany firmly into the Atlantic nuclear fold without relinquishing any real control. Essentially, the MLF played on undeveloped German desires for a say in European nuclear defence, tentatively proffering them a tiny portion with the possibility of giving them more if they used the privilege wisely.

The MLF also played up to Soviet fears. After the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962, many Soviets were willing to consider new deals to limit nuclear escalation, but the MLF seemed a little too much like encouraging proliferation. In their bid to win universal acceptance, the State Department Theologians portrayed the project as a force to stabilise relations within NATO and therefore prevent irrational decision making. Yet they must have seen that, if incepted, the MLF's prominence within NATO was bound to prompt Soviet unease. In an article for the journal *Foreign Affairs,* prominent political commentator Zbigniew Brzezinski claimed that the American approach to the problem of nuclear defence was decidedly Machievellian, playing up German nationalism, which in turn threatened to disunite Europe rather than encourage co-operation.

Despite these various objections and difficulties, the MLF was sufficiently supported to survive for the time being. To many Europeans an offer of genuine participation in a nuclear force was too good an opportunity to dismiss out of hand and to many Americans, the MLF appeared to be a possible way of making Europeans aware of the costs, responsibilities and difficulties of manning a nuclear force. Although Britain had very little to gain from the force, they were unwilling to be omitted, genuinely fearful of a German-American alliance.

So the MLF convoy rumbled on for most of 1963 with the President proposing a mixed-manned demonstration (MMD) ship provided by the United States to show the world that the MLF could work. His reasons for doing so are not clear. It can be argued that it was intended to continue the momentum created by the MLF talks during the year. It seems more likely, however, that he was attempting to gain some time and therefore probably wanted to stall the MLF talks so they would fade naturally. His objections to nuclear sharing made him unwilling to be personally associated with either the MLF or demonstration proposal and, as the issue of control seemed as intractable as ever, what interest he had for the force was fast receding. Also, the British desire to kill the force appeared to be growing, threatening relations between the two countries. Kennedy's continual paying of lip service to the MLF therefore appears to have been a political expedient for the short term.

Kennedy's assassination in November 1963 was vital in allowing the concept to be revived by its strongest advocates. By the beginning of 1964, it had been given a new lease of life. The Theologians regained control of the MLF and steered President Johnson into pushing the concept with more force than Kennedy had ever intended. Just before Kennedy’s death, two time-consuming MLF working groups had been incepted, but their rapid work seemed to indicate that a decision might be made before the end of the next year. A group in Paris began to examine issues of control and international legality in the proposal and a corresponding Washington group looked at the military implications with a view to establishing the MMD ship in the middle of 1964.

The Washington group produced their report and recommendations by the beginning of 1964 and in June of that year the only tangible military off shoot of the MLF came into existence. The MMD comprised an existing US Guided Missile Destroyer (DDG), the USS *Biddle*, equipped with surface-to-air Tartar missiles and anti-submarine rockets (ASROC). The vessel was manned by a crew of seamen from the US, Great Britain, West Germany, the Netherlands, Italy, Turkey and Greece. The common language spoken on

board was English and the Captain and Executive Officer, as well as half the crew, were American. Despite a few initial teething troubles and some misinformed, occasionally scathing reports in the press, the demonstration was hugely successful, running until December of 1965. The crew learned to gel and became an efficient element of the United States Sixth Fleet. They proved to the doubting Thomases of NATO that mixed-manning was viable option for the MLF. Most of the problems were minor and over time could be overcome. What the demonstration could not do was examine the full implications of mixed-manning in the long term, problems of rotation, pay and promotion, although some of the findings would ultimately help.

The issue of control, however, remained unresolved. The MLF Working Group in Paris continued to meet throughout most of 1964, discussing and arguing, but reaching no firm conclusions. They recognised what the Theologians could not, that to devise a multi-polar system of nuclear control required too many concessions from Americans and Europeans alike. The MLF sacrificed too many interests of NATO members at the expense of a German-American commitment to nuclear sharing and this was why the Italians and British were unwilling to become heavily involved. Even in Germany, political support was starting to wane with some leading statesmen coming out against the force.

The tide suddenly turned on the MLF during the latter part of 1964. In December 1963, British Defence Minister Thorneycroft had made a counter-proposal to the MLF, suggesting utilisation of existing military hardware as part of a multinational NATO force. This appealed to the British as it substantially reduced implementation costs, and implied that they would retain a greater degree of control than other nations, as they were already a nuclear power. Pilfering Thorneycroft's ideas, the incoming Labour government of November 1964 proposed the Atlantic Nuclear Force (ANF) in an obvious attempt to kill the force outright, or at least stall for time even further. Opposition to the MLF was natural for a party who had recently flirted with the notion of abandoning the British nuclear deterrent, who promised to re negotiate the Nassau agreement and who resented the special treatment of Germany by the US in the MLF. The latter was particularly important when considering the ANF. The US government was also very aware of the Labour Party’s position.

President Johnson, who had never been keen on the MLF and probably felt he had been frog marched into it, began looking for a way out of what was fast becoming an embarrassment to his administration. He had been manipulated by a disproportionately small number of State Department officials who had persuaded both he and Kennedy that the MLF was a workable concept. There was certainly little Congressional support for the MLF and the situation in south east Asia was starting to occupy more of the President’s time. Johnson saw, just as his predecessor had done, that relinquishing control of nuclear weapons was not easy or desirable. If he had chosen to push the idea onto the Europeans, a decision on the MLF could have been made by the end of 1964. Instead, after meeting new British Prime Minister Harold Wilson in December 1964, Johnson decided to slow the MLF process, which he did in an NSC memorandum the same month. Without Presidential or Congressional support, the MLF was effectively dead in the water. Although vague discussions drifted on and various American officials attempted to revive it throughout 1965, the concept was no longer an important element on the US strategic agenda. The Berlin crisis was firmly in the past, the German demand for nuclear weapons had certainly not materialised and there was a feeling that Europe was looking after it itself.

Johnson's ability to the kill the force almost on a whim showed its fragility on the international stage. Without France, the MLF failed to gain international status and other smaller countries, such as Belgium and Turkey, had withdrawn as the talks progressed, aware of the huge costs the force promised. These costs were not sufficiently offset by tangible political benefits. Europeans could not afford to sacrifice political or economic goals for membership of a force which contained no guarantee of nuclear status. Far from handing out nuclear weapons to the Europeans, the US had tentatively proffered a hollow military solution to a political problem in Europe. By the mid-1960s, NATO was developing a more consultative approach to nuclear planing, ironically like the one propounded by the MLF’s creator Robert Bowie. Strategy itself was also changing. With the Alliance developing the concept of flexible response as its "New Sword" the MLF soon became a forgotten relic of trans-Atlantic history.