

## NATO's nuclear 'sleight-of-hand'

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*For two Cold War decades, Dr Johnstone worked in the 'upper echelons' of US intelligence, including during the extended Berlin Crisis of 1961 which saw the construction of the Wall dividing the city.*

*Discussing a draft memo on 'NATO military policy in the Berlin Crisis', he probed the 'judgment' that 'the West had a preponderant advantage both in nuclear striking power and in capacity to survive a surprise [Soviet] attack'. This excerpt is from his posthumous memoir, From MAD to Madness: Inside Pentagon Nuclear War Planning (Clarity Press, Atlanta, 2017), which is published with a commentary by his daughter, Diana Johnstone.*

... The Soviets could deliver comparatively few weapons on North America in any case, and in the best case Western superiority would be overwhelming. Soviet counter-damage would be 'severe, but not so serious as to endanger (US) national survival'. However, the Soviets probably could seriously damage NATO Europe even after a full-scale pre-emptive attack, and to this extent their claim that NATO Europe was their hostage was valid.

On the other side, the acknowledged Soviet preponderance of conventional strength made it impossible for the Allies to oppose Soviet aggressions successfully by conventional means, and local and conventional military opposition to the Soviets could successfully serve but one purpose, which was to confront the Soviets with the clear choice between ceasing aggression and nuclear war. But even tactical nuclear weapons may trigger general nuclear war at low levels of engagement, and so therefore, 'It might be advisable to strike first strategically rather than engage in large scale tactical nuclear war'. Attaining goals without nuclear war remained as the NATO objective, but the Soviets should be regularly reminded of Western nuclear superiority and of 'Western readiness to engage in general war for our vital interests...' But because public emphasis on the fact that 'as action policy, the West will make every effort to strike first when the general situation demands general war' was destabilising, the 'declaratory policy', in contrast, 'would focus on our nuclear superiority, our ability to survive a Soviet first strike with dominant nuclear forces intact, and our

readiness to fight nuclear war in defence of our vital interests'. Here was a sort of ambiguity that left little doubt of what was left unsaid.

This draft was given the unqualified blessing of the Joint Chiefs of Staff by a formal memo on November 15, which described it as a 'well developed, forthright summation of US assessment, concepts and policies', and added that: 'It adequately reflects the basic concepts of US military policy with respect to Berlin and could serve as a basis for discussion with selected allies on occasion.'

Which it did, following approval by McNamara and Kennedy. Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, accompanied by his Defence Minister Franz Josef Strauss, spent four days in Washington from November 21 to 25, and in conversations with Kennedy recited the longstanding German scepticism over the effectiveness of the projected 30 conventional division NATO force, as well as over the preferred American tactic of gradually escalating military actions. Agreement was reached on enough of the issues to assure that the US and the Federal Republic of Germany could present a common front, especially in those areas where there might be negotiations with the Soviets. It is not explicit in the available records of the meetings that Kennedy actually used the International Security Affairs (ISA) [Defense Department] paper, although it seems probable he did, because Adenauer was sufficiently reassured to bring an end to the habitual German objections to our contingency planning proposals.

In follow-up actions just before the regular NATO December meetings, McNamara and Nitze made the contents known to the defence ministers of Britain and France, and Strauss's deputy, in a somewhat theatrical manoeuvre. Getting these officials alone where there was no chance of note-taking or making a record, McNamara read the paper aloud to them, letting them look over his shoulder as he read, then quickly withdrawing it. Such was the sleight-of-hand. Other NATO nations were, for the time being, left in the dark.

By this time – early December – the 1961 phase of the Berlin crisis was receding, and everyone knew it, although there were few who did not fear it would erupt again at any time. And it did, in February-March of 1962, as a test of our nerves over air corridor access. We were becoming much less jumpy about it by then, because we were learning from experience that the Soviets were just playing their game of seeking, by every conceivable annoyance or threat they believed would not provoke us into drastic reaction, to extort concessions they had no legal or moral right to ask, but which we found it difficult to deny because of our highly vulnerable, exposed position in Berlin.

There continued to be nasty little hold-ups on the Autobahn and on the railroads into Berlin, many minor tragedies along the Wall and in the no man's land separating West from East Berlin. The minimum Soviet objectives of solidifying their control of East Germany and East Berlin had been largely assured, if not fully accomplished and formally acknowledged. It is not clear how much more, or how much less, they could have gained, had our policies and actions varied within the compass of what was responsibly considered. It is a reasonable speculation that had we been either more aggressively defiant of Soviet moves, or readier to concede their demands, that a vastly different resolution of the issues would have occurred. The rapidly spreading unrest in East Germany in the period before the Wall was highly explosive, and that situation, combined with the generations-old Russian fear of invasion, especially by a militaristic Germany, might very easily have led the Kremlin into risks it would not have undertaken under any circumstances considered less threatening. We might therefore have precipitated the general war everyone dreaded by taking steps that prevented stabilisation of East Germany. On the other hand, had we seemed less resolute, the Soviets might well have sought to extend their grip on Germany by measures that would have ignited the German hatred of the Russians and precipitated violence that could quickly have become uncontrollable, and in this way have led to general war. Obviously, this is conjecture. But it can hardly be called mere conjecture that people on both sides who had the power to initiate nuclear war were considering, in all seriousness, taking steps that, from all we know, would have led us into that general war. We were that close to it ...

