



Promoting a more transparent and accountable NATO

US historical records reveal criminal insanity at heart of NATO 'Flexible Response' doctrine

By Ian Davis, NATO Watch

How can we deter with something that doesn't make sense?

Henry Kissinger (October 1970)

Official US historical records from 1969 to 1973 released in late 2012¹ reveal how US President Nixon, new National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger and other senior US officials discussed fighting a 'limited nuclear war' in Europe. It has long been known that under NATO's 'flexible response' strategy (formally adopted in 1967) it was envisaged that the Alliance and Warsaw Pact forces might end up fighting a relatively prolonged conventional or tactical nuclear battle on German territory.

However, the minutes from several US National Security Council meetings graphically highlight how Henry Kissinger sought assurances from his senior officials that the use of tactical nuclear weapons would not lead to all-out nuclear war – see the extracts reproduced below.

Official NATO strategy in the late 1960s was that in the event of the West appearing to be losing a conventional European war, NATO would attack Warsaw Pact controlled cities such as Prague and

Warsaw with strategic nuclear weapons and use smaller, tactical nuclear weapons on the battlefields. The obliteration of 'less important targets' in a nuclear first strike was supposed to convince the Soviets to stop fighting. However, as many critics said at the time, not only would this policy have destroyed most of Germany and Central Europe, nobody could be sure that the Soviets wouldn't in turn have decided to destroy 'less important' cities like London, Manchester and Glasgow to stop NATO fighting.

These historical documents reveal that US and NATO officials could not provide such assurances to Henry Kissinger: they acknowledged that the actual use of tactical nuclear weapons would likely end in further nuclear escalation. Yet, they continued to contemplate and advocate their use. The documents also confirm the sham of 'rational actors' being in charge of the West's nuclear arsenals: the policy of flexible response made a nuclear holocaust more and not less likely.

So what?

Given that nuclear Armageddon was successfully avoided during the Cold War, of what relevance are these documents today? Clearly,

¹ Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume XLI, Western Europe; NATO, 1969–1972, Editors: James E. Miller and Laurie Van Hook; General Editor: David S. Patterson

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The historical records document US regional and bilateral relations with Western Europe from January 20, 1969 to January 20, 1973. This includes US policy regarding European economic and political integration, US participation in NATO, as well as US bilateral relations with Canada, France, Ireland, Italy, Malta, Portugal, Spain and the United Kingdom. The first chapter focuses on US policy toward Western Europe and Canada as a whole, with a focus on two key issues that faced the Nixon administration: 1) how to maintain the cohesion of the Atlantic Alliance at a time of reduced tensions with the Soviet Union, and 2) how to respond to the emergence of serious economic tensions among the advanced industrialized nations.

things have moved on since the dark days of flexible response, which has been eclipsed by increasing awareness that nuclear weapons have no utility except perhaps to deter others from using these weapons (itself a more and more questionable conclusion).

Following the collapse of the Warsaw Pact in 1989 and the subsequent fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, NATO updated its concept for the deployment and use of nuclear weapons, and the US and Russian governments each took unilateral action to reduce their massive tactical nuclear weapon arsenals. Today, the number of US tactical nuclear weapons in Europe has been significantly reduced from 7,000 to around 180 weapons on the territory of five European allies (Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Turkey), while estimated numbers of operationally assigned non-strategic nuclear warheads in the Russian arsenal range from around 1,000 to 2,000 weapons (during the Cold War, the Soviets possessed about 17,000 tactical nuclear weapons).

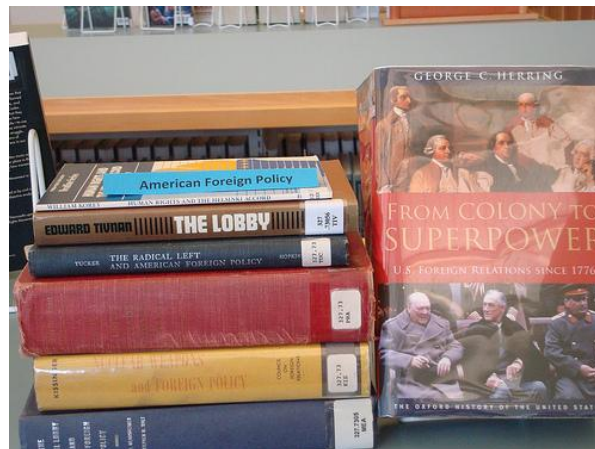
While that may read like job almost done, it would be the wrong conclusion to reach. Plans are afoot to modernise NATO's nuclear posture over the next decade that would result in an upgrading of both the nuclear weapons and delivery vehicles. The proposed increase in the military capabilities of NATO's nuclear posture in Europe not only contradicts key elements of NATO's recent Deterrence and Defence Posture Review (DDPR), it is unlikely to help persuade Russia to further reduce its non-strategic nuclear forces.

Instead, since NATO's current strategy is to seek "reciprocal steps" from Russia, modernizing NATO's nuclear posture would seem to endorse reciprocal Russian modernization of its non-strategic nuclear forces. Moreover, in a bizarre twist of fate, the flexible response or 'war termination' role for tactical nuclear weapons has now effectively switched to the Russian side, with Moscow now feeling vastly inferior in conventional forces.

Over 40 years ago a meeting of the US National Security Council chaired by Henry Kissinger concluded that, "While we have much to learn about nuclear weapons, there is little or no reason to believe that their use would result in an outcome favourable to NATO". That ice-cold official understatement remains a valid conclusion today and it is hard to see how nuclear

modernization would be in NATO's interest. Do we need to wait another 40 years for the release of foreign policy records to see that the minds of the nuclear decision-makers continue to be filled with contradictory arguments in defence of the indefensible?

One of the declassified documents ends with US officials discussing how European NATO countries might view "the results of a nuclear exchange". Unsurprisingly, the conclusion was that "they haven't any positive views. They are sensitive to the location of our nuclear weapons in our forward bases". Several of those 'host' states are finally hoping to see the bases being closed and the last nuclear weapons relocated away from the European battle field.



(American foreign policy – photo credit: Pesky Library/ flickr)

Some chilling extracts:

Minutes of a National Security Council Review Group Meeting,
Washington, June 16, 1970,
4:07–5:30 p.m.

SUBJECT: U.S. Strategies and Forces for NATO

Dr. Kissinger [Chairman] then turned to nuclear strategy, saying it was assumed that when the conventional phase ends, if we are on the verge of defeat, we will resort to nuclear weapons. He asked what the theatre nuclear forces are prepared to do without going into SIOP [single integrated operational plan].

General Hampton [DoD] replied that theater strike forces can be used flexibly with or without SIOP.

General Shaefer [Joint Chiefs of Staff] added that a good portion of our aircraft have dual capability, both conventional and nuclear.

Dr. Kissinger asked what we intend to do with the 7,000 tactical nuclear weapons in Europe.

Mr. Nutter [DoD] replied that the 7,000 figure is misleading. He said these were differently positioned and we were not planning to use 7,000 weapons.

Dr. Kissinger noted that the President, on his first visit to the Pentagon, had requested a statement on the use of tactical nuclear weapons. He asked if we would win a tactical nuclear exchange?

General Hampton said it was difficult to say, but that we could do a damage assessment.

Dr. Kissinger asked if we don't know how it would come out, why would we use tactical nuclears?

Mr. Nutter replied that this had been a hard fact for the Europeans to face, but that we are now beginning to consider what the use of tactical nuclears might lead to.

General Hampton commented that tactical nuclear weapons are useful as a deterrent, but that no one would win in a tactical exchange.

Dr. Kissinger said it was agreed that no one would win in a strategic nuclear exchange. The Soviets, however, say that they would win in a tactical exchange. If both sides believed no one would win, or if the Soviets believed we would win, we would have a deterrent. He asked if you can deter with something if you are unsure of the consequences of its use? He thought all of these questions should be considered.

Mr. Shakespeare [United States Information Agency] asked if "tactical" weapons mean that they would be used only against field troops?

Mr. Nutter [1 line not declassified]

General Shaefer said that there is no precise definition. It could mean all weapons deployed in a theater or it could mean all weapons applied in the field. This paper defines it as theater weapons, but he agreed that we need a precise definition.

Mr. Shakespeare asked, if the use of tactical weapons implies a limitation, could we add the premise that it would inevitably spread to strategic use.

Dr. Kissinger remarked that it was not inevitable that we would escalate from a tactical exchange that no one would win to a strategic exchange that no one could win.

Mr. Shakespeare asked if we were losing a tactical nuclear war would we not escalate to a strategic war? He thought tactical war, to the extent that it was considered a trigger, would create a deterrent.

Mr. Nutter said that the NPG [NATO nuclear policy group] was now studying this matter.

Dr. Kissinger asked if they were equipped to undertake such a study or would it turn into a political exercise.

General Hampton thought that NORTHAG could do a reasonable analysis.

Mr. Hillenbrand [State Department] said that he had been watching the debate on tactical nuclear weapons for 10 years and had not made up his mind as to an appropriate role for them in Europe. He thought ambiguity and uncertainty were part of the nature of the operation of a deterrent. The other side has the same ambiguities and uncertainties. Any effort such as that of the NPG to insert knowledge was to the good, although the result will not necessarily be clarity.

Dr. Kissinger asked, leaving aside the NPG and our allies, do we know what we mean by tactical nuclear war—how would it be initiated, how controlled, how

conducted? He asked if we had a model for the optimum use of tactical weapons?

Mr. Nutter replied that the military have studied these questions and have plans for their use, if they were sure it would be limited.

Dr. Kissinger said he was not being critical of the efforts, noting that he had written a book on the subject and still did not know the answers.

Mr. Cargo [State Department] and *Mr. Nutter* commented that our allies had not been willing to examine these issues.

Dr. Kissinger summed up the conclusions from the paper and where they led in regard to possible force cuts. We are strongest in naval and air forces and weakest on the ground, especially in our tank capacity. The Pact forces have two and a half times our tanks. It was correct to say that we maintain a balanced structure, but this balance won't redress the disparity in ground forces. Our naval, air and logistic strength would help in a condition of parity more than in a condition of inferiority.

General Shaefer remarked that the superior quality of our air would be an advantage.

Mr. Shakespeare asked if we would be holding back planes for a nuclear strike.

General Shaefer said 'yes' noting that a large portion of our dual capacity aircraft are on nuclear alert.

Dr. Kissinger saw four broad choices: (1) maintain existing ground forces by reducing our staying power; (2) maintain our ground forces by reducing our air and naval forces; (3) reduce our forces across the board; (4) maintain air and naval forces at the expense of ground forces.

If our analysis of the differences in reinforcement time for air, naval and ground forces is correct, he asked if it would not be better to maintain existing ground forces?



(B61 Nuclear Bomb and 280mm Atomic Cannon Shell on display in a US museum – photo credit: rocbolt/ flickr)

Minutes of a Combined Senior Review Group and Verification Panel Meeting, Washington, October 28, 1970, 10:35 a.m.–noon.

SUBJECT: US Strategies and Forces for NATO (NSSM 84); MBFR (NSSM 92)

General Ryan [Joint Chiefs of Staff]: If we use nuclear weapons, they will, too. If we begin with tactical nuclears, it will probably escalate to general war.

Mr. Kissinger: Assuming that it does not become general nuclear war, can we envision any use of tactical nuclear weapons that would restore the situation?

Mr. Packard [DoD]: No, because the weapons are not symmetrical. We can't assume symmetrical use of tactical weapons. The Soviets just don't have that type of weapon. They have area-type weapons which could devastate a general area so that their troops could go through. They have an entirely different approach. There is no scenario for going to nuclear weapons that makes any sense or that has any realism whatsoever.

General Ryan: I agree—their deterrent value is their main value.

Mr. Kissinger: How can we deter with something that doesn't make sense?

Mr. Packard: Because their use would be so horrible to contemplate.

Mr. Kissinger: If a part of the front should collapse and we should use tactical nuclear weapons could we stop them? I have seen an indication that 1400 nuclear weapons would not necessarily stop an advance.

Mr. Morse [DoD]: No one knows. We have not had enough experience and analysis cannot substitute for experience. This is the great unknown.

Mr. Kissinger: So you are saying that the uncertainty produced by the nuclear weapons provides the deterrent. No one is saying we should pull out our nuclear weapons. But can we find a rational use for them? (to General Ryan) If we were on the verge of losing, would you recommend we use them or not use them?

General Ryan: We would probably recommend we use them.

Mr. Kissinger: Why?

General Ryan: We might give the Soviets pause to stop and think about whether to use them.

(nature vs the cold war - detail from a UK Royal Observatory Corps nuclear monitoring post – photo credit: piglicker/ flickr)

Mr. Kissinger: For demonstration purposes, in other words. But we don't need 9400 weapons for demonstration purposes.

General Ryan: We must assume the Soviets know how many we have and that this would have an effect.

Mr. Irwin: This might be possible on one assumption—if they were used defensively in our own territory and not in Pact territory. We could take the position that if the Soviets use them in Germany, we would use them in the Warsaw Pact area. It would be a question of targeting.

Mr. Packard: They are already targeted on [less than 1 line not declassified] and the like.

Mr. Kissinger: I am not pushing a particular point of view. I am asking what it is we want to do with our nuclear establishment in Europe. What do our commanders think they will do with it?

Mr. Packard: They hope to keep it in the barn. They plan to use it like other weapons except that it gives them more fire power.

Mr. Kissinger: We don't know whether nuclear weapons could restore a situation, but could they prevent defeat?

Mr. Packard: If the other side does not use them.

Mr. Kissinger: What if both sides use them? If we can't make this judgment now we certainly can't make it in the crisis atmosphere of ten Russian divisions heading for Hanover. What decision would we ask from the President if this should happen? Would we tell him to release a few tactical nuclear weapons? Can we get a judgment on this?

Mr. Morse: We can't get it.

Mr. Kissinger: Then how can we ask the President to make a decision? We must have some theory of what we are trying to do.

Mr. Packard: The most rational theory would call for the use of a few tactical weapons in the hope that the situation would not escalate to general nuclear war.

Mr. Kissinger: In other words, hope for a shock effect.

Mr. Schlesinger [OMB]: If we are considering use of nuclears for demonstration purposes we should adjust our whole nuclear setup. Our present structure was inherited from the 50's. If we contemplate demonstrable use, these weapons should be made secure and relatively invulnerable. If we wait for a breakthrough to use them they will be overrun.

Mr. Kissinger: Can we get a statement of the various ways of looking at this problem?

Mr. Morse: Yes.

Mr. Kissinger: If we plan to consider asymmetrical reductions under MBFR [mutual and balanced force reductions] we might consider trading some of our nuclear weapons for some of their tanks. [2½ lines not declassified]

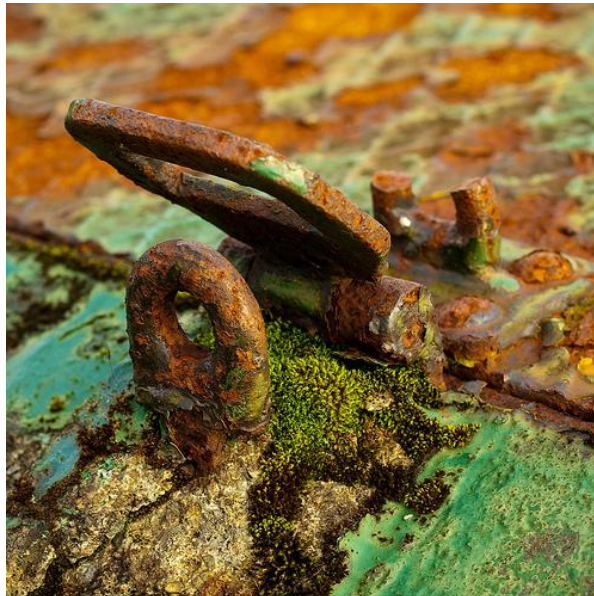
Dr. Smith [NSC Staff]: There are two in the paper—battlefield use and demonstration use.

Mr. Kissinger: Let's look at them in terms of what we are planning to do.

Mr. Court [NSC Staff]: There are three possible variations of our current strike plan in the paper dealing with survivability and target acquisition.

Mr. Kissinger: If we are serious about this we must address Mr. Schlesinger's question. If we contemplate the use of nuclear weapons, what would we have to do to adjust our forces? I recall the President raised this question the first time he visited the Pentagon.

Mr. Packard: I agree we need this badly. We don't know what to do in planning future nuclear weapons.



Mr. Kissinger: We need to establish some criteria so we could tell the President what he would be getting into. I agree it is tough but it won't get any easier in a time of crisis.

Mr. Irwin [State Department]: Have these questions been war-gamed?

Mr. Morse: For years.

Dr. Smith: All the studies have concluded that there would be no favorable outcome.

General Cushman [CIA]: Their response would probably be strategic nuclear attack, Europe-wide.

NATO Nuclear Strategy

At present, we place primary reliance on conventional and our strategic forces to deter and, if deterrence fails, defend against a Warsaw Pact attack. If it were feasible to deter the Soviets through tactical nuclear weapons, this could allow us to make major reductions in our conventional strength. The fact remains that NATO could be placed in a position where a decision would have to be made between accepting conventional defeat and using tactical nuclear weapons.

Under such circumstances, it would be very difficult to rely on tactical nuclear weapons for the following reasons:

—The NATO forces contain many small-yield nuclear weapons that could be used to limit damage. There is little assurance, however, that the Soviets could respond in a similar manner since they have few small-yield weapons.

—The NATO and Pact tactical nuclear forces each contain large numbers of survivable nuclear forces. Even if NATO struck first against the Warsaw Pact forces, the Pact could counter-attack killing half the urban population of Western Europe, using only its non-strategic nuclear forces.

—The facilities and forces of NATO are probably more vulnerable to attack than the Pact's. With fewer than 100 nuclear warheads, the Pact could close NATO's major ports, cripple its depot system, and destroy a substantial portion of its forces.

While we have much to learn about nuclear weapons, there is little or no reason to believe that their use would result in an outcome favorable to NATO.

Given present Pact doctrine and capabilities, it is also likely that any extensive first use by NATO would result in a massive Pact counterattack against Europe's cities and escalation to strategic warfare.

Minutes of a National Security Council Meeting, Washington, November 19, 1970, 10 a.m.

President Nixon: The assumption used to be that any war in the NATO area would escalate automatically into general nuclear war. That was the view in the old McNamara period. Is there an estimate now in the NATO area that there is less chance of escalation to nuclear war?

General Goodpaster [Supreme Allied Commander, Europe]: The estimates are much more qualified now.

President Nixon: I really don't see why. It seems more likely that they might use nuclear weapons now.

General Goodpaster: Our capability for assured destruction against the Soviets is very high.

President Nixon: But what about the risks we would take if we do that?

General Goodpaster: The Soviet attitude seems to be this. Since the Cuban missile crisis, they have a much more sobered view of the risks to them of a high-intensity provocation of the U.S. The same is true in Europe; they have shown more inhibition than before. The Europeans are convinced of this; they see the U.S. assured destruction capability as inhibiting the Soviet use of their MRBM's or IRBM's against Europe.

President Nixon: But Americans are more afraid than previously.

[Director Helms resumes his briefing with a discussion of MBFR.]

President Nixon: Are there any questions of Director Helms?

Director Lincoln [Office of Emergency Preparedness]:

What is the view of the NATO countries on the results of a nuclear exchange?

General Goodpaster: They haven't any positive views. They are sensitive to the location of our nuclear weapons in our forward bases, particularly those countries where our forward-based Tac Air are located.

(Protect And Survive Public Information Booklet - Protect and Survive was a pamphlet produced by the British Government to give advice on how to protect your home and family in the event of a nuclear war. Intended to be issued to every household if there was ever an immediate threat of nuclear war it was published in limited numbers in May 1980 after newspaper articles revealing its existence put pressure on the government – photo credit: Nathan Chantrell/flickr)

