

# INTRODUCTION

## THE UK AND THE ORIGINS OF NON-PROLIFERATION TREATY

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### Background

Andrew Pierre once argued that Britain's foreign policy and defence policy in relation to nuclear weapons has had a unique significance in the history of nuclear proliferation and non-proliferation.<sup>1</sup> In part, this was because Britain was the first state to decide to try to develop an atomic weapon. Following the Frisch-Pearls Memorandum in 1940 and the Maud Report in 1941, the Churchill government set up the Tube Alloys experimental atomic energy programme. After initial setbacks, the UK and US established a close atomic partnership in 1943 and British scientists played an important role in the Manhattan Project, which produced the bombs used against Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In the post-war period, the Attlee Labour government supported early attempts to achieve a system of international control of nuclear weapons but also decided in 1947 to develop an independent atomic weapons capability.<sup>2</sup> As such, Britain was the first second rank country to 'go nuclear'. In 1954, the UK decided to follow the two superpowers and produce thermonuclear weapons and to re-establish a close, 'special' nuclear alliance with the United States that involved an unprecedented exchange of nuclear secrets. Following successful thermonuclear tests in the late 1950s, the Macmillan government agreed to a moratorium on nuclear testing at a time when there was a serious domestic debate about giving up her nuclear weapons.<sup>3</sup> For a time the Labour Party in opposition also adopted a policy of unilateral nuclear disarmament. For its part, the Macmillan government subsequently played an important part in the negotiations, which led to the Partial Test Ban Treaty in 1963, which represented the first major international attempt to deal with the dangers of nuclear proliferation.

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Pierre, *Nuclear politics: The British Experience with an Independent Strategic Force 1939-1970*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), 312.

<sup>2</sup> Margaret Gowing, *Independence and Deterrence Britain and Atomic Energy 1845-1952*, Volume 1 Policy Making, Macmillan, London 1974.

<sup>3</sup> John R. Walker, *British Nuclear Weapons and the Test Ban 1954-1973 Britain, the United States, Weapons Policies and Nuclear Testing: Tensions and Contradictions*, Ashgate, 2010; Lorna Arnold, *Britain and the H-Bomb*, Palgrave, 2001.

## Britain and the MLF

The UK, USSR and US agreed a Partial Test Ban Treaty in 1963 at a time that the Macmillan government was attempting to secure the long-term future of the British independent deterrent force. With the growing vulnerability of the V Bomber force Britain had turned to the United States in 1960 to enhance its capability by providing the long-range air-launched Skybolt missile. In 1962, the US cancelled Skybolt leaving the future of the British deterrent in doubt.<sup>4</sup> At the Nassau conference in December 1962, Macmillan convinced President Kennedy to sell Britain the Polaris submarine-launched missile in its place. Part of the Nassau deal, however, involved putting the future British Polaris force into a multilateral NATO nuclear force. Although the UK would retain the ability to withdraw Polaris when 'supreme national interests were at stake', the following two years saw significant difficulties in the politics of defence in the Western alliance.

The original idea of a multilateral NATO nuclear force emerged in the late 1950s as a way of countering the build-up of Soviet medium range missiles in Western Russia. Initially the idea was for mobile land-based Polaris missiles in Europe. By 1960, this had evolved into a plan for a force of 25 Polaris missile submarines, manned by crews of mixed nationalities, under joint ownership and finance, under the control of SACEUR. Following the Nassau conference in 1962, the MLF concept became a major diplomatic venture for the US State Department as a means of giving Europe a strategic role while at the same time preventing the proliferation of national nuclear forces. From the beginning, Britain's reaction to the MLF was largely unenthusiastic, and, in military quarters, hostile. The UK considered it far too expensive and the Admiralty viewed the whole idea of a mixed-manned element as militarily unsound.

It was difficult, however, for the Macmillan government to reject the MLF out-of-hand. Instead, the Minister of Defence, Peter Thorneycroft, came up with an alternative idea

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<sup>4</sup> For a detailed account of the UK strategic nuclear deterrent see Matthew Jones, *The Official History of the UK Strategic Nuclear Deterrent, Volume I: From V-Bomber Era to the Arrival of Polaris, 1945-1964*, Routledge, London, 2017; *Volume II: The Labour Government and the Polaris Programme, 1964-1970*,

in 1963. Known as the 'Thorneycroft Proposals', this involved a multilateral force of tactical aircraft and missiles. The force would be mix-manned, jointly financed and SACEUR would control it. Significantly, this involved the multilateralization of forces that already existed, thus saving costs, and the mixed-manning of units and squadrons, not individual aircraft. Most importantly of all, it would not involve the UK's Polaris force, thus maintaining the independent nuclear deterrent. The United States regarded the British proposals as an attempt by Britain to undermine the MLF concept and for this reason, Washington rejected them.

In the run-up to the UK General Election of October 1964, the Conservative government under Macmillan's successor, Alec Douglas-Home, maintained its strong belief in the utility of the UK nuclear deterrent force. He told *The Times* that: 'We have decided that Britain must be equipped to be present in the councils of war and peace - and to be there by right. And this means nuclear power.'<sup>5</sup> On the eve of the Election, he pointed out the differences between the Conservative and Labour attitudes to nuclear weapons by arguing that 'the Socialists would propose to discard all control by a British government over Britain's nuclear arms... It would mean that we should surrender all our authority in world affairs and hand over the decision about the life and future of Britain to another country. This I am quite sure you cannot allow.'<sup>6</sup>

Douglas-Home was highlighting the impression that the Labour Party had created during the Election campaign that, if elected, it would give up Britain's nuclear weapons. Despite the Labour leader, Hugh Gaitskell's reversal of Labour's opposition unilateralist policy in 1961, the party had remained deeply divided over what it would do about nuclear weapons if elected to power. In its manifesto, the new Labour leader, Harold Wilson, avoided these divisions by claiming that it would re-negotiate the Nassau agreement, but did not go as far as specifically saying it would abandon nuclear weapons. Instead, Wilson criticised the 'independent deterrent' as neither 'independent' because of its dependence on the US, nor a 'deterrent' because, he argued, it lacked credibility.

#### The Labour Government, the Atlantic Nuclear Force (ANF) and Nuclear Sharing

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<sup>5</sup> *The Times*, 22 May 1963.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in A. Pierre, *Nuclear Politics*, 256.

With Wilson's victory in the 1964 General Election, it appeared for a time that Britain had a new Government with very different beliefs about the utility of nuclear weapons for Great Power status, deterrence and political influence in the United States. In practice, following the Election, Wilson and his Defence Secretary, Denis Healey, sought to maintain the deterrent force and like their predecessors they were unenthusiastic about the US MLF concept. In its place Wilson proposed that Britain's V-Bomber force and the Polaris submarines, together with US nuclear forces and a French contribution (if they wished to join), should form part of an Atlantic Nuclear Force (ANF). There was also to be 'some kind of mixed-manned and jointly owned element' in which the non-nuclear NATO states would be a part. Britain and the US would retain a veto over the use of the force.

There has been a great deal of debate about why the Labour government put forward this idea. Many commentators have concluded that the Wilson government put the proposal forward specifically to undermine the MLF project. It has been suggested that this was 'the first time in history that one non-existent fleet was used to sink another non-existent fleet'.<sup>7</sup> The reasons for promoting the ANF, however, are more complex. Wilson, like previous Conservative leaders, was concerned not to reject nuclear sharing arrangements out of hand, since both the United States and West Germany supported them. Apart from the objective of maintaining alliance cohesion, the ANF also suited the government's desire to deflect attention from Wilson's earlier promise to re-negotiate Nassau and thereby helped to maintain the unity of the Labour Party.<sup>8</sup> This said, there does not appear to have been much enthusiasm within the Labour government for its own ANF proposal.

### The Labour Government and Nuclear Consultation

Although the Multilateral Force and Atlantic Nuclear Force proposals remained on the political agenda, the British government and their advisors began to move away from 'hardware' solutions such as the MLF/ANF during 1966 towards a 'software' solution involving consultation measures within the Alliance framework. The Atlantic Nuclear

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> See John Young, 'Killing the MLF? The Wilson government and nuclear sharing in Europe 1961-66, *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 14:2, 2003.

Force, like the MLF proposals, gradually drifted into obscurity. In their place, the Wilson government supported the idea put forward by the US Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara, to set up a formal nuclear consultation arrangement within NATO, which would involve the non-nuclear states in the alliance in the nuclear planning process. After much debate, this led to the establishment of the Nuclear Planning Group in December 1966 consisting of the Defence Ministers of the US, UK, Italy and Federal Republic of Germany as permanent members and three rotating members from the other NATO members involved in the military integrated structure of the alliance. For the UK, nuclear consultation was far preferable to the 'hardware' solution to West German nuclear aspirations associated with the MLF, or indeed the ANF.

UK ministers and officials saw clear links in the debates about nuclear sharing and alternative consultation measures on nuclear weapons use within the NATO alliance to a wider debate about preventing the spread of nuclear weapons. International discussions on the non-dissemination of nuclear weapons had begun in 1960 at the Geneva Ten Nation Committee on Disarmament and continued in 1962 when the Committee expanded into the Eighteen Nation Committee on Disarmament (ENDC). In 1963-64, however, the Committee was deadlocked over disagreements between the United States and the Soviet Union, largely on the issue of nuclear sharing within the NATO alliance. Harold Wilson first committed himself to achieving a non-proliferation treaty in the Queen's Speech to the House of Commons on the 3 November 1964 shortly after taking office.<sup>9</sup>

### Britain, the US and the 'European Option'

In January 1965, the Wilson government revised an earlier draft of what contemporaries called at the time 'a non-dissemination treaty'.<sup>10</sup> Britain had been an active participant in the Partial Test Ban Treaty negotiations in the early 1960s and had refrained from testing in the mid and late 1960s. Ministers and officials felt that some form of nuclear consultation within NATO was the best way to move towards an

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<sup>9</sup> Gerald Hughes, *Harold Wilson's Cold War: The Labour Government and East-West Politics, 1961-1970* (Rochester: Royal Society Publication, Boydell Press, 2009), 52.

<sup>10</sup> See John R Walker, *Britain and Disarmament: The UK and Nuclear, Biological and Chemical Weapons Arms Control Programmes 1956-1975*, (Farnham, Ashgate, 2012)

agreement on non-proliferation. The government recognised the nuclear anxieties of the West Germans and the desire of the Johnson Administration to resolve these anxieties. However, it did not believe that a nuclear sharing arrangement of the sort represented by the MLF was the way to do this, especially as the Soviet Union was not prepared to move forward on a non-proliferation treaty if NATO adopted a nuclear sharing arrangement involving West Germany.

In June 1965, the British government consulted its allies about presenting its draft 'non-dissemination' treaty to the ENDC in Geneva. The United States, however, did not support this draft largely because it 'limited the development of the MLF/ANF proposal by insisting on the maintenance of a veto by one of the nuclear powers.'<sup>11</sup> The United States was anxious that this might cause difficulties amongst the other European states, particularly West Germany. As result, Britain did not present the draft to the ENDC. The government did not wish to undermine relations with the US or West Germany but it retained its opposition to the idea of some form of European force operating on the basis of majority voting. In July 1965 Foreign Secretary, Michael Stewart wrote to US Secretary of State, Dean Rusk:

I am as anxious as you are not to cause strains in the alliance or to allow the Russians to exploit Western disagreements, although we must recognise that a real difference of view exists between our two Governments on the question of the so-called 'European option' .... But we shall certainly want to review our position, rather than proceed at once on tabling the draft treaty at Geneva, if unfortunately we cannot get a NATO consensus of view.<sup>12</sup>

In July 1966, the Foreign Office produced a 'Brief for the Prime Minister' prior to his visit to Washington clearly spelling out the links between nuclear sharing, consultation and non-proliferation:

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<sup>11</sup> David James Gill, *Britain and the Bomb: Nuclear Diplomacy, 1964-1970* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), 119.

<sup>12</sup> Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1964-68, vol. XI, document 89, message from Stewart to Rusk, 23 July 1965.

Our objective is to show the urgent need to advance in the related fields of non-proliferation [and] nuclear sharing ... In particular we want to know whether the President would support us in an attempt now to persuade the Germans to give up 'hardware solutions' .... [a NATO body for nuclear consultation] should help to defuse the pressure for unattractive hardware solutions and thus preserve the unity of the main NATO allies .... If we reached agreement on these lines, we could agree to forget the ANF proposal in its original form.... [A] solution on these lines could remove one of the main obstacles to a non-proliferation treaty.<sup>13</sup>

By mid-1966, the Americans themselves were looking afresh at consultative and nuclear sharing approaches. Discussions with the Soviet delegates in Geneva indicated that a compromise deal might be possible if the US gave up its commitment to nuclear sharing and pursued the idea of a nuclear consultation arrangement with its NATO allies. US discussions with West Germany in the second half of 1966 led to a weakening of Bonn's commitment to nuclear sharing and a gradual acceptance of a nuclear sharing arrangement. According to Haftendorn: 'The original intention of getting a finger on the nuclear trigger had been replaced by the desire instead to be able to get hold of the nuclear safety catch.'<sup>14</sup> As a result, on 14 December the North Atlantic Council established the Nuclear Planning Group as a new permanent NATO group. For Britain, this was a very welcome development. David Gill has argued that: 'The NPG had removed nuclear sharing from the political landscape in a relatively painless way and paved the way for progress towards a non-proliferation treaty.'<sup>15</sup>

### Difficulties over the 'Safeguards Issue'

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TNA, CAB 133/347, FO brief for the prime minister's visit, 22 July 1966.

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H. Haftendorn, *NATO and the Nuclear Revolution: A Crisis of Credibility, 1961-67* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 166.

<sup>15</sup> David James Gill, *Britain and the Bomb: Nuclear Diplomacy*, 166.

The negotiations to achieve such a treaty, however, were to be far from straightforward and took up a considerable amount of negotiating effort at both Geneva and elsewhere. Despite Prime Minister Wilson's strong commitment to a non-proliferation treaty from the time he took office in October 1964, during the negotiations he deliberately adopted a 'secondary role', leaving the running to the United States and the Soviet Union. Given the serious difficulties of the British economy, Wilson had concluded that the UK had to make a second application to join the EEC (following the first failed application in 1963). With France continuing its hostility to British membership, Wilson believed that the UK should do nothing to alienate Britain from its European allies, and especially from West Germany.<sup>16</sup> This resulted in a cautious approach to differences, which arose between the US and its NATO European partners during the non-proliferation negotiations. One example of this was a major problem that arose over the issue of safeguards, 'a set of activities designed to verify that a state would not use nuclear programmes for nuclear purposes.'<sup>17</sup>

By 1967, the superpowers had made progress on an outline draft treaty, but had still to agree on safeguard arrangements. The US favoured making International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards a mandatory element of the Non-Proliferation Treaty. This, however, was not acceptable to the European members of NATO who preferred a system of verification through the European Atomic Energy Community (EURATOM), which was an important element in the European integration project. This produced a dilemma for the UK. The Wilson government did not want to upset the US by siding with the European states on the issue, but equally it did not want fall out with the European countries, especially West Germany, when it was preparing a second application to join the EEC. The government's dilemma is evident in a note from the Foreign Secretary, George Brown, to the Prime Minister in May 1967:

If the situation should arise in which there is a direct confrontation between the United States and Russians on one side – and the members of EURATOM on the other, on the issue of the acceptability of EURATOM safeguards we should have to consider

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<sup>16</sup> See Susanna Schrafstetter and Stephen Twigge, 'Tick or Truth? The British ANF Proposal, West Germany, and US non-proliferation policy,' *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 11:2, 2000.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 174



our position very carefully: the whole success of our European policy might depend on the choice we made. For the present, it should therefore be a major aim of our policy at Geneva to see things do not reach such a state.<sup>18</sup>

### Britain as a 'Bridge' between the Superpowers?

The government's position was to adopt a low profile on the issue but where possible to act as a 'bridge' between the US and the European allies. Whether this policy was successful is difficult to determine. Lord Chalfont, the UK's Minister of Disarmament and representative at the ENDC negotiations, claims that he saw his role as a 'broker' between the United States and the Soviet Union. In his memoirs, Chalfont says:

I had a good relationship both with William Foster, the leader of the American delegation and with Semyon Tsarapkin of the USSR and, as the representative of the only other nuclear weapons power at the Geneva negotiations, I had a special position, especially in discussions about the spread of nuclear weapons. I used this to urge both the Americans and the Russians towards a non-proliferation treaty.<sup>19</sup>

The US and the Soviet Union eventually accepted a compromise arrangement whereby the IAEA was the supreme control authority, but EURATOM would conduct inspections in Europe. David Gill, however, has suggested that this was more to do with the US acting as 'a global mediator,' rather than through any meaningful action by the UK. In his view, the UK 'had been unable to influence the superpowers and was unwilling to influence the countries of the EEC.'<sup>20</sup> What is true is that the UK's unwillingness to upset the European allies on the safeguards issue did not pay off because De Gaulle rejected the second application to join the EEC by on 27 November 1967.

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<sup>18</sup> TNA, PREM 13/1888, confidential note, 9 May 1967.

<sup>19</sup> Alun Chalfont, *The Shadow of my Hand: A Memoir*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2000), 115.

<sup>20</sup> Gill, *Britain and the Bomb*, 180.

### The issues of 'Security Assurances' and 'Non-Use'

Another difficulty arose, over the question of security assurances to the non-nuclear states. Many countries, like India, had significant doubts about a Non-proliferation Treaty because they regarded it as discriminatory. According to Lord Chalfont the non-aligned countries at the ENDC formed a club of nuclear have-nots 'who often seemed to regard the possibility of any agreement on arms control or disarmament between East and West as little better than a plan devised by two groups of alcoholics to impose total abstinence on everyone else.'<sup>21</sup> To try to deal with this objection both the British and American governments discussed the idea of providing some form of guarantees to those states that renounced nuclear weapons. Should they become the victims of threats or acts of aggression, the proposal was that the nuclear powers would provide some form of extended deterrence. The UK hoped this would overcome the objections of the non-nuclear weapons states and that they would then consequently sign the Treaty.

The US also put forward the idea of a 'non-use' commitment to the non-nuclear states. This involved the promise by the nuclear states that they would not threaten or use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear countries who accepted the non-proliferation provisions of the Treaty. This, however, caused some concerns in the Ministry of Defence in Britain. Denis Healey, the Defence Secretary, advised the Defence and Overseas Policy Committee in January 1968 that if the government agreed to this commitment the British nuclear deterrent and NATO strategy of Flexible Response would be weakened because strategic options would be significantly limited.<sup>22</sup>

Even though France had opposed Britain's second application to join the EEC, Healey also expressed the view that the treaty might cause problems for the UK's relations with its European allies. In his view, it was a superpower treaty that might be viewed as discriminatory against the smaller powers, including European states. These criticisms also echoed some concerns aired at the time in the opposition Conservative

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<sup>21</sup> Chalfont, *The Shadow of my Hand*, 109.

<sup>22</sup> TNA CAB 148/35, Cabinet DOPC, 30 January 1968. See also Gill, *Britain the Bomb*, 188-89.

Party. The Prime Minister and the rest of the Cabinet rejected these objections. They agreed that such security assurances had to be accepted as part of the price of an agreement between the superpowers and between the nuclear and nuclear powers. In March 1968 the US, the Soviet Union and Britain sponsored a draft resolution on security assurances for consideration by the UN Security Council.

Britain signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty on 1 July 1968 at the same time as the United States and the Soviet Union. On the same day, Wilson emphasised his long-held commitment to non-proliferation:

If steps had not been taken to prevent nuclear weapons spreading first to one country, then to another, within a few years the whole world would have been darkened by a black cloud of fear. The purpose of this Treaty is to dispel the gathering cloud, and to ensure that the vast forces locked inside the atom are devoted to the welfare of mankind, rather than to its destruction.<sup>23</sup>

Reflecting this commitment, further Britain became the first of the nuclear powers to ratify the Treaty on the 27 November 1968. In so doing, the Wilson government had successfully achieved its three main aims of trying to prevent nuclear proliferation, while at the same time ensuring continuing UK-US nuclear cooperation and maintaining the viability of UK nuclear force. West Germany signed the Treaty in November 1969 and, following differences over the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, the US and Soviet Union eventually ratified the treaty together on the 5 March 1970.

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<sup>23</sup> TNA PREM 13/2442, text of the speech delivered by the Prime Minister, 1 July 1968.

