

The Euromissile Crisis:
An Analysis from 1979-1983

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The Battle of the Euromissiles marks the last great battle of the Cold War. It called into question the ties of the Western Alliance, the nature of democracies against dictatorships and the role of nuclear arms as a deterrent force against their own use. This paper will give an overview of the developments involved and arguments made by historical authors during, and after the Euromissile crisis. A 1977 speech by Helmut Schmidt began the debate over the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (IRNFs) and eventually the Euromissiles, framing the conflict as maintaining an equilibrium of power for the Western Alliance. The NATO Double-Track decision served as the response from the Western Alliance in the face of the Euromissile crisis and started an intense debate over the role of NATO in the defense of Western Europe. The Soviet strategy revolved around upsetting the geopolitical balance through advanced missile capabilities, and the multi-national nature of NATO, whereas the NATO strategy contrasted this by creating a state of nuclear and conventional parity linked to the United States strategic arsenal. The series of events that developed from the Double-Track decision treaty involved achieving a balance of concerns between the Soviet Union and the United States in the face of the growing stockpile of nuclear arms, and popular protest against their stationing in West Europe. As the negotiations between the super powers continued the individual powers in Europe debated the arguments of the Euromissile crisis within themselves and considering their own political goals. During the crisis the debates between historians Michael Howard and E.P. Thompson gave insight to the ongoing intellectual debate over the realistic possibilities of deterrence and the ambitions of a denuclearized world. At large the Battle of the Euromissiles shows the intense political maneuvering the superpowers of the Cold War were capable of and reaffirms the pivotal role that the Western Alliance served throughout the Cold War.

In his 1977 lecture at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, Helmut Schmidt established the necessity for a strategic equilibrium that addressed Europe.¹ Schmidt's decision to bring the topic to the speech was born out a series of developments prior to his October speech. Three main developments stand out; the lack of European input to the US-Soviet debate of IRNF policies, and the complications of IRNF involved conflict for West Germany. While the Strategic Arms Limitations Talks (SALT) Treaty established a regulation for Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) it did not regulate tactical level nuclear arms, which were more likely to be used in a war in Europe.² Being that the SALT talks were primarily between the Soviet Union and the United States, Western Europe was understandably alarmed as the United States seemed to affect their security without receiving much input to their concerns regarding the topic.³ These concerns came a head when Schmidt made his October speech. In this speech he establishes three key points. First, the paradox of arms control and arms race must be fully realized. Both are no further from peace and war than the other as such policy must address the duality of the two. Second, SALT addressed the balance of strategic nuclear weapons between the Soviet Union and the United States but exposed the balance of tactical nuclear weapons and conventional forces in Europe. And third, negotiations for mutual balanced force reductions called the "Vienna negotiations" are a necessity to bringing about the balance of military power in Europe.⁴ He addresses the realistic applications of both arms control and arms race as a "paradox" that straddles the narrow edge between peace and war. As Freedman states the parity of nuclear arms was established not through overwhelming numbers but rather through the

¹ (Schmidt 1977)

² (Freedman 2003)

³ (Freedman 2003)

⁴ (Schmidt 1977)

capability to match the strategic destruction of the enemy.⁵ Alternatively, parity could be destabilized through arms control measures by reducing the capability for assured destruction. The paradox runs both ways however, arms control can remove or limit strategic advantages that can upset parity while an arms race can lead to the pursuit of new arms, upsetting strategic parity.⁶ Thus, to Schmidt an arms reduction and arms control must be approached from an angle of *realpolitik* as both are equally effective at establishing balance. With his second point Schmidt brings attention to the now exposed strategic imbalance of tactical nuclear weapons and conventional forces as an issue that the SALT talks critically failed to address. Schmidt states that this opening may be exploited by the Soviet Union to impede the security of the Western Alliance. Under Defense Secretary Schlesinger the United States saw the creation of a European-centric strategic balance separate from the United States strategic balance with the Soviet Union as undermining to the goal of intertwining the United States strategic balance with the NATO alliance strategic balance.⁷ Schmidt did not believe this guarantee enough to prevent a disparity of strategic disposition in Europe. The third point Schmidt makes is the importance of then ongoing talks in Vienna to reach a mutual balanced force reductions agreement. These talks sought to address the imbalance of conventional forces between a set of Warsaw Pact countries and a set of NATO countries. For Schmidt, the talks represented an important step for a European led response to the growing conventional arms imbalance across the iron curtain. The growing disparity of conventional forces and tactical nuclear arms in Europe was his focus. He saw a growing sense of content with the strategic nuclear arms equilibrium as both a falsehood and threat to the equilibrium in Europe. The establishment of a “conventional equilibrium”

⁵ (Freedman 2003) Retreat from Assured Destruction, Parity

⁶ (Schmidt 1977)

⁷ (Freedman 2003) Retreat from Assured Destruction, Parity

across the tactical and conventional strategic positions in Europe would then be necessary to ensure the security of Western Alliance. The legacy of Schmidt's speech, the dual-blade nature of parity and the need for an equilibrium is echoed in the resulting NATO Double-Track decision.

The NATO Double-Track Decision sought to address the growing disparity of the strategic position between the West European allies and the Warsaw Pact. The main point of concern for the decision was the Soviet deployment of RSD-10 Pioneer or SS-20 'Saber' missiles. The SS-20 missiles presented a grave long-range theater nuclear threat, a range of over 5000 kilometers, an accuracy of 450 meters, and rapid mobile deployment capability.⁸ These traits gave Russian nuclear tactical capability an edge over the existing United States systems. In addition, the Soviet Union had recently deployed the Tupolev Tu-22M strategic bomber, giving a similar edge in manned launch system through its supersonic capabilities. Given the relatively short range of the warheads deployed from these systems they were excluded from the restrictions in the SALT agreements thus allowing the Soviet Union free reign over the strategic situation of Europe.⁹ The initial response to this threat was developed by President Carter's Presidential Review Memorandum 38, "Long Range Theater Nuclear Capabilities and Arms Control." The document prompted the development of NATO IRNFs to three key points. The most pivotal of these points was the development that "arms control efforts to limit the SS-20 and Backfire bomber developments would probably not succeed unless NATO demonstrated willingness to modernize its IRNF."¹⁰ Armed with this report, and in pursuit of a resolution to

⁸ (Wettig n.d.)

⁹ (Wettig n.d.)

¹⁰ (Sherrett 1979)

this situation the NATO Double-Track decision was created. The Double-Track decision can be summarized as, approaching the problem presented by Soviet IRNFs with two ‘tracks’ of decisions for the United States and certain members of NATO to follow. The first decision detailed the United States opening negotiations with the Soviet Union to pursue arms control similar to SALT for the problem of missiles in Europe. On the second track a set of NATO members would receive United States developed and deployed Ground Launched Cruise Missiles (GLCMs) and West Germany received Pershing II intermediate range missiles to restore nuclear parity.¹¹ The modernization of the IRNFs in accordance with the second decision was believed to be enough weight to bring the Soviet Union to the negotiating table with the United States.¹² Simultaneously the deployment of the GLCMs would re-establish the nuclear parity between the NATO alliance and the Soviets SS-20 deployments. For NATO the Double-Track decision was presented with three main goals in mind.¹³ First, to strengthen the defense of the NATO alliance by giving a credible deterrent to a nuclear threat against the Soviet Union. In addition to this to better ‘couple’ American strategic deterrent, to the NATO IRNF deterrents. Second, preserve the NATO alliance against Soviet propaganda which previously exploited confusion over the neutron bomb deployment to sow friction between West Germany and the United States. And third, to maintain East-West relations through the developments and negotiations of the decision. The first point is addressed by the very deployments insinuated with the Double-Track decision. While the deployed missiles were American controlled, they served well as ‘coupling’ the American strategic forces to the European theater defenses. The second goal was reached by the dual nature of the Double-Track Decision. The Soviet Union would

¹¹ (Luns 1979)

¹² (Sherrett 1979)

¹³ (State 1978)

have a hard time presenting propaganda against a decision that openly offered arms control reduction even if it deployed missiles. Finally, the third goal was reached by making the IRNF talks between the Soviet Union and the United States ensuring that the discussion became one of East-West and not Europe-West.

The NATO strategy was similar to the goals of the Double-Track decision and revolved around countering the possibility of Soviet influence through their deployment of IRNF forces. Given the nature of NATO the particulars of this sentiment varied from member to member, but the consensus was to find ways to counter the growing imbalance of influence in Western Europe through a more structured alliance. NATO sought to ensure “no weak links in the spectrum of military options [...] that the Soviets might exploit”, to “close the gap in the ladder of deterrence” and prevent the ‘de-coupling’ of the defensive forces of United States and West Europe.¹⁴ The weak links are in reference to the logistics of a war in Europe, and disagreements among the NATO members.¹⁵ In the event of a war with Europe previous United States doctrine established that a portion of Western Europe closest to the Iron Curtain would be lost before United States forces could establish any tangible front line given the logistics of sending troops across the Atlantic. In order to ensure that this crack in the defenses was sealed, NATO integrally tied its tactical defense capability to the United States strategic nuclear capability.¹⁶ Should the Soviet Union strike with the SS-20 missiles at any of the nuclear response sites in Europe or invade and put response sites at risk, then it would draw the entire United States arsenal into play as a response to the situation in Europe. Regarding the disagreement among NATO members, the

¹⁴ (Sherrett 1979)

¹⁵ (Sherrett 1979)

¹⁶ (Sherrett 1979)

Double-Track decision displayed multiple major players of NATO presenting a united front against the influence of the Soviet Union regardless of internal disagreements. ‘Closing the gap of nuclear deterrence’ involved the modernization of nuclear forces by the deployment of American capability. Finally, the de-coupling of the United States was addressed in the same fashion as the ‘weak-links’ issue. By tying the nuclear response capabilities of Europe to those of the United States the Soviet Union could not break the defensive alliance the two had purely by tactical nuclear force pressure.

The Soviet strategy during the Euromissile crisis is the same as the strategy behind the deployment of the SS-20. First, to modernize the Soviet tactical arsenal in the European region. And second, to drive a wedge between the United States and the member states of NATO with the capabilities of the SS-20 missile.¹⁷ The modernization of the SS-20 missile offered a series of new features and capabilities that would be hard to match for West Europe. Emphasis on the destructive capability, accuracy, and mobility of the SS-20 missiles were the focus of its deployment doctrine. The accuracy of the missile was such that it could target specific facilities. This allowed for a “limited war” to be waged¹⁸ whereby the use of strategic nuclear forces was an overreaction to the number or nature of the targets engaged in an SS-20 strike. The destruction the SS-20 was capable of reaching was enough to target major cities, ensuring that in the event of an ICBM response the SS-20 could be used in response. Finally, the mobility of the SS-20 was the largest advantage offered by the missile. The SS-20 was launched from a mobile platform meaning there was no sure position as to where the missile was stationed at any given moment. All these factors combined painted a grim picture for the West European nuclear

¹⁷ (Ruehl, Le défi du SS-20 et la stratégie soviétique à l'égard de l'Europe 1979)

¹⁸ (Ruehl, Le défi du SS-20 et la stratégie soviétique à l'égard de l'Europe 1979)

strategic situation, the SS-20 could be launched without any warning or pinpointed location, detonate against a limited number of targets which in turn limited the capability to respond, and threatened the major cities of Europe against any response. The gap between a realistic response to a limited strike made by an SS-20 missile and the response options available to the United States based on logistics and severity of the strike are the main 'wedge' the Soviet Union hoped to exploit.¹⁹ By preventing the use of the US strategic arsenal, the Soviet Union hoped to decouple the defensive forces and call into question the willingness of the United States to defend its Western European allies. The capability to target separate nations meant that the Soviet Union could negotiate arms control treaties in relation to individual allies of NATO. At large, the Soviet Union hoped to begin the process of politically separating the United States from Europe. The goals of the Soviet Union and NATO shaped the first track of decision as the negotiations between the two powers began.

The negotiations that came out of the Double-Track decision took place between 1979 until they fell apart in 1983.²⁰ Taking place under the Carter administration (1979-1981) and Reagan administration (1981-1983) against Brezhnev's leadership (1979-1982) and Yuri Andropov's leadership (1982-1983). Most negotiations for arms control took place between 1981 and 1983. From the American perspective, the start of the debates was rough, the Soviet Union had the advantage of having already deployed IRNFs to Europe. European leftist parties were against the deployment of the missiles and staged multiple demonstrations throughout the negotiation and deployment.²¹ The nature of changing leadership in the United States posed a

¹⁹ (Ruehl, *Le défi du SS-20 et la stratégie soviétique à l'égard de l'Europe* 1979)

²⁰ (Sherrett 1979)

²¹ (Sherrett 1979)

challenge to the debates. The Reagan administration was far more ‘hardline’ against the Soviets, harming negotiations. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan became a topic of discussion as well, having eliminated the possibility of SALT II resolving the issues at hand. As popular protest the deployment of missiles grew throughout the United States and Europe, the Reagan administration was faced with the challenge of navigating the arms control stated in the treaty yet adhering to their own desire to build-up the nuclear forces of the United States. As such, the only significant result towards arms control in the United States was the renaming of SALT to START as a shift of Reagan policy towards arms control. During an IRNF treaty talk in Geneva, Reagan planned to make a significant step towards arms control by proposing the cancellation of any deployment of missiles if the Soviet’s were to dismantle the SS-20 systems. This ‘zero option’ however failed and did not strike any chord with its European counter parts who saw it as “little more than an effort to buy time.” As formal IRNF talks continued throughout 1981 to 1983 multiple proposals were declined. One particular proposal was an informal “walk in the woods” deal that was informally agreed to by both diplomats. Under such, IRNFs would be limited to 75 weapon systems. The decision authorized by Washington was later reneged by the Soviets. The United States proposed the limitation of IRNF missiles equal to warheads, later denied by the Soviets due to the SS-20 multiple independently targetable reentry vehicle (MIRV) capabilities.²² The Soviet Union focused on taking advantage of the popular opposition against the deployment of missiles to reverse the Double-Track decision. They aimed to display the United States and NATO as the aggressors in the situation with propaganda campaigns, while simultaneously leveraging their advantageous position to push for an abandonment of the Double-Track decision. Soviet negotiations displayed the threat of missile deployments as the

²² (Sherrett 1979)

main blockade against arms control negotiations, reinforcing the idea to West Germany chancellor Helmut Schmidt in his 1980 visit to Moscow. In 1981 the Soviet's shifted their strategy to attacking the United States policies of arms control. Brezhnev proclaimed "not a single real step" had been made by the United States towards arms control in critique of the Reagan administration. As formal negotiations began, the Soviet Union aimed to restrict any deployment of new missiles and equal reduction for both powers. Officially announcing the Soviet Union's pause on missiles in 1982 they showed that the Soviet Union was willing to cease deployments even as NATO and the US continued to debate deploying missiles. The Reagan administration issued its response by highlighting the growth of Soviet arms against the previous offers of his administration. Across both nations, a second round of talks began in 1982 that failed to shift toward any arms control treaty.²³ The leadership change in the Soviet Union did little to change the proceedings as, in 1983 when the third round of negotiations began and, though they made significant gains with proposals and counter proposals on both sides, ultimately failed. With the third and final failure to reach any treaty, the second track of the decision was called into play and the United States began deploying IRNFs systems to various powers of Europe

In West Germany, the debates on the Euromissile crisis served as a forwarding for a much deeper debate on the future role of West Germany as an ally of the West. The debate presented by the Double-Track decision in West Germany became a question of role of West Germany as an ally in NATO, and the nature of democracies against dictatorships. The guiding philosophy of German diplomacy between the traditional Western powers of Europe and the

²³ (Sherrett 1979)

Eastern power of Russia was attributed to *sonderweg* translating to a “special path.”²⁴ Developed in the late 19th century the idea dictates that Germany finds itself separate, in history, culture, and philosophy to that of both Russia or West Europe. As such their uniqueness could give them a position as an outlier to NATO and the Western Alliance. With the Euromissile crisis West Germany faced a question of *sonderweg* and its dedication to its West European allies. To continue in the NATO alliance, and allow the continued integration of US missile systems to the defense of West Germany, would deal away with the ‘special path’ proclaimed by *Sonderweg*. Otherwise, West Germany could pursue re-unification in the spirit of *sonderweg* by disassociating itself with the Western alliance, but risk falling underneath Soviet influence.²⁵ Another debate in West Germany came in the form of a question to the nature of democracies.²⁶ Given the history Germany it seemed that in the case of democracies against dictatorships there was little discussion for one preference. But the nature of dictatorships against democracies remained. Authoritarian regimes were capable of rapidly developing political stance and response while democratic governments, burdened by their bureaucracy were forced to slowly develop political stance and response. Considering this, the question of how to counter the authoritarian regime found in the Soviet Union became a topic of debate for the German decisions regarding the missile deployments. The final point of debate in West Germany concern the apathy of its people against the rising threat of the Soviet Union.²⁷ This apathy grew out of a previous failed attempt to deploy American neutron warheads to West Germany during the Carter administration. The topic became an intense debate at all levels of society before Helmut Schmidt made the decision to allow the deployments, only to have President Carter rescind the

²⁴ (Herf 1991)

²⁵ (Herf 1991)

²⁶ (Herf 1991)

²⁷ (Herf 1991)

offer.^{28 29} This confusion was exploited by the Soviet Union to push the people of West Germany away from favorable opinions of the United States nuclear defense. As such people found themselves more apathetic to the now growing Soviet power integral to the Euromissile debate.³⁰

In France, the government saw the Euromissile crisis as integrally tied to the newly questioned role of West Germany and the fate of Germany at large. Memories of the two World Wars in tow, France desired to prevent the German ‘drift’ away from the Western Alliance that ensured stability across Europe.³¹ This involved protecting the French “national sanctuary” and its two circles, the French “first circle”, and the linked German “second circle”.³² The German question drove French President Mitterland to make an unprecedented speech after the German election season, at Bonn on the anniversary of the Elysee Treaty.³³ The speech encompassed three main elements, one the de-coupling of the United States to Europe would put the European equilibrium and peace at risk. Two, a declaration of support for Chancellor Kohl and dedication to the Franco-German alliance and integration. And three, an exclusion of France’s nuclear arms in the discussion on IRNF treaties and limitations.³⁴ On the first topic Mitterland carefully worded his speech to appeal to the French sensibilities of independence from the Western Alliance. He carefully framed the point around any general area of Europe dictating that the equilibrium and peace in question as that of the United States and the Soviet Union. Yet from the NATO perspective it does not exclude them and the peace and equilibrium they insure as

²⁸ (Herf 1991)

²⁹ (Readman 2010)

³⁰ (Herf 1991)

³¹ (Lellouche 1983/1984)

³² (Bozo 2007)

³³ (Bozo 2007)

³⁴ (Bozo 2007)

separate from this point. Second, Mitterland declares his renewed alliance with West Germany separate from that of NATO as a move under Gaullist undertones to have France be its own great power separate from the United States. And finally, the third point simultaneously separates the French nuclear arsenal and capability from the United States while still declaring support for the Double-Track decision.

For Italy the Euromissile debate was part of a long-standing effort to gain and maintain a position of power and voice in the NATO alliance, and European affairs.³⁵ Early in the Cold War, Italy reached the conclusion that to maintain a major role among European powers, cooperation with the United States and NATO to receive nuclear-nation status was the best path. The Double-Track decision was viewed as an opportunity in lieu of this, “Thanks to its participation to the modernization of the Atlantic nuclear arsenal [...] Italy now has a chance [...] to become a member of the Western negotiating group.”³⁶ However, the stationed missiles would still be under the control and authority of the United States, and as such Italy sought to develop a ‘dual key’ method of launch, wherein the two nations have their own servicepeople turn the keys required to launch the weapon.³⁷ The current limitations in place to launch US missiles stationed in Italy required that both Italy and the United States agree to the launch the missile.³⁸ These limitations were at best verbal promises and subject to the nature of short-range nuclear combat. As such the ultimate goal for Italy was by agreeing to the Double-Track decision, they may earn control of the nuclear weapons deployed in Italy and gain a position of power among the West European political debate.

³⁵ (Nutti 2011)

³⁶ (Nutti 2011)

³⁷ (Nutti 2011)

³⁸ (Nutti 2011)

In Great Britain the question of the Euromissiles was a question to the integration of the United States to the defense of Europe.³⁹ Given that the SS-20 missiles could not strike at the continental United States and its tactical use nature, many Europeans began to doubt the legitimacy of an American defensive guarantee.⁴⁰ As well, the United States misstep with the neutron bomb in West Germany reinforced a skepticism amongst Europeans to the United States. As such Prime Minister (PM) Thatcher set about reinforcing the role of the United States as an integral defensive ally, while emphasizing her own country's position as a 'second centre' of the NATO alliance.⁴¹ As the United Kingdom (UK) was designated a recipient of United States missile systems by the Double-Track Decision they served the purpose of modernizing the UK's own nuclear forces, reinforcing the 'special relationship' shared by the two countries and reinforcing the dedication of the United States to the NATO alliance at large. At the same time as the Double-Track decision debates, the UK was experiencing its own debates on the modernization of its Polaris rocket systems.⁴² The UK's Polaris rocket systems were a 'last resort' IRNF gap-step in the eyes of the NATO alliance. As well, given the UK's significant nuclear commitment to NATO they were the main responsive power in Europe to any Soviet aggression. As such Britain developed these traits into a 'second centre' role in NATO, becoming the secondary leader of NATO. PM Thatcher was therefore onboard with the Double-Track decision as an assistance to their modernization and an opening for more options to respond to any Soviet aggression. The Double-Track decision also allowed for the UK to act as the main negotiator on the United States behalf. European trust in the United States had been

³⁹ (Stoddart 2014)

⁴⁰ (Stoddart 2014)

⁴¹ (Stoddart 2014)

⁴² (Freedman 2003)

lacking since the failure to deploy the neutron bomb in West Germany. Given the European mainland's misgivings about the United States, the United Kingdom acted as the recruiter to more neutral European powers and reinforce the integration of the United States nuclear force to the NATO alliance. In one such case, the Netherlands, PM Thatcher pressured the Dutch PM van Agt to join the side of deployments against their populist reservations in light of the neutron bomb.⁴³ At large the question for the UK and PM Thatcher became one of securing their role as the secondary leader of the NATO alliance.

⁴³ (Margaret Thatcher 1979)

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