

NATO Nations Far Apart On Timing of A-Trigger

By Bernard D. Nossiter
Washington Post Foreign Service

9/7/66

PARIS, Sept. 6 — Britain's balance-of-payments bind has exposed a curious hole in NATO's strategy: the organization has no agreed plan for the length of time its forces would fight a conventional war.

This fact of life is not new. Authorities at the NATO headquarters here say the organization has been living with this indeterminate state of affairs since its birth.

Now Britain's proposal to cut its military spending in Europe by about \$90 million has simply highlighted the problem again.

One official here remarked today "This is not so surprising. How can you be rational about the irrational, the length of time it should take before you have an all-out nuclear war."

Indeed, Robert S. McNamara, the Secretary of Defense, has gone further and suggested that the problem is not real. He dismisses any debate over the appropriate nuclear strategy as "abstract."

In NATO jargon, the problem is one of establishing the nuclear threshold. In less esoteric terms, it means planning for the length of time NATO forces would fight a conventional war before nuclear missiles were employed.

As a working hypothesis, the organization talks in terms of 90 days of conventional war supported by enough supplies on the continent to maintain troops for 30 days. In fact, according to officials here, only the United States maintains its share of the 30-day supply. Its 14 allies are all below this figure.

As part of her savings plan, Britain wants to cut her supply level to 10 days' worth of equipment. She would do this by closing down depots and other measures. This would spare the hard-pressed British reserves about \$40 million annually in foreign currency.

In the British view, any war in Europe would become nu-

clear a lot sooner than the working hypothesis forecasts. This notion is held by most of the other European NATO members, too.

Not surprisingly, opinions about the appropriate nuclear threshold reflect what nations conceive to be their interests. Those farthest from Russian troops are the strongest supporters of a graduated buildup to holocaust.

Thus, the Germans, Greeks and Turks have long pressed for a NATO stance that implied almost instant nuclear warfare.

The French developed a "tripwire" doctrine. Stripped of its niceties, it envisages a nuclear attack as soon as an

enemy penetration in force takes place.

The United States, with some support in the past from Britain has advocated a graduated deterrent. This means that Washington could envisage a longer time period in which so-called ordinary war raged on the continent before the United States exposed her cities to nuclear destruction.

Behind all this lie two other factors. For Europeans generally NATO strategic planning more and more appears to be an exercise in the unbelievable. The prevailing continental view is that any kind of war with the Soviet Union is unthinkable.

The second factor is technological. A new breed of giant transports enables nations to move troops and supplies so quickly from one point to another that large stockpiles no longer seem necessary.

American officials involved with NATO affairs are not showing any signs of alarm over the British proposal to cut supply stockpiles to ten days. Indeed, they say that the Joint Chiefs of Staff themselves have never agreed on a nuclear threshold for Europe.

The chief worry here is political. As part of their currency package, the British want to save about \$30 million either by having the Germans buy that much more from Britain or by reducing British forces on the continent.

American officials here are fearful that any reduction in British forces would imply a weaker British commitment to NATO. This, it is thought, would add to the woes of the Germans.

The alliance, it is said, has still not recovered from Paris' demand that American troops get out of France. In addition, the Germans are fretting over the reduction of American forces in Europe generally and fear more reductions are coming.

But if United States officials are unhappy over any cut in British troops, they do not want the Germans to pay for their retention at Washington's expense. With its own balance-of-payments problems, the United States has been pressing Bonn to pay for a bigger share of the cost of keeping American forces in Europe.