

“Let the MLF Sink Out of Sight”:
The Cold War and the Atlantic Alliance during
the Johnson Administration

*Itsuki KURASHINA**

INTRODUCTION

In the middle of the 1960s, the American proposed Multilateral Force (MLF) was an important focal point in negotiations between the United States and the Soviet Union, as well as among the members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The MLF was a proposal to put part of US strategic nuclear missiles under the common control of NATO members. Washington expected the MLF to modify the sense of inequality between the allies possessing nuclear weapons (the nuclear powers) and those without such weapons (the non-nuclear powers) and to discourage the latter's own nuclear development. Without such measures, the US government feared, unsatisfied non-nuclear powers, especially the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany), might develop their own nuclear arsenals. The MLF was designed to avoid nuclear proliferation within the alliance and to tighten its unity.

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*Associate Professor, Hiroshima City University

Yet, the MLF failed to calm frictions among the allies. Rather, it renewed concerns about West German nuclearization and challenged NATO. Not only the Soviets but also several NATO allies grew worried about German soldiers' participation in nuclear operations through the proposed "mixed-manned" MLF fleet. In the face of hesitation by NATO allies other than West Germany, several officials in Washington recommended new policies. Some of them found nuclear proliferation outside of Europe—such as in the People's Republic of China (PRC)—more dangerous and proposed acceleration of negotiations on the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Eventually, President Lyndon B. Johnson decided to prioritize the NPT and to block German participation in nuclear operations—that is, he decided to abandon the MLF.

This abortive project reveals an important aspect of the Cold War. Even though it was called a "war," US-Soviet confrontation after World War II was not a direct, open armed conflict. Rather, it was a mixture of ideological and geopolitical rivalry, avoidance of direct military clashes, and limited cooperation. Also, the two powers struggled for "men's minds and hearts" and to achieve friendly relations with countries all over the world. Their allies were indispensable as military cooperators, economic partners, and indicators of the attractiveness of ideologies. Yet, superpower relations and intra-alliance relations were not necessarily compatible. Actually, superpower relations could disturb the intra-alliance relations, and vice versa. These conflicts grew frequent in the 1960s, and the MLF was one clear example. It sat at the juncture of superpower relations and intra-alliance relations, and its fate was largely influenced by their mixture.¹

In this article I focus on the Johnson administration because the 36th US president finally abandoned the MLF. The project was first proposed at the end of 1960 by the administration of Dwight D. Eisenhower. President John F. Kennedy doubted the usefulness of the MLF but made no clear decisions on it. Why, then, did the Johnson administration mark the end of the MLF? How did Johnson deal with this legacy of his predecessors? And how did changes in superpower relations, intra-alliance relations, and the US international position, influence it? In order to consider these questions, I examine Johnson's policy toward the MLF in comparison with those of his predecessors.²

Study of the Johnson administration is advancing. Newly available documents have resulted in studies that tend to focus on issues other than Vietnam and to emphasize Johnson's leadership and his accomplishments.³ In regard to US-European relations, many studies stress Johnson's contribu-

tions to sustaining NATO despite challenges by French president Charles de Gaulle. Other studies stress his success in agreeing to the NPT with the Soviets and overcoming the MLF controversy.⁴ Yet, these studies fail to explain the problems in Europe in its long-term context because of their focus on individual administrations.⁵ In this article I compare Johnson’s policy with those of his predecessors and examine both continuity and difference to reveal long-term changes in US-European relations.

I. THE UNITED STATES AND GERMAN NUCLEAR ACQUISITION

In the late 1950s and 1960s, the spread of nuclear weapons was one of the most important issues for the US government. The MLF was one of the measures proposed to prevent nuclear development by Western European allies, especially West Germany. Eisenhower first proposed to NATO in 1960 that the United States put its middle-range nuclear missiles under the control of NATO. Later, the Kennedy administration revised the plan so that nuclear missiles would be deployed on mixed-manned surface ships while Washington would keep control of the nuclear warheads on these missiles.⁶

Preventing West German nuclearization was an important part of US policy. Even before the official establishment of West Germany in 1949, the US government was concerned about the country’s future. Its potential in military and economic fields was indispensable for containing Soviet expansion, but its recovery rekindled the memory of German threats. The policy of “double containment” was designed to modify this dilemma: West German entry into NATO in 1955 would mobilize its potential, while NATO would restrict West German freedom of action in the future.⁷

Acquisition of nuclear weapons by West Germany would break this fragile balance. The threat posed by a nuclear-armed Germany would make relaxing East-West tensions difficult. West Europeans would recall the damage inflicted by the Germans during the two world wars in the twentieth century. And the West Germans, confident with having their own nuclear weapons, might challenge United States in its leading position in the Western alliance. Yet, if Washington simply dismissed Bonn’s demands to improve its security, the Germans might feel their security was neglected. That would disturb US-German relations and the US alliance in Europe.⁸

Washington tried to solve this problem by a combination of two policies: nuclear sharing within NATO and arms control negotiations with the Soviets. The first was a promise to the NATO allies that they could use US

nuclear weapons if necessary. Such a promise was expected to make an independent nuclear force by a European country unnecessary. The second was seeking an international agreement to prevent the emergence of new nuclear powers. This aspect was part of US-Soviet negotiations under Eisenhower, after the conclusion of the Partial Test Ban Treaty (PTBT) in August 1963, nonproliferation came to the top of the agenda.⁹

However, neither nuclear sharing with Europe nor nonproliferation agreements with the Soviets could satisfy both superpower relations and intra-alliance relations. Pursuing an agreement with Moscow, Washington could encourage dialogue and reduce tensions between the two superpowers. A treaty not to allow West German access to nuclear weapons could have calmed Soviet worries. Yet, this effort raised suspicions among European allies that Washington might sacrifice their interests to improve US-Soviet relations.

On the other hand, nuclear sharing could calm allies' concerns about the credibility of US deterrence and contribute to the alliance's defense. Washington pursued two forms of nuclear sharing. A hardware solution, such as the MLF, meant physical participation of allies' soldiers in nuclear weapons operations, while a software solution allowed allies' participation in planning and targeting of nuclear weapons without physical access to them. The problem was that neither form of potential sharing eliminated the impression that nuclear sharing was little more than "de facto proliferation."¹⁰ In particular, the MLF and other hardware solutions could give the impression that West Germany had its finger on the nuclear trigger. It not only invited criticism from the Soviets but raised doubts within the alliance. Thus, successive administrations tried to find a proper balance between these two policies.

The Kennedy administration took this dilemma very seriously. It tried to reduce the possibility of a nuclear clash with the Soviets and, for that purpose, tried to secure sole control of nuclear weapons in the West for the United States. So Kennedy was reluctant to support the MLF, which would give US allies physical access to nuclear weapons. He was also willing to negotiate arms control under the Eighteen-Nation Disarmament Committee (ENDC), and reached an agreement with the Soviets on the PTBT in 1963. This interest in arms control made Kennedy uncomfortable with the MLF, a feeling that the Department of Defense shared. On the other hand, the Department of State remained supportive of the project.¹¹

Intra-alliance controversies forced the Kennedy administration to support the MLF, however. In the face of the growing autonomy of French

president de Gaulle and de Gaulle’s friendship with Konrad Adenauer, West Germany’s chancellor, Kennedy concluded that improvement of US-FRG relations was the task that was most in need of facing. He tried to convince the Germans that the United States, not France, could protect them from the Soviet threats and improve their position in NATO. The MLF was a proof of US support to the West Germans that should strengthen the pro-United States wing in Bonn, which included the vice-chancellor Ludwig Erhard and the foreign minister Gerhard Schröder.¹²

Even after Erhard and Schröder confirmed German ties with the United States and NATO, skepticism about the MLF was whispered about very discreetly in Washington. In mid-July, McGeorge Bundy, Kennedy’s national security advisor, warned Secretary of State Dean Rusk to avoid “any impression that the United States is trying to ‘sell’ the MLF to reluctant European purchasers.” Yet, in his conversation with State Department officials in August, Bundy did not oppose a US-West German bilateral agreement on an MLF in case other European countries did not participate.¹³ It is likely that Bundy held back from openly opposing the MLF rather than that he had changed his mind within a month. Even the president felt obliged to hide his disfavor of the MLF. In his July 10 conversation with Averell Harriman, US representative in PTBT negotiations, President Kennedy authorized him to indicate to the Russians that the United States might not stick to the MLF. This was contrary to Harriman’s official instruction not to compromise the MLF with the Soviets, which Kennedy had authorized. Yet, the record shows Kennedy did not clarify the exact quid pro quo of the MLF. This vague authorization, along with his refraining from opposing the official instructions to Harriman, shows that even the president could not question the MLF openly.¹⁴

This history shows that before the administration of Lyndon Johnson, Washington failed to decide its future course, on either the MLF or a nonproliferation treaty. Abandoning the MLF would have likely improved US-Soviet relations, but this decision was not taken due to concerns about the state of US-European relations. The MLF was expected to be an anchor that connected Europeans, especially the Germans, with the United States. Yet, it was not clear whether the MLF would really satisfy that expectation.

II. JOHNSON AND THE MLF

In the beginning of 1964, the Johnson administration was willing to

pursue the MLF. In April, the president authorized the State Department to hasten negotiations with allies and to consult with Congress, suggesting that Washington meant to put the MLF into force by the end of the year. Yet, the administration quietly began to shift course. Only seven months later, Johnson withdrew his support for the MLF and decided to observe West European negotiations from the sideline.

The close of MLF negotiations was set for the end of 1964 in order not to disturb the German general election in autumn 1965. Meeting this schedule became a priority for Washington. Thus, at the meeting of April 10, the president authorized the State Department to hasten the MLF negotiations.

Advocates of the MLF in Washington believed that US real support was necessary to realize this project. During the April meeting, Thomas Finletter, US ambassador to NATO, warned that US reluctance to take a clear position on the MLF had complicated negotiations in the past. Because Washington had been “diffident about the MLF,” European supporters could not persuade others that Washington truly wanted the MLF. George Ball, the under secretary of state, also assured the president that, with the US initiative, reaching agreement with the allies had “substantial possibility.” In the end, the president directed State Department officials to inform the Europeans that “the MLF was the best way to proceed.”¹⁵

Some scholars claim that the MLF supporters in the State Department misled the president, who paid little attention to the MLF issue.¹⁶ These supporters expected that the British and Italian governments would follow clear US initiatives, but this expectation turned out to be wrong. Rome could not solve this controversy within its governmental coalition, especially with the socialist party. And the British were expected to have a general election in the autumn.¹⁷ Yet, this cannot fully explain the decision to hasten the MLF negotiations on April 10. It is true that one loud voice of the MLF skeptics, the Defense Department, was not present at the meeting. Others, such as Bundy and William Foster, the director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, were present, and they expressed their reservations about the MLF. Yet, they refrained from questioning the State Department’s estimate of European reactions.¹⁸ This restricted attitude of the MLF skeptics indicates that there was a general reluctance to criticize the MLF continuing into the Johnson administration.

A factor that generated this reluctance was also continuing: the perceived weakness of US-West German relations. Erhard became the chancellor in October 1963, and his open-hearted support for close US-

West German relations reassured Washington. Yet, his domestic position was not stable because of opposition within his own Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and its sister party in Bavaria, the Christian Social Union (CSU). Former chancellor Adenauer, former defense minister Franz-Josef Strauss, and others criticized Erhard’s failure to sustain rapprochement with France.¹⁹ These pro-France politicians, the so-called Gaullists, in Bonn were the same people who had repeatedly requested West German access to nuclear weapons. Thus, it was difficult to exclude the possibility that a future Gaullist government in Bonn might follow the French course and acquire its own *force de frappe*. Such a government would be more cooperative with Paris and more independent from Washington. So, when Chancellor Erhard asserted that the failure of the MLF could raise concerns about future West German actions, he did not sound hyperbolic.²⁰

The MLF appeared as a measure to secure Erhard’s position and unite the CDU/CSU government because both the Gaullists and the Atlantikers, as the pro-United States wing was called, supported the project.²¹ Bonn repeatedly expressed its desire to sign the MLF agreement by the end of 1964 or early 1965. Wilhelm Grewe, West German ambassador to NATO, promoted this schedule. He insisted that the Britons and the Italians would join if the United States and the West Germans clarified their position. Grewe even claimed that a US-West German bilateral treaty should not be excluded if the other allies didn’t go along with it. At the end of March, Grewe asked Secretary of State Rusk if they could rush the schedule.²² Washington’s decision on April 10 was a response to the West German request to hasten the negotiations.

The April 10 decision backfired—it worried other European allies. The British government, for example, expressed concerns about US inflexibility in the proposed schedule. It also claimed that any decision was impossible before their general election in October. In addition, London proposed modification of the MLF’s surface ship force by expanding it with bombers and land-based missiles, even though US officials insisted on the original MLF proposal.²³ France also grew worried about the MLF’s impact on its position as the only nuclear power in continental Europe, and tried to discourage other European nations from participating in it. Naturally, de Gaulle’s first target was the West Germans. During his visit to Bonn in early July, de Gaulle was reported to have expressed “open opposition” to West German participation. Later, the French ambassador expressed directly to the US government his concerns about the MLF’s “divisive” impact on NATO and Europe. And the MLF actually divided

the German government because de Gaulle encouraged Gaullist criticism against the governmental policy.²⁴

In the face of European reluctance to adopt the MLF, concerns about the existing policy surfaced in Washington. Within the State Department, assistant secretary William Tyler wondered whether the United States had made “a very great mistake” by trying to impose the MLF on the Europeans. Later, he sent Bundy a “non-letter” that discussed European worries about the MLF’s “divisive” effects and US failure to mobilize support for it except in Bonn. Probably stimulated by this “non-letter,” Bundy started a staff study that proposed a review of the April 10 decision. Even though MLF advocates in the State Department reported their confidence in being able to persuade the Europeans, doubts about the MLF’s prospects were spreading.²⁵

It was in this context that, after the Labour victory in the British general election, the new prime minister Harold Wilson proposed the Atlantic Nuclear Force (ANF). Similar to the proposal of the Conservative government, the ANF would combine the British and US national nuclear forces with a smaller multilateral nuclear force than the original MLF. Bundy regarded this proposal as a possible alternative to the MLF, which “would be hard to achieve in view of hardening French opposition,” and tried to modify US insistence upon the MLF.²⁶

In his memorandum to President Johnson on November 8, Bundy reported that British hesitation and French opposition complicated the MLF negotiations, and the opinions in the US government were not united. Yet, officials at “lower levels of the Government” had been handling current US policy, and they could repeat the same mistakes. Bundy recommended tighter control of the MLF with White House clearance of all activities and documents relating to the MLF. He carefully hid his own skepticism in this memorandum but, later, he informed Ball of his conclusion “to let the MLF sink out of sight.”²⁷ The ANF was a catalyst that pushed the MLF skeptics to the surface.

Johnson took Bundy’s recommendation. On December 6, the president decided not to press the British to accept the MLF in his forthcoming meeting with Wilson. In the middle of December, he approved National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) No. 322. It ordered US officials not “to press for a binding agreement at this moment” and to “encourage direct discussion among Europeans.”²⁸ Once the United States stood aside from the MLF debate, and the MLF’s future became even more doubtful.

It is noteworthy that President Johnson’s withdrawal from the MLF was

the result of accumulating complaints about the project within the Western bloc. The ANF, another hardware solution, was the only alternative for a moment. Software solutions, such as information sharing and consultation on the use of nuclear weapons, were not seriously discussed yet. The arms control negotiations was a negligible factor. Even though the possibility of clashes between a nonproliferation treaty and the MLF was considered, the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency did not participate in Bundy’s review of the April 10 decision. Bundy even did not mention the arms control agency in his November 8 memorandum. He recognized the lack of alternatives to the MLF under the current considerations and asserted that future negotiations over alternatives could not be “worse than the MLF is today.”²⁹

On their side, the Soviets repeatedly criticized the MLF in the ENDC meetings and in other opportunities, but the United States did not seriously consider this criticism. Rather, the view of Foy D. Kohler, the US ambassador to the Soviet Union, that Moscow would accept the MLF when it became a reality was widely shared.³⁰ The Chinese nuclear test on October 16, 1964, did not seem to influence Bundy’s decisions, even though it might lead to a wider impact later. It was Ball, an MLF advocate, who referred to the Chinese test as “the forces for proliferation” and urged the United States to speed up MLF negotiations.³¹ In 1964, the Johnson administration did not take arms control negotiations very seriously.

In contrast to his two predecessors, Johnson first pursued the MLF at the cost of improvement in US-Soviet relations for arms control. His major motives were to calm West German worries about vocal Gaullist criticism. It can be considered as an extension of Kennedy’s policy in face of the de Gaulle-Adenauer friendship to solidify West German ties with the United States. However, when this policy initiative to improve the European alliance shook the Atlantic Alliance itself, Washington reconsidered it. It was still an open question which direction the US government would take to solve the problem of nuclear proliferation in the alliance.

III. PERSISTENCE OF THE MLF

Even if the effects were not immediate, NSAM No. 332 marked a turning point in US policy toward the MLF. After this decision, Washington gradually shifted its emphasis away from the MLF. Yet, this step was very slow because the administration did not find an alternative to nuclear sharing to calm the West Germans. Arms control negotiations at the ENDC did not

advance either due to the hardened Soviet position on nuclear sharing. Abandoning the MLF, the Johnson administration could not yet find a new policy on nonproliferation.

The difficulty in finding an alternative to the MLF emerged in the final report of the Task Force on Nuclear Proliferation, otherwise known as the Gilpatric Committee report. President Johnson established the committee after the Chinese nuclear test, and it submitted its report on January 21, 1965. The report recognized nuclear proliferation as a grave threat to US security and recommended negotiations for a nonproliferation agreement, a comprehensive test ban agreement, and nuclear-free zones.³² Following this report, Bundy requested Secretary of State Rusk and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara to consider reaffirming US support for the “principle” of a nonproliferation treaty at the end of March. In June, at Bundy’s initiative, the president approved NSAM No. 335 that authorized the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency to prepare a proposal for nuclear nonproliferation.³³ The Gilpatric Committee opened the way for the nonproliferation treaty.

Yet, regarding the MLF/ANF, the Gilpatric Committee could not present a united opinion. Instead, its report recognized the division. While some members believed the MLF/ANF was indispensable for deterring West German nuclear acquisition, others claimed that software solutions could be enough. This group argued that West German possession of nuclear weapons would not meet its national interest. The Soviets and French were expected to oppose the hardware solutions like the MLF, which would also weaken US security guarantees. Such opinions emerged despite their being MLF supporters in the committee. It is also noteworthy that the committee neglected Rusk’s reference to hardware solutions in Asia. The standard justification for the MLF, that physical access to US nuclear weapons was necessary to discourage the development of national nuclear forces, now grew less persuasive. Still, there was support for the MLF in Washington and among some allies, especially in Bonn.³⁴ The resiliency of support for the MLF became apparent soon after the adoption of NSAM No. 332. Just after this decision, the State Department abolished its office dedicated to the MLF and incorporated its tasks into the Bureau of European Affairs. When the media reported this change, the Erhard administration in Germany panicked and Gaullist criticism sharpened. German ambassador to the United States Heinrich Knappstein compared criticism of Foreign Minister Schröder in the cabinet to “a storm.” George McGhee, US ambassador to West Germany, also reported that Schröder was “at a loss as

to how next to proceed with the MLF” because Bonn believed US support was indispensable to move the MLF forward. In order to reassure Bonn, Rusk denied that there had been “a fundamental shift” in US policy.³⁵

The alleged change of policy on the MLF was not the sole reason for West Germany’s “near crisis of confidence with respect to its external relations.” For almost a year, Bonn’s new reunification plan had failed to get the endorsement of the three Western occupation powers. It was frustrating for the West Germans, whose feeling for reunification was, according to Knapstein, “approaching a state of hysteria.” The Erhard administration was under severe attack for its failure to get Western support, and it was not unrelated to the MLF debate. Among the Western occupation powers, France was most adamant in rejecting the endorsement, and Foreign Minister Couve de Murville indicated that French rejection was a response to Schröder’s open and strong support for the MLF. Clashes with France over the MLF spilled over into the reunification problem and shook confidence in the West German government’s foreign policy.³⁶

Contradictory to its repeatedly expressed support for the MLF, Bonn showed unwillingness to go ahead with the project. British Prime Minister Wilson visited Bonn in early March. Serious negotiations to settle their difference were expected, but Erhard decided not to discuss this problem before the general election in September. After his visit, Wilson reported to President Johnson that Chancellor Erhard did not press the nuclear issue in order not to disturb France and the Gaullists in his own party. Discussions in NATO also slowed down. Erhard visited the United States in June, but this did not advance the project of nuclear sharing either, though Erhard repeated his request for US commitment to the MLF.³⁷

Bonn’s confused attitudes complicated US perceptions of the Germans, and President Johnson downgraded his evaluation of Erhard. Adenauer had annoyed Washington by repeatedly requesting US assurance of defense of West Germany. Now Johnson found Erhard had the same habit, and he came to question Erhard’s hold on domestic politics. Receiving reports of West German demands to promote the MLF, Johnson expressed his irritation with “repeated and renewed German questions.” Bonn’s thinly veiled rejection of Washington’s request to show West Germany’s commitment to the war in Vietnam also disappointed Johnson. In spite of a US request, West Germany did not agree to send medical staff to Vietnam. Bonn’s reluctance to provide financial support for the US and British armies in Germany only made matters worse.³⁸

Bundy contributed to the president’s changing perception by expressing

doubts about the seriousness of Erhard's problems with the MLF. At the same time, Bundy seemed to be working to improve the president's view of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD). He arranged a summit meeting with SPD leader Willy Brandt in spite of Johnson's early rejection of the idea. Before the meeting, Bundy also called the SPD "the most consistently pro-American political force in Germany today." It is not clear whether Bundy favored the SPD or simply wanted to remain neutral on Germany's domestic politics. In any case, his willingness to treat the SPD as an alternative marked a clear contrast to Eisenhower's policy, which regarded CDU/CSU leadership consistent with US interests.³⁹

At the same time, other Europeans showed their hostility to the MLF. In the summer, London drew up a draft treaty on nonproliferation that prohibited "any association of states" from getting control of nuclear weapons. This would make the MLF/ANF impossible, so Washington, with Bonn's backing, demanded that the British draft be revised.⁴⁰ Analyzing the background of the British draft, the US Embassy in London assessed that it reflected British concerns about West Germany's eagerness for the MLF. The French government also expressed serious concerns about the MLF. In his meeting with US ambassador to NATO Finletter, French foreign minister Couve de Murville stated that the MLF would be "the first step toward the building of a German *force de frappe*." President de Gaulle also insisted to Under Secretary of State Ball that "with reference to nuclear matters" the Germans could not be equal to other Europeans.⁴¹ Opposition to the MLF was shared by London and Paris. They were likely pleased with the US and West German hesitation.

The deadlock over the MLF did not mean better prospects for alternatives to the MLF. Most important, the Soviets hardened their position not only against the MLF but also against *any* form of nuclear sharing. The Soviet delegates submitted a draft nonproliferation treaty to the General Assembly of the United Nations on September 24, 1965. Washington wondered if the Soviet draft prohibited the MLF as well as other hardware forms of nuclear sharing. Secretary of State Rusk's discussion with the Soviet ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin failed to clarify the Soviet position. Later, however, the chairman of the Soviet Council of Ministers, Alexei Kosygin, wrote to President Johnson and claimed that any physical access of non-nuclear powers to nuclear weapons was unacceptable to the Soviets. Also, the European non-nuclear powers' "participation in decisions on the question of nuclear strategy" were signs of proliferation.⁴² That meant a software solution was not acceptable for Moscow, either.

The last point was especially problematic because it could make alternative solutions to the MLF impossible. Secretary of Defense McNamara had proposed new measures to expand nuclear consultation and information sharing at the NATO ministerial meeting in May 1965. The idea was to create a select committee within NATO to discuss nuclear issues; this later developed into the Nuclear Planning Group.⁴³ Within the State Department, a study group proposed combining this nuclear consultation with a hardware solution to solve the MLF deadlock three days before the Soviet nonproliferation proposal.⁴⁴ The Soviet’s new position indicated that, as the MLF supporters claimed, Moscow was not seriously concerned about the MLF but was instead trying to exploit it to weaken NATO.

At this juncture, the general election in the FRG seemed only to worsen the situation. The Erhard administration secured victory and, after that, FRG officials began to once again stress the desirability of the MLF. The US State Department also argued that nuclear consultation could not substitute for a hardware solution. John Leddy, assistant secretary for European affairs, recommended that Rusk support Bonn’s demand for a hardware solution in the face of opposition from Bundy.⁴⁵

However, West German adamancy was more appearance than reality. In mid-November, the US Embassy in Bonn informed the State Department about Bonn’s possible acceptance of a compromise based on nuclear consultation and new arrangements for existing nuclear forces. The key was Bonn’s acquiescence to “at least postponing any decision for the creation of new forces.” This was similar to the State Department’s proposal on September 21. This news somewhat calmed the MLF opponents in the Johnson administration. For example, Bundy recommended a “real Johnson break-through” on the MLF at the end of November, but, just before the Johnson-Erhard meeting in December, he reported to the president that renewed pressure on Erhard would be unnecessary. Even though some elements of the West German ideas were unacceptable, they were worth listening to.⁴⁶

Examining the reasons for German modification of the MLF is not the purpose of this article. Still, US documents show that Chancellor Erhard continuously faced a difficult domestic situation even after the election victory. The Bureau of Intelligence and Research within the State Department reported that the Gaullists remained influential within the CDU/CSU. As a result, Erhard could not make his policy toward the MLF prevail. Also, Erhard had to pay close attention to de Gaulle’s attitude in the middle of the

“empty seat” crisis, or paralysis of the European Economic Community due to French refusal to participate to any decision making. The US Mission to the European Communities informed the State Department that, considering the French opposition, insistence on pursuing the MLF could give de Gaulle an “additional instrument for blackmailing” EEC members. So, it was desirable to postpone the MLF for a few months. In response, Leddy claimed that Bonn might prefer an early decision to “present the French with *a fait accompli*.”⁴⁷ Erhard, who could not fully control the Gaullists within his own party, chose to compromise on the MLF.

Given West Germany’s more flexible position, withdrawal from the MLF was almost in sight. Of course, the problem was not settled completely. It was only in April 1966 that the president approved NSAM No. 345, which authorized negotiations about nuclear consultation and postponed the hardware solutions. It took almost a year for the United States and the Soviet Union to officially obtain Soviet acceptance of nuclear consultation in NATO and agreement on the wording for the nonproliferation treaty’s first article.⁴⁸ Yet, the basic problem was solved by the end of 1965 because all parties finally agreed that the MLF was not achievable.

Debates over the MLF in 1965 show that the Johnson administration did not take the initiative to resolve the dilemma. In the end, the West German government solved it by indicating its willingness to withdraw from the plan. In one sense, this was a success of “education”—scrutinizing the problem by themselves, the West Germans gave up on the MLF.⁴⁹ Clear divisions within the US government show that this educational effect was more by accident than by US policy design.

CONCLUSION

In this article I have shown that the MLF’s demise was more the result of intra-alliance relations than superpower relations. The MLF failed to fulfill its original purpose of calming tensions within NATO. It was designed to strengthen the weakened credibility of US extended deterrence, but actually it raised worries about Bonn’s possible access to nuclear weapons and sharpened frictions among Europeans. This intra-alliance tension led to the decision by the United States to “let the MLF sink” under its own weight.

US-Soviet relations played a relatively small role in this development. It does not mean that the will to relax tensions between the two superpowers had no influence on the eventual abandonment of the MLF. Yet, as far as the documents indicate, it was not hope for better superpower relations that

encouraged the Johnson administration to reconsider its proposed policy of nuclear sharing. For Washington in 1964 and 1965, the prospect of US-Soviet détente was not a strong enough goal to sacrifice close ties with European allies. This revelation encourages further examination of the Johnson administration, especially the emphasis on the administration’s contribution to improving US-Soviet relations.

This article also helps in understanding the nature of the Cold War, especially the mixture of superpower and intra-alliance relations. MLF supporters and skeptics in Washington, Western European capitals, and even Moscow, expressed concern about the future of Germany if they had access to nuclear arms. All sides worried about the possibility that West Germany might take its own course and start a third world war in Europe. What divided the various actors were the measures considered suitable to prevent such a possibility: Would the MLF be another anchor to connect the FRG to the West, or would it be a fig leaf to hide the emergence of a powerful, militant Germany. Even in the mid-1960s, worries about the military might of Germany had not yet been wiped out. These continuous worries influenced the development of US policy in the Cold War.

The MLF episode also exposes the signs of the transformation in intra-alliance relations. The Johnson administration eventually gave up the MLF, the proposal that the Erhard administration supported, in the face of domestic and French criticism. This abandonment of an ally is at variance with the United States giving full support to Saigon, an unpopular government in South Vietnam. And the MLF was not the end of the issue, because President Johnson initiated the fall of Erhard on the issue of troop-stationing costs.⁵⁰ This seems to indicate a change in the relative importance of Western Europe for the United States: European states grew less important as Cold War allies and were more the cause of concern as economic competitors.⁵¹ The MLF demise was a result of the widening gap within the Atlantic Alliance.

NOTES

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¹ See Melvyn P. Leffler, *For the Soul of Mankind: The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Cold War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007), quote at 111; Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945–1963* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Francis J. Gavin, “Blasts from the

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²⁸ *FRUS* 1964–68 XIII, 133–34, 165–67.

²⁹ *FRUS* 1964–68 XIII, 121–22.

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⁵¹ This conclusion is partly stimulated by Yoshihiko Mizumoto’s comment during the 2012 annual conference of the Japanese Association of International Relations. Gavin in “Blasts from the Past,” 131–33, claims that West Germany had grown less important for Johnson.