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### **NATO Strategic Concepts: From "Massive Retaliation" to "Flexible Response"**

The creation in 1949 of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization brought together in time of peace under the same security umbrella the countries of Western Europe, the United States of America and Canada for the purpose of deterring and defending themselves against a possible aggression from the Soviet Union and her satellites in Central and Eastern Europe.

The aim of this paper is to analyze the first strategic concepts put forward by the alliance in the first twenty years of its existence and to determine if these concepts represented realistic attempts to find an answer to the security dilemmas confronting NATO or they were just exercises in wishful thinking. I shall argue that the first two strategic concepts coined and adopted by NATO between 1949-1968, "massive retaliation" and "flexible response", were the best compromises the alliance planners had come up with in order to balance the alliance need for security, the dissensions within the alliance over deterring and defending against a possible Soviet attack and integrating nuclear weapons in a broad strategic framework. Consequently in order to make my case I shall use in this paper the documents which expounded the strategic concepts of NATO as well as historical data in order to explain the context which led to the adoption of the first two strategic concepts.

The framework of analysis for the strategic concepts of NATO is built around the definition of strategy as "the use of armed force to achieve the military objectives, and by extension, the political purpose of the war"<sup>1</sup> as well as Karl von Clausewitz's assertion that war is the continuation of politics by other means. Clausewitz's assertion about the political

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Paret in Peter Paret, Gordon A. Craig, and Felix Gilbert (eds) *Makers of Modern Strategy: from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1986, p.3.

nature of war means that any strategy or security policy must entail a number of alternative courses of action for different contingencies and in any war or conflict the political the political purpose must guide the actions on the battlefield.

The end of World War II brought about the beginning of a contest for power that had dominated almost the entire second half of the XX century: the rivalry between the United States of America and the Soviet Union, known as the Cold War. The contest for power between the former allies of World War II began as soon as the war ended, when the Soviet Union transformed the countries of Central and Eastern Europe into her satellites and it seemed that even that won't be enough to satisfy the interest of the U.S.S.R.

As N.S.C. - 68 accurately describes the intensions of the USSR: "The Kremlin's policy towards areas not under its control is the elimination of resistance and the extension of its influence and control"<sup>2</sup>; in order to check the expansion of Soviet influence and control over the countries of Western Europe which were unable to provide adequately for their defense in the late 1940's as they were still recovering from the effects of the previous conflict, the United States together with these states decided to create an alliance that will safeguard Western Europe from the possibility of falling under the influence of the U.S.S.R. .

The reason why the United States got involved, for the first time since in its history, in a peacetime alliance was that the prospect of the Soviet Union controlling the entire European continent would provide the latter with the means to strike at the Western Hemisphere, a possibility deemed unthinkable and catastrophic by American policy makers. Therefore NATO was created in 1949 to protect the United States of America and her allies in Europe from such a catastrophic political development. The linchpin of the new alliance was the American guarantee to intervene against a possible aggression on what came to be known the North Atlantic Treaty area.

However in April 1949 when the treaty was signed in Washington D.C. nobody expected that NATO will develop in a full fledged military organization, but the beginning in 1950 of the Korean War removed all doubts over the role of NATO within the international system.

The historical background in which NATO was created wouldn't be complete if the role of atomic weapons would not be taken into consideration. Indeed without them the security guarantee of the United States towards NATO countries would have meant nothing. Under the umbrella of the American strategic arsenal (though still limited at the time when NATO was created) the development of a reliable deterrent against possible aggression could have undergone. Besides the critical role played by nuclear weapons in the creation of

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<sup>2</sup> N.S.C. -68, [www.fas.org/irp/offdocs/nsc-hst/nsc-68.htm](http://www.fas.org/irp/offdocs/nsc-hst/nsc-68.htm) site consulted November 20<sup>th</sup> 2004

the alliance, they will also play a divisive between the United States and its European allies, as the former will insist for many years to maintain a monopoly regarding technical data and plans for the use of such weapons, while the latter will have to wait until the 1960's in order to have a say in this field of military planning.

The advent of nuclear weapons had deep implications for both politicians and military planners in the aftermath of World War II, their awesome power of devastation giving them a somewhat mythical aura. In the Korean War although atomic weapons were not used, American hints that they might be used helped to broker an armistice by 1954. In the words of Secretary of State John Foster Dulles the security of the United States in the nuclear age depended "primarily upon a great capacity to retaliate instantly, by means and places of our own choosing".<sup>3</sup>

Not surprisingly in the first strategic concept of the alliance nuclear weapons were given both the role of ultimate deterrent and ultimate defense against any aggression of the USSR and her allies upon the members of NATO. This strategic concept came to be known as "massive retaliation" and was adopted in December 1952 by the North Atlantic Council as the M.C.-14/1.

The defense policy of NATO expounded in M.C.-14/1 was based on the assumptions that the objective of the alliance during peacetime was to convince the USSR that "*war does not pay*"<sup>4</sup> and if war broke out to defend the North Atlantic Area. In analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of the Soviet Union and her allies it was found that it possessed a vast land mass and power complex, the Soviet block had the ability to project military power into adjacent areas supported on virtually invulnerable interior lines of communication, it possessed numerical superiority in terms of manpower, it was not significantly vulnerable to sea action and it had a preponderant advantage in ground warfare<sup>5</sup>.

If the USSR and her satellites decided to mount an attack in Western Europe the objective of NATO was to destroy the aggressor's will and capacity to wage war. This objective would have been achieved by means of an air offensive and by simultaneously conducted air, ground and sea operations. The allies believed that only through the strategic and tactical use of air power where NATO, especially the United States which had a clear advantage over the Soviet block in this field, could an onslaught launched against the area of responsibility of the alliance might have been stopped. The rationale behind the use of

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Lawrence Freedman's "The first Two Generations of Nuclear Strategists" in Peter Paret, Gordon A. Craig, and Felix Gilbert, "*Makers of Modern Strategy: from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*", Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1986, p.738.

<sup>4</sup> M.C.-14/1, p.6

<sup>5</sup> Idem, p.8

strategic air power armed with nuclear weapons was that in 1952 the alliance lacked the conventional means to counter what they believed to be the threat of 175 Soviet and satellite divisions ready to strike at Western Europe.<sup>6</sup>

M.C.-14/1 envisaged in the first phase of operations to counter the Soviet offensive by every means available (from strategic air forces to “unconventional operations”) and to ensure that the allies still had the ability to carry out “strategic air attacks, by all means possible and with all types of weapons”<sup>7</sup>. In Western Europe the aim of the defense was to hold the “enemy as far to the east as possible”<sup>8</sup> in Germany, which translates in the concept of forward defense. This was primarily the task of land forces which would have been aided by tactical and strategic air forces delivering a wide variety of ordnance.

Being the first strategic concept put forward by the alliance and created in quite a short span of time since the inception of NATO one should expect some inherent errors and given the fact that accurate intelligence on the USSR was not available in 1952, these errors would have been unavoidable. Nevertheless the emphasis placed on air power, nuclear or conventionally armed, as the key factor of deterring and defeating a possible aggression is unwarranted because air power alone cannot win wars<sup>9</sup>. Air power can only support ground operations otherwise it cannot conquer or hold objectives. Why then air power received such an important place in NATO strategy?

The answer to this question has to take into consideration the realities confronting the United States and its allies in the early 1950s. After the war the United States had disarmed itself, keeping just what was considered to be absolutely necessary and developed its atomic arsenal. As for the Europeans the process of rebuilding their economies after the end of the previous war was their number one priority, leaving aside any serious spending on defense. The result of these evolutions was that the only clear cut advantage the allies had was in the field of strategic air power and in nuclear weapons, despite the fact that in 1949 the USSR had detonated her first nuclear device.

The emphasis placed by the allies on the use of nuclear weapons was due to the fact that in 1952 these weapons offered the prospect of security without the high costs which the development of a conventional force would have incurred.<sup>10</sup> A nuclear based strategy was preferred especially by the European members of the alliance, which for political and economic reasons could not afford a conventional force. Psychologically the threat of 175

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<sup>6</sup> Schwartz, David N., “NATO’s Nuclear Dilemmas”, The Brookings Institution, Washington D.C. 1983, p.17

<sup>7</sup> M.C.14/1, p.10.

<sup>8</sup> M.C.-14/1, p. 17.

<sup>9</sup> Mearsheimer, John J., “*The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*”, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, London, 2001, pp.99-110.

<sup>10</sup> Schwartz, David N., “*NATO’s Nuclear Dilemmas*”, The Brookings Institution, Washington D.C., 1983, pp 16-17.

divisions amassed on the other side of the iron curtain was too much for them, consequently they reasoned why should spend large amounts of money on conventional forces, when nuclear weapons offered security cheaply. The United States was forced however to develop a conventional force as it was fighting a war in Korea, while building up its nuclear arsenal. At the same time it urged its European allies to contribute to the development of an adequate conventional force for NATO.

Forward defense was also another problem of M.C.-14/1 which raises questions over the validity of the concept. The inclusion of such a concept in the strategic planning has more to do with politics rather than military planning. The United States wanted to assure West Germany of its commitment to its defense in case of an attack by Soviet forces. At the same time it wanted to reassure Germans that their country will not become a battlefield, despite the fact that it was not then possible neither to receive warning of an impending Soviet thrust or either to hold such a thrust at the border or at least to limit the Soviet penetration into Germany by conventional means.

However the underlying problem of M.C.-14/1 was the credibility of the deterrence power of the threat to use nuclear weapons in case of an attack by Soviet Russia. It is one thing to declare that any attack upon a NATO member will be met with a massive retaliatory strike and another to actually put it into action. As many critics pointed out the threat of an all out nuclear attack will be hopelessly inadequate against, for example, a small scale probing attack made by the Soviet Union against a NATO country, a repeat of the Berlin crisis or politico- military pressures against a member of the alliance.

Another line of critique dealt with the ability of the Soviet Union to play catch up and overcome the American advantage in terms of nuclear weapons and the means to deliver them. Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara accurately pointed out this possibility in the early 1960s:

“One reason why we cannot continue to rely on retaliatory air power as a sufficient deterrent is the effect of time. We have a substantial lead in air power and atomic weapons. But with the passage of time, even though we continue our advances in this field, the value of our lead diminishes”.<sup>11</sup>

An alternative to use this advantage efficiently was to develop under its umbrella a balanced collective force “that will continue to deter aggression after our atomic advantage has diminished”<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> Schwartz, David N., “NATO’s Nuclear Dilemmas”, The Brookings Institution, Washington D.C., 1983, p.20.

<sup>12</sup> Idem.

Sometimes even the proponents of massive retaliation had doubts about the practicality of the concept and publicly expressed in unguarded comments such as the one made by the US Secretary of State Christian Herter in 1959:

"I cannot conceive of any President engaging in all out nuclear war, unless we were in danger of all out devastation ourselves".<sup>13</sup>

Consequently the United States had a hard time demonstrating to their allies across the Atlantic that their nuclear guarantee was iron clad and they could depend on it in times of crisis.

Meanwhile the European allies of the United States, particularly France, Great Britain and West Germany, were gradually losing faith in the American nuclear guarantee, as they came to believe that the US will not risk for example Chicago for say Hamburg or any other European city in case of a nuclear attack of the Soviet Union against Western Europe. The Suez crisis of 1956 when the United States reprimanded France and Britain for invading Nasser's Egypt indicated that they could not rely on American support for their vital interests. Consequently France and Great Britain began building their own nuclear arsenals in order to make up for the American guarantee, while Germany developed a conventional capability and seeking access to nuclear weapons under a dual key arrangement with the United States. European fears were further fuelled by the American calls to develop conventional capabilities in order to broaden the capabilities of NATO. A previous gesture of the Truman Administration to send 6 divisions in Europe to form the nucleus of a NATO conventional force, did not go well with European governments as they interpreted the action as a sign that the United States were not serious regarding their strategic guarantee.<sup>14</sup>

The lack of confidence in the American nuclear guarantee along with the development of national nuclear arsenals by Great Britain and France, coupled with the unwillingness of the Americans to exchange informations regarding nuclear weapons and strategy gave rise to tensions within NATO on the issue of nuclear policy.

Nevertheless the question did "massive retaliation" helped NATO in any way still remains. One answer is that "massive retaliation" was more of declaratory policy used to obtain political leverage in uncertain times. The rationale behind "massive retaliation" was that the choice of response was not going to be restricted, but the authors never envisaged that the United States will turn any small scale conflict into an all out nuclear war.

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<sup>13</sup>Quoted in Lawrence Freedman "The first Two Generations of Nuclear Strategists" in Peter Paret, Gordon A. Craig, and Felix Gilbert, *Makers of Modern Strategy. From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1986, p.745.

<sup>14</sup> Schwartz, David N., *"NATO's Nuclear Dilemmas"*, The Brookings Institution, Washington D.C., 1983, pp.19-20.

Consequently “massive retaliation” must be viewed as a short term solution to the security dilemmas facing the United States and NATO.

If one considers the fact in the 1950s and for the most part of the 1960s the United States had enjoyed a clear superiority in terms of nuclear weapons and delivery means, “massive retaliation” for all its faults proved to be if not the best answer at least an adequate mean to contain the expansion of the Soviet Union.

Yet as time passed the Soviet Union continued to develop her nuclear arsenal and American policymakers and planners believed that over the long term this arsenal would become relevant. From a military point of view, however sacrificing conventional capabilities in favor of building up nuclear arsenals left NATO vulnerable to probing attacks, border incidents, limited conventional aggression against an individual member of NATO and politico-military pressures from the Soviet bloc. In a speech delivered in Cincinnati in 1958 the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) the American General Lauris Norstad voiced his concerns over the apparent vulnerability in terms of conventional capabilities and their overall potential impact during crises:

“In an era of nuclear plenty and of delivery means adequate in number and in effectiveness, the NATO Shield provides us with an option more useful than a simple choice between all or nothing. Should we fail to maintain reasonable Shield strength on the NATO frontier, then massive retaliation could be our only response to an, aggression regardless of its nature. There is a real danger that inability to deal decisively with limited or local attacks could lead to our piecemeal defeat or bring on a general war. If, on the other hand we have means to meet less than ultimate threats, with a decisive, but less than ultimate response, the very possession of this ability would discourage the threat and would thereby provide us with essential political and military maneuverability.”<sup>15</sup>

In order to address this vulnerability the SACEUR devised a plan calling for a 30 division strong active force with another 30 divisions in reserve and the creation of a NATO nuclear arsenal. The conventional force required seemed excessive for the European members of NATO which couldn't afford such defense spendings for economic and political reasons. This plan also fuelled their fears that America's nuclear guarantee is not serious, as it will mean, if ever used, the destruction of American cities in case of Soviet retaliatory strike. Moreover the Europeans allies of the United States also feared that in case of nuclear war, they will have no say what whatsoever in the decision to retaliate. In short they feared that they will be abandoned in case that nuclear deterrence failed and that they face

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<sup>15</sup> Ibidem, p.58.

destruction if the United States would launch retaliatory nuclear strikes against the USSR, which in turn will launch its nuclear weapons against Western Europe.<sup>16</sup>

Meanwhile across the ocean American policymakers and planners scrambled to quail the fears of their European partners. However the solutions they came up with to solve the problems facing the alliance were rather technical than part of a comprehensive strategy. Ever since the Eisenhower Administration replaced the Truman Administration, America began cutting back on defense spending and concentrated on increasing its nuclear arsenal, expecting that European countries will develop conventional forces in order to make up for the American cutbacks. Those who advocated and developed this policy believed that the Europeans will accept this division of labor within NATO, ignoring the latter's fears. Now in order to put the Europeans at ease the United States offered intermediate range ballistic missiles and in 1957 created a NATO nuclear arsenal<sup>17</sup>.

The nuclear weapons and delivery means were offered on the basis of a "*double key*" arrangement in which the United States provided the hardware and its European partners manned the systems and build bases for them, while the decision to use them had to be taken together. This arrangement satisfied the American interest of having a unitary command over the launching of nuclear weapons in order to make massive retaliation credible and avoid the fallacies of uncoordinated nuclear strikes by national arsenals. However only three countries accepted to base the IRBMs on their territories: Great Britain, Italy and Turkey. In the 1960s the United States initiated another program destined at creating a viable NATO nuclear force called the Multilateral Force, which consisted of a number of ships armed with medium range ballistic missiles and manned by international crews from member nations. The authorization to launch these was given to the SACEUR only in specific circumstances while in any other situation the SACEUR needed the approval of the North Atlantic Council and of the United States. However the proposition did not go well with the European members: France considered it just another ploy of the United States to hinder the development of national atomic arsenals and to impose its will on Europe while Great Britain dismissed it on technical grounds arguing that it will be impossible to man the ships due to the heterogeneity of the crews.<sup>18</sup>

The reasons behind the American MLF initiative were both strategic and political. Strategic because in order to make "massive retaliation" work the Americans believed that all nuclear weapons should be under unitary command in order to be deployed effectively in case that deterrence failed. Furthermore from political perspective national arsenals created

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<sup>16</sup> Ibidem, p51.

<sup>17</sup> Schwartz, David N, op. cit p.65.

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem, op. pp82-85.

tensions within the alliance, dividing members in two categories: nuclear capable and non nuclear members, particularly the United States feared that West Germany would have a second rate status within NATO due to its policy of not developing nuclear weapons. However some believed that the United States was promoting inequality within the alliance by treating Great Britain preferentially in nuclear matters quoting the Nassau agreement, by which the British were sold Polaris submarine launched ballistic missiles and technology to build the submarines to carry them<sup>19</sup>. Consequently what was considered by the United States a legitimate initiative to end the debates over nuclear weapons turned out to be just another dividing issue between NATO members. Finally the proposition had to be scrapped by the US Defense Secretary Robert McNamara in 1965.

In the United States the debate regarding the viability of "massive retaliation" as a credible deterrence produced unexpected results in civilian circles, especially in think tanks such as the RAND Corporation, which was asked by the Pentagon to carry out studies regarding the consequences of a nuclear war between the United States and Soviet Union. The study commissioned by the US Air Force showed that there was a possibility to control nuclear war by targeting the enemy's nuclear arsenal and by sparing the enemy's urban and industrial centers which it was hoped will provide him with incentives to spare American cities and to offer the necessary political leverage to end hostilities on terms favorable to the West. Targeting enemy nuclear weapons sites was called "counterforce" and holding hostage enemy cities was called "countervalue" and these concepts will form the backbone of the strategy of flexible response which will replace "massive retaliation" as NATO's strategic concept.<sup>20</sup>

In parallel studies dedicated to assessing the Soviet Union's military capabilities and economic and demographic potentials, it was discovered that the previous estimates of Soviet forces had grossly overestimated the nature of the threat and the number of 175 Soviet and satellites divisions poised to strike at Western Europe was not real. Consequently a revision of NATO strategy was called for, with emphasis being placed on developing conventional capabilities.<sup>21</sup>

The new strategy was presented by the United States in 1961 to its European allies at a NATO ministerial meeting in Athens. The goal of flexible response was to give NATO the capability to defend against Warsaw Pact aggression with conventional means so effective that the enemy would be forced to make a decision to escalate hostilities to the nuclear

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<sup>19</sup> Kissinger, Henry, *"Diplomatie"*, Ed. BIC ALL, Bucuresti 2002, pp. 530-535

<sup>20</sup> Schwartz, David N., *"NATO's Nuclear Dilemmas"*, The Brookings Institution, Washington D.C., 1983, pp.136-137.

<sup>21</sup> Idem

level, and in doing so face the devastating consequences of an American strategic attack.<sup>22</sup> However the Soviet Union in making such a decision would have to consider the risk of a devastating nuclear response from the United States and NATO, consequently it was believed that faced with the consequences of using first nuclear weapons the Soviets will search for a negotiated settlement.

European reactions to the new American strategy were negative in the beginning and the adoption of "flexible response" seemed impossible or at least far fetched in 1961. The main European concern was that "flexible response" made nuclear war controllable and therefore it will invite aggression not deter it<sup>23</sup>. For the United States the practical consequence derived from "flexible response" was the prospect of a wide range of political courses of action to choose from before considering the choice of general nuclear war. The Europeans, especially France however feared that the wide range of choices will weaken the credibility of nuclear deterrence and that counterforce options actually offered the USSR incentives to attack first because it threatened her retaliatory forces. Another issue with which the French did not agree with was the American demand of unitary command over the deployment of nuclear weapons, which was included in the version of "flexible response" presented in Athens by Robert McNamara. The Americans believed that only having a unitary command over deployment of nuclear weapons would make counterforce and countervalue targeting effective and credible.

The disputes between France and the United States on the issue of nuclear arsenals and over "flexible response" led French president Charles De Gaulle to withdraw his country from NATO's military structures and to demand the withdrawal of American troops from France. However the French withdrawal from the military structures of NATO paved the way for the adoption of "flexible response" as the new strategic concept of the alliance, but it was adopted in a different version than the one proposed by R. McNamara in Athens in 1961. The new version which was backed especially by Germany held that a credible and strong deterrence lay in NATO's ability to escalate the hostilities in case war broke out between NATO and the Warsaw Pact to the nuclear level. This version clearly calmed European fears that the United States will not use its nuclear arsenal in case Europe was attacked by the Warsaw Pact.<sup>24</sup>

In order to avoid further divisions within the organization over nuclear policy the United States created a body within NATO in which matters regarding nuclear strategy would be discussed. Membership within this body was extended to all NATO members

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<sup>22</sup> Schwartz, David N., " *NATO's Nuclear Dilemmas*", The Brookings Institution, Washington D.C., 1983, p.177

<sup>23</sup> Kissinger, Henry, " *Diplomatie*", Ed. BIC ALL, Bucuresti 2002, pp. 530-535

<sup>24</sup> Schwartz, David N., " *NATO's Nuclear Dilemmas*", The Brookings Institution, Washington D.C., 1983, p.177

regardless if they were nuclear capable or non nuclear members. The Nuclear Planning Group offered the opportunity the Europeans had always wanted to be consulted and informed on the nuclear policy and strategy of the United States<sup>25</sup>. Consequently the doubts over the credibility of the nuclear strategic guarantee of United States gradually disappeared from the minds of European statesmen.

“Flexible response” was adopted at a ministerial meeting of the alliance on May 9 1967<sup>26</sup>. The new strategic concept stated that the objective of NATO was to preserve peace and security in the North Atlantic Treaty Area against any “possible, threatened or actual aggression”. Credible deterrence against any form of aggression ranging from covert operations to all out nuclear war was the mean through which peace and security were guaranteed.

In the first paragraph it was clearly stated that an adequate deterrence meant NATO forces had to be properly trained and equipped so that the Warsaw Pact “will conclude that if they launched an armed attack the chances of a favorable decision to them are too small to be acceptable and that fatal risks could be involved”. The wording of the paragraph clearly reflects the determination of NATO to use if required nuclear weapons. In case of war MC 14/3 states that the military objective of the alliance is to preserve or restore the integrity of its area of responsibility “by employing such forces as may be necessary within the concept of forward defense.”<sup>27</sup>

Compared with MC14/1, MC14/3 asses better the capabilities, intentions and possible courses of action of the Warsaw Pact. The document states that the leaders of the Soviet Union have not given up on their objective to extend Soviet influence around the world, even though the policies by which they seek to attain their goal have been affected by “political changes in the world and to the continuing existence of a credible Western deterrent, the fundamental issues underlying the tension between East and West have not been resolved”. In the pursuit of their objective the Soviet leaders will concentrate all their means available to them including economic, political, propaganda, subversion and military power.<sup>28</sup>

In their assessment of the possible forms of aggression against the alliance, NATO planners believed that the Warsaw Pact will continue undermine and weaken NATO in order to ensure the withdrawal and dispersion of its military forces. The possible ways in which

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<sup>25</sup> Ibidem, p.186

<sup>26</sup> M.C. -14/3 p.i

<sup>27</sup> Ibidem, p.3

<sup>28</sup> Ibidem, p.4

the USSR and her satellites are going to attack NATO were covert action, limited aggression, major aggression, deliberate attack, accident and/or miscalculation.<sup>29</sup>

Deterrence against these possible forms of aggression is based on three premises: the manifest determination of NATO members to act jointly and defend themselves against all forms of aggression, the capability of alliance to respond effectively regardless of the level of aggression and flexibility "which will prevent the potential aggressor from predicting with confidence NATO's specific response to aggression, and which will lead him to conclude that an unacceptable degree of risk would be involved regardless of the nature of his attack."<sup>30</sup> The last premise forms the cornerstone of the entire concept, NATO being determined to maintain strategic initiative in any contingency and enjoying also the psychological advantage of surprising the aggressor with the level of its response.

In case of war, if deterrence should fail, NATO had three possible types of military response: direct defense, deliberate escalation and general nuclear response. Direct defense is defined as defeating the aggression at the level it occurs and a successful direct defense either defeats the enemy or places upon the enemy "the burden of escalation". In conducting direct defense the use of nuclear weapons is not prohibited.<sup>31</sup>

The next level of response is deliberate escalation which involves countering the aggressor by raising and controlling if possible the scope and intensity of combat in order to convince the aggressor that he is assuming disproportionate risks and costs to his objectives and nuclear response is imminent. The purpose of deliberate escalation is to weaken its will to fight rather than defeat him. According to the situation deliberate escalation means: broadening or intensifying conventional engagements, use of nuclear defense and denial weapons, demonstrative use of nuclear weapons, selective nuclear strikes on interdiction targets and selective nuclear strikes against other suitable military targets.

Finally the third option, general nuclear response which is a massive nuclear attack against the enemy's nuclear forces, other military targets and industrial and urban centers if the enemy launches a major nuclear attack. It is considered to be ultimate deterrent as well as the ultimate military response in case of war.<sup>32</sup>

Compared to "massive retaliation", "flexible response" had the advantage of offering a wide range of choices to NATO and the United States, however no one really knew what would have happened if NATO was forced to use nuclear weapons to halt a Warsaw Pact

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<sup>29</sup> MC-14/3 pp. 5-6

<sup>30</sup> Ibidem, p.10

<sup>31</sup> Idem

<sup>32</sup> Idem p.11

onslaught into Western Europe<sup>33</sup>. Even a demonstrative shot would have been enough to trigger massive Soviet retaliatory strike. Nevertheless with all the unknowns involving nuclear war, there was also a slight probability that in case of war the two sides might be forced to settle the dispute at the negotiating table. The existence of an adequate conventional capability for NATO offered such a probability.

The form in which "flexible response" was adopted 1967 reflected a compromise between America's need for strategic options during crisis and Europe's need for security. By the 1960's NATO had around 28-29 front line divisions ready in Europe and it also enjoyed superiority in some areas such as anti-tank weapons<sup>34</sup>. If one should add that although USSR had a potent nuclear arsenal, the United States still enjoyed superiority over its rival in terms of accuracy and delivery means<sup>35</sup>, then "flexible response" was not just a workable compromise, but a powerful deterrent that offered necessary political leverage to make the USSR think twice before acting.

"Massive retaliation" and "flexible response" had not been exercises in wishful thinking. Had it been so then the United States and NATO would not have witnessed the fall of communism in 1989 in Central and Eastern Europe or the dissolution of the USSR. The first two strategic concepts of NATO had been created to satisfy specific needs of the United States and her allies. They were not perfect, but they represented the best policy that was available at the time of their inception and the alliance could build on them.

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<sup>33</sup> Michael Carver, "Conventional Warfare in the Nuclear Age" in Peter Paret, Gordon A. Craig, and Felix Gilbert, *Makers of Modern Strategy: from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1986, p. 786

<sup>34</sup> Schwartz, David N., "NATO's Nuclear Dilemmas", The Brookings Institution, Washington D.C., 1983, p190

<sup>35</sup> Bernard Brodie, "The Development of Nuclear Strategy" in *International Security*, Vol.2, No.4, (Spring 1978) p.69.

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