

Brief to the Minister of Defence for a meeting with Sir James Hutchison on the control of nuclear weapons (London, 27 March 1958)

Caption: On 27 March 1958, the British Ministry of Defence issues a note for Frank William Mottershead, senior official in the Ministry of Defence, for the Minister's meeting with the British Conservative MP Sir James Hutchinson on the control of nuclear weapons. The brief outlines the circumstances under which the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) would resort to nuclear war and who would decide when those circumstances arrive. Concerns are raised that a possible rapid Soviet attack of a NATO member would not leave enough time for proper consultation on a nuclear retaliation. The note summarises the issues surrounding the definition of guidelines for the possible use of nuclear weapons under NATO control and outlines the capabilities of US nuclear forces. The danger of establishing overly precise guidelines is that it would show any potential aggressor the limits within which it could operate before being threatened by a nuclear response from NATO and therefore reduce the effectiveness of the Alliance's nuclear deterrence. The brief concludes that, for the time being at least, there will be no changes to the existing doctrine prescribed after the NATO Ministerial Meeting of December 1954, which states that the military is responsible for drawing up plans for the possible use of nuclear weapons and the civilian authorities are responsible for deciding whether or not to put them into action.

Source: The National Archives of the UK (TNA). Foreign Office, Political Departments, General Correspondence from 1906-1966. WESTERN ORGANISATIONS (WU): Western European Union-WEU (WUW). Control of nuclear weapons. 01/01/1958-31/12/1958, FO 371/137932 (Former Reference Dep: File 1241).

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Brief from Mr. Mottershead for
his meeting with Sir J. Hutchison.

References to former relevant papers

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Please see -/1.

This is the brief for the Minister of Defence to draw
on in talking to Sir James Hutchison.

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*Mr. Buckley
Foreign Office*

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MEETING WITH SIR JAMES HUTCHISON
BRIEF FOR MR. MOTTERSHED

RECEIVED IN
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27 MAR 1958

CONTROL OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS

WVW/24/13

1. It is probable that Sir James Hutchison will press for HMG to agree with their allies in WEU and NATO ~~a~~ formula, or machinery for consultation, before resorting to all-out nuclear war. This is the point made in his letter to which this ^{interview} will be the reply. It is a very delicate question. It really poses two issues:-

1. The circumstances in which NATO would resort to nuclear war.
 2. Who decides when those circumstances obtain.
2. It can be argued that no NATO country would start an aggressive nuclear war: in view, however, of the disparity in conventional ~~arms~~ ^{weapons} NATO would have to resort to nuclear weapons to defend a member country against a major Soviet aggression, in which case there might not be time for prior consultation about the use of nuclear weapons. This rather begs the question, however, as it is admitted that nuclear weapons would probably not be used against a minor incursion. So far NATO has been unable to agree on a definition for local hostile actions, incursions or infiltrations. Nor on what would be the minimum threat against which NATO nuclear weapons would be used. Indeed, not only is it impossible to do so in advance but any attempt to do so would be playing into the hands of a potential aggressor by making clear to him the limits within which he could operate without running an unacceptable risk. All that can safely be said is that NATO would be guided by the doctrine of economy of force and would use no more force than was necessary to defeat aggression. No one has yet decided who will "press the button" i.e. who decides that the prescribed conditions have been met.

3. In any event the problem does not yet exist for NATO. Only the U.S. have the resources to wage full-scale nuclear warfare and their retaliatory force, the Strategic Air Command, is not under NATO control. Even so, the U.S. Government is bound to consult HMG before using their nuclear forces based in the U.K. and similar conditions probably exist for their nuclear forces on other

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overseas bases. Our own Bomber Command is building up its resources for conducting thermo nuclear war and their target systems will be co-ordinated with those of the Americans.

4. There has, so far, been no discussion in NATO on the procedure by which Governments would take decisions for putting military plans into action. The general doctrine enunciated after the NATO Ministerial Meeting of December, 1954 still holds viz., it is for the military commanders to draw up plans; it is for Governments to take decisions to put those plans into action. We interpret this as meaning that the responsibility for resorting to the use of nuclear weapons rests with those countries in NATO which possess them i.e. U.S. and U.K. This doctrine makes military sense so long as the U.S. and U.K. alone possess the strategic deterrent.

5. The introduction of I.R.B.M.s and tactical atomic weapons for SACEUR's forces, foreshadowed in the communique following the NATO Ministerial Meeting last December (Cmd 339 paras. 20 and 21) means that other NATO countries besides U.K. and U.S. will contribute to the deterrent and this will complicate the question of control. It is probable that other countries will insist on arrangements for prior joint consultation similar to our arrangements with the U.S. Government for the use of U.S. nuclear forces based on the U.K. for the control of the I.R.B.M.s to be deployed on the Continent under SACEUR. Under the McMahon Act, even if it is modified as now proposed, U.S. nuclear weapons will have to remain in U.S. custody. The danger is that the need for consultation among the host country, the country controlling the warheads and the country controlling the means of delivery will make these weapons militarily ineffective. If all 15 countries of NATO have to be consulted no military decision could be reached in time.

6. The fundamental problem is to meet the political demands of our allies for a share in the control of nuclear weapons without destroying their military effectiveness. In the event of Soviet aggression there may be no time for consultation before the retaliatory forces have to go into action.

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6. If we are to be realistic about this problem of the control of nuclear weapons and in particular of the retaliatory force it is essential to bear in mind that in ^{fact} ~~effect~~ only the U.S. are now capable and likely to remain capable of conducting all-out nuclear warfare. Any effective form of control, therefore, by NATO or WEU must cover also the use of the U.S. nuclear forces, including those not even assigned to NATO. It is unlikely that the Americans would ever agree to consult NATO before employing their retaliatory force in the event of Soviet aggression. This seems to be tacitly understood and accepted by other NATO Governments. It is, therefore, embarrassing not only to the U.S. Government but also to other NATO Governments if this question of the control of nuclear forces is brought out into the open.

7. To sum up, therefore, there are two main arguments against introducing a formula, or machinery for consultation, before resorting to nuclear war:-

1. It is politically embarrassing to the Governments concerned.
2. It would destroy the military effectiveness of the deterrent by allowing a would-be aggressor some latitude within which to operate and by the delay it might cause before the retaliatory forces could be brought into action.

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