

## The Euromissile crisis

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## The Euromissile crisis of 1977 to 1982

Despite the ‘détente’ in East-West relations at the beginning of the 1970s, the various agreements to promote strategic arms limitation (SALT II) and mutual and balanced force reduction (MBFR), the growth of the Soviet Union’s nuclear arsenal gave rise to anxiety in the West.<sup>[1]</sup> According to communiqués issued by NATO Defence Ministers and the North Atlantic Council, ‘*the extent of the offensive capacity attained by Soviet armed forces is “excessive” in proportion to the real defence needs*’.<sup>[2]</sup> Add to this the fragility of Soviet executive power: the chief architect of détente on the Soviet side between 1970 and 1974, Leonid Brezhnev, was weakened and losing power. Lastly, the expansion of Soviet influence in the direction of southern Africa and the Horn of Africa meant that it could test its ability to project power but the costs of the resulting military commitments were high.<sup>[3]</sup> On the United States side, the Watergate scandal and the Vietnam War were leading to changes in the country’s foreign policy. The scope for the ‘semi-official’ diplomacy which had made it possible for President Nixon and his national security adviser, Henry Kissinger, to work for ‘détente’ was diminished.<sup>[4]</sup> Thus, Nixon’s successor Jimmy Carter put a stop to the secret interchanges with the Soviet Ambassador in Washington, Anatoly Dobrynin: from 1977 onwards, Soviet decision-makers lost a channel for discussion with the United States.<sup>[5]</sup> In the same year, as the SALT II and MBFR negotiations were going forward, the introduction of SS-20 IRBM missiles<sup>[6]</sup> into the Soviet arsenal and their deployment in the Soviet Union altered the strategic balance in Europe.<sup>[7]</sup>

In the final stage of the negotiations on the SALT II agreements (1976–1978), the Soviet Union did not adopt a moderate stance towards either the Europeans or the United States. The arrival in power of President Carter provoked a hardening of the negotiations and of relations between the two superpowers: the United States was moving closer to China and had to cope with the outbreak of the Iranian revolution from the autumn of 1978<sup>[8]</sup> and, above all, the US Congress was brandishing the threat of using its veto against ratification of the SALT II agreements. The conservatives took the view that the threat which Soviet (SS-18) missiles posed to ground-to-ground missiles (of the Minuteman type) had not been eliminated, while the liberals objected to the high ceilings allowed under the agreements.<sup>[9]</sup> Suspension of the ratification process by President Carter and the ‘double-track decision’ on nuclear forces in the NATO theatre taken on 12 December 1979 exacerbated the crisis. NATO’s Defence and Foreign Ministers viewed the deployment of SS-20 missiles as a threat to security. NATO needed to preserve the credibility of its graduated response strategy in the face of modernisation and expansion of Soviet theatre nuclear forces (TNFs) and took the double-track decision to modernise the long-range theatre nuclear force (LRTNF) by the deployment in Europe of American ground-launched systems comprising 108 Pershing II launchers and 466 GLCMs (Ground-Launched Cruise Missiles) and to begin negotiations with the Soviet Union on limiting LRTNF arms. These negotiations were launched in Geneva in November 1981.<sup>[10]</sup>

In the 1980s the United Kingdom and France still wanted independence in terms of deterrence and the use of their nuclear weapons, despite the threat which the deployment of Soviet SS-20 missiles in eastern Europe posed to western Europe. In the previous negotiations on arms limitation between the United States and the Soviet Union, the British and French forces had hardly been mentioned. The discussion of a ‘Euro-strategic’ balance meant they had to be included, as they could be used to swell

the numbers of NATO's military forces — a form of 'integration' which French President François Mitterrand rejected, particularly in 1983.<sup>[11]</sup> The General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, , then relied on these additional forces as a way of building up the Soviet position by seeking to establish a direct link between the numbers of French and British missiles and the SS-20s.<sup>[12]</sup>

François Mitterrand made his view clear even before the May 1981 elections: France had a duty to speak up in discussions about the future of Europe, as a slide towards a 'non-nuclear' Europe had to be avoided and, in the opposite direction, a balance of forces had to be re-established.<sup>[13]</sup> The new French government's policy towards the eastern bloc became tougher and it called for the implementation of NATO's decision to deploy Pershing missiles and GLCMs in order to preserve the 'Euro-American' strategic tandem. In September 1981, French Prime Minister Pierre Mauroy restated France's rejection of a bipolar world, the doctrine of 'massive retaliation' in the face of the SS-20 threat and the need for an independent French deterrent force under continuous modernisation.<sup>[14]</sup> The 'Euromissile crisis' provoked enormous anti-nuclear demonstrations in Europe, particularly in the United Kingdom, Belgium, the Netherlands and West Germany. Under popular pressure, West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt advocated uncoupling Europe's forces from those of the United States. This was a prospect which France did not support and which led François Mitterrand to intervene directly in the German electoral debate.<sup>[15]</sup> In a speech to the Bundestag in Bonn on 20 January 1983, he argued for a balance of forces in Europe. In particular, he also stressed the risks of decoupling the continent of Europe from the continent of America, which, he said, '*would [...] jeopardise the balance of forces and the keeping of the peace.*'<sup>[16]</sup> While passing through Brussels in October 1983, President François Mitterrand declared: '*I notice that the pacifism [...] is in the West and the Euromissiles are in the East. That looks to me like an unequal relationship.*'

The British considered that Germany 'overreacted' to the situation, even though they realised that Soviet deployment of SS-20 missiles and Backfire bombers had once again aroused concerns about the balance of theatre nuclear forces.<sup>[17]</sup> In substantive terms, London considered that there needed to be a greater presence of long-range US weapons, including ground-launched cruise missiles or Pershing IIs, but the desire for arms control could be an argument for not carrying out the deployments.<sup>[18]</sup> They eventually opted in favour of NATO's 'double-track decision' as an example of cohesion and military strength. In WEU, however, they stressed that this support was without prejudice to their desire for independence with respect to the use of atomic weapons, as the existence of a second decision-making centre helped to make the allied deterrent capacity more effective and should not, therefore, depend solely on NATO.<sup>[19]</sup>

Lastly, Pershing II missiles were deployed on the territory of the Federal Republic of Germany from 1983 onwards, with the support of leaders such as Margaret Thatcher and Helmut Kohl.<sup>[20]</sup> In parallel, cruise missiles with nuclear capacity (GLCMs) were also to be stationed in Belgium, Italy and the United Kingdom and on the territory of the FRG.

In the proceedings of the Council and Assembly of WEU,<sup>[21]</sup> the 'Euromissile crisis' triggered a reassessment of moves towards disarmament, in view of the Soviet superiority in nuclear and conventional forces. The close link there was between disarmament and the Euromissiles aroused interest and concern in the Assembly, which was in favour of NATO's 'double-track decision' of

1979; it recommended that the Council of WEU call on the North Atlantic Council to seek to re-establish the balance between Warsaw Pact and NATO forces, as that imbalance was a threat to peace. [22] The concern among members of the Assembly at developments in the talks on INFs (intermediate-range nuclear forces) prompted them to call for consultations to be held within WEU so that NATO's European members could have a more active voice in the discussions. The Council set that recommendation aside, on the grounds that consultations had already taken place in NATO and other specialist agencies such as the Special Advisory Group. [23]

In the debates in WEU, the British and French were very active. They took advantage of the draft replies to recommendations and the debates in the Council to reaffirm their position, despite the limits on WEU powers in relation to disarmament and nuclear arms limitations. The exchanges on 'major issues' between permanent delegates or between ambassadors at Council sessions were appreciated, with the French Ambassador, Emmanuel de Margerie, going so far as to describe them as '*breaths of fresh air*'. [24] Similarly, Georges Lemoine, the then State Secretary to the French Defence Minister, recognised that against the background of an imbalance between the United States and the Soviet Union, and in the face of the '*pacifism and neutralism*' which prevailed in Europe — two factors which, if combined, might even place in Europe in danger — WEU had a special part to play. [25] That part was related to the duty to provide assistance which linked its members together in the event of an attack and to the fact that the countries concerned were also members of the European Economic Community and the Atlantic Alliance. The Assembly was also seen as the '*natural place for discussion of defence questions*'. [26] On the substance of the matter, Britain confirmed that it was necessary to continue rejecting unilateral Soviet proposals for reductions in long-range missiles over which it was impossible to carry out checks on the extent of the Soviet reductions. [27] Furthermore, in their draft reply to the recommendation on the problem of nuclear arms in Europe, the British stressed the importance of pressing ahead with preparations for the deployment of surface-launched cruise missiles and Pershing IIs in order to oppose the Soviet SS-20s. [28]

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[1] RUEHL, Lothar. Le défi du SS-20 et la stratégie soviétique à l'égard de l'Europe. In: *Politique étrangère* [online]. 1979, 44th year, No 3, pp. 427-444, esp. p. 427 [consulted on 20 September–October 2014]. Available at: [/web/revues/home/prescript/article/polit\\_0032-342x\\_1979\\_num\\_44\\_3\\_1576](/web/revues/home/prescript/article/polit_0032-342x_1979_num_44_3_1576)

[2] Ibid.

[3] There was also a sharp increase in Soviet military assistance to several Middle Eastern countries, in particular Syria, Iraq and Egypt, rising from 9.2 billion dollars in 1966–1975 to 35.4 billion dollars between 1978 and 1982. ZUBOK, Vladislav M. Soviet foreign policy from détente to Gorbachev, 1975–1985. In: LEFFLER, Melwyn and WESTAD, Odd Arne (eds). *The Cambridge History of the Cold War (Volume III: Endings)*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. pp. 91, 98–99, 101.

[4] Ibid. pp. 98–99.

[5] Ibid. p. 99

[6] The SS-20 was the first new intermediate-class ballistic missile system since the SS-5 of 1961. This missile was therefore capable of reaching every country within a radius of some 4 000 km. Even if they were stationed beyond the Urals, SS-20s could reach part of Western Europe and the Middle East.

[7] RUEHL, Lothar. Le défi du SS-20 et la stratégie soviétique à l'égard de l'Europe. *Op. cit.* p. 435.

[8] SAIKAL, Amin. Islamism, the Iranian revolution, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. In: LEFFLER, Melwyn and WESTAD, Odd Arne (eds). *The Cambridge History of the Cold War (Volume III: Endings)*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, pp. 112–134.

[9] KLEIN, Jean. Vingt ans de négociations sur le désarmement. *Politique étrangère*. No 3, 1999, pp. 664–665.

[10] They culminated in the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, the purpose of which was to eliminate short-range and intermediate-range missiles. It was signed by the United States and the Soviet Union in Washington on 8 December 1987.

[11] LELLOUCHE, Pierre. France and the Euromissiles. In: *Foreign Affairs* [online]. Thursday, December 1, 1983. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/europe/1983-12-01/france-and-euromissiles> [consulted on 4 May 2015].

[12] FREEDMAN, Lawrence. The future of British and French nuclear policies. In: BOYER, Yves, LELLOUCHE, Pierre and ROPER, John (eds). *Franco-British defence co-operation: a new entente cordiale*. London: Routledge for the Royal Institute of International Affairs. Paris: Institut français des relations internationales, 1988, Chapter four, p. 39.

[13] LELLOUCHE, Pierre. France and the Euromissiles. In: *Foreign Affairs* [online]. Thursday, December 1, 1983. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/europe/1983-12-01/france-and-euromissiles> [consulted on 4 May 2015].

[14] La cohérence d'une politique de défense. Allocution du Premier ministre, le 14 septembre 1981, lors de la séance d'ouverture de la 34e session de l'IHEDN. In: *Revue de Défense Nationale*, 10.1981, 14 p. National Archives of Luxembourg (ANLux). <http://www.anlux.lu>. Western European Union Archives. Secretariat-General/Council's Archives. 1954–1987. Foundation and Expansion of WEU. Year: 1981, 01/09/1981-30/06/1982. File 132.18. Volume 1/2.

[15] GUTMANN, Francis. *Interview: Excerpt: France and the Euromissiles crisis*. [Interviewed by: MARTINS, Véronica; camera: GERMAIN, Alexandre.] Paris: CVCE [prod.], 10.09.2014. CVCE, Sanem. Video (00:02:20, Colour, Original sound).

[16] *M. Mitterrand plaide devant le Bundestag pour le maintien de l'équilibre des forces en Europe*. [Online] AFP, 20 January 1983. Available at: <http://www.50elysee.com/timeline/afp/36/detail/show/> [consulted on 12 May 2015].

[17] [US Department]. State Department cable 258185 to US Embassy London, *TNF Bilateral with UK*, 11 October 1978, Secret. Available at: <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/nukevault/ebb301/doc03.pdf> [consulted on 5 May 2015].

[18] Ibid.

[19] *Draft reply by the United Kingdom delegation to WEU Assembly Recommendation 360 on SALT and the British and French nuclear forces (London, 21 January 1981)*. The National Archives of the UK (TNA). Foreign Office, Western Department and Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Western European Department: Registered Files (R and WR Series). WESTERN EUROPEAN UNION. Western European Union Assembly recommendation 360: Strategic Arms Limitations Treaty (SALT) and the British and French nuclear forces. 01/01/1981-31/12/1981, FCO 33/5237 (Former Reference Dep: WRU 83/1).

[20] Tension between the Soviet and Western sides continued until 1985, with the arrival of Mikhail Gorbachev as head of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and his understanding with Ronald Reagan on the 'zero option' in 1987.

[21] See the subsection on 'Disarmament'. Assembly of Western European Union. Recommendation 323 on disarmament (Paris, tenth sitting, 21 November 1978). In: *Proceedings: Twenty-fourth Ordinary Session, Second Part, Volume IV: Minutes: Official Report of Debates*. Paris: Assembly of WEU, November 1978, pp. 28–29; Council of Western European Union. *Secretary-General's note. Assembly Recommendation 323*. London: 07.06.1979. C(79)83. 4 p. National Archives of Luxembourg (ANLux). <http://www.anlux.lu>. Western European Union Archives. Secretariat-General/Council's Archives. 1954–1987. Organs of the Western European Union. Year: 1979, 01/06/1979-30/11/1979. File 202.413.25. Volume 1/1.

[22] Assembly of Western European Union. Recommendation 345 on new weapons and defence strategy — The modernisation of theatre nuclear forces (Paris, first sitting, 2 June 1980). In: *Proceedings: Twenty-sixth Ordinary Session, First Part, Volume II: Minutes: Official Report of Debates*. Paris: Assembly of WEU, June 1980, p. 20; Assembly of Western European Union. Recommendation 374 on the reappraisal of global dangers to Western peace and security (Paris, eleventh sitting, 2 December 1981). In: *Proceedings: Twenty-seventh Ordinary Session, Second Part, Volume IV: Minutes: Official Report of Debates*. Paris: Assembly of WEU, December 1981, pp. 43–44; Assembly of Western European Union. Recommendation 375 on negotiations on Theatre Nuclear Forces (Paris, eleventh sitting, 2 December 1981). In: *Proceedings: Twenty-seventh Ordinary Session, Second Part, Volume IV: Minutes: Official Report of Debates*. Paris: Assembly of WEU, December 1981, p. 45.

[23] Council of Western European Union. *Secretary-General's note. Written question 230 put to the Council by a member of the Assembly*. London: 27.10.1982. C(82)111. 2 p. National Archives of Luxembourg (ANLux). <http://www.anlux.lu>. Western European Union Archives. Secretariat-General/Council's Archives. 1954–1987. Organs of the Western European Union. Year: 1982, 01/01/1982-30/10/1982. File 202.413.29. Volume 1/1.

[24] Council of Western European Union. *Extract from minutes of 582nd meeting of WEU Council held on 23 September 1981*. VI. Other business. CR(81)13. 2 p. National Archives of Luxembourg (ANLux). <http://www.anlux.lu>. Western European Union Archives. Secretariat-General/Council's Archives. 1954–1987. Foundation and Expansion of WEU. Year: 1975, 01/02/1975-30/12/1982. File 132.15. Volume 5/7.

[25] Assembly of Western European Union. Speech by Mr Lemoine, State Secretary to the French Minister of Defence (Paris, eighth sitting, 1 December 1981). In: *Proceedings: Twenty-seventh Ordinary Session, Second Part, Volume IV: Minutes: Official Report of Debates*. Paris: Assembly of WEU, December 1981, pp. 89–98.

[26] Ibid.

[27] CR(81)13. *Op. cit.*

[28] Council of Western European Union. *Secretary-General's note. Recommendation 383 on the problem of nuclear weapons in Europe*. London: 31.08.1982. WPM(82)17. 4 p. National Archives of Luxembourg (ANLux). <http://www.anlux.lu>. Western European Union Archives. Secretariat-General/Council's Archives. 1954–1987. Organs of the Western European Union. Year: 1982, 01/04/1982-30/11/1982. File 202.413.30. Volume 1/1. See also: Council of Western European Union. *Secretary-General's note. Recommendation 375 on negotiations on Theatre Nuclear Forces*. London: 26.01.1982. WPM(82)4. 6 p. National Archives of Luxembourg (ANLux). <http://www.anlux.lu>. Western European Union Archives. Secretariat-General/Council's Archives. 1954–1987. Organs of the Western European Union. Year: 1982, 01/01/1982-30/10/1982. File 202.413.29. Volume 1/1.