“Das Vadanya” to the Multilateral Force: the Soviet Union’s Role in the Johnson Administration’s Decision to Abandon the MLF

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ABSTRACT

The Multilateral Force (MLF) was a proposed nuclear sharing arrangement between the United States and a number of its NATO partners. Proposed in 1958, the MLF was debated until about 1965 or 1966 and was often distinguished by its controversial nature and failure to gain traction. This paper examines documents from the Digital National Security Archive (DNSA), Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), Record Group 59: General Records of the Department of State, and various secondary sources to evaluate the extent to which the Soviet Union contributed to the MLF’s failure as an initiative. The Force is often treated as a narrow and highly technical policy debate by existing literature. However, examination of these documents highlighted the necessity of viewing the Force as a topic of distinct political importance in American-Soviet nuclear negotiations. While technical disputes over the MLF’s constitution was an immediate cause of its demise, U.S. policymakers also faced strategic incentives not to pursue the treaty. In particular, the documents reflect growing belief within the Johnson administration that exiting the agreement could improve broader bilateral relations with the Soviet Union and ensure that the international community could continue to make progress on the creation of a nuclear non-proliferation agreement.

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The Multilateral Force (MLF) was a proposed transatlantic nuclear sharing agreement that was debated among the United States and a number of its European NATO partners from 1958 to around 1965 or 1966 (Solomon, 1999; Lundestad, 2005). The idea existed in a number of different forms throughout its lifetime, usually calling for a nuclear-armed naval force—consisting of either surface ships or submarines—that would be jointly operated by interested NATO members. The MLF idea was primarily entertained by the United States, United Kingdom, The Federal Republic of Germany (hereafter FRG or West Germany), and Italy, although there were also a number of attempts to entice France to join the Force (Solomon, 1999). Although the MLF remained a concept for the better portion of the decade, it was often controversial and defined by bureaucratic battles. Interested parties clashed over the technical composition of the Force—and the structure of its internal governance—leading to an array of sharing proposals, each of which alienated different members throughout the negotiation process. The agreement also encountered significant opposition from the Soviet Union, who believed the MLF would disseminate nuclear weapons to Western European allies of the United States.

Scholarship on the MLF remains relatively limited. A few academic articles, books, dissertations, and manuscripts from the mid and late 1960s discuss the Force in a contemporaneous context. For example, scholars such as Alastair Buchan offer 1960s perspectives on the MLF, with a particular focus on the intra-alliance challenges that complicated the proposal’s negotiation (Buchan, 1964). While these kinds of articles may give readers a glimpse of how the Force was viewed in an academic setting while it was being negotiated, they cannot account for simultaneous internal government discussions or the MLF’s bearing on future nuclear negotiations. Chapters within academic books focusing on the Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Lyndon Johnson administrations; transatlantic relations; and the development of early U.S. nonproliferation policy offer more modern, albeit not extensive, perspectives on the MLF. A notable limitation of many of these works is that they primarily summarize NATO negotiations over the Force during the Kennedy administration rather than the MLF’s connection to non-proliferation negotiations that occurred during the latter half of the 1960s. Geir Lundestad’s
work (2005) contextualizes the MLF within broader difficulties of strengthening the transatlantic alliance during the 1960s. However, its treatment of the MLF is short and focuses on the early period in which the Force was first proposed. Pascaleine Winad (1996) builds on this background by offering a more detailed overview of these Kennedy-era negotiations, and goes further by exploring the end of the MLF during the Johnson Administration—although still from a perspective of transatlantic politics. Lawerence S. Kaplan (1999) offers a far more critical view of the proposal, portraying the Force as a manifestly unworkable policy initiative.

“The Multilateral Force: America’s Nuclear Solution for NATO (1960–1965)” is a United States Naval Academy Trident Scholar Project that approaches the MLF in a somewhat similar vein to Winad’s writing. Midshipman James B. Solomon’s work, however, is uniquely valuable to this paper because it offers a clear and extensive chronological account of MLF negotiations based exclusively on primary sources. The length and focus of the paper—its 159 pages address the history of debates over the MLF’s specific operational constitution—allow it to provide a narrative of the Force’s lifespan from the Eisenhower to Johnson administrations that is logical and easily understandable. Because of this, it is helpful in allowing this paper to situate itself within the complete timeline of MLF discussions.

While these sources provide important context, particularly on early MLF negotiations, they do not address Soviet opposition to the Force or its relation to future non-proliferation negotiations. This may be the case for a number of reasons. Because the impetus for the MLF was in large part the strengthening of transatlantic unity and dissuasion of West Germany from acquiring nuclear weapons, the proposal is often viewed narrowly in a Western European context. Additionally, there are documents that reflect senior American officials asserting that the U.S. would not bow to Soviet pressure over the MLF. Viewed narrowly with documents relating to the Force itself, these opinions might suggest that the Soviet Union was not a major factor in the MLF’s collapse. When reconciled with documents addressing the broader non-proliferation environment, however, the importance of the Soviet role becomes more apparent. Finally, the MLF is often viewed as a policy prescription that had little chance of implementation or larger strategic meaning. While the MLF faced significant difficulties from its inception, its failure is not indicative of irrelevance. This paper suggests that this lack of success may have benefited the United States strategically.

Glenn T. Seaborg (1987) and Frank Gavin (2012) explore these Soviet and non-proliferation connections more critically. Drawing upon his experience as former Chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission, Seaborg surveys the Johnson Administration’s important contributions to global nonproliferation and arms control (Fyre 1987). He emphasizes the fact that the Soviet Union maintained consistent opposition to the MLF throughout nuclear negotiations with the United States—a fact supported by the primary source documents this paper analyzed. While Seaborg’s writing offers a thorough examination of the Johnson administration’s nuclear policy, Frank Gavin’s book does the best job of connecting the MLF to global nonproliferation debates during the 1960s. Gavin paints a picture of an international nuclear balance becoming rapidly destabilized by the potential of widespread proliferation—a situation dangerous for both superpowers. He also indicates that U.S. officials realized the potential for the MLF to act as a barrier to nonproliferation progress. Both Seaborg and Gavin make the important recognition that the MLF was a meaningful part of arms control debates—and that the Soviet Union saw the proposal as a major threat. However, their works still do not specifically address the impact of Soviet protests on American deliberation over the MLF.

Primary source documents constitute the bulk of this paper’s analysis and work to complement these secondary sources. Some of these primary source documents can be found in Record Group 59: The General Records of The Department of State at the National Archives in College Park, Maryland, which serves as the primary depository for 20th century U.S. government documents. The Digital National Security Archive (DNSA) is a nonprofit database serving a similar function through its digitization of many public sector records from the same time period. Many documents also originate from the Department of State’s Foreign Relations of The United States (FRUS) series, including 1964–1968 Volume X, National Security Policy and 1964–1968 Volume XI, Arms Control and Disarmament. In particular, these FRUS editions offer a strong selection of records detailing high-level U.S. government conversations. While more limited in nature, the LBJ Presidential Library also provides some especially insightful digital records of discussions within the Johnson administration’s inner circle.

Because this paper addresses the MLF in the context of U.S.-Soviet relations and non-proliferation in addition to traditional coverage of internal NATO negotiations, primary source documents were drawn from document collections relating to each of these major categories. Within these collections and databases, sources were primarily drawn from high-level U.S. government discussions of the MLF. Additionally, this paper examines some reports from the Department of State’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR), which often demonstrates significant appreciation of Moscow’s objections to the MLF. Because the State Department is in constant dialogue with diplomatic missions around the world, many documents from the time period examined may mention the MLF in passing. The documents this paper utilizes, however, are notable because of their close proximity to the decisionmaking that led to the
The MLF is usually referenced in documents by its acronym or its longform as the “Multilateral Force.” However, because the word “multilateral” is abundant in discussions of U.S. foreign policy, searching for documents that addressed the “MLF” generally yielded far more specific results. These searches were particularly straightforward when examining databases such as the LBJ Presidential Library, which has a small digital collection. Conversely, because the National Archives does not have any mechanism through which researchers can access documents digitally, a physical examination of the archives was required during the research process.

While the MLF has primarily been addressed in terms of the challenges the United States faced in negotiations with its NATO partners, the role the Soviet Union played in the collapse of these talks is less commonly examined. Opposition from Moscow to the MLF was constant almost from the Force’s conception. The USSR feared that the MLF would place nuclear missiles at its doorstep and empower a resurgent West Germany to once again embrace militaristic tendencies. There is well documented evidence of Soviet opposition—and threats of retaliation—against the United States for its pursuit of the MLF. These disputes also came at a time when both superpowers were beginning to recognize the growing benefits of promoting non-proliferation efforts around the globe. The Soviets consistently worked to define the proposed Force as proliferation rather than simply nuclear sharing. This paper utilizes insights from the primary source documents it examined to highlight the extent to which these Soviet criticisms played a role in the American policymaking community’s discontinuation of U.S. participation in the MLF. Specifically, it emphasizes the extent to which changing conditions in U.S.-Soviet relations—rather than internal NATO disputes—played a role in the American decision not to pursue the Force.

THE ORIGIN AND HISTORY OF MLF NEGOTIATIONS

The Multilateral Force (MLF) was a proposed nuclear sharing agreement for the United States and a number of its NATO partners in Europe. Although discussions over the MLF continued across three presidential administrations—Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Lyndon Johnson—the proposal was most often mired in controversy and disagreement. Barriers towards the MLF ranged from technical disputes over the composition of the Force’s deterrent to broader political considerations surrounding the status of Germany and the negotiation of a global non-proliferation agreement. Despite these challenges, U.S. diplomats worked assiduously to obtain a consensus on the issue until the MLF’s gradual and enigmatic death around 1965 or 1966.

The idea behind the MLF first originated during the twilight of the Eisenhower administration. In 1957, the Soviet Union successfully tested the first Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) in history, followed by the famous launch of Sputnik later in the year. These events precipitated not only public alarm but increasing concern within the American and European defense communities. Shortly after the development of the ICBM, Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) advocated for the deployment of Medium Range Ballistic Missiles (MRBMs) to Europe in order to ensure that Allied forces could more quickly retaliate against a Soviet attack (Solomon, 1999). This led to the development of a proposal within the Eisenhower Administration to establish a contingent of 25 MRBM-armed vessels that would patrol European waters. The scheme proposed that the Force could launch a nuclear attack with the unanimous consent of NATO members—representing the first iteration of what would eventually become the MLF. The administration introduced this proposal to the North Atlantic Council in 1960, where members expressed interest in discussing the idea (Solomon, 1999). Concurrently, two developments set the stage for years of more intense negotiations. 1958 saw the failure of the GAM-87 Skybolt missile system, which the British government had long sought to acquire for its V-Bomber aerial nuclear deterrent. Given the significant effort and political capital policymakers in London had devoted to Skybolt, the program’s cancellation engendered significant concern over the future of the country’s deterrent. Fortunately for the British, this blow came at the same time Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Nathan Twining was seeking to shift the joint surface MRBM force to one that would rely on Polaris submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs). This proposal survived the transition between the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations, offering the United Kingdom a new avenue to modernize their deterrent and cementing the permanence of the joint nuclear force idea (Solomon, 1999).

In May 1961, only months after taking office, President John F. Kennedy affirmed his support for a jointly controlled nuclear fleet at a meeting of NATO leaders in Ottawa, Canada. He advocated for an SLBM force with an egalitarian governance structure that would afford every participating country a veto over launch authority. This idea quickly gained traction after the signing of what became known as the Nassau Agreement in December 1962. The negotiations in Nassau, Bahamas between JFK and British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan ended Britain’s “Skybolt Crisis” (Jones, 2019). Macmillan managed to convince the President to sell his country the Polaris missile system. In exchange, however, Kennedy requested that the United Kingdom contribute this new SLBM
deterrent to the MLF. The United States also resolved to offer France the same arrangement, fearing that a failure to do so would lead to accusations of unfairness from Paris. The DeGaulle government—which had quickly moved to scale back France’s participation in NATO and pursue an independent nuclear weapons program—rejected Kennedy’s overture. However, this outreach to France generated West German interest in the broader idea of the MLF (Solomon, 1999).

The FRG’s desire to participate in this joint force marked the beginning of a new phase of negotiations that would define the MLF for much of its remaining lifespan. West Germany had made significant economic strides since its occupation and subsequent establishment following the Second World War. Given its location in the heart of Central Europe, the FRG had enormous strategic importance—a reality highlighted by the terrifying confrontations in Berlin between the United States and Soviet Union in 1948, 1958, and 1961 (Hershberg, 2019). The U.S. was enthusiastic about further integrating West Germany into the NATO alliance but also was wary of the country developing an indigenous nuclear deterrent—an outcome that American policymakers widely feared would catastrophically destabilize relations between the Soviets and the West. These realities required that the United States strike a delicate balance when courting FRG participation in the MLF. Allied negotiators worked to design an arrangement that would allow West Germany to contribute to a nuclear weapons force without directly delegating launch authority to the country (Solomon, 1999).

Eventually, it became clear that the leaders in such a fleet would be the United States, United Kingdom, West Germany, and Italy, leading to the establishment of the MLF Working Group. The Working Group first met in October of 1963 and moved to formulate a more coherent vision of the Force. Conceptually, the unit would be established as a fleet of 25 surface ships disguised as merchant vessels; each ship would be armed with eight Polaris missiles. The fleet would be divided into two, with one contingent operating out of an Atlantic base and another from a Mediterranean base. Additionally, the Working Group assessed the MLF’s compatibility with the Geneva Convention, the establishment and maintenance of nuclear safeguards for the Polaris system, and the internal governance of the Force (Solomon, 1999). The conclusions of this final consideration, in particular, offer insight into one of the major flaws of the MLF—that the deterrent it offered to the alliance was impracticable. This is best illustrated by the firing process the Working Group approved. The ships’ Polaris missiles could only be launched with the approval of all the participating home governments and the MLF Board of Governors. Even after taking this step, the Board of Governors would need to transmit a launch order to SACEUR—who in turn would finally convey the order to the fleet itself. Many in the European Defense community as well as in the United States feared that this cumbersome hierarchy would give Soviet leadership little pause in any decision to attack Western Europe (Solomon, 1999).

The credibility of the MLF’s deterrent was not the only challenge the arrangement faced. The firing and governance structure of the Force was designed to allay international fears that the scheme would give West Germany independent access to nuclear weapons. Despite these efforts, however, the entrance of West Germany hampered the enthusiasm of the United Kingdom. Anti-German sentiment was still significant in the UK, and the fear of German militarism returning was only inflamed when the FRG pushed for launch authority to only require a simple-majority vote of members. London mainly supported the MLF because of their agreement with Kennedy at Nassau—they were loathe to offer non-nuclear powers any level of control over British atomic weapons and had little interest in subsidizing the nuclear ambitions of other nations (Solomon, 1999).

The negotiations over the MLF took yet another turn following the assassination of JFK in Dallas, Texas on November 22nd, 1963; Lyndon B. Johnson became the 36th president of the United States later that day. While his administration’s international attention would later become dominated by the Vietnam War, Johnson’s early foreign policy worked to finish implementing JFK’s vision of securing the MLF (Kaplan, 1999; Winad, 1996; Lundestad, 2005). Political trends in Europe, however, were aligning even more unfavorably against the MLF. The Multilateral Working Group, originally slated to produce a final report in late 1963, delayed producing a conclusive recommendation. This setback was due primarily due to the fact that the United Kingdom and Italy faced elections in 1964. Competing against parties that opposed the MLF, incumbent governments were hesitant to draw attention to the issue in an election year. The situation became considerably worse when both these opposition parties took power. Most significantly, the incoming British Prime Minister, Labour Party leader Harold Wilson, was one of the MLF’s major detractors. Wilson’s government quickly proposed the Atlantic Nuclear Force (ANF) as a superior alternative to the MLF. The ANF addressed one of London’s major reservations about the MLF: because the Force was designed to be multinational, the fleet’s ships would be staffed by personnel of multiple countries. This new proposal called for a force where individual countries would contribute—and maintain operational control over—their indigenous capabilities. The United Kingdom and the United States, as nuclear powers, would add a nuclear element to the task force. However, non-nuclear weapons states, such as the FRG, would only be able to exercise operational control over their own conventional forces—an adjustment totally unacceptable to West Germany. Because the United Kingdom and the FRG would be the two most significant
European members of the MLF, this new fissure made the agreement all but impossible (Solomon, 1999). Johnson’s advisors—believing he would back away from the MLF during an approaching December 1964 meeting with Wilson—attempted to convince the president otherwise in what became an intense clash in the Oval Office on December 6, 1964. Undeterred, Johnson signaled to Wilson that he would effectively drop the U.S. pursuit of the MLF (Winad, 1996). This was reaffirmed by National Security Action Memoranda (NSAM) 318, which Johnson issued shortly after his Washington meeting with the British prime minister (Johnson, November 14, 1964). The president also personally leaked the document to James Reston of The New York Times, making it clear that the MLF project was effectively over (Solomon, 1999; MLF on The Shelf, December 23, 1965). Although LBJ used this NSAM to reiterate U.S. support for the general intentions of the MLF and ANF, he also emphasized that the proposals ran afoul of efforts to achieve more significant policy goals—including a global non-proliferation treaty (Johnson, November 14, 1964). On the surface, the MLF dispute seemed to be a series of technical quarrels between allies, but NSAM 318 alludes to the more nuanced challenges the proposal presented in the context of a geopolitical environment where non-proliferation was becoming a more important objective of American foreign policy.

THE NUCLEAR NON-PROLIFERATION TREATY: 
EARLY HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENTS

The 1968 Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT or NNPT) is a fundamental pillar of the international community’s nuclear control regime. The NPT created a nuclear hierarchy, recognizing five powers—the United States, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, France, and the People’s Republic of China—as legal “nuclear weapons states” in exchange for affording protections to countries that agreed not to pursue nuclear weapons. The treaty called upon the nuclear powers to incentivize “non-nuclear weapons states” against proliferating. Specifically, it asked that non-nuclear weapons states be protected from nuclear blackmail and that the five nuclear powers assist non-atomic states in developing peaceful nuclear energy programs. The nuclear weapons states also agreed, in principle, to work towards the reduction of their own arsenals. Today, the NPT is signed by 191 countries and is the centerpiece of international nonproliferation policy. The treaty’s inception, however, was far from certain. The development of the NPT was inseparably tied to the currents of Cold War superpower conflict—disputes in which the MLF often played a significant role.

The global nuclear landscape in the early days of Lyndon Johnson’s presidency was extremely ominous. In October 1964, less than a year after LBJ took office, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) tested its first nuclear weapon. The test sparked enormous concern within the U.S. government. Mao’s China was widely considered unstable by American observers. The Communists had intervened on behalf of Kim–Il Sung during the Korean War; precipitated the Taiwan Straits Crisis of 1954–1955 and 1958; attacked India in the 1962 Sino-Indian War; and continually interfered in Southeast Asian affairs, particularly in Indonesia and Vietnam. Beijing’s adventurism seemed even more dangerous in the context of Mao’s ideology—indeed, the Chinese leader believed that nuclear war with the West was both inevitable and necessary (Gavin, 2012). The PRC was reflective of an international environment where an increasing number of countries viewed nuclear weapons as fundamental to their security. The same year as the PRC’s test, Russell Murray—a future staffer on the Gilpatric Committee—estimated that the world could soon see up to an additional sixteen nuclear weapons powers. In fact, U.S. officials believed that many of these new states would emerge as a direct result of China’s new weapon’s program. India, Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan all had reason to fear the PRC’s military ambitions. India’s acquisition of a weapon would likely lead to a Pakistani program; Indonesia’s would lead to an Australian one. An arms race of this magnitude, American policymakers reasoned, would motivate West Germany to build the bomb—a development that would plunge U.S.-Soviet relations into a dangerous new phase (Gavin, 2012). This was the type of climate that originally incentivized the MLF—many officials in the U.S. believed that the Force could serve as a less offensive substitute for an indigenous FRG nuclear program. The Soviet belief that this was still proliferation, however, would eventually force them to reevaluate.

The potential for many more states to acquire nuclear capabilities led some in the U.S. government to wonder whether it would ever be possible to stop nuclear proliferation. In October 1964, only about two weeks after the PRC’s first test, President Johnson responded to these developments by establishing what would become known as the Gilpatric Commission. Directed by former Deputy Secretary of Defense Roswell Gilpatric, the Commission was tasked with recommending potential changes in U.S. nonproliferation policy. Indeed, the Commission’s January 1965 recommendations would result in a substantial realignment of American priorities—one to which the MLF was more of a barrier than a benefit (Gavin, 2012). Johnson was presented with four options, of varying intensity, with which the United States could pursue its nonproliferation objectives. Option 1 was the most pessimistic of the approaches—it asked the United States to accept nuclear proliferation as an unresolvable reality and to instead promote allied weapons programs that would benefit the country’s strategic objectives. Option 2 recommended no major policy changes and endorsed pursuing only nonproliferation objectives in cases where the United States would face low costs. Practically
speaking, this proposal was the same as Option 1 with the hope of preventing some additional proliferation at the margins. The Commission offered the possibility of a more dramatic change through its presentation of Option 4. This proposal called upon the United States to make nonproliferation the cornerstone of its foreign policy. In order to achieve this goal, however, the U.S. would have to be willing to offer extremely strong security guarantees—or punitive measures—to convince other nations that the benefits of abandoning their nuclear weapons programs outweighed the costs. All of these propositions were too radical for those in Johnson’s circle (Gavin, 2012).

Support from within the administration eventually coalesced around Option 3 of the report. Following this proposal would require the United States to dramatically scale up its nonproliferation efforts, with only some limits relating to its own arsenal. Significantly, the Commission also recommended dropping the MLF proposal if this option was pursued in order to avoid making it easier for non-weapons states to have access to the atomic bomb (Gavin, 2012; Committee on Nuclear Proliferation, January 21, 1965). This was an implicit recognition that the Soviet insistence that the MLF was a mechanism of proliferation did in fact have validity. In the same vein, this development raised the possibility of cooperation with the Soviet Union on a potential non-proliferation agreement—if controversial items such as the MLF were no longer in contention. In both Washington and Moscow, there was growing recognition that the spread of nuclear weapons—even to ideologically similar states—was dangerously destabilizing.

The Gilpatric Commission’s findings came during a period when the prospects for international collaboration on a non-proliferation treaty were slowly rising. In 1958 and 1959, Ireland proposed resolutions to the United Nations that formed the basis of what would become the NPT; it asked states with nuclear arsenals not to distribute atomic weapons and states without bombs not to seek them. A concurrent Swedish proposal, known as the Unden Plan, called for Nuclear Weapons Free Zones (NWFZs) but encountered resistance from American diplomats who believed it would undermine extended deterrence. Another significant development came in 1961, when the UN-backed Geneva Committee on Disarmament morphed into the Eighteen Nation Conference on Disarmament (ENDC). Charged with negotiating a potential nonproliferation agreement, the ENDC began to receive proposals for restricting atomic weapons from a variety of countries, such as a 1963 and 1964 recommendation for Latin American and African NWFZs, respectively (Popp, 2016).

Despite the increased global interest in nonproliferation, however, the proposals of non-aligned countries carried little weight when compared to the ambitions of the two superpowers. The first bilateral discussions on the possibility of nonproliferation cooperation took place during 1962 between Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko in Geneva. The MLF quickly emerged as a major source of disagreement: the Soviets were adamant that Germany should remain nuclear free and stated their opposition to any arrangement which would allow the U.S. to share nuclear weapons with its allies (Seaborg, 1987). This objection was followed a year later by a Soviet threat to create their own version of the MLF if the United States refused to drop the initiative (Popp, 2016). These meetings—along with documents examined in Section IV—show that the Soviet Union did not view the Force as an unimportant or obscure policy initiative as many modern examinations imply. Moscow saw the MLF as a major provocation and was unwilling to make significant compromises on a global non-proliferation agreement until the proposal was scrapped.

Despite these disputes, a more notable—albeit incremental—sign of progress came in 1963 when the United States, Soviet Union, and Britain signed the Limited Test Ban Treaty (LTB T), which banned every form of nuclear testing except subterranean detonations. Much of the political motivation for the treaty was to preempt a potential Chinese test. While the United States was far more frightened by the prospect of a PRC nuclear program than the USSR, Moscow’s original support for the Chinese program waned as Soviet leaders became increasingly wary of allowing Mao to have nuclear weapons. Indeed, the idea of military strikes against China’s nuclear program was an idea the United States proposed to the Soviet Union not long after, although the proposal proved unfruitful (Popp, 2016; Hershberg, 2019). While the U.S. fear surrounding the PRC’s nuclear program is also emphasized when reviewing this history of American nonproliferation policy, it is important to note that the Soviet Union viewed West Germany’s nuclear ambitions in much the same way the United States viewed those of China. This meant that each nation had an incentive to support broader arms control efforts, but it also explains why the MLF was such a threat to Moscow. Because Soviet leaders viewed the FRG as similarly irrational to communist China, any initiative that situated the country closer to nuclear weapons—even indirectly—would create an unwelcome hazard.

In 1965, the U.S. and USSR both presented nonproliferation proposals to the ENDC—with the Soviets calling for the elimination of the MLF (Seaborg, 1987). Continuous negotiations between the two sides paved the way for a 1966 ENDC submission by the Soviets that the U.S. agreed to with minor revisions. This allowed nonproliferation negotiations to expand to the entire international community. Technical discussions over safeguards and the security of non-nuclear states produced the ultimate text of the NPT. More than 50 countries joined the treaty when it was opened for signature on July 1st, 1968, and the treaty entered
into force on March 5, 1970 (Popp, 2016). This major accomplishment came about through these complicated negotiations but also gained more traction following Johnson’s NSAM 318 effectively withdrawing from the MLF. Documents in the years leading up to the NPT’s passage confirm that the MLF was a major barrier to the treaty’s success and that American policymakers seeking to promote nonproliferation were very conscious of Soviet objections to the initiative.

EXAMINING THE SOVIET ROLE IN THE MLF’S DEMISE

The evolution of U.S.-Soviet conversations on the MLF can be documented through an examination of a number of U.S. government documents. Many of these documents can be found in the collections of the DNSA, the State Department’s FRUS series, and Record Group 59: The General Records of the Department of State at the National Archives in College Park, MD. Primary sources from the period of mid-1963 to the end of 1965 detail particularly active conversation of the MLF’s role in relation to the negotiation of the NPT.

In May of 1963, three months before the passage of the LTBT, Ronald I. Spires—a staffer for the Department of State’s Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs—was invited to lunch at the Soviet Embassy, where charge d’affaires Georgi M. Kornienko pressed him on U.S. support for the MLF. The nuclear sharing proposal, Kornienko claimed, would increase tensions between the East and West, and hinder American–Soviet negotiations on other important matters (MLF, Disarmament, May 30 1963). Kornienko acknowledged that some of the potential motives behind the MLF—namely, demonstrating to non-nuclear powers how expensive and unmanageable an atomic weapons program would be—were legitimate. Moscow, however, believed the Nassau Agreement between Kennedy and Macmillian had marked a shift in the MLF from an intellectual idea to a practical one. Furthermore, he reiterated the strong Soviet belief that the MLF would pave the way for West Germany to acquire nuclear weapons. Spires responded with a talking point that was frequently deployed in these conversations: that the MLF’s collective buy-in would in fact discourage West Germany from developing its own nuclear weapons. In response to these criticisms, Spires challenged Kornienko to put forward a proactive solution to the impasse. “I asked him what the Soviet Union would do in this situation,” Spires wrote. “Mr. Kornienko said, ‘Sign a non-proliferation agreement.’” This suggestion added further clarity to the 1962 Rusk-Gromyko talks in two respects. First, it reaffirmed that both the United States and the Soviet Union were interested in pursuing a potential non-proliferation treaty. Furthermore, it indicated that the fate of the MLF would be inherently tied to any future American–Soviet arms control negotiations.

“He did not feel that U.S. officials truly understood that the establishment of the MLF would be a serious setback to those who sought an improvement in US-USSR relations,” Spires commented (MLF, Disarmament, May 30 1963, pp. 3, par. 2). He also noted that “Mr. Kornienko said that as a result of the Rusk-Gromyko talks in Geneva in March and April of 1962, the Soviets had concluded that a non-proliferation agreement was a real possibility” (MLF, Disarmament, May 30 1963, pp. 4, par. 3). These statements, coupled with general agreement between both parties on the desirability of a test-ban treaty and a NATO-Warsaw non-aggression pact, highlight both the early potential for cooperation between the two superpowers and the problematic nature of the MLF (MLF, Disarmament, May 30 1963).

The documentation of the Spires-Kornienko conversation was one of many instances in 1963 where the United States gained greater clarity on how the Soviet Union viewed the MLF and non-proliferation. A September 4th research memorandum from Thomas L. Hughes, Director of the State Department Bureau of Intelligence and Research, informed Secretary Rusk that Moscow’s signing of the LTBT had been paired with a statement that again denounced the MLF. He also used the report to highlight Soviet rhetoric that equated the nuclear ambitions of West Germany with the nuclear ambitions of the PRC (Current Soviet Line on the MLF, September 4, 1963). This was significant in two respects. Firstly, it reaffirmed the fact that the USSR viewed the MLF as an instrument of proliferation, rather than a stabilizing force. Additionally, it raised the possibility that the Kremlin opposition to West German atomic weapons was part of a broader foreign policy seeking to emphasise the importance of non-proliferation—rather than an attempt to undermine Western resolve. This was again illustrated in a meeting at the 1963 U.N. General Assembly during a meeting between Rusk, Gromyko, and British Prime Minister Alexander Douglas Home. Although this meeting also displayed contours of agreement between the West and East on nonproliferation, Gromyko accused the United States of only going “halfway” by supporting the MLF, reiterating the Soviet position that the international community should adopt a prohibition of nuclear weapons that did not make exceptions for nuclear sharing (World Reaction to Test Ban Treaty, September 28, 1963, pp. 9, par. 4). He also suggested that the USSR might be able to convince the PRC into joining a non-proliferation agreement if the U.S. and U.K. could reciprocate by exerting pressure on France—an idea to which the two powers seemed amenable (World Reaction to Test Ban Treaty, September 28, 1963). The Soviet positions articulated during these meetings gave U.S. diplomats a clearer sense of Moscow’s non-proliferation priorities and would continue to play a role in American thinking as MLF negotiations reached a climax in 1964 and 1965.
1964 saw more concerted efforts to gauge and respond to Soviet positions on the MLF. A July research memorandum from Hughes offered Rusk a detailed assessment of how adamantly Moscow truly opposed the MLF. Hughes felt that Soviet opposition to the proposal had been most intense in early 1963 when the USSR had refused to consider any non-proliferation agreement without first eliminating the MLF. However, Hughes speculated that this position had softened—or become more vague—in the months following their initial statement. The Soviets were also facing pressure from East Germany, which was more hawkish than the Kremlin on the issue. This increased ambiguity, however, did not eliminate harsh Soviet rhetoric towards the idea of a shared nuclear force. The Soviet Union frequently threatened unspecified retaliation if the United States and its partners continued to pursue the MLF. The Kremlin’s true intentions, Hughes wrote, were difficult to ascertain and might be designed to intimidate western European allies (Stiffer Soviet Position on MLF, July 13, 1964). A later October memorandum from Hughes considered strategies to address Soviet and French opposition to the Force, including the possibility of reducing its size (Critical Assessment of the Multilateral Force, October 3, 1964).

Two events later in the year injected new ideas into how Soviet hostility towards the MLF should be addressed: the October 1964 establishment of the Gilpatric Commission and the November United Nations General Assembly. The State Department issued “Talking Points on the MLF and Non-Discernment” in the weeks leading up to the General Assembly, which placed heavy emphasis on the importance of achieving a non-proliferation agreement (Talking Points on MLF and Non-Discernment, November 27, 1964). A formal internal position paper issued by the Department reiterated this objective while offering a dim assessment of the MLF. The paper portrayed the Force as a hindrance to the achievement of a non-proliferation agreement. While diplomats were instructed to argue that the MLF was a mechanism through which non-proliferation could be achieved, finding common ground on a comprehensive non-proliferation agreement was the overarching goal (Secretary’s Delegation to The Nineteenth Session of The United Nations General Assembly, December 5, 1964; Nineteenth General Assembly, New York—December 1964, November 27). “The most desirable solution would be...a verifiable agreement on disarmament,” it declared (Nineteenth General Assembly, New York—December 1964, November 27, 1964, pp. 2, par. 5). These documents guided U.S. negotiators as they worked to navigate a large number of disarmament proposals introduced at the General Assembly, including Ireland’s late 1950s nonproliferation initiative. The December immediately following the Assembly brought Johnson’s fateful meeting with PM Harold Wilson and the release of NSAM 318. In a telephone conversation with National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy shortly before his meeting with Wilson, Johnson admitted that “My own instinct is that I don’t want to bring any more hands on the button then we’ve already got,” an indication that he may have shared some Soviet concerns that the Force would have a proliferating effect (Telephone conversation #6472, November 24, 1964). Others in Johnson’s administration also warmed to the possibility of working with the Soviet Union on non-proliferation. In conjunction with his Commission’s work, Roswell Gilpatric produced a report on his analysis of the MLF’s role in nonproliferation. Gilpatric used this report to argue that the United States needed to abandon the MLF in order to secure a stable path for non-proliferation negotiations. “For a US nonproliferation policy to be effective,” Gilpatric wrote, “Soviet cooperation—either implicit or explicit—would be essential” (Tentative Thoughts on Certain Proliferation Problems, December 4, 1964, pp. 1, par. 2). This viewpoint was reinforced during a meeting between Rusk and Gromyko on December 9th, where the Soviet Foreign Minister once again threatened political retaliation if the U.S. continued to support the MLF. Rusk also used this meeting to take the major step of confidingly expressing American willingness to cancel the MLF for the Soviets. “Any weapons we had, including the so-called MLF, would be subordinate to any disarmament arrangements we might arrive at,” Rusk told his counterpart (MLF; Non-proliferation, December 9, 1964, pp. 3). This shift in Johnson administration views, along with Prime Minister Wilson’s opposition, made the defeat of the MLF almost inevitable. McGeorge Bundy, however, saw the fiasco as an opportunity. “I begin to think more and more that it is an opportunity for a real Johnson break-through here,” he wrote to the President. “It is clear that the Germans no longer really expect that we will support an MLF...the way might be open toward a non-proliferation treaty” (Memorandum From the President’s Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Bundy) to President Johnson, November 25, 1965, par. 1).

While the MLF technically remained alive in 1965, the events of December 1964 all but guaranteed its failure. Both publicly and privately, significant questions began to arise over whether the United States still supported the MLF with any level of seriousness. This was particularly true of Germany and Italy, who felt betrayed by the sudden repudiation of the United States (Subject Numeric Files, 1965; Chronological Files, The Secretary’s MEMCONS, 1964-1965). Although the State Department insisted in a telegram to McGeorge Bundy that “US views on substance ANF/MLF have not changed,” and LBJ reiterated his support for the MLF publicly, there was little additional effort expended to promote the Force (Subject Numeric Files, 1965; Transcript, November 24, 1965; Outgoing, January 14, 1965, pp. 1, par. 1). American officials spent much of the remainder of 1965 attempting to reassure its allies that achieving the MLF was still possible—with
little success (Subject Numeric Files, 1965; Chronological Files, The Secretary’s MEMCONS, 1964-1965). In a memorandum to Rusk on March 4th, Bundy effectively closed off the possibility for future promotion of the MLF. “I wonder whether we should not ask ourselves a few hard questions about the whole MLF concept before we agree to any serious multilateral discussions,” he wrote. “I therefore wonder if we should be giving close thought to other possibilities for nuclear coordination” (Memorandum for The Secretary of State, March 4, 1965 pp.1, par. 3). Internal documents continued to reference the MLF, especially in conversations with European governments, but the war in Vietnam quickly began to dominate Johnson’s presidency (Subject Numeric Files, 1965; Chronological Files, The Secretary’s MEMCONS, 1964-1965; Lundestad, 2005). Although Geir Lundestad writes that the MLF initiative was formally discontinued in 1966, Laurence Kaplan argues in John F. Kennedy and Europe that the exact date of its cancellation is unknown (Lundestad 2005; Kaplan, 1999). Regardless, the global nuclear debate shifted towards greater discussion of universal nonproliferation, leading to the NPT’s passage and new prospects for arms control (Lundestad 2005).

**DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

U.S. government documents from 1963, 1964, and 1965 offer significant clarity on two major issues. First, these sources illuminate the nature of Soviet opposition to the MLF and how the United States interpreted these objectives. Secondly, the documents demonstrate the extent to which the MLF was tied to non-proliferation treaty negotiations. Throughout the Force’s conceptual existence, the Soviet Union argued that the MLF facilitated proliferation and would make West Germany a nuclear power only two decades after the Nazis had terrorized Europe. They also broadly opposed the introduction of MRBM s to the continent and the increased accessibility to nuclear weapons that would be afforded to Western European participants in the Force. Most fundamentally, the Soviets were fairly consistent in their insistence that the MLF precluded—or at minimum posed a substantial barrier to—any global non-proliferation agreement.

American reactions to Soviet concerns offer significant insight into internal deliberations that led to the end of the MLF. Although Soviet threats of retaliation for the MLF often remained vague, U.S. policymakers were well informed on the broad strokes of Moscow’s policy towards the proposal. Meetings such as the one between Spires and Kornienko also highlighted to the United States the significant commonalities that existed between their nonproliferation objectives and the Soviet Union’s. In particular, both sides were concerned by allies that were also pursuing nuclear weapons programs. The United States was alarmed by the possibility of West Germany developing an indigenous weapons program, a problem they believed the MLF would alleviate. Conversely, the Soviet Union’s initial support for Beijing eventually transformed into reservations about the Communist Chinese nuclear program. The MLF was tied to the global proliferation problem, they believed, because it would elevate another rogue government to nuclear power status. This increased understanding of the Soviet position was concurrent with the Johnson administration’s reorientation of United States nuclear policy towards universal non-proliferation. Instructions to diplomats in the lead-up to the 1964 U.N. General Assembly recognized that the MLF was often viewed as an instrument of proliferation and de-emphasized the importance of the proposal in comparison to that of a non-proliferation agreement. The Gilpatric Commission’s recommendation that the MLF be sacrificed as a means of improving cooperation with the Soviets was also significant. While the talking points for the 1964 U.N. meetings came directly from the administration, the Commission was established specifically to offer candid recommendations on how the United States could improve its non-proliferation strategy. This emphasized the fact that forsaking the MLF could be defended as an effective policy reform, rather than an action undertaken simply because of immediate political pressures. More broadly, the timing of these developments was convenient for the United States, as it also came during a period where the Western alliance was losing enthusiasm for the MLF.

Describing the impact the Soviet Union had on the decision to end the MLF is complicated for a number of reasons. The date of the MLF’s cancellation remains ambiguous, and the proposal likely died as the result of bureaucratic processes rather than a single event. Even Johnson’s December meeting in 1964 with Harold Wilson only practically, not formally, ended the MLF. Additionally, existing literature suggests that the primary reason for the MLF’s failure was because of internal disagreement among the NATO allies over the construction of the Force and its internal governance. The British, for example, wanted to maintain as much direct operational control over the nuclear weapons as possible, while West Germany sought a simple majority to authorize the missiles’ use. Documents surrounding the Johnson-Wilson meeting support that these disagreements may have been the direct cause of the MLF’s collapse. However, documents utilized throughout this study suggest that a more nuanced view is required. The MLF was less an independent variable of U.S. nuclear policy than a product and reflection of current political realities. The Force was first advanced during the Eisenhower administration, when the potential of direct nuclear confrontation with the Soviet Union was high; following the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, talks between the United States and Soviet Union over the regulation of nuclear weapons intensified. The period in which the Johnson administration gained a greater understanding of Soviet intentions occurred...
parallel to increased recognition, both within the U.S. government and internationally, that the world risked dangerous normalization of nuclear weapons should nations with high breakout capacities choose to develop them. While U.S. officials pushed back against claims that the MLF was an instrument of proliferation, instances such as Johnson’s remark to Bundy that “I don’t want to bring any more hands on the button then we’ve already got” suggest that they understood the potentially problematic optics of sharing weapons with non-nuclear states (Telephone conversation #647 2, November 24, 1964). These broader political realities demonstrate that any attempt to ascribe the MLF’s failure to bureaucratic or technical disputes should not be viewed in a vacuum. The shifting visions of the force certainly alienated the United Kingdom and West Germany at different points throughout the negotiation process. However, Johnson’s dissemination of NSAM 318 seems less a direct product of these disagreements than a convenient justification to end a project that had become a major distraction for greater American strategic objectives.

This paper was limited in a number of respects. The timeframe and scope of the project precluded the examination of documents and sources that may have offered more insight into the day-to-day debate and development of the MLF. Additionally, because this project focuses on contextualizing the MLF in broader American-Soviet non-proliferation negotiations, it does not offer a comprehensive examination of the proposal’s technical and operational facets. The scope and depth of James Solomon’s “The Multilateral Force: America’s Nuclear Solution for NATO (1960-1965)” offers one of the best examinations of objections that Italy, the United Kingdom, and West Germany lodged against the Force’s specific mechanics. Finally, the geographic limitations of this study made access to the non-digitized collections of the LBJ Presidential Library impossible. However, the documents from the DNSA, FRUS, and RG 59 utilized in this paper—combined with corroboration from secondary sources—allowed for an examination of how Soviet postions on the MLF affected American officials’ thinking and understanding of the proposed Force’s implications. The intention of this paper is to complement the exploration of Western European perspectives on the MLF debate by highlighting the continuing importance Soviet viewpoints played throughout the Force’s lifetime.

Because the MLF remains an obscure proposition in nuclear history, its impact on current U.S. policy seems insignificant at best. Broadly, however, a number of relevant lessons can be drawn from the debate. The MLF—as well as the lead-up to the NPT more generally—runs counter to the confrontational nature in which the Cold War is often portrayed. American-Soviet interchange throughout discussion of the MLF resulted in increasing understanding between the two countries on issues of non-proliferation. These conversations also illuminated

the preconditions under which each side would be willing to advance NPT negotiations, allowing the United States to gauge the political capital that was required to come to an agreement with the Soviet Union. Additionally, the MLF saga highlights a country’s ability to strategically sacrifice objectives in pursuit of greater goals while also incurring relatively few costs. Although the Kennedy and Johnson administrations vigorously disputed the intent of the MLF with their Soviet counterparts, the Johnson administration was willing to consider walking away from the proposal as a concession to Moscow. This demonstrates that accommodating a strategic rival, contrary to conventional American wisdom, carries the possibility of yielding a net positive political benefit. As was the case in many other Cold War nuclear negotiations, resolving disputes over the MLF required mutual collaboration, compromise, and communication.

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