
URL: [http://h-diplo.org/reviews/PDF/AR411.pdf](http://h-diplo.org/reviews/PDF/AR411.pdf)

Reviewed by John O. Iatrides, Southern Connecticut State University, Emeritus

Histories of the Cold War discuss in considerable detail the nuclear arms race but usually pay scant attention to early proposals to contain it. Such initiatives are often treated as spurious, hopelessly unrealistic, or crude propaganda. Thus, little has been written about a British 1955 proposal for an experimental demilitarization along Germany’s eastern borders, or Soviet initiatives in 1956 and 1957 for a demilitarized zone in East-Central Europe.¹ Lykourgos Kourkouvelas’ article is therefore a welcome attempt to fill a significant gap in the study of early diplomatic attempts to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons in Europe and elsewhere.

The article examines the reactions of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to several Soviet-bloc proposals for the denuclearization of the Balkans, East-Central Europe and the Mediterranean during 1957-1963. It makes effective use of western scholarship on the Cold War as well as of NATO archives and the papers of Greek Prime Minister Constantine Karamanlis. It provides a useful synopsis of key developments in the East-West ‘balance of terror’ which coincided with the proposals he examines. Specifically, in mid-1955, West Germany, whose rearmament the West had already endorsed, joined NATO, adding strength to the Alliance’s central front. The Soviet Union and its East European satellites, including East Germany, concluded the Warsaw Pact and placed their armed forces under Soviet control. Soviet intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) rendered the American homeland vulnerable to nuclear attack and undermined the credibility of Washington’s ‘nuclear umbrella’ over its European allies. This development raised the threat of conventional war in Europe, in which the Soviet bloc enjoyed significant advantages, while their ICBM arsenals held the two nuclear superpowers at bay.

To remedy the new strategic imbalance, in April 1957 the United States agreed to provide intermediate-range missiles (IRBMs) under dual-key control for the defense of NATO’s “forward line,” and to stockpile tactical nuclear weapons in Europe. The Soviet bloc launched a ‘peace offensive’ consisting of several proposals for the creation of nuclear-free zones in Europe, the Mediterranean, and elsewhere.

Kourkouvelas examines NATO’s reactions to several Soviet-bloc proposals for the denuclearization of the Balkans and the Mediterranean during 1957-1963, and thus focuses on one side of the Cold War ‘dialogue.’ This is a sensible approach, particularly for an article of moderate length and on a complex subject for which the available sources are predominantly western. Its drawback is that the proposals discussed and the motives behind them largely involve western officials who saw Moscow as an implacable and treacherous adversary with whom substantive negotiations on all points of friction, including the arms race, were not only pointless but dangerous.

To be sure, as with most Cold War issues, Soviet-bloc sources on these proposals remain woefully inadequate. Nevertheless, recent scholarship offers important insights into the thinking of post-Stalin Soviet leaders regarding the East-West conflict and the likelihood of war. And it suggests that despite Moscow’s dominant role, after 1956 Europe’s communist regimes were capable of pursuing their own initiatives. One such example is the 1957 “Rapacki plan” for a nuclear-free East-Central Europe, that is discussed by Kourkouvelas.

In September 1957 Romania’s Prime Minister Chivu Stoica communicated to the governments of Bulgaria, Greece, Turkey and Yugoslavia a proposal for a pact of friendship, cooperation, and non-aggression and for discussions of a nuclear-free Balkans. According to a secret Romanian memorandum to Moscow cited by Kourkouvelas, if Greece and Turkey accepted the proposal, NATO’s influence in the Balkans would diminish; if they did not, the communists’ “status and influence” in the region would be enhanced and Greece and Turkey would face “an internal problem” (203). NATO authorities paid little attention to the proposal and authorized Athens and Ankara to respond to it.

In rejecting the Romanian initiative Greece argued that (a) until the issues dividing the states of the region had been resolved, the proposed treaty was meaningless, and (b) denuclearization was also pointless as long as the Balkans were defenseless against nuclear attack. (205) The author adds that the Greek rejection was also motivated by fear of a resurgence of communism at home (204). In its negative response Turkey argued that (a) denuclearization of the Balkans would damage NATO’s strength in Europe and (b) Turkey

---


needed America’s nuclear protection against the Soviet threat along its long borders. The proposal for a nuclear-free zone in the Balkans was renewed in May-June 1959 by Romania and Bulgaria, and repeated by Nikita Khrushchev when NATO was discussing the deployment of IRBMs. (207) These initiatives were similarly dismissed as attempts to create dissent within NATO.

In October 1957, within weeks after the Stoica initiative, Poland’s Foreign Minister Adam Rapacki presented to the UN General Assembly a proposal for the denuclearization of East-Central Europe to include the two Germanys, Czechoslovakia and Poland. Drawing on NATO documents, Kourkouvelas writes that the move was an irritant and an embarrassment to the Atlantic community: “Western leaders wanted to find the most appropriate way to convince their own publics that the Rapacki plan would have been detrimental to NATO interests” (205). Explaining its unanimous rejection he points out that “At a time when NATO military doctrine relied heavily on nuclear weapons, the … Polish proposal threatened to remove these weapons and leave the Soviet Army the … dominant force on the crucial central front of the European continent” (204). He adds that, according to NATO sources, the plan did not provide for stopping nuclear weapons production and for inspection of existing stockpiles.

In his analysis of NATO’s responses to the Stoica and Rapacki proposals the author argues that NATO’s interpretations of Soviet-bloc motives were “largely accurate.” However, he concedes that they were also “influenced by the mutual suspicions of the Cold War. NATO analysts and statesmen were convinced that the Soviet Union and its allies were attempting to sow disunity among NATO members and win a small propaganda ‘battle with the West’” (209).

In the early 1960s, hoping to dissuade West Germany, France and Britain from acquiring their own nuclear forces, Washington recommended to NATO the deployment of nuclear-armed naval units with multinational crews (Multilateral Force, MLF) under U.S. control. The move coincided with the introduction of U.S. Polaris submarines in the Mediterranean in the aftermath of the Cuban missile crisis. Although the MLF concept was eventually abandoned, it prompted the Soviet government to propose in May1963 the denuclearization of the Mediterranean. In return, Moscow pledged not to introduce nuclear weapons in the region. In return, Moscow pledged not to introduce nuclear weapons in the region. The North Atlantic Council rejected the initiative and advised the member states on the substantive points to be used in their responses to the Soviet authorities. (212) As Kourkouvelas points out, in rejecting Moscow’s proposal NATO members claimed that, in the absence of agreement on general and complete disarmament, they were entitled to take measures of collective self-defense. In their view, the proposal was “a propaganda move intended to create dissent in NATO” (212).

In his concluding section the author briefly departs from NATO’s standard interpretations of Soviet proposals for denuclearization. Citing A. Fursenko and T. Naftali’s Khrushchev’s Cold War, he argues that “Khrushchev viewed disarmament as a prerequisite for avoiding a military confrontation, allowing the ‘battle’ against capitalism to be decided on political
and economic grounds. Khrushchev believed that an unbridled military competition would hinder Soviet economic growth and derail his hopes of boosting living standards in the USSR” (213).

The assertion that Moscow’s ‘peace offensives’ may have been motivated by economic considerations and the fear of nuclear Armageddon introduces a dimension to the debate on denuclearization that deserved consideration throughout this article. However, following this brief aside, the author rejoins NATO’s strategists: “NATO analysts surmised that the Soviet Union preferred the struggle between East and West to take other forms, mainly economic and political; and they regarded the denuclearization proposals as a form of political warfare” (213). This is a surprising interpretation of the Cold War: in reality, the West had nothing to fear from economic and political competition with the Soviet Union; it was Moscow’s military strength and perceived aggressive expansionism under Stalin that had sparked the conflict.

In fairness, the motives behind the denuclearization proposals discussed here are beyond the focus of Kourkouvelas’ study, and his discussion of NATO’s responses is well argued. What is missing is an analysis, however brief, of Washington’s key role as ‘first among equals’ in NATO’s decision-making regarding the subjects discussed here.

In retrospect, as the author argues, the Rapacki plan and Moscow’s proposals for denuclearizing the Mediterranean threatened to undermine vital pillars of the NATO strategy which required nuclear superiority. They offered no realistic opportunity for even the most cautious consideration, especially since they were interspersed with blandishments and threats intended to hide the Soviet bloc’s sense of insecurity.

The Stoica plan was a different matter. Most probably offered without any expectation of success, in principle and under different circumstances it might have served as the starting point for exploratory negotiations and progress toward the resolution of regional conflicts. In the late 1950s the Balkans were nuclear-free and on the periphery of the East-West conflict. Greece and Turkey were vulnerable and their allies had neither the will nor the capacity to defend them. Because of NATO’s refusal to allow Greece to pursue a ‘forward defense’ strategy, the tactical nuclear weapons Athens eventually received could only strike targets on Greek soil. Similarly, if attacked, most of Turkey’s hinterland would have been overrun by the enemy before U.S. missiles could do much about it. In short, NATO might be able to avenge its Balkan members but could not protect them. After 1955, given the seriousness of the Greek-Turkish dispute over Cyprus and Aegean issues, providing Athens and Ankara with nuclear weapons of any kind would not have been particularly wise. In short, although too many regional conflicts and suspicions rendered the Stoica plan still-born, the suggestion that the Balkan region might be kept free of nuclear weapons was not without merit and could have served as the basis for an exploratory dialogue. But Cold War tensions left no room for flexibility. In their sophomoric responses, the governments of Greece and Turkey demonstrated their fealty to NATO and offered proof that, in the frigid climate of the Cold War, diplomatic dexterity was too dangerous to contemplate.
Kourkouvelas’ study accentuates the key role of nuclear weapons in defining the contours of the Cold War in the 1950s and 1960s. Its analysis of western responses to Soviet bloc proposals for denuclearization raises interesting questions about the failure of the two camps to explore timely and meaningful paths to conflict resolution.

John O. Iatrides is Emeritus University Professor of International Politics at Southern Connecticut State University. He was educated in Greece, the Netherlands and the United States (Ph.D. Clark University). His major publications include Balkan Triangle: Birth and Decline of an Alliance across Ideological Boundaries (1968); Revolt in Athens. The Greek Communist "Second Round" (1972); (ed) Ambassador MacVeagh Reports: Greece 1933-1947 (1980); (ed.) Greece in the 1940s. A Nation in Crisis (1981); (ed.) The Aegean Sea after the Cold War. Security and Law of the Sea Issues (2000). His current project is entitled “Greece and the Birth of Containment: An American Perspective.”

© 2014 H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.