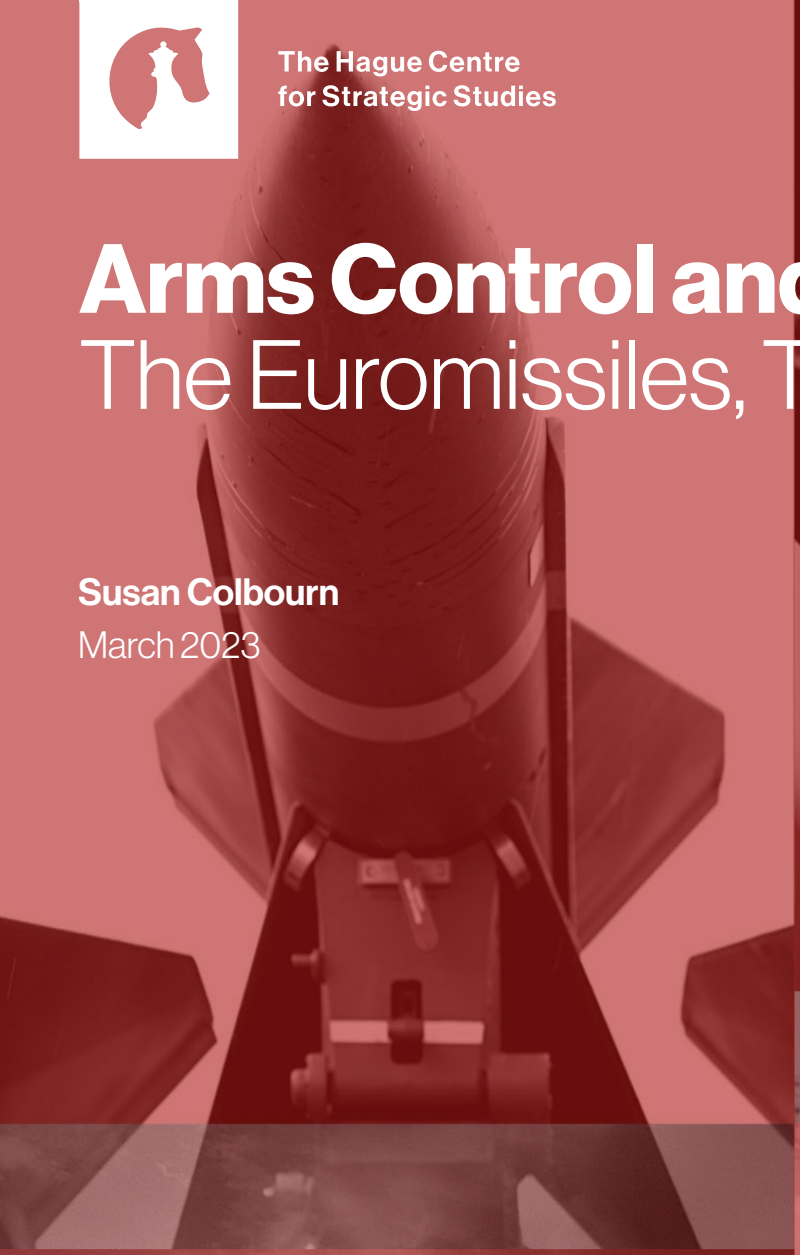
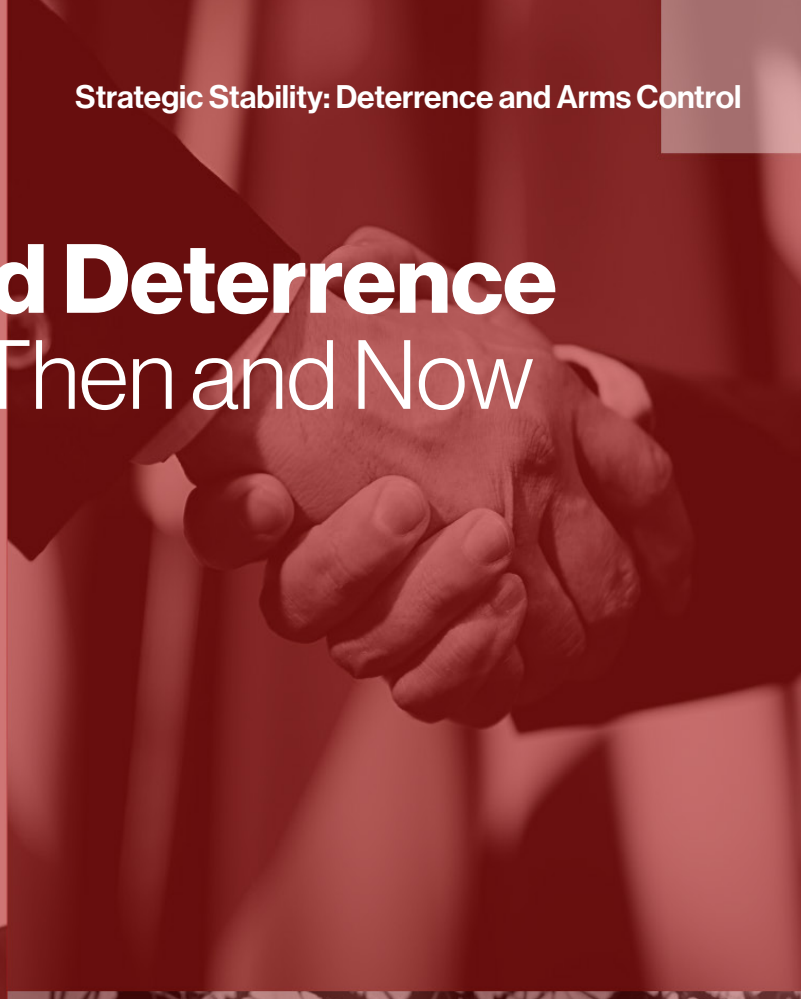
The Hague Centre
for Strategic Studies

Arms Control and Deterrence
The Euromissiles, Then and Now

Susan Colbourn

March 2023





The Hague Centre
for Strategic Studies

Arms Control and Deterrence
The Euromissiles, Then and Now

Author:
Susan Colbourn

Editors:
Paul van Hooft and Tim Sweijs

This paper is part of the HCSS programme on Strategic Stability: Deterrence and Arm Control.

Cover photo:
LA(phot) Mez Merrill/ UK MOD

March 2023

The research for and production of this report has been conducted within the PROGRESS research framework agreement. Responsibility for the contents and for the opinions expressed, rests solely with the authors and does not constitute, nor should be construed as, an endorsement by the Netherlands Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defense.

The prospects for meaningful arms control negotiations seem slim these days. In recent years, commentators have speculated widely about the decline of arms control in international politics. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, widening the war first launched in 2014, has only exacerbated this sense of pessimism about the future of arms control.

Against this backdrop, policymakers on both sides of the Atlantic continue to affirm arms control's role in preserving strategic stability. In NATO's most recent Strategic Concept, released in 2022, the Western allies touted arms control, disarmament, and non-proliferation as central to strategic stability alongside "effective deterrence and defence" and "meaningful and reciprocal political dialogue."[1] That three-part formulation – arms control and disarmament, effective deterrence and defence, and political dialogue – is a familiar one in allied circles. NATO has relied on variations of that formula for decades. In 1967's Report on the Future Tasks of the Alliance (better known as the Harmel Report), for instance, the allies highlighted defence, deterrence, and dialogue as NATO's core functions. "Collective defence is a stabilizing factor in world politics," the drafters of the Harmel Report maintained. "It is the necessary condition for effective policies directed towards a greater relaxation of tensions."[2] And today, that logic endures. An effective posture of deterrence and defence continue to be seen as the necessary foundation upon which to engage adversaries in dialogue, including negotiations to limit and reduce arms, both nuclear and conventional.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, widening the war first launched in 2014, has only exacerbated this sense of pessimism about the future of arms control.

Looking to the past can help us consider the advantages and potential risks resulting from this broad approach. Revisiting the history of NATO's struggles over the Euromissiles – the theater nuclear forces (TNF) or intermediate-range nuclear forces (INF) deployed in Europe during the late Cold War – can shed light on some of the basic dilemmas and difficulties facing arms control and deterrence today. There are not neat lessons to be drawn from this history nor are there any easy frameworks that can be exported and applied to the problems of the present. Instead, thinking about the challenges that faced NATO in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s can provide new perspective on the difficulties in today's security landscape, particularly in Europe. With that in mind, what follows highlights four central takeaways from the history of the Euromissiles before turning to reflect on the similarities and differences between then and now.

Arms Control is Competitive

It is all too tempting to assume that arms control is a fundamentally cooperative enterprise. Arms control is often described – particularly in public settings – as a means of building confidence, reducing tensions between adversaries, and paving the way toward better relations. Successful agreements limiting or eliminating weapons can contribute to these goals, but much of the driving force behind arms control is not an end to adversarial relations per se, but rather about harnessing and guiding competition in order to compete more effectively.[3]

1 NATO Strategic Concept (2022).

2 "Future Tasks of the Alliance," December 18, 1967, NATO, C-M(67)74(2nd revise). See, also, Timothy Andrews Sayle, *Enduring Alliance: A History of NATO and the Postwar Global Order* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019), 154-60; Susan Colbourn, *Euromissiles: The Nuclear Weapons That Nearly Destroyed NATO* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2022), 21-24.

3 John D. Maurer, *Competitive Arms Control: Nixon, Kissinger, and SALT, 1969-1972* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022).

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the United States and the Soviet Union held arms control talks to limit strategic nuclear weapons, much of what drove the Nixon administration to the negotiating table was concern about how sustainable the US position in the world would be over the long haul. Accordingly, Nixon and his advisers pursued a policy designed to shed commitments and scale back where possible so that the United States could compete with Soviet Union more effectively. Arms control represented one tool in the administration's toolkit designed to reshape the landscape in which the two superpowers engaged in competition. Through negotiation, the thinking went, the United States could shape the playing field in ways that would make it easier and more sustainable to compete going forward.[4]

Despite this competitive strategy, it proved possible to reach agreement with the Soviet Union. The agreement signed by the superpowers in 1972, SALT I, gave the Kremlin something politically desirable: recognition of a degree of equality between the two superpowers.

Much of the driving force behind arms control is not an end to adversarial relations per se, but rather about harnessing and guiding competition.

Arms Control Comes with Trade-Offs

Arms control agreements shape the security environment and create new incentives and constraints that in turn shape force posture, strategy, weapons development, and the overall political climate.

After the United States and the Soviet Union signed SALT I, the agreement defined a particular group of weapons as strategic. Early US efforts to include Soviet medium-range and intermediate-range ballistic missiles (MR/IRBMs) that threatened Western Europe fell by the wayside. The Nixon administration dropped its attempts to include these weapons in order to protect NATO's forward based system (FBS), the mix of aircraft and sea-launched nuclear capabilities that the United States relied on to extend its deterrent over its allies in Western Europe.[5]

The final agreement signed by the United States and the Soviet Union capped weapons systems capable of striking either superpower but left other elements of the arsenal unchecked. In practice, those restrictions encouraged the arms race between the superpowers to be channeled into the European theater, leaving competition on the continent unchecked and unconstrained. For Western Europeans, already sensitive about any suggestion that a "limited" nuclear war might be fought on the continent, the lack of constraints on nuclear weapons in Europe gave them pause. SALT met mixed reactions in Western Europe. On one hand, it was heralded as a significant breakthrough in US-Soviet relations that signaled the arrival of détente, which many Europeans hoped would continue to deepen in the years to come. On the other hand, the specifics of the agreement clearly weakened the protection of NATO's deterrence and, particularly, the ability of the United States to extend its deterrent to Europe. The fact that broad swaths of the population believed Cold War competition was coming to an end, if not already over, added to the problems as it increased pressure to cut spending on conventional weapons as well.[6]

When the Soviet Union began upgrading its medium-range missiles targeting Western Europe in the mid-1970s, replacing the old SS-4s and SS-5s with the new, more accurate SS-20s that

4 Colbourn, *Euromissiles*, 28-29.

5 Colbourn, *Euromissiles*, 37-39.

6 Colbourn, *Euromissiles*, 40-41.

boasted multiple warheads, it was entirely consistent with the existing arms control regime. Yet, critics used this to wage a political campaign against détente and arms control, insisting that the Soviet Union had violated the spirit of their earlier agreements.[7]

Generating Leverage is Risky

In order to bring an adversary to the negotiating table, some form of leverage or incentive is often necessary. The adversary needs to be convinced, somehow, that negotiations are worth pursuing. Yet, the kinds of leverage that might shift an adversary's calculus and encourage a country to enter into negotiations can also send a politically costly signal.

The kinds of leverage that might shift an adversary's calculus and encourage a country to enter into negotiations can also send a politically costly signal.

Once the Western allies came to broad agreement that they wanted to see Soviet SS-20s covered in arms control negotiations in the late 1970s, NATO's members needed to figure out how they might convince the Soviet leadership to enter into talks. This posed a particular challenge: while the Soviet Union had ground-based medium-range nuclear weapons systems in Europe, NATO relied on 'offshore' weapons that were air- and sea-launched. Accordingly, some argued that the only way to bring the Soviet Union to the negotiating table would be to plan for a new round of deployments, threatening to introduce ground-based missiles at the theater level for the first time since the Cuban Missile Crisis.

These deliberations paved the way for the December 1979 Dual-Track Decision, where NATO's members agreed to two, parallel policies: (1) to deploy ground-launched cruise missiles (GLCMs) and Pershing II ballistic missiles to Western Europe starting in 1983, to be stationed in Belgium, the Federal Republic of Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom; and (2) to pursue arms control talks on these same systems with the Soviet Union at the same time.[8] In practice, the second track obligated the United States to undertake negotiations with the Soviet Union in bilateral talks. The rest of the NATO allies relied on extensive consultations and the goodwill of US officials to stay informed about the US negotiating position, as had more or less been the case in the earlier rounds of negotiations on strategic arms control.

The Dual-Track Decision ended up a lightning rod for public opposition. It stoked broad popular anxiety about a return of full-scale Cold War competition and the threat of nuclear war in Europe, helping to fuel some of the largest protests in post-1945 Europe and North America.[9] Public backlash threatened to derail the deployments scheduled to begin in 1983. What if these concerned citizens organized themselves at the ballot box, voting in leaders who would reject the new US missiles?

The structure of the Dual-Track Decision made it particularly fragile. The deployment track relied on a complex formula of burden-sharing so that the government in Bonn would not be left alone to host the new US missiles. To meet West German concerns, NATO's 1979 plans envisioned deployment to a number of nonnuclear allies as well as to the United Kingdom (already a nuclear power in its own right).[10] If the other nonnuclear allies chose not to deploy

7 Colbourn, *Euromissiles*, 48-52.

8 "NATO's Dual-Track Decision," December 12, 1979, https://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=1127.

9 Colbourn, *Euromissiles*, 115-132.

10 Colbourn, *Euromissiles*, 97-99.

the missiles, however, it could lead to exactly the scenario West German officials had hoped to avoid. Even in retrospect, it is not hard to see how easily that situation might have transpired. Both Belgium and the Netherlands repeatedly deferred their final votes on the missiles, meaning that the only other ally who met the West Germans' conditions was Italy. To keep the deployments on track rest, in large part, on the Italian parliament.

Arms Control is Easy to Romanticize

The seeming end of the Euromissiles story is the INF Treaty, the historic agreement eliminating an entire class of intermediate-range weapons signed by Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev in December 1987. In retrospect, with the benefit of knowing how the Cold War ended in Europe, many see the INF Treaty as a prime illustration of the perfect arms control agreement.

With the benefit of knowing how the Cold War ended in Europe, many see the INF Treaty as a prime illustration of the perfect arms control agreement.

The INF Treaty preserved significant US advantages. The United States secured major elements of its initial negotiating position, including global restrictions (as opposed to restrictions limited to Europe) and comprehensive inspections that far outstripped earlier arms control agreements. The treaty's limited ground-based nuclear and conventional weapons with a range between 500 kilometres and 5,500 kilometres but left air- and sea-launched systems where the United States had a clear advantage unchecked. The same was true in sheer numbers. Under the terms of the treaty, the Soviet Union agreed to destroy 1,000 more missiles than the United States.

To reach that agreement, the Soviet Union agreed to drop a link between restrictions on intermediate-range nuclear forces and those designed to curb the Reagan administration's Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI). What made that possible was, in large part, the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev. Faced with acute economic difficulties and growing problems within the Soviet alliance system, Gorbachev and his key advisers were willing to reconsider fundamental aspects of the Soviet Union's role in the world. The horrific nuclear accident at Chernobyl in the spring of 1986 gave new urgency to nuclear issues, as it brought home the potential dangers. The capabilities of the US missiles deployed earlier in the decade, particularly the Pershing II with its short flight time, added to these concerns. But Gorbachev's decision to pursue agreement was a product of much more than the arrival of new US missiles.

Gorbachev could not reach an agreement alone. In Ronald Reagan, he found a partner willing to question the old logic of nuclear deterrence and to negotiate steep reductions. The road to the INF Treaty, as a result, offers a sharp reminder about how difficult it can be to disentangle contingency and structure in accounting for what made agreement possible.

Despite these advantages, the INF Treaty came at a cost to the NATO allies. After Reagan and Gorbachev signed the INF Treaty, NATO quickly became embroiled in another debate about whether or not to modernize a group of weapons left outside the treaty – short-range nuclear forces (SNF) – and what role arms control might play in the conversation. Nearly all of the difficulties facing the Western allies were the same as the debates over the Euromissiles a decade earlier. Thanks to a new arms control agreement, the Western allies wondered once

more whether their strategy of deterrence was still credible and whether it could sustain sufficient public support.[11]

The ensuing debates about short-range nuclear force modernization and whether arms control was desirable divided the allies and called into the question the foundations of their overarching strategy. These problems lingered throughout 1989, until the political and societal transformations sweeping Central and Eastern Europe changed the environment so dramatically that the old strategy no longer seemed relevant. What saved the Western allies from these debates were not policy solutions, but intervening events. With communist rule collapsing across Eastern Europe and into the Soviet Union, the logic of nuclear modernization no longer reflected realities on the ground. Had the trends of the late 1980s continued, the Western allies would likely have stared down increasingly difficult conversations about whether and how to sustain a strategy dependent on threatening the use of nuclear weapons.

Then and Now

The history of the Euromissiles suggests that great powers enter into arms control negotiations for a wide array of reasons, many of which extend far beyond pure military considerations.

In the early 2020s, with arms control seemingly in the doldrums, plenty of observers have looked to the past for inspiration – including the history of the Euromissiles.

With the benefits of hindsight, it is tempting to draw a simple lesson from the Euromissiles episode: the need to deploy new weapons systems to generate leverage and produce agreements. Yet, the history of the Euromissiles also offers a sharp reminder of how contentious that process can be. In a world after the INF Treaty, if the United States considers the deployment of new intermediate-range missiles, where would these missiles be deployed and to what end? Would the domestic politics of prospective host countries support deployment? What about the knock-on consequences of deployment? Would the introduction of new weapons systems attract widespread public attention and stoke fears about the prospect of full-scale conflict between the United States and its rivals, as it did in the early 1980s?

Even if all of the risks identified above could be mitigated, would the deployment of new systems be sufficient to generate the kind of leverage to make a new arms control agreement possible? The history of the INF Treaty suggests not. What brought the Soviet Union back to the arms control table in 1985 and, even more critically, what made a final agreement possible was not a direct result of NATO's deployments. Individuals on both sides mattered, not least Mikhail Gorbachev – whom Vladimir Putin takes clear public pride in not resembling, policy-wise.

In today's geopolitical environment, there are larger questions about what form and venue arms control should take. Is bilateral arms control on the model of the superpowers' Cold War dealings still the best format to contain current security challenges? Or do other past arms control episodes like the Washington Naval Treaty – a multilateral agreement – provide a better model for today's situation?

The history of the Euromissiles suggests that great powers enter into arms control negotiations for a wide array of reasons, many of which extend far beyond pure military considerations. Policymakers interested in bringing the Russian Federation back to the negotiating

11 Colbourn, *Euromissiles*, 240-60.

table, for instance, might consider the role that recognition and prestige played in Soviet thinking about the value of negotiations, including but by no means limited to arms control talks.[12] In the early 2020s, that same impulse might be harnessed and leveraged through multilateral negotiations. If the United States were able to bring the People's Republic of China to the negotiating table, that in turn might create new pressures on the Russian Federation for fear of being left on the sidelines – and no longer seen as a truly great power in international politics.

If the US were able to bring the PRC to the negotiating table, that in turn might create new pressures on the Russian Federation.

The challenges today are all the more acute as a result of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the litany of atrocities and human rights violations committed by Russian soldiers as part of this latest phase of Moscow's war. The history of the Euromissiles reminds us that public pressure can shape arms control, but there are few guarantees about how the attitudes of everyday citizens impact the process. Some observers might survey the present landscape and see a compelling case to redouble arms control efforts to reduce the dangers of nuclear conflict. Others might come to the opposite conclusion, viewing continued engagement with the Russians as tacit acceptance of Moscow's war in Ukraine. (The same logic might be applied to the People's Republic of China with reference to the state's crackdown on Hong Kong or human rights violations against the Uyghurs.) In this atmosphere, looking to the past reminds us that a critical part of arms control is the case made in public to sell negotiations and agreements to allies, legislators, and voters.

12 For a prime illustration beyond the arms control space, see Michael Cotey Morgan, *The Final Act: The Helsinki Accords and the Transformation of the Cold War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

Susan Colbourn is associate director of the Program in American Grand Strategy at Duke University. A diplomatic and international historian, she specializes in European security, the politics of nuclear weapons, and the history of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). She is the author of *Euromissiles: The Nuclear Weapons That Nearly Destroyed NATO*, published by Cornell University Press in 2022.

The Hague Centre
for Strategic Studies

HCSS
Lange Voorhout 1
2514 EA Hague

Follow us on social media:
@hcssnl

The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies
Email: info@hcss.nl
Website: www.hcss.nl