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SACEUR'S SELECTIVE RELEASE PROCEDURES AND
NUCLEAR POLICY DECISIONS (U)

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SUMMARY

(S) NATO's FALLEX 68 exercise confirmed what some analysts have suspected but almost no one has yet said in so many words:

- o SACEUR's procedures for the selective release of nuclear weapons are both inappropriate and ineffective for the purpose of making nuclear policy decisions.
- o The reason is that these procedures are, in effect, an adaptation of traditional procedures for requesting artillery and air support or reinforcements; they are ill-suited to the totally different policy-decision task.

(S) Procedures are not, of course, the only problem. Communications facilities need to be improved, and special-purpose systems established for handling essential command and control functions -- including nuclear requests. But it is increasingly clear that the procedures themselves are the main problem. The attempt to get timely, relevant nuclear policy decisions is unlikely to be successful until they are radically changed.

(U) For their intended purpose -- that of making tactical decisions regarding the allocation of limited resources -- the traditional procedures work reasonably well. Requests are initiated by the commander who needs help and are processed up through successively higher levels of command, each of which, in turn, decides whether it can provide the needed support. Despite the sequential nature of the process it works because the "decision loops" are short, the commander making the decisions is in close touch with the situation, and all of the echelons involved are working in close to "real time."^{*}

^{*}(U) The level at which resources are controlled depends on how scarce they are. Artillery support is, typically, controlled from Brigade or Division level, air support from Corps level, and reinforcements from Corps

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PREFACE

(U) When I commented to Jim Schlesinger that I had concluded that SACEUR's selective release procedures were no good for policy decisions and that I thought I had discovered why, he asked me to: "Say just that, in two pages."

(U) The assignment was tougher than it sounds. I can say "just that" in one sentence -- or in a 30-page document. But 2 pages is on the border between saying just too much or too little.

(U) The result is a compromise. My basic assertions are contained here in a few pages, as Jim requested. But for those who are interested in the reasons for my conclusions, a description of the nuclear-request gamesmanship revealed by my observations at FALLEX 68 and the post-exercise survey, and a more detailed discussion of what should be done, I now plan to write several related D's.*

(U) Taken together, I think that perhaps these have the makings of an RM, one which I now have enough data and case study material to write. Comments on this would therefore be greatly appreciated.

* (U) Each of these will carry the tag line: "SACEUR's Selective Release Procedures... ." This will be followed by a title indicating the area covered:

- o What is wrong with them
- o Why they haven't been improved
- o Exercises in nuclear gamesmanship during FALLEX 68.
- o FALLEX 68 without games

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(S) Clearly, the fact that tactical support-request procedures work reasonably well in their traditional role does not mean that they can be applied to the totally different process of obtaining nuclear policy decisions. Yet this is what appears to have been done in developing SACEUR's selective release procedures.* Requests are still initiated at lower levels of command, when the local commander feels he can no longer cope with the threat conventionally. They are still processed sequentially up through the chain of command, with each echelon, in turn, evaluating whether the justification is "adequate" (i.e., the situation hopeless) and whether they concur in the request. And the process is continued until the request finally reaches the only level that can make nuclear policy decisions: the national executive levels of the nations concerned.

(S) There are, of course, some differences. The lowest echelon authorized to initiate a formal NATO request is Army Group (or equivalent Air Force level)--through they typically base such requests on earlier requests from lower echelons, usually Corps.

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* (S) The reason why the procedures were set up as they are is probably now lost in the history of NATO's early planning for the selective use of nuclear weapons. One possible explanation is that, in those days, there was a tendency to regard nuclear weapons as another and more powerful form of artillery support. This thesis is supported by the fact that in some headquarters nuclear operations are still assigned to the "fire support" element of the operations staff.

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But these superficial differences only serve to underscore the essential similarity of SACEUR's selective release procedures to the traditional procedures for requesting other forms of support. Both are focussed on the problem of how to help the local commander fight the local battle. In both cases the justification is essentially a local justification. And in both cases, higher-level commanders are, typically, preoccupied with whether the local commander is really as hard-pressed as he says, and whether the plan outlines in the request is the best way to contain the local threat.

(S) The problem of trying to use SACEUR's selective release procedures for nuclear policy decisions has led to an almost constant tinkering with the process.

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And much effort has been spent in trying to train staffs to write "good" requests. In the end, however, most of these attempts to improve SACEUR's selective release procedures have probably done more harm than good. The new policy-decision wine simply will not go into the old support-request wineskins.

(S) The conclusion is clear. SACEUR's selective release procedures are urgently in need of a complete overhaul. This should be based, first of all, on the understanding that the "request" mechanism is inappropriate and ineffective for making nuclear policy decisions. From lower-echelon commanders we do not need formal requests but reports of what is happening and what alternatives they see for coping with the situation. From intermediate-level commanders we need, not "concurrence," but a broader

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view of the situation and an expansion of the potentially usable options. And from higher-level commanders we need, not a powerful advocacy of a single (nuclear) option, but an objective appraisal of the overall situation and an evaluation of the alternative courses of action.