

# **NATO and the Berlin Crisis of 1961: Facing the Soviets While Maintaining Unity**

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When East German border guards began stringing barbed wire on 13 August 1961 – the first step in constructing what soon became known as the Berlin Wall – NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] and the West had already been confronted by an on-again, off-again crisis over Berlin since late 1958. On 27 November 1958, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev had stated he would end the four-power occupation of Berlin and sign, within six months, a separate peace treaty with the German Democratic Republic, threatening the continued presence in West Berlin of British, French and U.S. forces. Soon afterward, at the NATO Ministerial Meeting of 16 December 1958, the Alliance’s foreign ministers gave full support to the position of the three Western Allies in Berlin by declaring that “the denunciation of the inter-allied agreements on Berlin can in no way deprive the other parties of their rights or relieve the Soviet Union of its obligations.”<sup>1</sup> But in terms of developing responses to possible Soviet moves against the Allies’ position in Berlin, NATO was not actively involved prior to the summer of 1961. Instead, the three Western Allies preferred to deal with this crisis themselves, and established tripartite mechanisms to do so. The Washington Ambassadorial Group (WAG) – consisting of the British and French ambassadors to the United States and Deputy Under Secretary of State Robert Murphy – became the senior forum for tripartite consultation in January 1959, and in April the three powers established the LIVE OAK contingency planning staff in Paris to prepare military responses to possible Soviet restrictions on Allied access to Berlin. General Lauris Norstad was the first “Commander LIVE OAK” as a third “hat” in addition to those he wore as NATO’s Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) and the US Commander-in-Chief Europe (USCINCEUR).<sup>2</sup>

In the autumn of 1959, tensions over Berlin eased as Khrushchev quietly dropped his ultimatum against the Western Allies. General Norstad therefore reduced the LIVE OAK planning staff in size but chose not to eliminate entirely this source of expertise for Berlin planning. LIVE OAK continued to produce various contingency plans to deal with Soviet threats to Western access to Berlin. For ground access, LIVE OAK had developed plans that included a small (company-sized) tripartite probe to test whether or not the Soviets actually were stopping all Allied access to Berlin, and a larger tripartite battalion effort to demonstrate the Allies’ determination to reopen the access routes. To deal with threats to Allied use of the three air corridors to West Berlin, LIVE OAK also developed a series of air contingency plans. These plans did not, however, include plans for another airlift like the one of 1948-1949. Not wishing to rush immediately into another airlift without first testing Soviet intentions on the ground, the United States had ordered the removal of all airlift planning from LIVE OAK in January 1960.<sup>3</sup>

## **Soviets Test Mettle of New U.S. President**

NATO's involvement in Berlin contingency planning did not come until the crisis reawakened in 1961, after Khrushchev decided to test the new U.S. administration of President John F. Kennedy by renewing his earlier threats against the Western presence in Berlin. Initial hints of such an action had already come in the early months of 1961, and Khrushchev's intentions became clear at a summit meeting with Kennedy in Vienna on 3-4 June 1961, when he again threatened to sign a separate peace with East Germany and said that Allied forces would have to depart from Berlin within six months after the signing.<sup>4</sup>

The renewed crisis over Berlin came at a time when NATO was in the midst of a substantial debate about the future direction of its military strategy, which was still officially one of heavy reliance on nuclear weapons to defend the Alliance's territory. After the new U.S. administration began calling for a considerable strengthening of NATO's conventional forces in order to postpone the start of nuclear conflict in the event of war, the European NATO members began to fear that the United States was moving away from the strategy set forth in MC 14/2, a strategy that is commonly called "massive retaliation" even though the actual strategy was not quite so inflexible as to launch all the missiles and strategic bombers as soon as the first Soviet soldier crossed a NATO border.<sup>5</sup>

On 5 June 1961, one day after the Kennedy-Khrushchev summit in Vienna, U.S. Secretary of State Dean Rusk appeared before the North Atlantic Council to inform the nations about the Vienna meeting. He expressed the belief that the Soviets would force the Berlin issue before the end of the year.<sup>6</sup> Two days later the U.S. Permanent Representative to NATO,<sup>7</sup> Ambassador Thomas K. Finletter, informed his colleagues about the state of tripartite military contingency planning, the first such report to the Council since December 1959. He noted that in order to meet this "new threat" from the Soviet Union, additional multinational planning had become necessary, including work on economic countermeasures by NATO, and a tripartite plan for further non-military countermeasures.<sup>8</sup>

## **A Divided, Indecisive, and Irresolute NATO**

What Ambassador Finletter did not say to the Council, however, was that the three Western Allies still held widely divergent views on their own military contingency plans. Thus even before President Kennedy met with Premier Khrushchev in Vienna, members of the Kennedy administration were already expressing dissatisfaction with the existing contingency plans for Berlin. On 5 May 1961 Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara had written to the President calling the existing military contingency plans for an access crisis over Berlin "deficient" and complaining that they could be stopped even by the East Germans acting alone. He therefore called it "mandatory, that in any military operation larger than a probe, we have at least the level of forces required to defeat any solely Satellite force, without employing our nuclear response."<sup>9</sup> In stark contrast to the growing belief in the Kennedy Administration that plans for much larger operations to restore access were needed, the United Kingdom Chiefs of Staff still believed that large-scale operations were "militarily unsound and, moreover, could not

succeed in their object unless it was made clear that they were backed by the threat of nuclear striking power and that the West was in all respects prepared to go to war.”<sup>10</sup> The French also had their doubts about the quality of existing military plans for Berlin. *Ministère des Armées* Pierre Messmer told British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan in July 1961 that “LIVE OAK planning certainly did not seem very realistic.”<sup>11</sup>

General Norstad shared British concerns about the effectiveness of large-scale operations to restore access to Berlin. In a letter he wrote to McNamara as USCINCEUR on 29 May 1961, he stated that he was planning to order the development of a corps-level plan on a unilateral basis, but his letter gave only one possible justification for such a force – rescuing a probe – while pointing out many grave disadvantages: “A large probe, that is, one of several divisions, could be stopped almost as easily as a small one, perhaps even by the East Germans without Soviet assistance, and the greater the force used, the greater the embarrassment which would result from failure. . . . We must also, in considering the size of the effort to be used, remember that nothing would impress the Soviets less than wasting in the corridor the forces that are known to be essential to our over-all defense.”<sup>12</sup>

### **Defending Berlin Air Corridors Exposes NATO Vulnerabilities**

This was the great dilemma of the larger military contingency plans for Berlin: they endangered the overall defense of the NATO area by placing substantial forces in a position that was completely untenable from a military point of view. For the Kennedy Administration, the only way out of this dilemma – which would otherwise force the early use of nuclear weapons in a Berlin access crisis – was to consider a major build-up not only of the U.S. forces deployed in Europe but also those of the NATO allies. At the request of Secretary McNamara, the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff developed a “Requirement Plan for the Allies” listing measures that the NATO allies could take to increase their forces’ readiness. President Kennedy then issued a direct appeal to the NATO allies on 20 July 1961 to undertake such an immediate military build-up to meet the Soviet challenge over Berlin. This appeal took the form of personal letters to President de Gaulle, Prime Minister Macmillan and Chancellor Adenauer, plus directives to U.S. ambassadors in the other capitals to inform the foreign ministers of the proposed U.S. military build-up and the United States’ desire that the other NATO members make a comparable effort.<sup>13</sup>

As a follow-up, Secretary of State Rusk addressed a private meeting of the North Atlantic Council on 8 August 1961. He urged the Alliance to support the preparation of economic countermeasures and NATO coordination of “propaganda and political action in support of our position in Berlin.” He supported the need for a NATO military build-up, noting that “If there is any way, short of the actual use of force, by which the Soviets can be made to realize Western determination, it is by making our strength visibly larger.” He also stated that the build-up may “influence Soviet political decisions.” Secretary Rusk informed the Council that existing military contingency plans were being reviewed, “the military contingency planning group known as Live Oak is being brought into the SHAPE [Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe] area, and we can expect close coordination of that planning with NATO as a whole.” He called for the

West to have a “wide choice of courses of action after the first Soviet use of force,” even though some of these plans might never be executed and recognizing the fact that “planning implies no commitment to execute.” He also called for the NATO allies to bring their forces up to previously agreed forces levels and to make their first-echelon forces combat ready. In the economic field they should be prepared to impose a total embargo on the Communist bloc in the event Western access is blocked. Reaction in the Council to Rusk’s speech was generally supportive, and the ambassadors agreed to meet again to consider their governments’ preliminary reactions.<sup>14</sup>

Secretary Rusk’s statement that LIVE OAK “was being brought into the SHAPE area” referred simply to the physical move of the staff from the USEUCOM compound to the SHAPE compound, a move for which General Norstad had requested authorization from the Tripartite Chiefs of Staff on 4 August 1961 in order to provide the British and French staffs at LIVE OAK access to their national secure communications facilities at SHAPE, to enable him to supervise the staff’s work more closely, and to facilitate the transfer of control of operations to NATO if that proved necessary. However, there was some initial confusion about this statement at NATO Headquarters, with the head of defense planning in NATO’s International Staff informing the Deputy Secretary-General that “the decision to transfer direction of LIVE OAK’s operations to SHAPE confirms the intention of the United States, Great Britain, and France to put this matter under NATO, in particular into the hands of the military authorities of the Alliance.”<sup>15</sup> In reality, LIVE OAK remained an independent organization until the end of its existence in 1990, but the move to SHAPE did symbolize the desire to create a closer relationship between quadripartite and NATO planning as well as to ensure a rapid transfer of control once operations to restore access to Berlin moved past the smaller LIVE OAK plans. In addition to the move to SHAPE, LIVE OAK underwent another key change on 9 August 1961, when a German liaison officer joined the staff. The Washington Ambassadorial Group also became quadripartite through the addition of the German ambassador to the U.S. in late July. Although German military personnel and diplomats were now involved in the LIVE OAK planning and approval process, the *Bundeswehr* could not take part in any Allied military actions on the access routes or in the air corridors; these had to remain tripartite.

As a follow-on to Secretary Rusk’s call for stronger conventional forces in the Alliance, SACEUR Norstad wrote to Secretary-General Dirk Stikker on 11 August outlining a series of “actions which could be taken by NATO countries to prepare for a possible Berlin crisis.” He provided detailed tables of the current land, sea, and air forces for each NATO member, including their authorized versus actual periods of compulsory military service, and he made recommendations for specific measures to “improve the posture of the Alliance in the next few months.”<sup>16</sup>

### **East Germany Seals Border – The Berlin Wall Rapidly Appears**

Two days later – on 13 August 1961 – the East Germans acted to stop the flow of refugees into West Berlin by starting the construction of the Berlin Wall. Although it was a Sunday morning, SACEUR Norstad was working in his office at SHAPE headquarters. He sent two

messages to the Joint Chiefs of Staff that did not mention the events in Berlin but instead concerned his request for 38,000 more troops to make US Army Europe (USAREUR) “ready for initial combat” and capable of sustained operations.<sup>17</sup>

A visiting group of North American politicians later asked General Norstad how quickly he had heard about the building of the Wall. He replied, “The time factor is a matter of policy, not of communications.” Norstad then explained that the East German action had been foreseen, although not specifically for that time, and the information had been relayed quickly from Berlin. Noting that reaction to such a step could be “almost instantaneous,” Norstad stated that the delay had been a “policy action rather than a technical one.”<sup>18</sup> His own views on what the West might have done when the Wall was built were reflected in a conversation with Vice-President Lyndon B. Johnson in late September 1961. Norstad remarked that if he had been the military commander on the scene, he would have “slung a hook across the barbed wire when it was erected, attached the hook by a rope to a jeep and torn down the wire.” He also stated that he would have felt justified in “battering down the wall with a tank.” After expressing these strong personal feelings, however, he returned to political reality and concluded that he did “not believe orders to take such action could be delivered by a government to a local commander.”<sup>19</sup>

The Western Allies made formal protests about the Wall but took no further action because the East German move was seen ultimately as a defensive action that did not interfere with the status or rights of the Western Allies in Berlin. Some members of the Kennedy Administration initially tended to overreact to the construction of the Wall and suggested that a much faster military build-up than that ordered by President Kennedy in July would now be necessary.<sup>20</sup> General Norstad, however, advised on 28 August that “events since 13 August have tended to support, not invalidate, the U.S. decisions of July.” Always mindful of his NATO responsibilities, SACEUR added that, “A further problem is that our Allies outside of the Four are becoming increasingly concerned over the dangers of the situation and restive under a system which they feel does not respect their desire for adequate consultation.”<sup>21</sup> Norstad thus believed that the non-LIVE OAK NATO Allies would not react well to yet another demand being placed on them by the United States before they had even had time to react to the initial one.

In keeping with his moderate and realistic approach to the military build-up, SACEUR submitted his “Plan of Action: NATO Europe” to the North Atlantic Council on 21 August 1961. The plan set forth proposals for increasing the Alliance’s conventional forces within the context of agreed NATO military documents. Norstad did not want to add lots of new but essentially hollow divisions. He therefore recommended in order of priority: (1) the strengthening of equipment and personnel levels in existing combat units; (2) the addition of new combat units; (3) the addition of fresh combat and service support units; and (4) an improvement in the status of the reserves.<sup>22</sup>

## NATO Faces Quandary of How Much Force, When, and Alternatives

Two days later the Council met to discuss the proposed military build-up. SACEUR opened the meeting with a statement on the military situation in Allied Command Europe. He described the Soviet threat and then the actions of the Soviets since the construction of the Wall, noting that there had been no interference with Allied access. He recalled that this was not the first crisis over Berlin. As a result of the threatening situation in December 1958, the three Western Allies had become concerned about military action possibly being required and had set up the small contingency planning staff known as LIVE OAK outside of Paris. LIVE OAK's plans "ranged from small-scale probes along the autobahn, perhaps 2 or 3 vehicles, to more extensive use of large units, a battalion, a division, or even a corps. Plans going beyond this would inevitably involve NATO." To improve the connection between the smaller-scale plans and ones he was responsible for in his NATO capacity, he was moving LIVE OAK from the U.S. European Command compound to the SHAPE area. He noted that because all of the plans involved some danger, no action should be taken without an improvement in the general posture of military forces and the establishment of some degree of military vigilance or alert in NATO.<sup>23</sup>

In addition to the LIVE OAK plans, General Norstad also discussed the on-going efforts to increase NATO's military forces. He told the Council that, in response to a request by the Secretary-General, he had prepared a paper containing a plan for bringing NATO forces to a higher degree of readiness. The plan was a capabilities proposal: his estimate of what appeared to be within the reasonable capacity of the countries in keeping with existing NATO requirements. He noted that the current total of 21⅓ NATO divisions was equivalent to a full 16 divisions. His proposals would increase this to 24⅓ divisions with a strength equivalent to almost 24 divisions by 1 January 1962. In response to a question by Secretary-General Stikker about whether it would be necessary for the West to resort, at an earlier stage, to the use of nuclear weapons, if access to Berlin were blocked and there had been no build-up of NATO forces, SACEUR replied that the current situation was such that "even assuming the use of all weapons, the West could not defend itself without an improvement in its position. . . . It was absolutely impossible to achieve with the equivalent of 16 divisions, tasks which required 30 divisions." He warned that the crisis in Berlin could reach a point of the greatest seriousness by the end of the year, perhaps within the next several weeks. He therefore needed to know within days or at least weeks, what forces would be made available. The nations agreed to send their responses to him by 4 September 1961.<sup>24</sup>

At a private Council meeting that same day, the permanent representatives discussed a proposal by the Western Allies for economic countermeasures against the Soviet bloc in the event of a Berlin access crisis. The Council agreed to establish an Ad Hoc Working Group composed of members of the Committees of Political and Economic Advisers to study the economic counter-measures proposed by the Four Powers, assess the political and economic implications of a total economic embargo against the Soviet bloc, and also examine the effects of implementing such measures on the individual NATO countries along with possible ways to avert or mitigate adverse effects.<sup>25</sup>

## **Military Buildup and Concern over Nuclear Confrontation**

During the next two weeks the nations' responses to General Norstad's call for a military build-up began arriving, but not all had been received when the original deadline of 4 September arrived, so the Council was not yet able to have a substantive discussion.<sup>26</sup> Two days later, "Plans of Action" from the two other Major NATO Commanders – the Supreme Allied Commander Atlantic or SACLANT and the Commander-in-Chief of Allied Channel Command (CINCHAN), who was responsible for the vital English Channel area – arrived at NATO Headquarters, and Secretary-General circulated them to the nations, asking them to submit responses "as a matter of urgency."<sup>27</sup>

As the nations' responses continued to trickle in, SACEUR prepared his initial assessment of the overall NATO response to his Plan of Action, which he submitted to the Council on 15 September 1961. He noted that while the response indicated a "significant increase in capabilities in the Central Region, the defence of the Northern Region would, at best, be marginal." He added that he had not been able to make an assessment of the Southern Region because Greece and Turkey had not yet submitted their responses. Overall SACEUR concluded that "the responses, while encouraging, did not provide strength adequate to the requirements of the times" and he recommended further action to meet both the short and longer term requirements as well as steps necessary to meet a possible all-out emergency.<sup>28</sup> One week later the NATO Military Committee endorsed SACEUR's overall analysis but warned that even though the forces available for Central Region "appear encouraging, they must only be regarded as a stepping stone to achievement of the full figures asked by end-1962." The Military Committee also emphasized the importance of maintaining the existing NATO strategy relying upon nuclear weapons to defend Europe, saying that even when the larger forces are available, "NATO must be prepared to use all means at its disposal, including nuclear weapons as provided in the strategic concept, if such proves necessary in order for SACEUR to fulfill his mission."<sup>29</sup>

## **American Hegemony in Crisis Unsettles NATO, Triggers Bureaucratic Issues**

Before most of the nations had submitted their responses, however, a new controversy arose over Allied responses to the Berlin crisis. On 1 September 1961 the UK Delegation presented Secretary-General Stikker with a copy of the four LIVE OAK powers' "Draft Instructions to General Norstad." These instructions spoke of "the military actions within the competence of SACEUR, whether within the framework of LIVE OAK or the larger framework of the Allied Command in Europe" and thus were clearly not just limited to tripartite or quadripartite planning for Berlin. The document called upon General Norstad to modify existing tripartite plans as necessary and also prepare "additional military plans covering broader land, air or naval measures within the purview of your command" [i.e., NATO's Allied Command Europe]. These plans should include "expanded non-nuclear air operations, expanded non-nuclear ground operations with necessary air support, and the selective use of nuclear weapons to demonstrate the will and ability of the Alliance to use them." General Norstad was further tasked "to establish permanent liaison with the Ambassadorial Group in Washington" and also

make recommendations for “assuring continuity of military control during transition from tripartite military measures to control by established NATO machinery.”<sup>30</sup>

Clearly shocked by the way the Four Powers had bypassed the NATO chain of command with these instructions to SACEUR, Stikker wrote a memo stating that it was his job as Secretary-General to “maintain the unity of the Alliance” as well as to “ensure the proper functioning of the agreed institutions and safeguard the existing chains of command in the political and military fields.” He warned that “the dangers which are threatening the Alliance do not come only from outside. Problems may also arise from inside the Alliance.” He added that during the initial discussion of this document in the Council, several ambassadors had complained bitterly about the lack of consultation. Stikker then met with the NATO ambassadors of the Four Powers on 2 September and read his memo to them, asking them to pass it on to their governments. In the ensuing discussion he stated that he “had to have his position made absolutely clear to their four governments. He could not allow the situation to get underway where there would be any doubt as to what was the political authority of the Alliance, i.e. the Council: it could not be left with a junta.” He then expressed the belief that some satisfactory machinery could be evolved, but “the present 4-power proposal was not the right way to go about the problem. The Council would certainly not accept an outside authority giving instructions to SACEUR.”<sup>31</sup>

Over the next week the four ambassadors met with the Secretary-General or his advisors six times to discuss Berlin-related issues. They then invited him to meet with the Washington Ambassadorial Group (WAG) and Secretary of State Rusk on 9 September 1961. At this meeting Mr. Stikker stated that he thought that the responses of NATO governments on defense measures had been “rather good thus far on the whole, but said that there had been more difficulty on the matter of economic counter-measures. Some of this difficulty was due to the fact that the Council did not like to be confronted with the conclusions of others.” Secretary Rusk responded that “the NATO reaction to the Four Power recommendations is not a new one and illustrates a dilemma frequently facing the U.S. in dealing with NATO. . . . The U.S. is usually criticized for lack of leadership if it does not put forward firm proposals, but it is criticized equally for dictating to others when it does submit firm recommendations.”<sup>32</sup>

The meeting also examined the controversial issue of the instructions that the Four Powers had sent to General Norstad. Stikker informed the WAG members that the handling of this Four Power instruction could develop into a very serious problem in NATO because there was great sensitivity to direction by the Four Powers. He noted that the present directive did not involve existing NATO military command channels (the Military Committee and its 3-nation executive body, the Standing Group, consisting of generals from France, the United Kingdom and the United States), but he thought it would not be difficult to redraft the paper on the basis of the NATO treaty for the purpose of developing an agreed NATO policy and instructions to SACEUR. Secretary Rusk wondered if SACEUR already had broad authority for planning but felt limited by the forces available to him. Assistant Secretary of Defense Paul Nitze pointed out one more limitation on General Norstad, the fact that “NATO strategy and planning is entirely defensive and really does not cover the problem of offensive action designed to bring about the re-opening of access to Berlin.” Stikker informed the WAG members that there was tremendous



confidence in General Norstad as SACEUR and, in order to maintain his position, he must continue to take his political direction from the North Atlantic Council. The group then decided that the Four Powers' Permanent Representatives might, with Mr. Stikker's assistance, prepare a new paper for the Council containing NATO instructions for General Norstad.<sup>33</sup>

Secretary-General Stikker's confidence in General Norstad was well-placed, for SACEUR was one of the strongest advocates of the views of the European NATO allies in the discussions occurring within the Kennedy Administration about building up NATO's conventional military strength as a result of the Berlin crisis. On 8 September 1961, President Kennedy had sent Secretary of Defense McNamara a list of questions regarding the advisability of calling up four National Guard divisions to active duty, making a total of six new divisions by January. On 13 September, McNamara prepared his responses and then sent them to General Norstad for comments. Three days later, Norstad replied that he was "disturbed by what may be over-optimism with respect to . . . our ability to defend Western Europe against a massive conventional attack by the Soviet bloc for as much as a month or more, without having to resort to the use of nuclear weapons." Norstad pointed out that the proposed reinforcements would only bring NATO's force levels up to what had been previously established as the minimum required for an effective defense of Europe *with* nuclear weapons. In Norstad's opinion, the Kennedy Administration's desire to defend Europe solely with conventional forces was a "policy that could be construed by the Soviets as permitting them to become involved, and then, if they decide the risks are too great, to disengage." He therefore argued that it was "absolutely essential that the Soviets be forced to act and move at all times in full awareness that if they use force they risk general war with nuclear weapons." Norstad also stressed the potential impact on NATO of what McNamara was proposing: "We must keep in mind the fact that our NATO strategy must be generally acceptable to our allies if they are to have either the will to face up to possible military operations or the inclination to build up their forces. Unreasonable as such an interpretation would be, any policy which might appear to suggest trading large areas of Europe for time in which to seek to avoid the spread of war to the United States or which appears to deny the use of capabilities and weapons which might divert or destroy the Soviet threat to European lives and territory, will have hard going."<sup>34</sup>

Secretary-General Stikker's prediction that the North Atlantic Council would not wish to have its authority usurped by quadripartite decision-making bodies was borne out at the next Council meeting on 18 September 1961, when ambassadors began questioning the role and authority of the quadripartite Ambassadorial Group in Washington. The Canadian Permanent Representative commented that the "Ambassadorial Steering Group in Washington is a good thing as long as it does not become an institution," and he asked "what is the status of this group? . . . Is it related to the North Atlantic Council or any other body?" The second agenda item, dealing with long-term NATO strategy, also proved controversial when the U.S Permanent Representative presented his government's call for NATO to "accord high priority to enhancing NATO non-nuclear ground/air capabilities in the forward areas of Allied Command Europe" and "defer action" on the NATO Commanders' proposed requirements for medium range and submarine-launched ballistic missiles. Other nations remained more supportive of the existing strategy with its heavy reliance on nuclear weapons for the defense of Europe.<sup>35</sup>

## NATO Questions Role and Influence of LIVE OAK and WAG

One week later, on 22 September, the issue of NATO's relationship to the quadripartite bodies came to a head in the Council. In response to the query made by Canada concerning the relationship between NATO and the Washington Ambassadorial Group, Secretary-General Stikker confirmed that the Ambassadorial Group was *not* a NATO steering group and that the Council had not given it any **power**. A number of permanent representatives expressed strong dissatisfaction with the fact that the Council was receiving very little information about Berlin planning, that the Ambassadorial Group was giving instructions to General Norstad as SACEUR, and that the Three or Four Powers were presenting papers to NATO committees on a "take it or leave it" basis rather than entering into discussion. The Canadian Permanent Representative then asked about the relationship of the LIVE OAK group to SACEUR. He agreed that the Four Powers had special responsibilities in Berlin, but over the years they had asked the other Allies to be as closely associated as possible with the policy they were pursuing in Berlin. "Surely it was up to the four powers most directly concerned to make sure that if the allies were to be committed in war they should be informed in peace. No blank cheque had been given to the three or the four." The Belgian ambassador complained that the "Council received information, but consultation took place elsewhere." He added, "since all members of the Alliance are equally involved in the danger of war, they should all take part in planning."<sup>36</sup>

The quadripartite representatives then began responding to these attacks. The United Kingdom's ambassador replied that the Council was aware that Norstad had assumed responsibility for supervising certain planning in relation to access to Berlin. He categorically denied that the Four Powers were trying to prepare with General Norstad plans involving the alliance as a whole, with a view to requesting the Council to rubber-stamp these plans. The U.S. ambassador expressed the view that "this was one of the most important discussions which had taken place in the Council, since it showed the deep dissatisfaction of some members . . . at the way in which the affairs of the Alliance were being conducted. . . . He thought that the four powers intended that full consultation should take place in the Council, though he admitted that on occasion in the past they had presented the Council with information rather than the possibility of consultation." Secretary-General Stikker concluded the meeting by stating that the "Council was working on the right lines in the military field and that its present study would lead to a comparison of national efforts towards the military build-up. When the Council received the report on the planning contained in the LIVE OAK documents, it would become clear that consultation was intended; he thought furthermore that it would be possible to reach agreement on NATO-wide planning."<sup>37</sup> After the meeting, U.S. Ambassador Finletter sent a telegram to the Department of State praising the "skillful and constructive presentation by Stikker [that] held Council in line with hope for increased consultation in immediate future." Finletter concluded by saying, "It is clear there is still dissatisfaction, and proof of the pudding is going to lie in the eating of how we deal full NAC [North Atlantic Council] into our operations on full partnership basis."<sup>38</sup>

## **U.S. Seeks to Mollify NATO to Avoid Losing Focus on Escalating Berlin Crisis**

The Four Powers responded quickly to this strong sense of dissatisfaction in the Council; on 27 September they provided a report on the full range of LIVE OAK plans and stated that General Norstad would discuss them with the Council on 29 September and provide additional information if required. The Council also received draft instructions for General Norstad, which Stikker said that he had developed in discussions in Paris with the four Permanent Representatives and SACEUR. The "Suggested Instructions to NATO Military Authorities" set out the basic objectives of NATO in regard to Berlin and said they will if possible be attained by negotiations and the application of non-military measures, but in the event that such measures or negotiations do not deter USSR or GDR from blocking Western access, the instructions were designed to start the preparation of NATO military plans for a Berlin crisis. Military actions will have to be integrated into a general, overall strategy applicable as appropriate on a worldwide scale; they should be "graduated but determined" and consist of "a catalogue of plans from which appropriate action could be selected by political authorities in light of circumstances and with the aim of applying increasing pressure." These military plans "must take into account of and be consistent with current defensive concepts of NATO strategy. They must, therefore, retain the defence of the alliance members as a central consideration." As for the use of nuclear weapons, the instructions stated that "The Alliance will stand ready for nuclear action at all times. However, planned recourse to nuclear weapons in these operations can be envisaged only under any one of the three circumstances of: (1) prior use by the enemy, (2) the necessity to avoid defeat of major military operations, or (3) a specific political decision to employ nuclear weapons selectively in order to demonstrate the will and ability of the alliance to use them."<sup>39</sup>

Two days later SACEUR met with the Council to discuss the development and nature of the LIVE OAK Plans. He assured the Council that "in his capacity both as SACEUR and as the supervisor of LIVE OAK, that he had always made sure that these plans were adjusted as necessary to NATO plans and that they not only did not interfere with, but that they complemented NATO plans. When planning was extended to the use of larger forces, NATO would be fully involved from the start." During discussion of the proposed instructions to NATO Military Authorities, the Netherlands Permanent Representative asked if the three conditions for use of nuclear weapons were consistent with the Political Directive and the Strategic Concept. General Norstad replied that since these instructions constituted primarily a directive to himself, it was he who would interpret them, and in so doing he would interpret them to the full within the limits of the Political Directive. Canada queried the section on the use of nuclear weapons, asking if their selective use could lead to "rapid escalation . . . into a nuclear exchange." On the other hand, if the Soviets did not respond, then "the West would bear the odium before world opinion of the first use of nuclear weapons." Norstad hoped that "when the Council considered the danger of incurring odium it would bear in mind the fact that this action would only be taken when all possible steps had already been taken and failed, and when it was necessary to choose between defeat and further action." Belgium asked if the plans had already been prepared and if not, would this be on a tripartite basis or otherwise. Norstad replied "that about two months ago he had instructed the appropriate NATO Commanders to prepare plans

for the four eventualities cited, and also other items. This planning was, therefore, being carried out within the normal NATO planning structure."<sup>40</sup>

### **Threat of Hydrogen War Looms, U.S.-Soviet Face-Off at Berlin Wall**

During the next three weeks the Council met several times in private session to discuss these instructions to SACEUR. Some ambassadors were not happy with the paragraph concerning the use of nuclear weapons; in particular, the idea of using one to demonstrate the Alliance's resolve, but U.S. Ambassador Finletter made a strong argument for the retention of this option:

This provision calls for planning for one more step at the very last minute to try to save the world from hydrogen war. The theory is that the political authorities should have available to them, if they choose to use it, this demonstration when every other effort to persuade the Russians not to drive us to the use of nuclear weapons had failed.<sup>41</sup>

His impassioned plea helped win over the other ambassadors, who declared themselves in agreement with his views, and on 25 October 1961 the Council agreed to the proposed instructions.<sup>42</sup> From now on NATO military planning for Berlin would be controlled by all fifteen NATO members, not just the four LIVE OAK powers. But the crisis itself remained primarily the responsibility of the Western Allies, as was clearly demonstrated two days later, when U.S. and Soviet tanks faced each other across Checkpoint Charlie as the result of a dispute over entry procedures for civilians. This dangerous confrontation was resolved by the two superpowers without any NATO involvement.

Tensions eased somewhat after the two sides' tanks left Checkpoint Charlie, and Khrushchev's six-month ultimatum expired without the threat to sign a separate peace treaty being carried out, but tensions over Berlin continued into 1962, when the air corridors became the frontline. In addition, there was one final flare-up involving autobahn access in 1963.<sup>43</sup> Based on the North Atlantic Council's instructions in October 1961, SHAPE went on to prepare the Berlin Contingency (BERCON) plans that included operations from one to four divisions through East Germany toward Berlin, air operations within the air corridors as well as over large portions of the German Democratic Republic, maritime operations against Soviet bloc shipping within SACEUR's area of operations, and even nuclear demonstrations to show how serious the West was about reopening access to Berlin. Similarly, SACLANT's planners prepared Maritime Contingency (MARCON) plans for use against Soviet bloc shipping all around the world. These plans were presented to the North Atlantic Council in early 1962, and the effort to achieve political approval continued until late October, finally occurring after the Cuban Missile Crisis had once again heightened East-West tensions.

Although NATO's BERCONs and MARCONs only came into existence officially in 1962, the decision to authorize this planning and provide political guidance for it had come during the key crisis year of 1961. That year was marked not only by the Soviet ultimatum regarding Allied access to West Berlin but also by internal NATO divisions that threatened the solidarity of the

Alliance itself. The Kennedy Administration's push for a rapid conventional military build-up in Europe was unpopular with many European allies, who were not convinced of the need to send large forces down the autobahn in an access crisis or to attempt to defend Western Europe solely with conventional forces for an extended period of time. Additional strains on the Alliance came from the efforts of the four LIVE OAK powers to keep all Berlin-related decision-making to themselves and simply present the rest of the Alliance with the results of their decisions. The other Allies were already grumbling about the lack of consultation coupled with 4-Power proposals being presented on a "take it or leave it" basis when the Four went one step further and issued their own instructions to General Norstad as SACEUR, not just as Commander LIVE OAK, at the beginning of September 1961. Secretary-General Stikker deserves great credit for firmly resisting this move to undercut the authority of the Council and replace it with what he called a "junta" consisting of the four powers. He also proved to be an effective mediator between the quadripartite powers and the rest of the Council, working closely with the four ambassadors to produce NATO rather than Four-Power instructions for General Norstad that would be firmly anchored in NATO institutions and procedures.

### **General Lauris Norstad's Diplomacy Maintains Alliance, Berlin Crisis Resolved**

SACEUR Norstad was also a key figure in defusing the crisis within the Alliance by reassuring the Allies on issues such as the interface of LIVE OAK and NATO plans and the possible use of nuclear weapons in a Berlin crisis, stating that he would always interpret his instructions in accordance with the Council's existing Political Directive and the Strategic Concept. Overall General Norstad frequently took the side of the European allies in discussions with the Kennedy Administration, which put him on a confrontation course that cost him his job the following year.<sup>44</sup>

Finally, the four powers themselves deserve credit for recognizing the strains that their actions had placed upon the Alliance and adopting a more flexible, NATO-based approach. While they continued to refine their quadripartite measures for smaller, immediate actions to restore access to West Berlin, they now clearly accepted the principle that any larger efforts would have to come under the control of the existing NATO structure and that all NATO nations would have a say in developing and deciding to execute such plans..

One important benefit of the Berlin Crisis of 1961 for the Alliance was a major improvement in its conventional defense capabilities, as nations carried out a number of measures in response to SACEUR's "Plan of Action: NATO Europe." This increase in conventional capabilities, combined with the wide range of contingency plans developed for Berlin in both the quadripartite and NATO areas, helped pave the way for NATO's adoption of the new strategy of Flexible Response in December 1967.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Declaration on Berlin", attachment to North Atlantic Council [NAC] Ministerial Meeting of 16-18 December 1958, in NATO Information Service, *Texts of Final Communiqués, 1949-1974, Issued by*

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*Ministerial Sessions of the North Atlantic Council, the Defence Planning Committee, and the Nuclear Planning Group* (Brussels, n.d. [1975]), 123-124.

<sup>2</sup> For more information on LIVE OAK see Gregory W. Pedlow, "Allied Crisis Management for Berlin: The LIVE OAK Organization, 1959-1963," in William W. Epley (ed.), *International Cold War Military Records and History: Proceedings of the International Conference on Cold War Military Records and History Held in Washington, D.C., 21-26 March 1994* (Washington: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 1996), 87-116; Gregory W. Pedlow, "Three Hats for Berlin: Lauris Norstad and the Second Berlin Crisis, 1958-1962," in John P. S. Gearson and Kori Schake (eds.), *The Berlin Wall Crisis: Perspective on Cold War Alliances* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 175-198. The official history of LIVE OAK that the author prepared at the time the organization closed in 1991 has been declassified and will be published in: Gregory W. Pedlow, *LIVE OAK TOP SECRET! Allied Cold War Planning for a Soviet Blockade of West Berlin, 1959-1989: The Official History* (forthcoming).

<sup>3</sup> The Quadripartite Berlin Airlift (QBAL) plan by the three Western Allies and the Federal Republic of Germany continued to be updated, but this was now the responsibility of Headquarters, US European Command, not LIVE OAK. LO-TS-61-53, Memorandum for Record, Detailed LIVE OAK Activity Report, 24 March 1961, LIVE OAK Archives, *Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv*.

<sup>4</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, Vienna, June 4, 1961, 3:15 p.m., Vienna Meeting Between the President and Chairman Khrushchev, in *Foreign Relations of the United States* (hereafter cited as *FRUS*) 1961-1963, vol. 14, *Berlin Crisis 1961-1962*, 96-98.

<sup>5</sup> The full texts of MC 14/2, "Overall Strategic Concept of the Defense of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization Area," 23 May 1957, and its accompanying military document known as MC 48/2, "Measures to Implement the Strategic Concept," 23 January 1957, can be found in Gregory W. Pedlow, ed., *NATO Strategy Documents, 1949-1969* (Brussels: North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, 1997), 277-332.

<sup>6</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff [hereafter cited as JCS], Joint Secretariat, Historical Division, *Germany and the Berlin Question* (Washington, D.C., 1961), 2:172. This declassified (with deletions) official history written during the Berlin Crisis can be found in the Berlin Project Files of the National Security Archive (hereafter cited as NSA BPF), a private organization in Washington, D.C., that collects declassified government documents.

<sup>7</sup> The North Atlantic Council normally meets in Permanent Session at ambassadorial level, and the member nations' ambassadors to NATO are also known as Permanent Representatives. The two terms will therefore be used interchangeably in this essay. The Council also meets occasionally in Ministerial Session, with nations represented by Foreign or Defense Ministers, depending on the topic to be discussed.

<sup>8</sup> JCS, *Germany and the Berlin Question*, 2:173.

<sup>9</sup> McNamara to Kennedy, 5 May 1961, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 14:61-63.

<sup>10</sup> Chiefs of Staff Committee, Confidential Annex to COS(61)38<sup>th</sup> Meeting Held on Tuesday, 20<sup>th</sup> June 1961, DEFE 4/136, UK National Archives,.

<sup>11</sup> Cyril Buffet, "De Gaulle, the Bomb and Berlin: How to Use a Political Weapon," in Gearson and Schake (eds.), *Berlin Wall Crisis*, 86.

<sup>12</sup> Norstad to McNamara, 29 May 1961, NSA BPF.

<sup>13</sup> JCS, *Germany and the Berlin Question*, 2:224. See also *FRUS 1961-1963*, 14:223-224.

<sup>14</sup> Although the actual discussions of the private meeting of the NAC on 8 August 1961 have not yet been declassified, Rusk described to President Kennedy what he intended to say in a telegram on the previous day (*FRUS, 1961-1963*, 14:309-311), and the full text of his presentation on the military build-up is found in the United States Delegation, Memorandum on Statement to the North Atlantic Council in Private Session on Military Build-Up, Soviet Motives and Intentions, 8 August 1961, Military Planning for Berlin Emergency (1961-1968) [hereafter cited as MPBE], DEF 4-4-04 (1961-1), Sec. 1, Doc. 2, NATO Archives.

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NATO's recently declassified collection of documents related to the Second Berlin Crisis can be found on the Archives portion of the NATO website ([www.nato.int/archives/berlin](http://www.nato.int/archives/berlin)) with the title "Military Planning for Berlin Emergency (1961-1968)."

<sup>15</sup> JS.100/61, J. Sagne, Note Pour M. le Secrétaire Général Délégué, Propositions américaines dans le domaine militaire à l'occasion de la crise de Berlin, 10 August 1961, MPBE, DEF 4-4-04 (1961-1), Sec. 3, Doc. 1. Mr. Sagne was Head of the Finance and Defence Planning Section of the Economics and Finance Division, which later became the Defence Plans and Policy Division.

<sup>16</sup> Norstad to Stikker, Actions to be Taken by NATO Countries for a Possible Berlin Crisis, 11 August 1961, MPBE, DEF 4-4-04 (1961-1), Sec. 3, Doc. 2, NATO Archives.

<sup>17</sup> Norstad to Lemnitzer, 13 August 1961, and Norstad to Lemnitzer, ECJCP 9-91443, 13 August 1961, Norstad Papers, Box 86, Berlin-LIVE OAK 1961 thru 30 Aug (3), Dwight D. Eisenhower Library.

<sup>18</sup> Notes on General Norstad's Question-and-Answer Period with the North American Politicians Group, SHAPE, 21 November 1961, SHAPE Historical Office files.

<sup>19</sup> Memorandum of Conversation between Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson, Ambassador Gavin, Ambassador Finletter and General Norstad at the United States Embassy, Paris France, Sept. 30, 1961, NSA BPF. See also *FRUS 1961-1963*, 14:456.

<sup>20</sup> Willard S. Poole, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and National Policy*, vol. 8, 1961-1964 (Washington, DC: Office of Joint History, 2011), 149.

<sup>21</sup> Norstad to Lemnitzer, 28 August 1961, *FRUS, 1961-1963*, Vols. 13-15, Microfiche Supplement, Doc. 147.

<sup>22</sup> SHAPE 167/61, Plan of Action: NATO Europe, 21 August 1961, MPBE, DEF 4-4-04 (1961-1), Sec. 4, Doc. 2.

<sup>23</sup> C-R(61)39, Summary Record of NAC Meeting on 23 August 1961, 29 Aug 1961, MPBE, DEF 4-4-04 (1961-1), Sec. 5, Doc. 4. Military Vigilance was the lowest level of the NATO Alert System in existence in the 1960s. It was followed by three levels of Alerts: Simple Alert, Reinforced Alert and General Alert. General Norstad's statement that LIVE OAK plans included division- or corps-level operations was not correct; such plans had only been considered in U.S. national channels. The largest LIVE OAK plan in 1961 – JUNE BALL – involved assembling a tripartite division near the entrance of the autobahn to Berlin. Employment of such a division would have taken place under NATO, not LIVE OAK, control. See Pedlow, "Allied Crisis Management for Berlin," 96-97, 102-103.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> C-R(61)39-ADD1 (Extract), Extract from NAC Meeting on 23 August 1961, 1 September 1961, MPBE, DEF 4-4-04 (1961-1), Sec. 5, Doc. 3. The full record of this private NAC meeting has not yet been released.

<sup>26</sup> C-R(61)41, Summary Record of NAC Meeting on 4 September 1961, 9 September 1961, MPBE, DEF 4-4-04 (1961-1), Sec. 5, Doc. 5.

<sup>27</sup> PO(61)722, Memorandum by the Secretary General to the Permanent Representatives, SACLAN and CINCHAN Plans of Action in Face of the Berlin Crisis, 6 September 1961, MPBE, DEF 4-4-04 (1961-1), Sec. 10, Doc. 1.

<sup>28</sup> SHAPE 188/61, Norstad to Stikker, Analysis of Country Replies, 15 September 1961, MPBE, DEF 4-4-04 (1961-2), Sec. 1, Doc. 2.

<sup>29</sup> PO/61/747, Secretary General to Permanent Representatives, SACEUR's Analysis of, and Recommendations Concerning, Country Responses to "Plan of Action – NATO Europe," 22 September 1961, MPBE, DEF 4-4-04 (1961-2), Sec. 3, Doc. 2.

<sup>30</sup> UK Delegation, Draft Instructions to General Norstad, 1 September 1961, MPBE, DEF 4-4-04 (1961-1), Sec. 7, Doc. 1.

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<sup>31</sup> Private Office, Memorandum by G. Vest on Meeting of the Secretary General with the Permanent Representatives of France, the United States and Germany and the Acting Permanent Representative of the United Kingdom on 2<sup>nd</sup> September 1961, 4 September 1961, MPBE, DEF 4-4-04 (1961-1), Sec. 7, Doc. 10.

<sup>32</sup> US Department of State, Memorandum of Conversation, NATO Aspects of Berlin Planning, 9 September 1961, NSA BPF.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Kennedy to McNamara and Rusk, National Security Action Memorandum No. 92, 8 September 1961, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 13:398-399; Norstad to McNamara, 16 September 1961, Attachment to Memorandum from McNamara to Kennedy, 18 September 1961, *FRUS 1961-63*, Microfiche Supplement, Vols. 130-15, Doc. 177.

<sup>35</sup> Extract from C-R(61)44, Talks by Foreign Ministers in Washington on 14<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> September, 26 September 1961, MPBE, DEF 4-4-04 (1961-2), Sec. 4, Doc. 1. The full record of this meeting including the discussion of NATO strategy is found in CR(61)44, Summary Record of a Restricted NAC Meeting on 18 September 1961, 26 September 1961, Council Records.

<sup>36</sup> C-R(61)46, Summary Record of a Restricted NAC Meeting on 22 September 1961, 5 October 1961, MPBE, DEF 4-4-04 (1961-2), Sec. 4, Doc. 4.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> POLTO 375, US Mission NATO to Department of State, 22 September 1961, *FRUS 1961-1963*, 14:434.

<sup>39</sup> PO/61/765, NATO Planning for Berlin Emergency, 27 September 1961, Annex A, Report by the French, United Kingdom and United States Governments to the North Atlantic Council; Annex B, Suggested Instructions to NATO Military Authorities, MPBE, DEF 4-4-04 (1961-2), Sec. 5, Doc. 1.

<sup>40</sup> C-R(61)49, Summary Record of NAC Meeting of 29 September 1961, 13 October 1961, MPBE, DEF 4-4-04 (1961-2), Sec. 5, Doc. 2.

<sup>41</sup> The restricted sessions of the Council from this period have not yet been declassified, but the discussions on 3 and 4 October 1961 were summarized by Secretary-General Stikker in PO/61/789, NATO Planning for Berlin Emergency, 10 October 1961, MPBE, DEF 4-4-04 (1961-2), Sec. 5, Doc. 8.

<sup>42</sup> C-R(61)55, Summary Record of NAC Meeting of 25 October 1961, 2 November 1961, DEF 4-4-04 (1961-2), Sec. 5, Doc. 8.

<sup>43</sup> Pedlow, "Allied Crisis Management for Berlin," 105-109.

<sup>44</sup> Pedlow, "Three Hats for Berlin," 186-188, 191.

<sup>45</sup> See Gregory W. Pedlow, "Flexible Response Before MC 14/3: General Lauris Norstad and the Second Berlin Crisis, 1958-1962," in *Storia Delle Relazione Internazionali* 13:1 (1998), 235-268, and Sean M. Maloney, "Berlin Contingency Planning: Prelude to Flexible Response, 1958-63," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 25(2002), 99-134.