

CHAPTER 16

MBFR: The Great Diversion

Negotiations between NATO and Warsaw Pact countries about mutual and balanced force reductions (MBFR) in Central Europe proved highly significant during the 1973 to 1976 period, not for the talks stated objectives but for the larger political and diplomatic goals surrounding them. Neither Nixon nor Ford pressed for or anticipated success. Instead, they used the talks as a tool to deflect congressional demands for unilateral U.S. withdrawals from Europe and to convince West Europeans that reducing their forces would senselessly deprive NATO of diplomatic leverage to press Moscow for a force reduction.¹

The Nixon administration had begun preparing options for MBFR negotiations in 1970 and, for maximum domestic political gain, emphasized “asymmetrical reductions” that would redress the imbalances that favored the Warsaw Pact, but stood little chance of being accepted by the Soviets. The White House grew increasingly concerned with congressional efforts to reduce the U.S. troop presence in Europe, especially after Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield’s May 1971 proposal to cut U.S. forces in Europe by 150,000 personnel drew considerable support from his colleagues. Disillusionment over the Vietnam War and weariness with unending overseas commitments had allowed Mansfield’s proposal to gain traction. Determined to avert unilateral withdrawals and keep 300,000 troops in Europe, Nixon and Kissinger seized the opportunity presented to them when on May 15, Soviet Secretary General Leonid Brezhnev indicated a readiness to begin negotiations on mutual force reductions. According to Kissinger, the administration and Mansfield’s opponents viewed the speech as “manna from heaven.” Now the administration could argue that unilateral reductions would foolishly squander a chance to negotiate away Soviet conventional superiority in Europe. The argument was effective.

Mansfield's amendment was defeated by 36 to 61 on May 19, 1971. However, unilateral withdrawal advocates continued their campaign, and the continued success of the administration's counter campaign would depend on the appearance and not the reality of progress toward mutual conventional reduction. Neither Nixon nor Ford believed the Soviets would ever barter away their conventional advantage. They were right. Highly suspicious of U.S. motives, the Soviets never seriously considered agreeing to asymmetrical reductions.²

From 1973 to 1976, the Office of the Secretary of Defense devoted enormous energy in assisting the Nixon and Ford administrations in crafting what was essentially a prolonged diversion. Throughout the period, OSD had to carefully assess how to ensure that proposals involving conventional reductions would neither imperil the U.S. position in Western Europe if they were accepted by the Soviets nor alienate the European allies, who were under pressure from the defense secretaries to improve their own contributions to détente. They saw many advantages in the talks. Schlesinger, in particular, would view the negotiations as a godsend—not because he expected or even wanted them to succeed, but because he could use them to provide political cover for his efforts to step up NATO's conventional and nuclear defense of Western Europe.³

The Preparatory Period

From the outset of negotiations in 1970, Nixon defined the primary U.S. objective in MBFR as maximizing a reduction of Soviet forces. Because the Soviets enjoyed a conventional superiority, he directed the administration to focus on proportionately large Soviet and American cutbacks, rather than on balanced reductions that would only result in a continued imbalance, albeit with fewer forces on either side. In November 1971 Defense Secretary Melvin Laird had provided the

president with two possible approaches. The first started with a 10 percent reduction of “stationed” ground forces, followed by a further 10 percent cut in stationed as well as “indigenous” ground forces. The negotiators defined “stationed” forces as those outside military personnel based on foreign soil, such as U.S., British, and Canadian forces in West Germany and Soviet forces in East Germany. “Indigenous” units were those national forces deployed on their own territory. Laird’s second, more ambitious approach consisted of several phases: an initial agreement about constraints and verification; followed by a 10 percent cut of each side’s stationed and indigenous ground forces as well as 10 percent of their stationed air personnel; and finally, a “mixed package” that traded NATO aircraft, nuclear warheads, and another 10 percent of stationed ground forces for cuts in Warsaw Pact tanks and a ceiling on the Pact’s intermediate and medium range ballistic missiles.⁴

The administration proceeded with deliberate slowness in crafting a position. By mid-1972 the State Department and DoD studied how mutual force reductions might correct NATO-Pact imbalances. They considered achieving a common ceiling by thinning out stationed NATO forces in exchange for pulling out Pact units and equipment. Special limitations might be put on Pact tanks because their far superior numbers were “most threatening and destabilizing to NATO.”⁵

In November 1972 the North Atlantic Council invited Warsaw Pact nations to join exploratory MBFR talks set for January 13, 1973, in Vienna. Since substantive discussions would follow by autumn, the allies needed to agree upon a precise position. West Europeans, however, saw more dangers than opportunities in MBFR. In Washington, interagency experts drafted six options labeled A through F. Option A, which expanded upon the second of Laird’s approaches, drew the most support from Defense, State, and the National Security Council. In

Option A's first stage, NATO and the Pact would accept a common ceiling upon their stationed ground forces, basing that number upon what NATO's personnel levels would be after a 10 percent cut. The second stage would establish a common ceiling upon indigenous ground forces, based again on the figures resulting from a 10 percent NATO cut. The third stage would see a mixed package trade along the lines suggested by Laird.⁶

On the advice of OSD's Office of International Strategic Affairs, Richardson declined to endorse Option A outright. His broadly worded recommendation to Kissinger and Secretary of State William Rogers, dated March 16, 1973, proposed sharing with the allies some of the six options, along with an indication of which ones the U.S. government could support. Richardson envisaged MBFR as a phased long-term process, aiming for a first-stage agreement that would include a force limitation or ceiling lasting for the duration of MBFR talks, and a 10 percent cut in NATO's stationed ground forces combined with a maximum possible Soviet reduction.⁷

The geographic scope of MBFR became contentious but, in the Pentagon's view, the selection of what nations would participate in the negotiations would be critically important to avoid a diplomatic fiasco. The Western powers wanted negotiations to cover only what they termed the "NATO Guidelines Area," or NGA: West Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, East Germany, Poland, and Czechoslovakia. They also invited Hungary to participate. The Pentagon strongly supported Hungary's inclusion, because it would significantly increase the Warsaw Pact's overall totals, both of indigenous forces as well as stationed forces. The disparity favoring the East in central Europe would appear even greater, which would strengthen the West's diplomatic leverage. Understanding this, the Soviets countered that if Hungary were included, they would demand adding Italy into MBFR. Worried that U.S. negotiators would compromise too much, too quickly to appease Congress by moving the MBFR talks forward, the British

adamantly opposed including Hungary. By mid-March, NATO negotiators decided to leave Hungary's role in abeyance but determined that the Pact should not be left free to circumvent MBFR by building up stationed forces there.⁸

Two concurrent and related negotiations affected the superpowers' MBFR negotiation strategies. The first was Strategic Arms Limitation Talks. In May 1972 Nixon and Brezhnev had concluded an Interim Agreement that capped strategic offensive arms as well as an Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty that severely limited deployments of antiballistic missile systems. For a subsequent SALT II, the United States sought essential strategic equivalence, a concept open to a range of interpretations. The Soviet Union aimed to restrict U.S. forward-based systems, an issue bound to intrude upon MBFR, since tactical and theater nuclear weapons affected conventional force considerations. The second negotiation was over the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), with representatives from 35 nations meeting in Helsinki, Finland. The Soviets agreed to move forward with MBFR in return for western participation in the CSCE, which Moscow thought would prove more significant as it could result in a declaration that accepted the inviolability of post-World War II borders, thereby enshrining the territorial status quo.⁹ The Western powers argued for provisions about free movement of peoples and ideas, protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms, and changing frontiers only by peaceful means. To lessen the odds of war through miscalculation, they tabled measures at Helsinki that would require NATO and the Warsaw Pact to notify one another before military maneuvers and exercises occurred as well as agree to exchange observers at those maneuvers.¹⁰

The Defense Department's role, however, in the conference was peripheral; its focus remained on MBFR. Some DoD officials optimistically hoped that MBFR could even be used to weaken the Brezhnev Doctrine, which loomed over the Eastern Bloc as a threat that Warsaw Pact

forces would intervene against any satellite that charted an independent path from Moscow. As Acting Assistant Secretary (ISA) Lawrence Eagleburger argued:

The real forum for moving to limit, in meaningful ways, the Brezhnev Doctrine [justifying intervention to protect socialist states] is probably MBFR. If we can get Soviet acceptance of ... confidence-building measures that apply to a broader area than ... [MBFR] we will have made at least some progress toward helping countries such as Romania. Even if the restraints are limited to the [MBFR] area we will have achieved a substantial advance.

In essence, in addition to improving NATO's security, military force reductions in the Warsaw Pact might lessen the odds that a nation would use force against a fellow Pact member.¹¹

Kissinger, as national security adviser, chaired the Verification Panel that served as an interagency forum for crafting proposals about arms limitations. Other members included Deputy Secretary Clements, the JCS chairman, and representatives of similar standing from State, CIA, and the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency. When the panel convened on March 15, 1973, Kissinger warned that "MBFR is getting to a point that if we don't get it under control ... Congress will take unilateral action that will cut the ground out from under us." But the European allies, he observed disingenuously, had "invented MBFR to prevent any [U.S.] reductions." Kissinger wanted to couple the talks with U.S. demands for force improvements from the allies, which he believed would satisfy Congress by linking the negotiations to a broader concept of security. Clements said that defense was not yet ready to stake out positions on specific options.¹²

The administration remained uncertain in early April about whether to indicate to European allies a single preference or several, or to propose that allied force improvements be linked explicitly to MBFR. The NSC staff recommended presenting the allies with three alternatives. First, a 10 percent cut in stationed ground forces (34,000 for the West, 83,000 for

the Soviets) that would lead to a common ceiling of 307,000. Second, a mixed package removing 1,000 U.S. nuclear warheads, 36 of the 108 Pershing missile launchers, and 54 nuclear-capable F-4s in exchange for the withdrawal of a Soviet tank army (about 1,500 tanks and 60,000 men). Third, a one-sixth cut in U.S. and Soviet ground troops to create approximate parity between NATO and the Pact in total ground troops. Eagleburger divided the approaches into two categories: the common ceiling and the symmetrical reductions approaches. He wrote to Richardson that ISA's analysis indicated that though neither approach would significantly change the balance, "the common ceiling does show up as marginally more favorable to NATO simply because fewer US personnel and more Soviet personnel are withdrawn than in the symmetrical approach." ISA and the Office of Systems Analysis, however, staunchly opposed Kissinger's proposal to link MBFR to specific allied improvements. Such a course might hinder both MBFR and NATO force improvements, would strike too blatant a note of "you build up so we can reduce," meaning allied expansion would justify U.S. withdrawals and would prematurely commit Washington to specific force improvements before the government could complete studies on the subject.¹³

When the National Security Council met on April 12, the group feared that the combination of a post-Vietnam Congress bent on force reductions and weak West European governments might gravely erode the West's defense posture. Nixon emphasized the danger that Congress would mandate unilateral withdrawal and NATO would "come apart." "We are keeping one step ahead of the sheriff," he warned, and "we have got to show movement" in the MBFR talks. Much effort, Richardson observed, had gone into convincing members of Congress that the forces in Allied Command Europe could conduct an effective conventional defense. Kissinger replied that "as things stand, we do not have a cohesive alliance. We have the dilemma

of MBFR versus force improvements.” The defense secretary recommended expressing a preference for reducing stationed forces at as high a percentage as was negotiable, while presenting the mixed package trade as only an “illustrative approach.” Nixon emphasized that “improvement of forces *must* go along with MBFR. It is *essential* for support here at home.” Congress had to be shown that the allies were doing their fair share.¹⁴ That would not be easy, Nixon thought, as Europe was led by “a bunch of ward heelers, not international leadership.” British prime minister Edward Heath, he said, wanted to be strong but faced economic constraints. German chancellor Willy Brandt faced different problems: Look at [the West German attitude] toward our troops. Brandt is a muddle head anyway.”¹⁵

Nixon decided to give the “ward heelers” options. Through National Security Decision Memorandum 211, issued on April 16, he directed the secretaries of state and defense to provide the allies with three approaches before the month’s end. All three were directed at getting the West Europeans to focus on the desired strategic outcome to improve NATO’s defense posture rather than become bogged down in endless debate over tactics. The first involved phased cutbacks of stationed and then of indigenous forces down to a common ceiling. The second would achieve overall NATO/Pact ground force parity through U.S. and Soviet reduction of one-sixth each. The third would trade about 20 percent of U.S. nuclear systems for 20 percent of Soviet armored attack capability. U.S. representatives had to bear in mind, the NSDM stressed, that indigenous reductions were “disadvantageous to NATO,” while stationed reductions were “more advantageous.” Underscoring the importance of U.S. and allied force improvements, Nixon directed Richardson to draft such a program. On April 30, European allies were briefed about the three approaches.¹⁶

The NSDM had diverged from the DoD position by putting indigenous forces into the second stage of reductions, by not emphasizing the advantages of a common ceiling over a percentage or parity approach, and by casting the mixed package as the least favored option. The Joint Chiefs of Staff urged that U.S. reductions do not exceed 19,000 personnel, that the disadvantages of a percentage/parity approach be shown clearly, and that the mixed package be held back for presentation later.¹⁷

Early in July 1973 matters grew even more complicated. An NSC staff member informed Kissinger that “the data we have been using for our analysis and to construct options has turned to jelly.” The CIA reported that the Soviets had 70,000 and possibly 120,000 more ground troops in the NATO Guidelines Area than estimated. The adjustments meant that there may be as many as 460,000 Soviet troops in the German Democratic Republic, Czechoslovakia, and Poland. If correct, “the new data effectively wrecks both the stationed force common ceiling and the U.S.-Soviet percentage parity proposals.” Reaching a common ceiling of 307,000 on stationed forces would require a U.S. reduction of 34,000 but a Soviet cut of 153,000, almost double the 83,000 calculated earlier. “This much asymmetry makes the common ceiling proposal for stationed forces ridiculous,” the NSC staff concluded. To achieve parity in the cuts, a percentage reduction would have to reach between 35 percent and 50 percent. Those figures translated into a reduction of 60,000–100,000 U.S. personnel, far beyond any number contemplated.¹⁸

Reacting to the revised intelligence, the Verification Panel decided on July 18 to inform European allies that the U.S. goal was a common ceiling of about 700,000 ground personnel. Phase I would see 15 percent reductions, including the removal of a Soviet tank army (about 68,000 men and 1,700 tanks) and 29,000 U.S. personnel. If appropriate, the United States would offer to give up nuclear elements to bring about removal of the tank army. Because trading

nuclear systems for armored attack capability was the third concept outlined in NSDM 211, such a trade would be labeled Option III. Phase II—cutting 49,000 NATO and 122,000 Pact troops to reach a ceiling of 704,000—should neither be defined nor put before the Soviets, other than to say it would complete movement to a common ceiling. Donald Rumsfeld, U.S. ambassador to NATO, briefed the North Atlantic Council about these phases on July 27 and reported that “the initial reaction was positive.” The alliance could move forward with a common goal in mind.¹⁹

Refining Option III

By September 1973 an MBFR team was in place. Stanley Resor, secretary of the Army from 1965 until 1971, headed the U.S. delegation in Vienna. James Schlesinger, secretary of defense since July 2, chose Bruce C. Clarke Jr., who had been CIA director of strategic research since 1967, to represent him on the delegation. The new defense secretary was more eager than his predecessor had been to bring forward-based nuclear weapons into the MBFR talks. He told Clarke that he considered the U.S. nuclear posture in Europe “silly,” having been created for political reasons, and believed NATO had far more nuclear weapons deployed on the continent than were necessary. The secretary viewed tactical weapons as particularly superfluous. In a later conversation after an NSC meeting, the defense secretary referred to them as “junk.”²⁰ The conventional imbalance posed the real problem, however, and Schlesinger would be willing to give away a lot of “junk” to address imbalance. He would give up as many as 500 warheads in exchange for withdrawing a Soviet tank army.²¹

Schlesinger tasked the DoD MBFR Task Force, which bore responsibility for developing and coordinating the Pentagon’s analyses, plans, and positions related to the talks, to ensure that the proposed 29,000 troop reduction would not grievously degrade NATO’s combat readiness.

He directed the task force to work with OSD's Program Analysis & Evaluation office, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Clarke to ensure NATO would retain both the ability to defend against a surprise attack and support the first 30 days of a buildup before war. The JCS, however, backed the Supreme Allied Commander Europe, General Andrew Goodpaster, who proposed a withdrawal of 10 combat battalions amounting to 25 percent of the 29,000, with the other 75 percent coming from support elements. This reduction would weaken the alliance too much, the task force concluded. Instead, the group recommended an all-support reduction and the transfer of the resulting lost functions to the allies. Clarke advised the secretary that "our broader purposes in MBFR and in NATO policy generally seem best served by starting with a position that seeks to avoid combat reductions." Schlesinger agreed. He wanted cuts drawn only from support personnel and castigated the JCS for simply passing Goodpaster's poorly conceived recommendation on to him. Chastened, the JCS then provided him with a revised proposal that cut the combat component down to just one artillery and four maneuver battalions. The secretary approved this as an initial negotiating offer.²²

By October 30, when MBFR negotiations opened, congressional efforts to mandate unilateral withdrawals had failed, but the opening statements showed how difficult the achievement of an actual settlement would be. In Phase I, the NATO allies proposed a 15 percent stationed ground force cut, with the Soviets pulling back a tank army (about 68,000 soldiers and 1,700 tanks) and the United States removing 29,000 troops. The Soviets responded with a proposal for equal percentage cuts to indigenous as well as stationed forces, which would disband 75,000 personnel from West Germany's armed forces while only redeploying Soviet forces outside the NATO Guidelines Area without disbanding them.²³ Washington had reached an understanding with European allies that they would include nuclear elements with the 29,000-

man reduction, if doing so appeared necessary to bring about withdrawal of the Soviet tank army. NATO members also agreed that, during the first phase, they would seek a Soviet commitment to a second phase of negotiations and to the common ceiling. The administration had not decided, however, whether such a commitment would necessarily be a prerequisite for concluding Phase I.²⁴

To avoid a diplomatic catastrophe, U.S. negotiators required accurate intelligence on Soviet personnel numbers, but these estimates changed yet again in January. When the Verification Panel convened on January 7, the CIA reported that estimates of the Pact's air forces in the NGA had almost doubled, from 112,000 to 202,000. Kissinger thought that when Moscow learned of this revision, their interest about putting air forces into the common ceiling might cool. To avoid this, the panel agreed to encourage the Soviets to start talking about stationed force reductions in Phase I by assuring them that the common ceiling in Phase II would include European forces. However, to avoid placing harsh constraints on either West German efforts or West European defense cooperation, no subceilings should be imposed on indigenous Europeans. The only ceilings would be the overall 700,000 troop ceiling and the subceilings on stationed superpower personnel. That way, Europeans could substitute for U.S. or Soviet forces but not vice versa. Even so, Kissinger saw no chance that Moscow would trade the withdrawals of 29,000 U.S. personnel without equipment for 68,000 Soviets with equipment, unless the nuclear package was added.²⁵

On January 10, 1974, Nixon authorized the U.S. delegation to negotiate reductions in U.S. and Soviet ground force reductions and to discuss specific language linking Phase I with Phase II. The delegation could advise the Soviets to assume that West German forces would be included under a common ceiling, but any subceilings in Phases I and II should apply solely to

U.S. and Soviet forces. An advance commitment to German reductions, moreover, would require a Soviet promise to accept a common ceiling as the outcome of Phase II. Finally, the delegation should oppose including air and nuclear forces to convince the Soviets that Washington would not address these areas.²⁶

As expected, the administration again faced congressional pressure for unilateral troop withdrawals. If NATO's conventional posture was in fact as hopeless as the MBFR negotiations indicated, they reasoned, why not remove forces from Europe and rely on nuclear weapons for deterrence. Rather than emphasize imbalances favoring the Warsaw Pact, as he instructed his MBFR representative to do in negotiations with the Soviets, Schlesinger argued that there was in fact relative parity. Early in 1974 he testified before the Senate Appropriations Committee that there was "an approximate balance between the immediately available forces of NATO and the Warsaw Pact in the Center Region." The Pact deployed 27 Soviet and 31 satellite divisions in East Germany, Poland, and Czechoslovakia, supported by 2,800 aircraft, mostly air-to-air fighters. In a comparable area, NATO deployed 29½ divisions—substantially larger than their Pact equivalents—as well as 2,700 aircraft, about half of them being fighter-bombers. While the Pact led in troops (925,000 versus 777,000 when the French were included) and particularly in tanks (15,500 versus 6,000), NATO had advantages in tank destroyers, antitank weapons, trucks, logistics support, and, most importantly, in modern fighters. Therefore, Schlesinger argued, since unilateral U.S. withdrawals "could begin to tilt what has been a relatively stable balance dangerously in favor of the Warsaw Pact.... I cannot in good conscience recommend that we take out units short of an agreement with the Pact on mutual and balanced force reductions."²⁷ In essence, Schlesinger told the senators that the situation was not as bad as the MBFR negotiators were arguing in Vienna, but it would be if Congress cut their feet out from under them.

Late in April 1974 Bruce Clarke conferred with Senator Sam Nunn, who backed the administration but worried that an MBFR agreement would freeze U.S. troop levels, putting them beyond the reach of Congress and removing pressure on the allies to improve their conventional postures. Nunn believed the chances were good for another Mansfield resolution to pass the Senate, particularly if the initial MBFR reduction only included 20,000 to 30,000 troops. Representative Samuel Stratton (D-NY) told Clarke that *New York Times* articles claiming Schlesinger was considering reductions, possibly outside the MBFR framework, were hurting efforts to hold the line. An amendment to reduce troops stationed overseas by 100,000 lost in the House by 163 to 240, but a motion to cut 75,000 failed in the Senate by only two votes. Senator Nunn crafted a bill that, for MBFR, helped defuse arguments that U.S. European Command had too much fat and too little muscle. Signed on August 5, Public Law 93-365 required an 18,000-man reduction in U.S. noncombatant strength by June 30, 1976, but allowed corresponding increases in combat components.²⁸

At Vienna, meanwhile, there was little movement. Not until June 21, 1974, did Clarke report that the Soviets began talking in terms of phasing and confining initial reductions to U.S. and Soviet forces. Clarke reminded Schlesinger that, assuming intelligence estimates of higher Soviet strength were correct, “what we are asking of the Soviets, particularly in regard to the common ceiling, is even more inequitable than we thought when we first put together Option III.” He urged the secretary to consider “which way we should go: increase the Option III package or cut back on our objectives?”²⁹

On July 29 Schlesinger and his subordinates, including Clarke, informed Resor that DoD’s primary concern was conventional parity—whether from mutual reductions or a NATO buildup. The secretary defined the objective as achieving symmetry between NATO and the

Warsaw Pact forces stationed in Central Europe. The Soviets, he noted, had built up their conventional forces to compensate for their strategic inferiority. As strategic forces came into balance, the United States was justified in demanding cuts to Soviet conventional strength. Since the Soviets had made asymmetrical deployments, they should take asymmetrical cuts. Resor suggested trying to unfreeze the negotiations by either adding nuclear elements to Phase I or scaling Phase I back to small troop reductions. Schlesinger said he had no hesitation about tabling Option III: in fact, “we should implore the Russians to keep asking for nuclears,” because implementing Option III would take out their tank army while removing “an albatross from our necks [obsolete nuclear weapons].” What mattered to the defense secretary was not warhead numbers, but the warhead type and delivery system. When Resor showed concern that the U.S. nuclear posture might be degraded, the defense secretary concluded the negotiator failed to understand his true strategic goal. They would not go public with the proposal to reduce warhead numbers, Schlesinger said. Instead, they would tell the Soviets in front of their allies that they would not move weapons within the NGA. Privately, they would let the Soviets know that they were actually modernizing the U.S. nuclear force in Europe by replacing the outdated weapons “with better weapons with longer range.” They could ask the Soviets “how they would like another 1,000 Lance missiles in the NGA and Pershing II.” Because the Soviets believed the Pershing II could strike Soviet territory from Western Europe, they viewed the weapon as strategic rather than a theater or tactical weapon. The United States might reduce total warhead numbers, but deploying more capable weapons would drastically improve NATO’s nuclear force posture. Schlesinger agreed to include air as well as ground troops in a common ceiling. He viewed P.L. 93-365, allowing tail-to-tooth conversions, as a license to increase U.S. combat strength. Hence, he spoke of sending the Soviets “a personal message” that “unless they get on

with it we are going to move a division into the NGA.” He viewed Soviet obstinacy as “the best incentive the U.S. can have” for improving its own conventional force posture. Resor’s concerns were misplaced. The defense secretary had no interest in degrading NATO’s position.³⁰

On September 21, through NSDM 269, President Ford authorized the delegation to begin discussing the role of air forces. Once the allies reached agreement, the Pact could be approached about including air personnel in the database for Phase I reductions: withdrawing up to 15 percent of U.S. and Soviet air forces and placing them within a common overall ceiling. Ford also approved, but only in principle, a nuclear proposal along the lines of Option III, but chose to delay introducing Option III until a decision about SALT II had been finalized. He did not want a nuclear proposal to scuttle his SALT objectives. He instructed negotiators to avoid discussing Option III with both NATO and Pact members, pending further guidance.

Late in November 1974 at Vladivostok, Ford and Brezhnev reached an “understanding” about strategic nuclear arsenals that limited each side to 2,400 ICBMs, SLBMs, and heavy bombers, of which 1,320 could be MIRVed missiles. The administration believed Moscow had been unwilling to move on mutual force reductions until SALT II was “squared away.” At Vladivostok, the Soviets dropped demands that they be compensated for U.S. forward-based systems (those stationed in Europe and the western Pacific). With the topic of forward-based systems removed from SALT negotiations, the way was open for the administration to move forward with Option III in MBFR negotiations.³¹

Immediately after Vladivostok, Schlesinger reviewed MBFR’s prospects with his advisers. Washington’s main objectives with mutual force reductions remained the improvement of Western Europe’s security and the increase of allied contributions to their own defense. A secondary objective, he said, was quelling domestic criticism of U.S. force levels in Europe. He

defined DoD's specific aim as removing a Soviet tank army while retaining a strong U.S. ground capability. Rating the Pact's airpower as "lousy" compared with NATO's, the secretary noted that allied aircraft and air personnel, if removed, could return to Europe within 48 hours.

Schlesinger also emphasized the need to stop any Soviet bid to shrink West German armed forces. He was willing to present the Soviets with Option III if NATO could retain strong ground forces.³²

Willing to table a nuclear package, Schlesinger argued that not only Public Law 93-365 called for the retirement of obsolete nuclear weapons but there was an excess of warheads anyway. In an emergency, nuclear weapons could be brought back quickly. He opposed offering nuclear reductions from within the NATO Guidelines Area, preferring drawdowns instead from [REDACTED] or weapons afloat. He and his staff favored limiting Option III to 1,000 warheads, although the Joint Chiefs of Staff recommended that nuclear-capable F-4 aircraft and Pershing launcher reductions be included in the negotiations. Schlesinger preferred to hold these back to use them as bargaining chips if they were needed. Finally, the secretary suggested moving a Lance missile battalion to Europe immediately, thus making the Soviets aware of NATO's modernizing potential while thwarting their recent proposal to freeze personnel and equipment levels within the NGA.³³

Schlesinger concluded the chiefs failed to understand the adversary's negotiating tactics. When Option III was being prepared, the JCS opposed including explicit or reciprocal ceilings, instead they preferred provisions that would prevent the circumvention of any agreement. Schlesinger disagreed and overruled them. He wanted a "firm grasp" on the number of Pact tanks and did not see how generalized non-circumvention provisions would prevent destabilizing force

increases by the Pact. The Soviets practice, he reminded Chairman General Brown, had been to stretch loosely worded agreements to their maximum advantage.³⁴

After establishing a DoD position, Schlesinger sought to push the negotiations forward. Writing to Kissinger on December 3, he recommended promptly informing the Pact that NATO was “prepared to consider” withdrawing 1,000 nuclear warheads if the Pact would consider removing a Soviet tank army. The allies should be advised, he wrote, that the offer might later expand to include 27 Pershing launchers and 48 F-4s. The act of agreeing to equipment reductions, Schlesinger reasoned, should prevent Washington and Moscow from exceeding the residual levels specified. Meeting in a four-star session on December 6, the JCS agreed to support Schlesinger’s proposal. On the next day, however, Kissinger urged the president to postpone action until March 1975. Preparations for a mid-year summit meeting were already underway, and Brezhnev might be willing to move MBFR forward to lay the groundwork for a successful summit, without notice of a potential NATO concession. Schlesinger agreed to the postponement.³⁵

On January 7, 1975, Schlesinger again appraised MBFR’s prospects with Ambassador Resor and revealed his ambivalence over a successful settlement. Although Democrats had scored substantial gains in the November elections, controlling both House and Senate by very large majorities, the defense secretary was upbeat, believing that congressional attitudes toward NATO had improved. Resor recalled that in 1974 Senator McClellan said that failure to negotiate reductions would drive Congress to act unilaterally. Schlesinger countered that the administration would not lose a House vote and cautioned that they must avoid being “stampeded” about MBFR. The worst Congress might do he believed would be to impose a worldwide cut of 50,000. Was not MBFR motivated mainly by congressional pressure, he asked?

Resor's deputy replied that limiting the extent of unilateral reductions by NATO allies also was an important justification. Schlesinger speculated whether "the nature of the Western world" rendered U.S. and allied reductions inevitable, in which case "we might as well get something in return from the East." The Soviets, he said, enjoyed a preponderance of conventional force and wished to maintain it. The priority of U.S. policy toward the allies was getting Europeans to do more. Instead, MBFR would establish even lower ceilings and, in return, the Soviets would "do us the favor of withdrawing a few miles to the east." He kept worrying about verification. The database on Pact personnel struck him as ambiguous at best; the CIA had undercounted in the past and might still be doing so.³⁶

Despite his ambivalence toward an actual settlement, Schlesinger had grown increasingly confident that Congress, if handled adroitly, would not prevent negotiations from moving forward. The Soviets, however, might. When the National Security Council discussed MBFR on January 23, Kissinger stressed three areas of disagreement between NATO and the Pact: whether Phase I should apply to U.S. and Soviet forces alone or to all participants; whether reductions should be equal percentages or equal numbers; and whether cutbacks should be ground forces only or ground, air, and nuclear units with their armaments. In each of those cases, NATO held to the first position and the Pact to the second position. By establishing a principle of equality, Kissinger said, the Vladivostok understandings offered a good argument for applying equality to MBFR as well. The Verification Panel had reached a consensus that the nuclear package should not exceed 1,000 warheads, 36 Pershing launchers, and 54 F-4s. Schlesinger, calculating that P.L. 93-365 meant Congress was more likely to cut warheads than troops, recommended expanding the package to 2,000 warheads out of 5,000 in the NGA. Chairman Brown reported that, "with some arm twisting," he had brought the service chiefs to accept 2,000. In an

emergency, the military could rapidly return the warheads. Schlesinger downplayed the threat from Congress. Having spoken with several newly elected Democrats, he claimed “they want to make a serious appraisal of Defense needs, and not only react to Vietnam.” Ford said that his “visceral reaction” drew him to the opposite conclusion. Schlesinger’s more optimistic prognosis proved correct.³⁷

Ford sided with Kissinger about the nuclear package and agreed on a smaller nuclear package of just 1,000 warheads. The European allies already knew about the 1,000-warhead withdrawal proposal, Kissinger argued, and a dramatically larger number might cause them to conclude that a secret deal had been struck between the superpowers at Vladivostok. Despite Schlesinger’s counterarguments that the British and Germans had indicated a willingness to accept larger cuts, Ford said he found the lower cut “a better strategic approach.” NSDM 284, issued on February 4, stipulated that all its elements—1,000 warheads, 36 Pershing missiles, and 54 F-4s—should be presented to the Pact at one time. Combined air and ground force totals for U.S., Soviet, NATO, and Pact forces could be tabled in support of a proposal to place air personnel within a common ceiling. However, the Pact would be given additional data about force strength only if it reciprocated by presenting comparable figures. Kissinger did not “think they will accept the proposal but they can’t ignore it.”³⁸

The domestic climate surrounding MBFR changed abruptly in March and April 1975, when South Vietnam and Cambodia respectively fell to communists. As a result, congressional demands for unilateral withdrawals from Europe were mostly quelled. On May 20 the House defeated an amendment requiring a 70,000 overseas troop reduction by a lopsided vote of 311 to 95. Majority Leader Tip O’Neill, who had advocated a larger cut the year before, said this was

“the wrong time” to take such a step in “a troubled world.” In consequence, the pressure to move forward on MBFR had ebbed.³⁹

Compared to the glacially paced MBFR talks, the negotiations at the Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe advanced rapidly. They culminated with the signing of the Final Act by the 35 heads of government at Helsinki on August 1, 1975, an occasion which would mark détente’s apex.⁴⁰ The agreement contained a declaration of principles for interstate relations that endorsed the inviolability of frontiers, non-intervention in internal affairs, and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. But a free-standing article affirmed that borders could be changed in accordance with international law, by peaceful means and by agreement. Signatories also recognized a nation’s right to join alliances, to leave them, or declare neutrality. Negotiations over confidence-building measures led to a compromise, stipulating that there be 30 days’ prior notification for division-size movements (25,000 or more) with exchanges of observers.⁴¹

At this point, the Soviets thought they had won the best of the MBFR–CSCE bargain, winning ratification of the territorial status quo without agreeing to any tank or troop withdrawals. Years later, the act’s human rights provisions would help undermine the Soviet empire. At the time in the United States, however, Helsinki came under attack for appearing to legitimize Moscow’s hegemony over Eastern Europe. Ronald Reagan, who would campaign against Ford for the Republican nomination, but had not yet announced his candidacy, said of the Final Act: “I think all Americans should be against it.”⁴² Across a range of arms control issues, the administration faced more domestic criticism from the right than from the left, which made any softening of its negotiating positions politically dangerous.

Equipment and Personnel Issues

The MBFR negotiations plodded forward. On June 11, 1975, after reaching agreement with the British and Germans, Resor finally presented Option III to the North Atlantic Council.

According to extant plans, however, the United States would have no nuclear-capable aircraft in the NATO Guidelines Area by the early 1980s as F-4s retired. Unless the new F-16s were provided with nuclear capability, Assistant Secretary Ellsworth advised Schlesinger, the Soviets might realize what lay ahead and Option III would be undercut. Ellsworth called this “almost a classic case of the need to relate foreign policy to military strategy and weapons acquisitions.”

The F-16s were subsequently made nuclear-capable.⁴³

The Pentagon faced even greater challenges deciding what equipment limitations would be wisest. This was so, Clarke explained in a December 8 memo to Rumsfeld, who had just succeeded Schlesinger, because the long-term impact of mutual force reductions upon NATO’s military posture would derive more from limitations than from reductions. While equipment limitations would apply to West German and other indigenous forces within the NGA, U.S. and Soviet forces outside the NGA would be unrestrained. In completing Option III, the alliance decided against including limits on U.S. tanks and deferred a decision about limiting Soviet nuclear elements. The tank inventory of U.S. Army, Europe stood about 800 below its authorized level, a shortfall caused mainly by transfers to Israel. New production would not fully replace that shortfall until December 1977. The U.S. need to address its tank shortage made tank limits problematic.⁴⁴

At Vienna, in mid-December 1975, the Western powers formally introduced Option III, trading 1,000 warheads, 36 Pershing launchers, and 54 F-4s for a Soviet tank army. The U.S. representative also proposed a common ceiling on combined ground and air forces of about

900,000. Two months later, the Soviets tabled a counter-proposal that had only superficial similarities: reduce in 1976 between 2 and 3 percent of total NATO and Pact forces by cutting only U.S. and Soviet strengths; withdraw equal numbers of specified U.S. and Soviet equipment, including 300 tanks, 54 nuclear-capable aircraft, some ballistic missile launchers, and 36 air defense missile launchers per side; and freeze remaining NATO and Pact forces, committing all parties to reducing forces and equipment by an equal percentage from 1977 to 1978.⁴⁵

The divergence blocked any further progress over the data on Pact forces. The Pact claimed that it had 987,300 ground and air personnel in the NGA—174,700 fewer than NATO's estimate of Pact strength. Resor tabled a figure of 921,000 NATO ground and air personnel in the NGA; a Soviet spokesman noted that French forces in West Germany had been excluded.⁴⁶ Such debates about personnel data continued, without any resolution, well into the next administration.⁴⁷

In hindsight, the Vienna talks never stood a serious chance of success. The Nixon administration entered negotiations mainly to fend off unilateral cuts by Congress, and from that standpoint MBFR proved a clear success. It crafted a proposal that was plausible enough to appease critics at home while, if accepted, would improve the conventional balance in Europe and thereby satisfy U.S. allies. Moscow went forward with MBFR in exchange for convening the CSCE, through which it succeeded in ratifying the territorial status quo.⁴⁸ The proposals about mutual force reductions from both sides showed that reaching an agreement was not the basic purpose. Option III and a common ceiling would eliminate the Pact's conventional advantage, while percentage cuts pushed by the Soviets would preserve and possibly even improve the Pact's superiority. Senior Pentagon officials were not distressed when deadlock ensued. Quite the

contrary, as Schlesinger viewed Soviet obstinacy as the best incentive for improving Allied Command Europe's posture. His main objective was strengthening, not slimming, NATO's conventional capability.

Endnotes

1. The Soviets disagreed strongly with the Western notion of "balanced" reductions and detested the "MBFR" designation for the talks. The official name of the conference was the Conference on the Mutual Reduction of Forces and Armaments and Associated Measures in Central Europe. Given the terrible unwieldiness of the resulting acronym (MURFAAMCE), this chapter will rely on the Western designation for the talks. Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation*, 533n15.
2. Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation*, 533–535. Raymond Garthoff, who had headed the MBFR working group for the Verification Panel in 1973 thought that Soviet espionage might have partly accounted for their recalcitrance. The Soviets had obtained preliminary NATO studies from the late 1960s on potential proportional force reductions, which given the far larger number of Warsaw Pact forces stationed in central Europe, would favor the Soviets. Garthoff wrote: "The question arises whether the studies misled the Soviets into expecting NATO to accept proportional reductions." Garthoff, 21n, 535
3. Henry A. Kissinger, *White House Years*, 938–939, 946–947.
4. Telegram, State to NATO Mission, 28 Jul 1972, *FRUS 1969–1976*, vol. 39, *European Security*, ed. Douglas E. Selvage (Washington, DC: GPO, 2007), *FRUS 1969–1976*, 39:177–178.
5. Telegram, State to NATO Mission, 28 Jul 1972 (quote), *FRUS 1969–1976*, 39:314–317 (doc 102).
6. Memo, Acting ASD(ISA) for SecDef, 24 Feb 1973, subj: MBFR, folder NATO 320.2 (Mar-) 1973, box 76, Acc 330-78-0001, OSD Records, WNRC; Editorial Notes, *FRUS 1969–1976*, 39:366–369 (doc 119 and doc 120).
7. Memo, Rear Adm. Murphy for Lawrence Eagleburger, 3 Mar 1973; memo, Acting ASD(ISA) for SecDef, 14 Mar 1973, subj: MBFR Questions, folder NATO 320.2 (Mar-) 1973, box 76; ltrs, SecDef to ATP for NSA and SecState, 16 Mar 1973, folder NATO 092 (Jan-May) 1973, box 74: all in Acc 330-78-0001.
8. Memo, Acting ASD(ISA) for SecDef, 17 Mar 1973, subj: Soviet Proposal on Stationed Forces in Hungary and Italy, folder NATO 320.2 (Mar-) 1973, box 76; memo, Acting ASD(ISA) for SecDef, 2 May 1973, subj: MBFR: The British Position on the Hungarian Question, folder NATO 320.2 (May-Jun) 1973, box 75: both in Acc 330-78-0001. Garthoff later wrote that he found suspicions that Kissinger had conceded the inclusion of Hungary in the MBFR talks as "well-taken." Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation*, 20n, 535.
9. Tony Judt, *Postwar*, 501.
10. SALT II is described in chapter 15.

11. Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, 637–639; memo, Acting ASD(ISA) Eagleburger to SecDef, 9 Feb 1973, subj: Confidence Building Measures and the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, folder Europe 092.3 1973, box 66, Acc 330-78-0001.
12. Verification Panel Meeting, subj: MBFR, 15 Mar 1973, Digital National Security Archive.
- 13 Memo, Acting ASD(ISA) for SecDef, 9 Apr 1973, subj: MBFR; memo, Acting ASD(ISA) for SecDef, 9 Apr 1973, subj: MBFR and Allied Force Improvements (quote): both in folder NATO 320.2 (Apr) 1973, box 75, Acc 330-78-0001.
14. Memo of Conversation, NSC Meeting on MBFR, 12 Apr 1973 (quote) *FRUS 1969–1976*, 39:415–418.
15. Ibid.
16. NSDM 211, Kissinger to SecDef and SecState, 16 Apr 1973, *FRUS 1969–1976*, 39:425–426 (doc 137); “Background on Nuclear Issues in MBFR,” n.d. (quote), folder NATO 320.2 (4 Jan 74), box 69: both in Acc 330-78-0001.
17. Memo, Acting ASD(ISA) for SecDef, 26 Apr 1973, subj: NSDM 211 and JCS Views, folder NATO 320.2 (X-1928) (28 Apr 73); JCSM-175-73 for SecDef, 24 Apr 1973, folder NATO 320.2 (Apr) 1973: both in box 75, Acc 330-78-0001.
18. Memo, Phillip Odeen and Helmut Sonnenfeldt for Henry Kissinger, 10 Jul 1973 (quote), found in Editorial Note, *FRUS 1969–1976*, 39:992.
19. Memo, ASD(ISA) for SecDef and DepSecDef, 24 Jul 1973, subj: US MBFR Position for NATO (quote), folder NATO 320.2 (Jul) 1973, box 75, Acc 330-78-0001; *FRUS 1969–1976*, 39:992–993.
20. Schlesinger quote, Jan Lodal, NSC Staff, log of 23 Jan 1975 NSC Meeting, notes of conversation with Schlesinger, found in Editorial Note, *FRUS: 1969–1976*, 39:1053. Lodal recorded: “After the NSC, I walked down he stairs with Schlesinger. He said, ‘I didn’t realize you felt as though we’re such fans of tac nucs.’ I told him that I wasn’t, but I wasn’t a diplomat. WE discussed how obvious it was that we should get rid of some of the tac nucs. He referred to them as ‘junk.’”
21. MG Wickham Notebooks, entry for 5 Oct 1973, box TS-4, Schlesinger Papers.
22. Reginald Bartholomew from ISA served as the first chairman of the task force, succeeded later by Col. Louis Michael. Memo, SecDef for CJCS et al., 22 Aug 1973, subj: MBFR: US Reduction Alternatives; JCSM-399-73 for SecDef, 10 Sep 1973; memo, Bruce Clarke for SecDef, 28 Sep 1973, subj: MBFR: US Reduction Alternatives (quote): both in folder NATO 320.2 (Aug-Sep) 1973, box 75, Acc 330-78-0001; Poole, *JCS and National Policy 1973–1976*, 229.
23. *FRUS 1969–1976*, 39:1005n2, 1011n3, and 1009n5.
24. Memo, ASD(ISA) for SecDef, 2 Nov 1973, subj: MBFR at the NPG and Bonn, folder 334 NPC (Nov-Dec) 1973, box 77, Acc 330-78-0001.
25. Memo for the Record, Director DoD MBFR Task Force, “Verification Panel MBFR Meeting, 1040-1140, 7 January 1974,” 8 Jan 1974, folder NATO 320.2 (Jan-Mar) 1974, box 69, Acc 330-78-0011, OSD Records, WNRC; *FRUS 1969–1976*, 39:1012n5.
26. NSDM 241 for SecDef et al., 10 Jan 1974, subj: MBFR, *FRUS 1969–1976*, 39:1011–1012 (doc 346).
27. House Subcommittee on Appropriations, *Department of Defense Appropriations for Fiscal Year 1975: Hearings*, pt. 1, 93 Cong., 2nd sess., 5 Mar 1974, 124–125.
28. MFR by Bruce Clarke, “Discussions on the Hill Regarding MBFR,” 29 Apr 1974 (quote), folder NATO 320.2 (Apr) 1974, box 69, Acc 330-78-0011.

29. Msg, Bruce Clarke to SecDef, 211008Z Jun 1974, folder NATO 320.2 (Jun) 1974, box 69, Acc 330-78-0011.
30. *FRUS 1969–1976*, 39:1014–1018. Subsequently, U.S. Army Europe was augmented by two brigades.
31. MFR by ATSD(AE) Cotter, “Discussions with the Secretary of Defense on MBFR, 26 November 1974,” folder NATO 320.2 (Oct-Dec) 1974, box 68, Acc 330-78-0011.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid.
34. JCSM-374-74 for SecDef, 11 Sep 1974; memo, SecDef for CJCS, 20 Sep 1974, subj: MBFR Option III and Equipment Ceilings: both in folder NATO 320.2 (Aug-Sep) 1974, box 68, Acc 330-78-0011.
35. Memo, Acting ASD(ISA) for SecDef, 29 Nov 1974, subj: Nuclear Elements in MBFR; ltr, SecDef to SecState, 3 Dec 1974; memo, Director MBFR Task Force for ASD(ISA), 6 Dec 1974, subj: MBFR: Nuclear Elements, folder NATO 320.2 (Oct-Dec) 1974, box 68, Acc 330-78-0011; *FRUS 1969–1976*, 39:1032–1034.
36. Memo of conversation, “Meeting Between SecDef and US MBFR Ambassador Resor (7 January 1975),” 10 Jan 1975, folder NATO 320.2 (Jan-Mar) 1975, box 73, Acc 330-78-0058.
37. NSC Meeting Minutes, *FRUS 1969–1976*, 39:1038–1052 (doc 355).
38. NSDM 284 for SecDef et al., 4 Feb 1975, *FRUS 1969–1976*, 39:1054–1055 (doc 284).
39. John W. Finney, “House Rejects 70,000 Cut in Troops Abroad, 311–95,” *New York Times*, 21 May 75, 1, 15.
40. Westad, *The Cold War*, 390; Jussi Hanhimäki, “Détente in Europe” in *The Cold War: Crises and Détente*, 2:212–213.
41. Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation*, 531–533.
42. Reagan quote in Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation*, 532; *FRUS 1969–1976*, 39:918–920, 931–935; Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, 640–645.
43. Memo, Sonnenfeldt for SecState, 2 Jun 1975, *FRUS 1969–1976*, 39:1058–1059 (doc 359); memo, ASD(ISA) for SecDef, 12 Aug 1975, subj: U.S. Nuclear-Capable Aircraft in Europe (quote), folder NATO 320.2 (Jul-Aug) 1975, box 73, Acc 330-78-0058. Special wiring would monitor the status of an on-board nuclear weapon; a signal from the cockpit sent through it would arm and release the weapon
44. Memo, Bruce Clarke for SecDef, 8 Dec 1975, subj: Option III and the Question of Equipment Limitations, folder NATO 320.2 (Dec) 1975, box 72; “Increasing U.S. Tanks in Europe,” attached to memo, LTC Pellegrini for MG Wickham, 4 Aug 1975, folder NATO 320.2 (Jul-Aug) 1975, box 73; both in Acc 330-78-0058.
45. Memo, Scowcroft for Ford, *FRUS 1969–1976*, 39:1081, 1088–1089 (doc 370).
46. France, which had withdrawn from the integrated command, participated in the CSCE but not in MBFR talks.
47. Editorial Note, *FRUS 1969–1976*, 39:1090–1093 (doc 371).
48. Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, 638.