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Atoms for Allies: U.S-French Nuclear Assistance in the 1970s

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Atoms for Allies: U.S.-French Nuclear Assistance in the 1970s

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of the
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in International Relations-Political Science
under the advisement of Professor Paul K. MacDonald

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Acronyms

CEA: Commissariat a l'Energie Atomique
EDC: European Defense Community
FRG: Federal Republic of Germany
ICBM: Intercontinental Ballistic Missile
NATO: North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NPG: Nuclear Planning Group
NPT: Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty
NSC: National Security Council
NSAM: National Security Action Memorandum
NSSM: National Security Study Memoranda
MLF: Multilateral Force
MIRV: Multiple Independently Targetable Reentry Vehicle
LTBT: Limited Test Ban Treaty
SALT: Strategic Arms Limited Talks
SLBM: Submarine-launched ballistic missiles

Abstract

Why did the Nixon administration decide to offer nuclear assistance to France in 1970? Although France withdrew from NATO and President Richard Nixon publicly claimed that the U.S. would act as the “nuclear umbrella,” the Nixon administration initiated a secret nuclear assistance program of information sharing on ballistic missiles, nuclear weapons technology, and nuclear weapons safety to the French government. Given that atomic assistance inadvertently raises the likelihood of nuclear proliferation, the current literature suggests that nuclear assistance should be a rare occurrence and fails to provide a compelling explanation for why, and under what condition, a state may be willing to offer nuclear assistance to an ally. Through an examination of archival and secondary sources, I argue that the U.S. formulated its nuclear assistance policy to France in response to particular opportunities and incentives that were connected more to bilateral relations with France at the time than theories related to the threat or normative environment. This thesis challenges the current literature’s expectations and calls for a new analytical approach towards understanding the dynamics of nuclear assistance.

Introduction

When France announced its decision to develop its own nuclear capabilities in the 1950s and staged its first nuclear test ten years later, the U.S. publicly opposed to the development of nuclear forces by other states except those approved by NATO. As Washington was engaged in serious disputes with Paris over the organization of the Western alliance system, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), many U.S. officials expressed no interest in assisting or encouraging an independent nuclear force in a Western European country and called for the implementation of specific policies to prevent France from receiving any such aid. U.S. senior officials expressed concerns that that an independent French nuclear capability would provoke an arms race in Western Europe, and even trigger a nuclear war with the Soviet Union.¹ As outlined in the National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) No. 294, the Johnson administration asserted that the U.S. government would not engage in significant assistance affecting timing, quality or cost of the French nuclear program as long as the French strategic nuclear weapons are not committed to NATO.²

However, by the end of the 1960s, President Richard Nixon's administration reversed U.S. attitudes towards the French nuclear program. Open to the possibility of nuclear assistance to France, the Nixon administration charted a new course in U.S. nuclear policy. In 1969, U.S. officials began to secretly assist the French in developing and improving its own autonomous nuclear defense program from NATO. Between 1970-1973, the Nixon administration indirectly

¹ Sean Maddock, *Nuclear Apartheid: The Quest for American Atomic Supremacy from World War II to the Present* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 155.

²"National Security Action Memorandum, NSAM 294, McGeorge Bundy to Secretary of State, 'US Nuclear and Strategic Delivery System Assistance to France'," April 20, 1964, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, National Security Council Files (NSCF), box 676, France vol. V 01 Feb 70-Apr 70. Obtained and contributed by William Burr and included in NPIHP Research Update #2. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/110246>

circumvented the Atomic Energy Act restrictions against the transfer of nuclear weapons design information by informing the French whether the steps they were taking in the right direction. In addition, Washington offered nuclear assistance in the form of technology components for multiple reentry vehicles and hardening of reentry vehicles (RVs/warheads). Through this covert strategy known as "negative guidance," U.S. officials helped the French "perfect their nuclear warheads."³

In this thesis, I seek to answer the following question: Why did the U.S., under the Nixon administration, decide to offer nuclear assistance to France? From a historical perspective, the timing of the U.S.-French nuclear assistance program is puzzling. In 1966, French President Charles De Gaulle's withdrew of all French forces from NATO's military integrated command. This greatly diminished America's trust in France as a reliable ally and security partner against the Soviet Union.⁴ Yet amid this transatlantic crisis and public claims that the U.S. would continue to act as Europe's "nuclear umbrella," President Nixon was willing to accept and support the development of an autonomous nuclear force outside of NATO four years later. Moreover, the Nixon administration initiated this nuclear assistance program after the NPT was ratified and during the period of détente, raising questions about why U.S. officials at this time were willing to risk upsetting U.S. relations with the USSR. From a theoretical standpoint, the U.S.-French nuclear assistance program also illustrates an unusual case that deviates from the conventional theories' expectations about the willingness of a state to offer nuclear assistance. As Matthew Fuhrmann argues, a state faces significant trade-offs when it offers nuclear

³ William Burr, "U.S. Secret Assistance to the French Nuclear Program, 1969-1975: From "Fourth Country" to Strategic Partner," The Wilson Center. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/us-secret-assistance-to-the-french-nuclear-program-1969-1975-fourth-country-to-strategic>

⁴ Mary Nolan, *The Transatlantic century: Europe and America, 1890-2010* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 284.

assistance. Given that the U.S. wishes to maintain a monopoly on nuclear weapons and that atomic assistance inadvertently raises the likelihood of nuclear proliferation, the Nixon administration should have had no incentives to offer nuclear assistance to the French.⁵ The discrepancies between the conventional wisdom and observation raise the question of whether other factors, such as alliance politics, were at work in causing U.S.-French cooperation in the nuclear realm.

Although this thesis focuses on a historical case study of the Nixon administration, it addresses a significant gap in a burgeoning literature on nuclear weapons policy. Over the past fifteen years, political scientists have demonstrated a renewed interest in studying nuclear proliferation, in light of policy concerns about new proliferating states after the Cold War. This case study also has general applications to the study of the politics of nuclear assistance. The U.S.-French nuclear assistance program deals with several core questions that U.S. policymakers continue to grapple with today. For example, under what conditions does the U.S. wish to offer nuclear assistance to support the development of other nuclear states despite the risks of nuclear proliferation? When does the prevention of nuclear proliferation subordinate to other national interests? If a state has already acquired the bomb, under what conditions will the U.S. government impose counter proliferation policies, or merely accept the proliferation? Deepening our understanding of this interesting yet under-explored case also offers important policy implications for how, and the conditions in which, the U.S. may offer nuclear assistance to other nuclear states in the future.

⁵ Matthew Fuhrmann, "Spreading Temptation: Why Nuclear Export Strategies Backfire." In *Atomic Assistance: How "Atoms for Peace" Programs Cause Nuclear Insecurity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012).

Chapter I: Theorizing Nuclear Assistance

I. Literature Review

What are the conditions under which a state will be willing to offer nuclear assistance? In this thesis, I define “nuclear assistance” as the sharing and transfer of nuclear technology, materials and knowledge from an “assister” state to a recipient state designed to help the latter’s development nuclear program. This is distinct from “nuclear proliferation,” which refers to the pursuit of a nuclear weapon by a non-nuclear weapon state. While there is a robust and extensive set of literature that seeks to explain why states pursue or abandon nuclear weapons programs, few have examined what is arguably the more puzzling question: why do states provide sensitive nuclear assistance to other states? Specifically, why would a state be willing to offer nuclear assistance, given the likelihood that this might encourage nuclear proliferation to non-desirable states and/or non-state actors? Conventional wisdom suggests that given the anarchic and self-help nature of the international system, states should face little incentive to offer nuclear assistance. First, it is in a state’s interest to keep the number of nuclear weapons states in international politics low because nuclear proliferation increases the risks for accidents, and generates other harmful side effects such as inadvertent escalation and regional instability that can distract a state from pursuing other strategic goals and interests. Second, states will want their own nuclear monopoly because of the relative advantage of nuclear weapons possession. Nuclear weapons allow a state to intimidate or coerce against regional or international adversaries by removing the capability of one state to have complete military dominance and demonstrate their technological advancement. Given this, nuclear assistance should be a rare occurrence in international politics. Yet many nuclear states received some form of external assistance from

another nuclear state.⁶ For example, between 1959-1965, France provided Israel with sensitive nuclear assistance, and China assisted Pakistan in the 1980s.⁷

The existing theoretical literature is sparse and unorganized but offers some explanations for why a state would offer nuclear assistance. Some scholars argue that there are sizable strategic incentives for a state to offer nuclear assistance, such as strengthening extended deterrence vis-a-vis a growing external threat. Others, such as Matthew Kroenig, suggest that a state may be willing to risk nuclear assistance to a relatively weaker state because it can help signal credible threats to an adversary. A final set of literature argues that states will offer nuclear assistance in search for economic profit. Despite these competing approaches, a central assumption among the literature is that a state will be willing to offer nuclear assistance under some condition in which it believes it can gain a strategic benefit significant enough to outweigh the risks of nuclear proliferation.

Although existing scholarship has offered some diverse insights that may explain the factors that compel a state to offer nuclear assistance, there are several gaps that continue to exist in the theories. First, the majority of the literature fails to distinguish the type of relationship between the nuclear assisting state and the recipient state. For states that are adversaries or not aligned with the U.S. it is obvious why the U.S. would adamantly oppose nuclear assistance. However, it is unclear whether nuclear assistance to an allied or “friendly” state provokes the same net negative geopolitical calculations. This distinction is important because some states have provided nuclear assistance to close military allies, especially during the Cold War period.

⁶ Kroenig similarly finds that sensitive nuclear assistance is positively correlated to a state’s acquisition of a nuclear bomb.

⁷ Matthew Kroenig, “Exporting the Bomb: Why States Provide Sensitive Nuclear Assistance,” *The American Political Science Review* 103, no. 1 (2009): 116.

Second, the literature assumes that the “nuclear assister” is one that is “underdeveloped” state. In practice, however, cases of nuclear assistance often include instances where the assister is a great power. These observations reveal that the literature would benefit from a more precise definition of “nuclear supplier” state, and a broader engagement with the political context in which nuclear assistance takes place.

The remainder of this chapter proceeds as follows. The first section examines the competing explanations for nuclear assistance in international politics. The subsequent section highlights the limitations of the existing theories in explaining the U.S.-French case and advances the argument for a different analytical approach to address this question. I build on this observation and describe how different set of theories— such as alliance politics, nuclear nonproliferation norms and political opportunism – may help illuminate the conditions under which a state may be willing to offer nuclear assistance to an ally.

1.1 Balance of power between two states

Recent scholarship suggests that a critical factor in understanding the causes of nuclear assistance is the relative balance of power between the state offering nuclear assistance, and the state receiving the assistance. In “Exporting the Bomb: Why States Provide Sensitive Nuclear Assistance,” Matthew Kroenig argues that the more powerful a nuclear state is relative to a potential nuclear recipient, the less likely it is to provide sensitive nuclear assistance. Here, a state is defined as “relatively powerful” if it has the ability to project military power over a particular state.⁸ According to Kroenig, the spread of nuclear weapons will threaten powerful nuclear states more than weaker states because the nuclear power benefits from the existing

⁸ Ibid., 115.

balance of power status quo. This argument builds on the assumption that nuclear weapons offers a state leverage against both its adversaries and weak states. Nuclear superiority, an advantage in the size, number, and sophistication of a nuclear arsenal relative to others, allows a state to gain a strategic advantage over particular states by influencing the states' foreign policy.⁹ Thus, even if a friendly state acquires nuclear weapons, the relatively powerful nuclear state is constrained from using its conventional military power to its advantage.¹⁰ Therefore, states that have military superiority, such as the U.S., should be generally opposed to nuclear assistance because it contributes to nuclear proliferation and decreases their ability to use conventional military force against a particular state.

Kroenig's theory also suggests an interesting counterhypothesis: relatively powerful states may actually be more likely to provide nuclear assistance because it is able to defend and deter against a nuclear attack and will not feel threatened by nuclear proliferation.¹¹ This hypothesis rests on two different premises about the utility of nuclear weapons in international security. If the proliferating state views the aggregation of nuclear weapons as offering no strategic advantage because nuclear weapons serve no purpose other than deterrence, then it will perceive the aggregation of nuclear weapons to have no effect on the strategic balance in the international system. Thus, the proliferating state may be willing to offer nuclear assistance because it does not pose a significant threat to its own security. On the other hand, if the proliferating state perceives the spread of nuclear weapons as an effective way to create an asymmetric balance of power against an adversary by serving as a form of a credible threat, then

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ The underlying logic of coercive diplomacy is that a state can generate costs sufficient and credible enough to convince an adversary to alter its behavior without resorting to brute military force. For a discussion on coercive diplomacy, see Alexander George, *Forceful Persuasion* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 1991).

¹¹ Ibid, 157.

it is more likely to offer nuclear assistance. In this perspective, building up another state's or an ally's nuclear capabilities through the act of nuclear assistance can increase the nuclear assister's security and help signal credible threats to an adversary.

The relative balance of power approach offers some useful insight to understanding why the nuclear assister is often a great power, such as the U.S. However, his two theories offer two contrasting and extreme expectations of a state's nuclear assistance behavior, raising questions about the specific conditions that would generate the differing outcomes. The first theory suggests that since nuclear weapons constrain a state's conventional military power and alter the existing strategic balance of the international system, a state should always remain completely opposed to nuclear assistance. On the other hand, if a state was relatively more powerful than the nuclear assistance recipient, and the spread of nuclear weapons is perceived to send a credible threat to an adversary, then a nuclear weapons state should offer nuclear assistance to every single ally or strategic partner. Therefore, while the relative balance of power theories provides a good starting point to examine a country's overall nonproliferation stance, it provides little insight into the conditions that would cause a state to either offer or not offer assistance.

1.2 Threat Level in the International System

A second set of literature focuses on the level of a security threat in the international environment that shape the costs and incentives of providing and receiving nuclear assistance. In "The Strategic Logic of Nuclear Proliferation," Nuno P. Monteiro and Alexandre Debs argues that the likelihood of a state offering nuclear assistance is determined by the existing security environment because the anarchic nature of the international system will pressure a state to

balance against the nuclear capabilities of a rival state.¹² Their research provides a more nuanced perspective that has been largely absent by including the variables of the proliferating state and its adversaries. Monteiro and Debs argue that since the development of nuclear weapons can alter the timing, intensity, consequences of a conflict, and a state's diplomatic influence, one must consider these critical factors that influence the likelihood of nuclear proliferation. They argue that states are more likely to proliferate if it faces a high-level security threat. Monteiro and Debs define security threat as the "likelihood of future conflict between a country and its adversaries."¹³ In this perspective, the security benefit of the proliferation of nuclear weapons is perceived to outweigh the costs of a nuclear program by increasing a state's relative power against its adversary. Conversely, a benign or improved security environment would lower the benefit of nuclear proliferation and undermine a state's willingness to proliferate.¹⁴ Kroenig builds on Monteiro and Deb's logic by arguing that states will be more likely to provide sensitive nuclear assistance to states with which they share a common enemy.¹⁵ By providing nuclear assistance to other states, the nuclear supplier can impose strategic costs on adversaries.

A limitation of their theory is explaining the relationship between the "level of threat" variable in the international system and a state's decision to pursue internal vs. external balancing of nuclear capabilities through nuclear assistance. Internal balancing refers to efforts to enhance state's power by increasing one's economic resources and military strength to be able to rely on independent capabilities to counter an adversary and compete more effectively in the international system.¹⁶ In contrast, external balancing is defined as strengthening one's alliances

¹² Nuno P. Monteiro and Alexandre Debs, "The Strategic Logic of Nuclear Proliferation" *International Security* 39, no. 2 (2014), 13-17.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁵ Kroenig, "Exporting the Bomb: Why States Provide Sensitive Nuclear Assistance," 127.

¹⁶ Kenneth N. Waltz, "Theory of International Relations" (Addison-Wesley Publishing, 1979), 168.

and interstate defense cooperation and capabilities in order to counter an adversary.¹⁷ However, it is unclear when a state would pursue a strategy of external balancing to bolster its allies' defense capabilities in the nuclear realm. Likewise, this theory suggests that a state faced with a low security threat in the international system will be unlikely to provide sensitive nuclear assistance to a state. Since Monteiro and Debs do not clearly define "low security threat," further research is required to determine the severity of a threat that would prompt a state to offer nuclear assistance.

1.3 Alliance Politics

Although the literature on alliance politics has predominately focused on conventional weapons and arms trade, it also serves as a potentially useful framework to understanding the conditions under which a state may offer nuclear assistance. Here, the term "alliance" refers to a "formal or informal arrangement for security cooperation between two or more sovereign states."¹⁸ Since the beginning of the Cold War, numerous scholars have asserted that alliances have enabled the U.S. to prevent arms races and reassure its strategic partners that the U.S. will defend them in a military crisis that involves a shared adversary. Consequently, America's allies face little incentives to acquire their own nuclear weapons. However, a significant gap in the alliance politics literature is the condition under which a state would be willing to offer nuclear assistance to an ally. For example, if two states have a solid and close relationship within an alliance, one could argue that it is likely they would cooperate on security issues in general and

Scholars argue that in a self-help, anarchic system, mechanisms of internal balancing are believed to be more reliable and precise than external balancing.

¹⁷ Ibid., 169.

¹⁸ Stephen Walt, *Origins of Alliance*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990). 90.

thus be willing offer nuclear assistance to an ally. This significant gap in the alliance politics theory suggest the need for further analysis and research.

1.4. Economic factors

Several nuclear politics theorists stress the impact of a state's level of economic development and openness to the international economy as key to understanding the causes of nuclear assistance. For example, Sheena Chestnut argues that states will export sensitive nuclear materials and technology and ignore the security risks in a desperate search for hard currency.¹⁹ Less developed countries may face strong incentives to proliferate to improve their current economic situation. Jabko and Weber include another perspective in this economic literature, stating that states that are more open to the international economy will be more likely to provide sensitive nuclear assistance. They argue that a state dependent on a particular trading partner may be more likely to provide nuclear assistance to that state to avoid undermining an important trade relationship.²⁰

While there is considerable merit in their analysis, it is not widely supported by empirical evidence and does not appear useful in understanding the driving factors behind the majority of states' willingness to offer nuclear assistance. A problematic and implicit assumption in this theory is that the state offering nuclear assistance is categorized as a "rogue" or "underdeveloped" state. Such categories neglect the various types states that can fall under the

¹⁹ Sheena Chestnut, "Illicit activity and proliferation: North Korean smuggling networks." *International Security* 32 (2007): 80-111.

²⁰ Nicholas Jabko and Steven Weber. 1998. "A Certain Idea of Nuclear Weapons: France's Non-Proliferation Policies in Theoretical Perspective." *Security Studies* 8, no. 1 (Fall 1998): 108-50.

category of nuclear supplier. For example, the U.S and Soviet Union were not “underdeveloped” states, yet they demonstrated a willingness to offer nuclear assistance to its allies and security partners during the Cold War.

II. The Distinct Features of the U.S.-French Nuclear Assistance Case

As the existing literature on nuclear assistance has been limited to explaining nuclear assistance to an adversary or unaligned state, they appear inapplicable in explaining why the Nixon administration decided to offer nuclear assistance to France. Kroenig’s argument suggests that since nuclear weapons constrain U.S. conventional military power and alter the existing strategic balance of the international system, the U.S. should not have offered nuclear assistance to France in 1969. On the other hand, since the U.S. was relatively more powerful than any other European state and the spread of nuclear weapons could have sent a credible threat to the Soviet Union, the U.S. should’ve offered assistance to every single Western European ally. However, neither of these outcomes is reflected in the U.S.-French case of nuclear cooperation. Under the Nixon administration, the U.S. decided to only offer nuclear assistance to France and was opposed to other European states, such as West Germany, from developing an autonomous nuclear force separate from NATO.

The level of threat in the international system, and alliance politics, initially appear as plausible explanations but are also not sufficient factors to explain the Nixon’s administration nuclear policy decision towards France. The problem with this approach is that it expects either too little or too much nuclear assistance. For example, why did the U.S. decide to only offer nuclear assistance to France and not to other states? If the Soviet Union was perceived as a high security threat to both the U.S. and France, it remains unclear why the U.S. helped France bolster

its autonomous nuclear force instead of internally balancing NATO's nuclear capabilities to strengthen its extended deterrence? On the other hand, one could argue that the Soviet Union was a low threat in the late 1960s, as President Nixon and Soviet President Leonid Brezhnev were engaged with SALT negotiations. However, if the Soviet Union was perceived as a low security threat at this time, then U.S. officials should have faced no incentives to offer nuclear assistance to France. These contrasting observations suggest that nuclear assistance to an ally is a distinct case whose dynamics cannot be sufficiently captured by the theories noted above.

Scholars have yet to offer an analytical approach that is best able to explain the conditions under which a state may be willing to offer nuclear assistance to an ally. Rather than asserting that the existing theories outline above are incorrect or irrelevant, I argue that we need to develop a new and specific set of theories to understand why U.S. officials were willing nuclear assistance to the French in 1969. America's nuclear assistance to France represents a distinct empirical case. The nuclear supplier is a great power (the United States), and the recipient is a major power ally (France) and not a peripheral actor. Based on this empirical case's unique conditions, I propose that scholars should examine the question of nuclear assistance to an ally through a different analytical approach. One approach is to consider how the strength of an alliance may influence a state's willingness to offer nuclear assistance. According to the traditional theories of alliance politics, states are more likely to cooperate in general as the strength of an alliance increases. Conversely, the breakdown of an alliance would result in greater mistrust and less cooperation between two states. Thus, we could imagine a state offering nuclear assistance when alliance relations are strong and opposing nuclear assistance when alliance relations are weak. Another plausible approach is to consider how norms against nuclear proliferation may influence a state's willingness to offer nuclear assistance to an ally. For

example, the ratification of the NPT in 1968 helped serve as the foundation for a near-universal nuclear nonproliferation regime. As argued by Martha Finnemore, international institutions and norms are able to constrain a state's power by increasing reputational costs. Therefore, we could hypothesize that the relative strength of a nuclear nonproliferation norms in the international system may determine a state's willingness to offer nuclear assistance to an ally.

III. Political Opportunism in Bilateral Relations

I aim to address the puzzle of America's nuclear assistance to France through a broader lens by contextualizing the Nixon administration's decision in comparison to previous administrations. While scholars have often characterized the U.S.-French nuclear assistance program in 1969 as shocking and unprecedented, it is critical to note that the question of nuclear assistance to France did emerge in earlier periods. As I will demonstrate in chapter two, U.S. government officials in the Eisenhower and Kennedy administration considered and were even willing at times offering nuclear assistance to France. Additionally, existing theories have sought to explain nuclear assistance by focusing solely on the state's capabilities. This emphasis on the state's attributes implicitly suggests that a state's decision to offer nuclear assistance is straightforward and deterministic. Yet America's decision of whether or not to offer nuclear aid to France was not linear or predictable, and included instances where policymakers were willing but ultimately did not offer nuclear assistance to France. Examining earlier periods of U.S.-French nuclear relations can provide important insight to the significance of the Nixon administration's decision, as well as the gap between the U.S. willingness and U.S. decision to offer France nuclear assistance across the different administrations.

By incorporating this broader context, this thesis argues that Nixon officials formulated the U.S. nuclear assistance policy to France in response to particular opportunities and incentives that were more connected to bilateral relations with France. In comparison to his predecessors, President Nixon appears as the least likely candidate that would provide France nuclear assistance, given the weakened state of NATO relations, détente, and U.S. commitment to the nuclear nonproliferation regime during his administration. Yet during periods of a relatively high Soviet threat and strong NATO alliance relations, the U.S. did not offer nuclear assistance to France. Although President Eisenhower and Kennedy demonstrated a willingness to offer nuclear assistance to France, it was only under the Nixon administration that U.S. officials implemented such policy. The political opportunism approach offers a compelling explanation that accounts for both the perplexing timing and decision that grand theories related to the threat or normative environment cannot sufficiently capture.

IV. Methodology and Hypotheses

Drawing on the analytical approach outlined above, I will test this theory of political opportunism in influencing policy outcomes alongside the possible competing explanations for the dependent variable, the U.S. decision to offer France nuclear assistance. I measure the variable “nuclear assistance” by examining policies, agreements and memos that reveal when U.S. officials implemented a policy of nuclear assistance. I will test the following hypotheses:

- **H1:** The U.S. decision to offer nuclear assistance to France was due to the relative strength of nuclear nonproliferation norms

- **H2:** The U.S. decision to offer nuclear assistance to France was due to a shift in the level of threat that the Soviet Union posed to U.S. and Western European security
- **H3:** The U.S. decision to offer nuclear assistance to France was due to the relative strength of the NATO alliance
- **H4:** The U.S. decision to offer nuclear assistance to France was in response to the relative political opportunism within U.S. and France bilateral relations.

Although this thesis is focused on addressing the outcome of nuclear assistance, I also examine whether U.S. officials across each administration considered offering nuclear aid to France, and if so, how they attempted to shape the character of the assistance. An exploration and consideration of U.S. policymakers' attitudes and willingness can shed some light on the timing, sequence, and significance of this policy decision.

According to theories of nuclear nonproliferation, as the norm against nuclear proliferation strengthens over time, this should reduce a country's incentive to offer nuclear assistance to another state because the reputational costs increase. Under **H1**, we would find evidence that the U.S. offered nuclear aid to France before the NPT, due to the permissive international environment characterized by weak norms against nuclear proliferation. We would expect President Eisenhower and Kennedy to consider and offer nuclear assistance to France. After the implementation of the NPT in 1968, the U.S. should not have offered nuclear assistance to France. We would expect President Johnson and Nixon not to implement a policy of nuclear assistance.

If nuclear assistance is directly correlated with level of threat in the international system, the U.S. would have offered nuclear assistance to France in response to the level of the Soviet threat (**H2**). We would expect that as the Soviet threat increases and nuclear deterrence appears to be weakened, U.S. officials would pursue nuclear assistance as a way to strengthen its nuclear deterrence. Thus, as Soviet conventional and nuclear parity in the early 1960s challenges America's extended deterrence commitments to its allies, the assumption is that U.S. policymakers offered nuclear assistance to France as a way to create independent nuclear forces in Western Europe. As scholars have noted that U.S. and Soviet Union reached nuclear parity by the Cuban missile crisis, we would expect the U.S. to not offer nuclear assistance until after 1963.²¹ However, the easing of tensions in U.S.-Soviet relations by 1969 would decrease the level of the Soviet threat and lead the U.S. not to offer nuclear assistance.

Under **H3**, we should expect nuclear assistance to be offered to France in response to perceived strengths or weaknesses in the NATO alliance. Nuclear assistance should be offered when transatlantic relations were strong and U.S. and European policymakers had favorable attitudes towards NATO institutions. During periods of transatlantic tensions and institutional strife within NATO, we would expect the U.S. to not offer nuclear assistance. Within the context of U.S.-French nuclear relations, nuclear assistance should thus exist prior to 1960, when France was still integrated in NATO's military command and before the Vietnam War introduced significant tensions in the NATO relationship.

²¹ Steve Weber, *Cooperation and Discord in U.S.-Soviet Arms Control* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014). 192.

Under **H4**, U.S. nuclear assistance to France would be formulated in response to particular political opportunities and incentives that were connected more to bilateral relations with France at the time. Instead of justifying nuclear assistance in terms of U.S. strategic security advantages, the U.S. would consider and frame the assistance program within U.S.-French relations. In this logic, stronger U.S.-French ties would have positive spillover effects to other diplomatic and security issues that the U.S. were concerned with. We should find evidence that earlier administrations debated and considered offering nuclear assistance to France but faced domestic and international constraints to implement such policies (i.e.: De Gaulle's administration, concerns of West Germany rearmament). In contrast, we would expect the Nixon administration to prioritize U.S.-French relations over both U.S.-NATO relations and U.S.-bilateral relations with other Western European countries (i.e.: Germany and U.K.). This would be reflected in the frequency of the content relating to France discussed within internal and diplomatic meetings, as well as the number of meetings between U.S.-French officials compared to the meetings held with officials from other Western European states. In particular, we would expect Nixon to reference nuclear assistance to other broad geopolitical considerations prior to the start, and throughout, the duration of the nuclear assistance program, such as future integration and cooperation on military and economic issues between the U.S. and France.

To test these hypotheses, I conduct process-tracing to reconstruct the historical narrative and track the development of the Nixon administration's foreign policy making decision process. I draw on private documents, memorandums, meeting notes, and reports from the National Security Archive, Richard Nixon Presidential Library, and the Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) series, to trace the Nixon administration's decision to offer nuclear assistance. I will also consult Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's memoirs to gain some

perspective and assess how their perception of the risks of nuclear proliferation and assessment of U.S. and Soviet power may have influenced their policy decision. I also relied primarily on recently declassified documents compiled by William Burr from the Wilson Center to explore how the Nixon administration carried out its strategy of “negative guidance” with the French Defense Ministry. There are two significant limitations to my research. Some of these documents related to this case remain classified or have critical texts sanitized, so I am unable to capture the entirety of the Nixon administration’s decision-making process and calculation. In addition, I am unable to provide the French perspective of this case because existing French archival laws have severely restricted access to records on nuclear weapons matters. Thus, this thesis does not claim to provide a comprehensive account of the U.S.-French nuclear assistance program, a task that remains impossible until more documents are released. However, since my thesis attempts to explore the factors driving U.S. policymakers’ decision to offer nuclear assistance to France, I am still able to deduce some broad conclusions by contextualizing the case beyond the Nixon administration.

Using these archival source materials, I analyze the broad shifts and debates in U.S. nuclear policy towards France in the following sections. The first chapter sets up this specific case study by reviewing the history of U.S. nuclear policy towards the French arsenal under the Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson administration. Although the U.S. consistently preferred a defense strategy whereby the U.S. provided the “nuclear umbrella” and allies supply the “conventional forces,” I demonstrate that debates and consideration towards nuclear assistance to France varied over time and in intensity. The following chapter focuses on the Nixon administration’s decision-making process to offer nuclear aid to France. In particular, this chapter seeks to trace the character and timing of the nuclear assistance program. I focus on the

internal debates and discussions within the Department of Defense, National Security Council (NSC) members, President Nixon, and Secretary Kissinger's over time regarding support for the French nuclear program. This allows me to assess whether predicted dynamics of alliance politics, the level of Soviet threat, nuclear nonproliferation norms, or bi-lateral concerns influenced policymaker's decision across all four administrations. I also assess whether the French nuclear debate was framed in terms of NATO or U.S.-French bilateral relation concerns. The final chapter concludes with implications for theories of nuclear assistance, and questions for future research.

Chapter II: Dealing with the “Fourth Country Problem”: Patterns of U.S. Nuclear Assistance Policies Towards France, 1953-1968

France’s pursuit of an independent nuclear weapons program began over two decades before the formation of an international nonproliferation regime, and the development of U.S. nonproliferation sanctions policies.²² After World War II, France launched its own nuclear program that was initially oriented towards peaceful and civilian use through an atomic energy agency, the Commissariat à l’Energie Atomique (CEA), but had a “clear capacity for military application.”²³ Similar to the British, France perceived an independent nuclear force as a “complement to, rather than a substitute for” the U.S. strategic deterrent.²⁴ In the 1950s, the rapid emergence of the Soviet threat and fears of a nuclear-armed West Germany prompted the French Assembly began to conduct studies on the costs of a French nuclear capability and authorized the construction of a plutonium reprocessing facility.²⁵ To support its efforts for the development of an independent military nuclear weapons program, the French parliament voted against the ratification of the European Defense Community (EDC) treaty in 1954, which prohibited member states from using fissile material for military purposes.²⁶ Scholars have noted and argued that France’s incentives for nuclear weapons were a mixture of political and military

²² Nick Miller, “The French Nuclear Program,” *Stopping the Bomb: The Sources and Effectiveness of US Nonproliferation Policy* (Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 2018), 148

²³ Vipin Narang, “France.” In *Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era: Regional Powers and International Conflict* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 15.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 192

²⁵ Miller, “The French Nuclear Program,” 149. There is an extensive amount of literature that explores the rationale for France developing its own nuclear weapons program. Some argue France pursued the bomb for security and prestige reasons, while others have argued that the U.S. failure to aid France made French leaders doubt U.S. security guarantees. For a detailed background on the origins and sources of the French nuclear program, see *Jacques E. C. Hymans, The Psychology of Nuclear Proliferation: Identity, Emotions, and Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

²⁶ *Ibid.* The European Defense Committee was a proposed supranational European army to counterbalance the Soviet Union’s conventional military power, and to integrate West Germany’s military forces to avoid rearmament.

factors. French president Charles De Gaulle justified France's pursuit of becoming the world's fourth nuclear power by asserting "American nuclear power does not necessarily and immediately meet all the eventualities concerning France."²⁷ From the French government's perspective, the U.S. failure to intervene and aid France in Dien Bien Phu and the Suez crisis suggested that there were limits to the circumstances under which the U.S. would protect France raised questions about U.S. security guarantee to its allies. This reinforced the need for a French nuclear arsenal that was independent of the U.S.-led defense structure.²⁸ Aside from national security concerns, French military officials also expressed that becoming the next nuclear power was the means to bolster France's prestige and international status after French defeat in Indochina and loss of its overseas colonies. France's exclusion from the special nuclear relationship between Great Britain and the U.S. in the mid-1950s also increased the strength of French arguments for diminishing their country's reliance on the U.S.²⁹ By 1958, Prime Minister Guy Mollet directed the CEA to prepare for the militarization of France's nuclear capability. After France successfully carried out its first nuclear test in the Algerian Sahara Desert in 1960, the French government proceeded to ignore international demands related to halting nuclear tests and implemented a five-year nuclear plan.³⁰

Although scholars have argued that Nixon's decision to provide nuclear assistance to France reflected a dramatic shift in U.S. policy, an examination of U.S.-French nuclear assistance policy in earlier periods suggests that such notion is more complicated and nuanced.

²⁷ Avery Goldstein, *Deterrence and Security in the 21st Century: China, Britain, France, and the Enduring Legacy of the Nuclear Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 192.

²⁸ *Ibid.*,

²⁹ Wilfrid L. Kohl, The French Nuclear Deterrent, *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science* 29, no. 2 (1968): 81

³⁰ Narang, "France." In *Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era: Regional Powers and International Conflict*, 15-17.

Between 1955 to 1968, U.S. policymakers did not penalize or attempt to apply coercive pressure on Paris to abandon its nuclear ambitions.³¹ Rather, U.S. officials entertained the idea of engaging in nuclear assistance with France and adopted a policy of ambivalence towards the French nuclear program. This chapter seeks to briefly outline U.S. nuclear assistance policies towards France's arsenal across three different presidential administrations: Dwight D. Eisenhower (1953-1961), John F. Kennedy (1961-1963), and Lyndon B. Johnson (1963-1969). Each subsection examines each president's perspective on NATO, nuclear nonproliferation, and the role nuclear weapons in U.S. foreign policy to contextualize U.S.-French nuclear assistance policies. As my thesis concentrates on exploring the shift in the U.S. nuclear assistance policy to France during the Nixon administration, this chapter does not attempt to provide an in-depth history of U.S.-French nuclear relations across three decades. However, by tracing the history of U.S. nuclear policies to France, I utilize this context to demonstrate the significance and distinctiveness of Nixon's decision to offer nuclear assistance to France.

I. U.S.–France Nuclear Relations: A Postage Stamp History

i. President Eisenhower: Contending with France's emerging nuclear power status

Scholars have characterized U.S. nuclear nonproliferation policy during the Eisenhower administration as “facilitating proliferation,” in which the U.S. passed policies that either “contributed to a state's existing nuclear weapons capabilities, or increased the ability of a state to have independent control over nuclear weapons.”³² Although official U.S policy in the immediate post-WWII was opposed horizontal nuclear proliferation, concerns about

³¹ Miller, *Stopping the Bomb: The Sources and Effectiveness of US Nonproliferation Policy*, 150.

³² Nick Miller, “Hegemony and Nuclear Proliferation,” (Dissertation, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2014), 18.

nonproliferation only received “sustained attention from U.S. security planners in the early 1960s.”³³ The intelligence estimates produced during the Eisenhower administration reflected optimistic views of proliferation. For example, the 1957 National Intelligence Estimate concluded that only France, Sweden, and Canada had the capability to build nuclear weapons in the near future and that “no individual fourth country will be able within the next 10 years to develop more than a limited nuclear capability.”³⁴ In this perspective, U.S. policymakers expected the geopolitical effects of nuclear weapons to be modest.

Against the backdrop of the growing Soviet threat, the Eisenhower administration implemented a national security policy known as “New Look,” which emphasized balancing U.S. security threats with the nation’s financial resources by relying on strategic nuclear forces to deter both conventional and nuclear threats from the Soviet Union.³⁵ As noted by historian Marc Trachtenberg, the U.S. military was “over extended” and the Eisenhower administration believed America’s European allies should have a nuclear capability of their own.³⁶ Thus, NATO played a key role in the Atlantic alliance defense strategy against the Soviets, and the U.S. Defense and State Department proposed that NATO allies should be trained in, and have access to, the use of nuclear weapons in the event of a crisis.³⁷ President Eisenhower supported the notion that U.S. allies in Europe should obtain access to nuclear weapons, either those deployed or designed by

³³ Hal Brands, “Non-Proliferation and the Dynamics of the Middle Cold War: The Superpowers, the MLF, and the NPT,” *Cold War History* 7, No. 3 (2007): 391.

³⁴ National Intelligence Estimate 100-6-57, “Nuclear Weapons Production in Fourth Countries – Likelihood and Consequences,” doc. 2, June 18, 1957, in William Burr, “National Intelligence Estimates of the Nuclear Proliferation Problem,” NSA, EBB no. 155. <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB155/prolif-2.pdf>

³⁵ For a more detailed overview of Eisenhower’s nuclear strategy and policy, see David Alan Rosenberg, “The Origins of Overkill: Nuclear Weapons and American Strategy, 1945-1960.” *International Security* 7, no. 4 (1983): 3-71.

³⁶ Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement 1945-1963* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 175-177.

³⁷ Miller, *Stopping the Bomb: The Sources and Effectiveness of US Nonproliferation Policy*, 153.

the U.S. because it could provide them with low-cost ways of obtaining security in the midst of the growing Soviet arsenal while also help facilitate the withdrawal of U.S. military forces from Europe.³⁸

The Eisenhower administration perceived a strong NATO as the most effective instrument in deterring the Soviets, but such integration efforts would require the U.S. to subordinate nonproliferation concerns to strengthening the security alliance. While Eisenhower's 1953 "Atoms for Peace" initiative was aimed at promoting an international focus on the potential peaceful uses of atomic energy, the diffusion of nuclear technology risked the global spread of nuclear weapons capabilities. As Sokolski notes, the Atoms for Peace program actually "made the acquisition of such [nuclear] capabilities more likely."³⁹ Thus, his administration pursued and implemented nuclear policies that strove to maintain allied cohesion within a framework of limited nuclear sharing. U.S. divergent nuclear policies at this time towards the British and French arsenal directly reflect this attempt at selective proliferation. For the British, Eisenhower officials concluded that an Anglo-Saxon nuclear hegemony would best protect U.S. security interests. According to Baum, Eisenhower and his advisors believed that by increasing nuclear cooperation between the U.S. and Britain, all other states would be deterred from attempting to develop their own nuclear arsenals.⁴⁰ In particular, officials believed that it was in U.S. interests to have a closer relationship with Britain because it would strengthen NATO.⁴¹ Thus, Congress modified the Atomic Energy Act in 1954 to enable the U.S. government to share substantial

³⁸ Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement 1945-1963*, 148-149.

³⁹ Henry D. Sokolski, *The Best of Intentions: America's Campaign Against Strategic Weapons Proliferation* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group Inc., 2001), 33.

⁴⁰ Keith W. Baum, "Two's Company, Three's a Crowd: The Eisenhower Administration, France, and Nuclear Weapons." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 20, no. 2 (1990): 316

⁴¹ Jan Melissen, "Nuclearizing NATO, 1957-1959: The 'Anglo-Saxons', Nuclear Sharing and the Fourth Country Problem." *Review of International Studies* 20, no. 3 (1994): 254.

nuclear information and materials to aid Britain's construction of nuclear submarines. These amendments helped strengthen the British nuclear arsenal, and Britain became a junior partner in managing NATO's nuclear arsenal.⁴²

The Eisenhower administration appeared to have similar optimistic attitudes towards providing assistance for the development of France's nuclear program. Consistent with the administration's overall nuclear strategy, the Eisenhower administration initially did not seek to limit France's access to nuclear weapons. In the early to mid-1950s, U.S. nuclear support to France were offered in two limited forms. The U.S. deployed nuclear bombs on U.S. Air Forces Europe (USAFE) tactical aircrafts based in Morocco and France, and also supplied nuclear warheads for French forces based in Germany.⁴³ After de Gaulle returned to power in 1958, French officials noted to U.S. policymakers that France was still seeking nuclear assistance: "France wants at least a few bombs...or at least as much technical information as France could get [from the U.S.]"⁴⁴ This prompted U.S. officials to reconsider U.S. nuclear assistance policy towards the French. According to Miller, Deputy Secretary of Defense Donald Aubrey Quarles argued that the U.S. "should make it clear to [de Gaulle] that U.S. policy is not to try to prevent the French from developing a nuclear weapons capability."⁴⁵ This notion is supported by the fact the Dulles informed de Gaulle that the U.S. could potentially offer nuclear assistance to France under the recent amendments to the Atomic Energy Act if France also made "substantial progress in developing atomic weapons" and could "prove herself a strong and stable ally."⁴⁶

⁴² Ibid., 254-257.

⁴³ Robert S. Norris, Andrew S. Burrows and Robert W. Fieldhouse, *Nuclear Weapons Databook. Volume V: British, French, and Chinese Nuclear Weapons* (New York: Avalon Publishing, 1994), 188.

⁴⁴ Foreign Relations of the United States, Volume XLI, Western Europe; NATO, 1958–1960, eds. Daniel J. Lawler and Erin R. Mahan (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2010), Document 20. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v07p2/d20>

⁴⁵ Miller, *Stopping the Bomb: The Sources and Effectiveness of US Nonproliferation Policy*, 159.

⁴⁶ "Joint Recommendations for Nuclear Discussions with Charles De Gaulle Being Forwarded," June 28, 1958, DNSA, NP00441 in Miller, *Stopping the Bomb*, 161.

Given that Congress had not authorized U.S. aid to France, Dulles proposed to de Gaulle that the U.S. could “train French forces in the use and delivery of nuclear weapons” and help them “develop nuclear-propelled submarines.”⁴⁷

However, America’s proposals did not satisfy France’s desire for its own autonomous nuclear weapons. De Gaulle welcomed the prospect of receiving U.S. nuclear weapons, but believed that acquiring an independent nuclear arsenal would “enable France to meet her commitments in the Atlantic alliance.”⁴⁸ His desire to elevate France’s role in the Atlantic alliance led him to propose to a “*directorie a trois*,” a tripartite organization consisting of the U.S., Britain, and France that would make joint decisions on nuclear developments. De Gaulle felt that the U.S. had “unfairly penalized an ally” and placed France in a “permanent political, military, and technological inferiority in the councils of the great powers.”⁴⁹ Through this tripartite organization, France would obtain an equal veto power as Britain and the U.S. over the use of nuclear weapons unless one was under attack. However, President Eisenhower rejected de Gaulle’s proposal, noting that U.S. assistance to the development of a “third NATO [nuclear] power capable of independent action” would not be authorized by Congress and could have a “decisive effect upon other members of [the] alliance” such as West Germany.⁵⁰

In fact, when U.S. policymakers failed to offer nuclear assistance to the French through the Atomic Energy Act, it attempted to convince France to renounce its ambitions for an independent arsenal by rejecting de Gaulle’s tripartite organization offer and instead proposing a

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Wilfred L. Kohl, *French Nuclear Diplomacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 47.

⁴⁹ Norris, Burrows and Fieldhouse, *Nuclear Weapons Databook. Volume V: British, French, and Chinese Nuclear Weapons*, 190.

⁵⁰ “Views and Suggestions on Question of Aiding the French Atomic Weapons Program,” June 27, 1958, DNSA, NP00440 in Miller, *Stopping the Bomb: The Sources and Effectiveness of US Nonproliferation Policy*, 161.

sea-based Multilateral Force (MLF) for NATO, where European allies would have joint control over an integrated nuclear force, in 1958.⁵¹ The MLF would allow for “an independent and ultimately purely European nuclear force, whose use would not be subject to an American veto.”⁵² However, such plans were hindered when de Gaulle turned down the U.S. offer and proceeded to build its own nuclear device. President Eisenhower’s final attempt to permit nuclear assistance with France faced staunch Congressional opposition in 1960.⁵³

In sum, although Eisenhower signaled a willingness to aid the French nuclear program on several occasions throughout his presidency, a hostile de Gaulle administration government and U.S. Congress prevented his administration from offering France the technical nuclear assistance that it granted to Britain.

ii. *President Kennedy: Schizophrenic Attitudes Towards the French Nuclear Arsenal*

In contrast to Eisenhower, President John F. Kennedy entered office in 1961 with a firm policy of nuclear nonproliferation, and did not favor trading nuclear knowledge in exchange for political or economic benefits.⁵⁴ Kennedy warned that “the possibility in the 1970s of the President of the United States having to face a world in which 15 or 20 or 25 nations may have these weapons... is the greatest possible danger and hazard.”⁵⁵ U.S. nonproliferation policy towards adversary and nonaligned states during the Kennedy administration can be characterized as “impeding proliferation,” where U.S. policymakers attempted to “restrict the global spread of

⁵¹ “Multilateral Force Or Farce?” *The New York Times*, December 13, 1964, https://www.nytimes.com/1964/12/13/multilateral-force-or-farce.html?_r=0

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Burr, “U.S. Secret Assistance to the French Nuclear Program, 1969-1975: From “Fourth Country” to Strategic Partner,” The Wilson Center.

⁵⁴ Douglas Brinkley and Richard T. Griffiths, *John F. Kennedy and Europe* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1999), 324.

⁵⁵ “President Kennedy’s News Conference,” March 21, 1963. <https://www.jfklibrary.org/Research/Research-Aids/Ready-Reference/Press-Conferences/News-Conference-52.aspx>

sensitive nuclear technologies or to reduce the ability of states to gain independent control of nuclear weapons.”⁵⁶ This public commitment towards reducing the possibility of additional nuclear-armed states in the international system is reflected the various nuclear policies and agreements that the Kennedy administration proposed and passed. For example, the U.S. and USSR ratified the Limited Test Ban Treaty (LTBT) in 1963, which prohibited all nuclear tests except for those underground. This international treaty was intended to prevent additional states from acquiring nuclear weapons.

The Kennedy administration replaced Eisenhower’s military strategy of “massive retaliation” with “flexible response,” a strategy that emphasized reliance on conventional capabilities instead of nuclear weapons to allow the U.S. to develop several options to respond to any form of military crisis in Europe.⁵⁷ Kennedy pulled back Eisenhower’s policies that had granted Europeans control over American nuclear weapons, ordering that “National nuclear forces were to be avoided and control was to be concentrated in American hands.”⁵⁸ Moreover, the Kennedy administration modified the proposed MLF plan. Instead of functioning as a precursor to an independent European nuclear force, the MLF would have a firm American veto and was aimed at preventing nuclear proliferation to West Germany.⁵⁹

As U.S. officials reformed the MLF plan, Paris continued to seek U.S. nuclear assistance to save time and money. At this time, France had already staged its first nuclear test. However, the Kennedy administration publicly presented itself against offering any form of nuclear aid, arguing that it would jeopardize U.S. interests in Europe and NATO. From a strategic defense perspective, some U.S. government officials argued that there was little value in having

⁵⁶ Miller, “Hegemony and Nuclear Proliferation,” 18.

⁵⁷ Gavin, *History and Strategy in America's Atomic Age*, 30.

⁵⁸ Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement 1945-1963*, 305.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 312-314.

independent, European nuclear forces outside of NATO, as the U.S. continued to offer nuclear warhead support to French in West Germany.⁶⁰ Defense Secretary Robert McNamara asserted that “Relatively weak national nuclear forces are not likely to be sufficient to perform even the function of deterrence.”⁶¹ At a NATO Ministerial meeting in Athens, McNamara argued that such independent nuclear forces were dangerous and unnecessary costs because it encouraged the proliferation of other nuclear powers.⁶² In addition to such security risks, other officials expressed concerns regarding the political implications of initiating a nuclear assistance program with the French. Undersecretary George Ball expressed that France was already challenging U.S. hegemony in Europe, and a U.S.-led nuclear collaboration with the French could inspire West Germany to seek its own arsenal.⁶³

Despite U.S.-French tensions and Kennedy’s public stance towards nuclear nonproliferation, he later reversed Acheson’s policy recommendations and proposed the U.S. to consider aiding France’s nuclear capabilities. What can explain this sudden turnaround in U.S. nuclear policy? As historian Francis Gavin critically notes, Kennedy officials’ rhetoric did not reflect the administration real strategic views on the issue of nuclear sharing. While officials applied its policy of nuclear nonproliferation towards other states, they separated the French

⁶⁰ Norris, Burrows, Fieldhouse, *Nuclear Weapons Databook Volume V: British, French, and Chinese Nuclear Weapons*. “A 1961 Agreement for Cooperation between the two countries facilitated the use of U.S. warheads on French launders, which by 1965 constituted two fighter-bomber wings of NATO’s Fourth Allied Tactical Air Force (4 ATAF),” 189.

⁶¹ Richard Dean Burns and Joseph M. Siracusa, *A Global History of the Nuclear Arms Race: Weapons, Strategy, and Politics* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2013), 332.

⁶² “Remarks by Secretary McNamara, NATO Ministerial Meeting, 5 May 1962, Restricted Session,” May 5, 1962, <https://robertsmcnamaracom.files.wordpress.com/2017/04/1962-05-05-flexible-response-speech-to-nato.pdf>

⁶³ “Memorandum from Under Secretary of State George W. Ball to President Kennedy, 'A Further Nuclear Offer to General De Gaulle',” August 08, 1963, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, National Archives, Record Group 59, Records of Undersecretary of State George Ball, box 21, France. Obtained and contributed by William Burr and included in NPIHP Research Update #2. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/110245>

question from nonproliferation concerns. Between 1962 to 1963, nuclear sharing remained an open question, and the U.S. did not actively oppose France's nuclear development and were even in the process of opening up negotiations.⁶⁴ During the Cuban Missile crisis in 1962, Kennedy offered nuclear assistance to France. U.S. Ambassador to France James Gavin advocated for expanding U.S. bilateral nuclear relationship because it may give the U.S. "the same element of control that our cooperation with the British has given."⁶⁵ At the Nassau Conference in December 1962, Kennedy also extended to France Polaris missiles under the same status and condition as Britain.⁶⁶ In January 1963, Secretary Rusk instructed the U.S. ambassador to France Charles Bohlen to "impress on the French that the decision to offer them the Nassau proposals represents a major turning point in United States policy. It implies a willingness to recognize France as a nuclear power and to bring substantially to an end the exclusive quality of the U.S.-U.K. relationship."⁶⁷ By the summer of 1963, the Kennedy administration was even ready to give the French "Polaris or Minutemen missiles...Polaris submarine technology," and even "nuclear warheads for their bombs" under the condition that France signed the Limited Test Ban.⁶⁸ De Gaulle did not accept this offer, but Kennedy's personal offer to France suggests that U.S. attitudes towards nuclear assistance was not influenced by concerns regarding the Soviet threat.

In sum, an examination of U.S. policies towards France's nuclear weapons program in the mid-1960s reveals that the Kennedy administration adopted a policy of selective proliferation

⁶⁴ Francis J. Gavin, *History and Strategy in America's Atomic Age* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), 39.

⁶⁵ Shane J. Maddock, *Nuclear Apartheid: The Quest for American Atomic Supremacy from World War II to the Present* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 157.

⁶⁶ The Nassau Conference was a meeting with President Kennedy and British Prime Minister MacMillan that resulted in an agreement where the U.S. would sell Polaris missiles to the U.K. as a substitute for the Skybolt missile program that the U.S. had initially promised but canceled due to both budgetary and concerns about France and Germany. For more details on this proposal, see Geir Lundestad, *No End to Alliance: The United States and Western Europe: Past, Present and Future* (New York: Springer Publishing, 2016).

⁶⁷ *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume XIII, Western Europe and Canada, Document 262*. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v13/d262>

⁶⁸ Gavin, *History and Strategy in America's Atomic Age*, 39.

when it came America's European allies. Similar to Eisenhower administration, Kennedy officials entertained with, and debated, the idea of assisting an independent French nuclear force. While the Kennedy administration publicly adopted a rhetoric of "flexible response," officials privately demonstrated a willingness to aid an independent French nuclear force.

iii. President Johnson: Denial and Diversion

When President Johnson entered office in 1964, he initially remained ambivalent toward towards the risks of nuclear nonproliferation for both adversary and allied states. Washington was willing to maintain its "special relationship" with the U.K. and maintained its support for the MLF. There is a significant gap in the literature pertaining to the Johnson administration's attitudes debates towards assisting the French nuclear arsenal, but the administration inherited Kennedy's nuclear policies towards the French and remained committed to the MLF plan.⁶⁹ However, after the People's Republic of China's (PRC) conducted its first atomic test in 1964, U.S. nuclear policies reverted to firm nuclear nonproliferation for both adversary and allied states. For the French, National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy maintained that the U.S. should not exchange any information, research activities, or sell equipment that would assist in the development of France's nuclear capabilities.⁷⁰ The Johnson White House formalized U.S. opposition in the National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) 294, which asserted that the U.S. would not engage in significant assistance affecting timing, quality or cost of the French

⁶⁹ This observation is noted in Miller, "Hegemony and Nuclear Proliferation," 77.

⁷⁰ "National Security Action Memorandum, NSAM 294, McGeorge Bundy to Secretary of State, 'US Nuclear and Strategic Delivery System Assistance to France'," April 20, 1964, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, National Security Council Files (NSCF), box 676, France vol. V 01 Feb 70-Apr 70. Obtained and contributed by William Burr and included in NPIHP Research Update #2. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/110246>

nuclear program as long as the French strategic nuclear weapons are not committed to NATO.⁷¹

In sum, the U.S. was now opposed to the development of nuclear forces by other states except those approved by NATO. U.S-French relations became more tense and difficult, reaching its lowest point in 1966 when de Gaulle withdrew France from NATO's military structure.

Following France's withdrawal, the U.S. suspended the 1961 Agreement and all forms of nuclear weapons support to France was halted.⁷² Most notably, the Johnson administration scrapped the proposed MLF plans and the concluded the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1968.

II. Assessments

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Norris, Burrows and Fieldhouse, *Nuclear Weapons Databook. Volume V: British, French, and Chinese Nuclear Weapons*, 194

	President Dwight D. Eisenhower	President John F. Kennedy	President Lyndon B. Johnson
Attitudes towards Nuclear Assistance to France	Favorable	Ambivalent	Initially ambivalent, then shifts to hostility
Final Policy Decision Outcome	No Assistance	No Assistance	No Assistance

Table 1: Summary of U.S. attitudes and policies towards nuclear assistance to France, 1953-1968

Existing theories suggest that due to the risks of nuclear proliferation, the U.S. should have halted nuclear assistance to France at the onset. Yet throughout the 1950s to 1960s, France successfully expanded and improved its nuclear capabilities in the midst of relatively little American opposition. During these two decades, it was not obvious to U.S. officials that proliferation was inimical to U.S. interests.⁷³ By tracing the history of U.S.-French nuclear assistance policies prior to the Nixon administration, this chapter challenges the common notion that the Nixon's decision to offer nuclear assistance to France in 1970 reflected a dramatic shift in U.S. nuclear policy. A consistent and notable trend observed across the three administrations is that the question of whether to aid the French nuclear weapons program was much more frequently discussed than the question of whether to use coercion to stop the French's nuclear ambitions. Although the U.S. actively sought to prevent West Germany from acquiring nuclear weapons and was concerned whether the Soviets would perceive nuclear assistance as a

⁷³ I would like to thank Tim McDonnell for this critical insight

contradiction to U.S. commitment to non-proliferation, top decision-makers did not assert that a strong opposition policy was necessary or even desired. Another critical observation is that U.S. officials' reactions to France's nuclear development and assistance requests deviate from our existing theories' expectations. Despite shifts in the Soviet threat and changes in the strength of the NATO alliance, each administration demonstrated a willingness to offer France nuclear assistance. However, President Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson fell short of implementing such policy, suggesting the need to explore the factors that could explain the perplexing gap between the U.S.' willingness vs. policy outcome. The following chapter turns to the Nixon administration, and outlines when and how the U.S. carried out nuclear assistance policy to France.

Chapter III: The Start of Something New? Nixon's Approach towards France

When President Richard Nixon entered office in 1969, he inherited a weakening U.S.-European relationship and a NATO that appeared increasingly obsolete and in disarray. After the failure of Western European leaders to coordinate a response to the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968, U.S. and European policymakers questioned whether NATO would be renewed beyond its twenty-year deadline, which was set to expire in April 1969.⁷⁴ For five years, America's ongoing war in Vietnam was at the forefront of U.S. foreign policy. Nixon thus "wanted to show the world that the new American President was not completely obsessed with Vietnam... [and] that, despite opposition to the war, their President could still be received abroad with respect and even enthusiasm."⁷⁵ Thus, transatlantic relations were one of the key foreign policy areas that were personally handled by Nixon and Kissinger, and U.S. officials hoped to usher in a period of "imaginative updating and refurbishing of the NATO Alliance."⁷⁶ This emphasis on a "rebalance" towards Europe was clearly reflected in Nixon's public statement on February 6, 1969, where he formally announced that his first overseas would be to Western Europe. Nixon hoped his visit would demonstrate U.S. commitment to its European allies, and foster closer transatlantic ties: "The Alliance, held together in its first two decades by a common fear, needs now the sense of cohesiveness supplied by common purpose. I am eager for an early exchange of views on all the important issues that concern us."⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Luke Nichter, *Richard Nixon and Europe: The Reshaping of the Postwar Atlantic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, May 19, 2015), 9.

⁷⁵ Chris Barber, "Why Europe was President Nixon's First Foreign Trip," The Nixon Foundation, <https://www.nixonfoundation.org/2014/03/europe-president-richard-nixon/>

⁷⁶ Nichter, *Richard Nixon and Europe: The Reshaping of the Postwar Atlantic World*, 2.

⁷⁷ Richard Nixon, "Statement on the Forthcoming Visit to Western Europe.," February 6, 1969. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=2219>.

While the Nixon administration had to grapple with a plethora of transatlantic issues, one of the centerpieces of his foreign policies was the normalization of U.S.-French security and defense relations. This chapter examines how it was that, under the Nixon administration, the U.S. nuclear assistance policy towards France shifted from ambiguity to support. As outlined in the previous chapter, with the exception of President Johnson, Nixon's predecessors were relatively ambivalent about the risks of nuclear proliferation and showed signs of willingness to accept the possibility of selective nuclear assistance to France. However, Nixon was the only President that formalized America's interest in helping France possess a more effective nuclear force. Neither the state of international politics or specific changes in U.S.-NATO relations can fully explain this shift in nuclear policy. Despite poor and weakened U.S.-French alliance and the assumption that the U.S. would soon enter a phase of détente with the Soviet Union that encouraged a decrease in the number of nuclear weapons in the international system, U.S. policymakers proactively helped the French improve their nuclear force.

Using available and declassified primary sources, I lay out the evolution of U.S.-French discussions and debates pertaining to cooperation on military defense, and how the administration reached the conclusion that the U.S. would offer nuclear aid through a program known as "negative guidance." Due to the secretive nature of the program, there remain significant gaps in how much technical assistance U.S. offered, and the extent of the cooperation. President Nixon, Secretary Kissinger, and government officials did not mention of the program in their memoirs, and the program was not leaked to the press. The confidentiality and maximum security classification is reflected in the small number of senior government officials who were aware of this nuclear assistance initiative: President Nixon, Kissinger, Melvin Laird (Secretary of Defense), Richard Helms (Director of Central Intelligence), General Earle Wheeler (Chairman of

the Joint Chiefs of Staff), Glenn T. Seaborg (Chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission) and Gerard Smith (director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency (ACDA)).⁷⁸ As many of the details remain obscured, this chapter does not seek to provide a full or definitive narrative of the nuclear collaboration program between Washington and Paris, but rather outline the timeline of discussions and the strategic concerns expressed by U.S. policymakers in their decision to aid France. I conclude with how the political dilemmas that the Nixon administration faced by deciding to initiate a nuclear assistance program, and how it attempted to manage and overcome these tensions.

I. Diverting from the Status Quo: A New Dimension of U.S. -French Nuclear Relations

Given the Nixon's administration desire for a new phase in transatlantic relations, it is unsurprising that it pursued a new course of revitalizing and expanding bilateral relations with France. National Security Council (NSC) members emphasized that good diplomacy and military relations "between France and the United States contribute[d] to the health of the [NATO] Alliance" while "poor French-U.S. relations make our tasks more difficult and distress our allies."⁷⁹ These vague conclusions did not equate to specific policies that outlined how administration would conduct defense relations with France. In fact, in contrast to the Johnson administration, the Nixon White House did not have a clear or coherent doctrine basis towards dealing with the rise of nuclear powers. However, Nixon and Kissinger early on "sought to make it clear that they did not oppose the French force," and "appreciated the contribution it made to

⁷⁸ K. Stoddart, *Losing an Empire and Finding a Role: Britain, the USA, NATO and Nuclear Weapons, 1964-70* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012).

⁷⁹ *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976, Volume XLI, Western Europe; NATO, 1969-1972, Document 133.* <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v41/d133>

Western security."⁸⁰ At a private meeting at Élysée Palace between Nixon and de Gaulle in March 1969, Nixon had already expressed that “it was important for the good of the U.S. that not only France should have nuclear weapons but in a broader sense” so that that would be another power which “can be a major economic, political, and military force apart from the U.S.”⁸¹

The question and discussion of the possibility U.S. assistance to France’s nuclear program under the Nixon administration formally emerged when Kissinger met with British Defense Minister Denis Healey to discuss U.S.-French military cooperation in April 1969.⁸² Healey noted to Kissinger that there had been press speculation that France would be interested in joint nuclear planning with the U.S.⁸³ Although the French had not formally approached any U.S. officials about nuclear cooperation, nor had the U.S. proposed any explicit offers at this time, Kissinger noted that the U.S. was “reviewing its stance towards European nuclear forces” and if the French triggered talks of cooperation, the “U.S. response would be to give them a respectful hearing.”⁸⁴ Any decision to aid France would be heavily weighed beforehand by U.S. and U.K. officials.⁸⁵ However, conversations between Theodore L. Eliot, Jr. and Kissinger reveal that the U.S. and U.K. did not share the same approach towards the French nuclear program. The U.K. insisted that any form of French nuclear cooperation had to be discussed within the

⁸⁰ Robert Ullman, “The Convert French Action,” *Foreign Policy* no. 75 (1989): 7.

⁸¹ Luke Nichter argues that informal discussions about a possible U.S.-French bilateral defense cooperation occurred before Nixon entered office. However, there is no document that can confirm this timing. In National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Box 1023, President/HAK Memcons, Memcons—The President/Gen. De Gaulle, February 28–March 2, 1969. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v34/d13>

⁸² “Memorandum from Henry A. Kissinger to President Nixon, 'Guidance to State and Defense Department on Our Attitude Toward Military Cooperation with the French,'” April 15, 1969, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, National Security Council Files (NSCF). Box 681. Germany Vol. 1 through Apr 69. Obtained and contributed by William Burr and included in NPIHP Research Update #2. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/110247>

⁸³ Matthew Jones, *The Official History of the UK Strategic Nuclear Deterrent: Volume II: The Labour Government and the Polaris Programme, 1964-1970* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017).

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ According to Burr, Kissinger passed “talking points” for the Healey meeting to Secretary of State Roger, but misleadingly informed him that Nixon had approved them before the conversation. *Ibid.*

framework of the NATO alliance, and under the conditions that France agreed to be a part of the NPG and reenter NATO defense.⁸⁶ In contrast to this position, while the U.S. similarly prioritized “preserving the integrity of NATO,” officials did not wish to bind the U.S. to any formal commitments without fully assessing its implications to U.S. foreign policy, and would not affirm to the U.K. that the U.S. would approach nuclear cooperation with France with the same stance.⁸⁷

In the midst of de Gaulle’s uncertain political future and possible resignation, Nixon requested the NSC Interdepartmental Group for Europe to conduct a study formulating U.S. policy options with respect to military relations with France. From this memorandum (NSSM 47), it is clear that the Nixon administration was interested in specifically exploring the possibility of fostering U.S.-French nuclear cooperation with a focus on how it would impact U.S.-alliance relationships, specifically nuclear relations with the U.K. Nixon outlined three guidelines for the NSC to consider while developing U.S. policies and options towards post-de Gaulle France: developments in France that would require “positive” reaction by the U.S., key areas that the U.S. should attempt to influence French foreign policy, and how the sharing of nuclear weapons technology information would affect U.S. bilateral relations with France.⁸⁸

Despite the Nixon’s assertion that his administration would prioritize strengthening NATO and U.S. relations with its allies, notably missing from this memorandum is any consideration or

⁸⁶ "Memorandum from Theodore L. Eliot Jr. to Henry A. Kissinger, 'British Position on Nuclear Cooperation with France'," October 21, 1969, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, National Archives, Record Group 59, Subject-Numeric Files, 1967-69, AE 1-1 Fr-UK. Obtained and contributed by William Burr and included in NPIHP Research Update #2. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/110251>

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ The secretive nature of this program is confirmed in this memorandum: “President has directed that no department or agency of the Executive Branch shall make any public or private statement, or enter into any commitment, which would have the effect of circumscribing the President’s freedom of choice among available policy options.” In *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume XLI, Western Europe; NATO, 1969–1972, Document 126.*

<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v41/d126>

discussions of how U.S. policies towards France would impact U.S. bilateral ties with West Germany, the NATO alliance, and U.S. relations with the Soviet Union.

While the French government rejected rejoining NATO's defense structure, U.S. Ambassador to France Robert Sargent Shriver Jr. shared with Kissinger and NSC senior staff member and advisor Henry Sonnenfeldt that the French signaled an interest in entering bilateral military talks with the U.S.⁸⁹ At this point, the Nixon administration does not appear to have formulated any decision regarding U.S. nuclear cooperation with France. However, Nixon officials' attitudes appear generally favorable towards exploring potential possibilities for a nuclear assistance program. The retirement of De Gaulle, and appointment of Georges Pompidou as the new French president, prompted a reassessment of U.S.-French defense relations. The administration's speculation pointed to two factors of why the French was now willing to enter into a closer, more cooperative relationship with the U.S. The U.S. sought to de-escalate the war in Vietnam, and Washington respected Paris' "right to disagree" in the "interest of more effective cooperation toward common aims."⁹⁰ Consequently, the French government was now more "open," and ballistic missile programs was "an area where we [the U.S.] can further cooperate with this country."⁹¹ Although the prospects of nuclear sharing were unclear at this point, Kissinger explicitly shared with Shriver that President would not let any

⁸⁹ This assessment is in reference to the statement "Over the past year there have been numerous indications of greater French interest in military cooperation with NATO and with the US. President Pompidou told Ambassador Shriver on 23 July that France was dedicated to working with its allies for the defense of Western Europe, that France was willing to enter into bilateral military talks with the US." In *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume XLI, Western Europe; NATO, 1969–1972, Document 132.* <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v41/d132>

⁹⁰ Ibid., Document 133.

⁹¹ "Memorandum from Helmut Sonnenfeldt to Henry A. Kissinger, 'Memo from Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense on Assistance to France on Ballistic Missiles'," January 23, 1970, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, National Security Council Files (NSCF), Box 676, France Vol. IV 11/69-31 Jan 70. Obtained and contributed by William Burr and included in NPIHP Research Update #2. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/110252>

“NATO theology” stand in the way of “whatever advantages might accrue to U.S. security” through an increase in U.S.-French military cooperation.⁹² Kissinger also suggested to Shriver that Nixon may be interested in developing some cooperation in this nuclear weapons field.⁹³ With this optimistic outlook, Shriver, Kissinger, and Sonnenfeldt agreed to invite French President Pompidou to visit the U.S. in February 1970 to further explore and discuss U.S. and NATO cooperation with France.

II. The First French Nuclear Request to the Nixon Administration

In December 1969, the French Armaments Ministry Jean Blancard formally issued a direct request to the Pentagon for technical assistance with developing and improving France’s ballistic missile program. The Pentagon noted that the French had four key, broad technical interests: reliability, star tracker navigation equipment, re-entry vehicle materials, and U.S. contractor support on development of boosters.⁹⁴ The memo does not provide further details, it noted that such technical assistance would help the French improve the reliability and accuracy of their missiles. While the U.S. could provide some technical assistance without jeopardizing classified and sensitive information that could threaten U.S. security, Director of Defense Research and Engineering John S. Foster Jr. argued that greater concern was whether an assistance program would jeopardize or contribute to U.S. foreign policy interests. Three of the

⁹² While Kissinger does not explicitly define what “NATO theology” meant, it can be inferred that the Nixon administration would consider this issue on a bilateral basis aside from multilateral. In *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976*, Volume XLI, Western Europe; NATO, 1969–1972, Document 131. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v41/d131>

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ "Memorandum from Helmut Sonnenfeldt to Henry A. Kissinger, 'Memo from Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense on Assistance to France on Ballistic Missiles'," For an in-depth description of what type of assistance, the U.S. had provided to the French up until 1969, see "Deputy Secretary of Defense Packard to Kissinger, enclosing 'US/French Interchange in Area of Ballistic Missiles'," February 20, 1970, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, National Security Council Files (NSCF), box 676, France Vol. V Feb '70-Apr '70. Obtained and contributed by William Burr and included in NPIHP Research Update #2. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/110253>

major political and military implications emphasized in Foster's memo to Kissinger included U.S. obligations under the NPT, the possibility of "strengthening NATO" or U.S. position in France, and U.S. Congressional reaction.⁹⁵ Given these assessments and uncertainties, Kissinger requested the Department of Defense to prepare a background study that would review these various policy implications, as well as the outline the legal restrictions "concerning the provision of various kinds of information or assistance" the U.S. could offer. Kissinger also sent a memorandum to President Nixon noting that while Pompidou was unlikely to take any initiative to raise military issues during his visit to the U.S., Nixon should attempt to gain a broader sense of French strategic thinking towards NATO during their meeting.⁹⁶ The Department of Defense's assessment, combined with insight into Pompidou's attitudes, in relation to the French's nuclear request would allow the Nixon administration to consider if the U.S. should foster closer military cooperation with France, and if so, pursue policy under the NATO umbrella or in the form of bilateral relations. In hopes of granting the administration the most flexibility in formulating

⁹⁵ "Memorandum from Helmut Sonnenfeldt to Henry A. Kissinger, 'Memo from Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense on Assistance to France on Ballistic Missiles'," January 23, 1970, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, National Security Council Files (NSCF), Box 676, France Vol. IV 11/69-31 Jan 70. Obtained and contributed by William Burr and included in NPIHP Research Update #2. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/110252>

⁹⁶ This positive assessment was made based on Kissinger's observation of Pompidou's interview with the *New York Times*, as well as his initial meeting with Pompidou prior to Pompidou's visit to the U.S.

The *New York Times* article notes: "In March 1966, the French withdrew from the Atlantic alliance's military command...but they consider the move as simply a withdrawal from the integrated command structure and in no sense an invalidation of the alliance or of its mutual obligations," in C. L. Sulzberger "Pompidou, in Interview, Explains Policy," *New York Times*, February 15, 1970.

<https://www.nytimes.com/1970/02/15/archives/pompidou-in-interview-explains-policy-he-links-libyan-jets-to-plan.html>

Kissinger also personally noted to Nixon that "When I asked whether he [Nixon] could discuss defense matters on his visit, President Pompidou said, "I can and I want to" in "Memorandum from Henry A. Kissinger to President Nixon, 'Summary of My Conversation with President Pompidou'," February 23, 1970, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Nixon Presidential Library, Henry A. Kissinger Office Files (HAKO), box 852, Camp David Vol. II. Obtained and contributed by William Burr and included in NPIHP Research Update #2. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/113678>

policy options, Kissinger recommended Nixon that his discussions with the French should avoid the topic of returning France to the military dimension of NATO.⁹⁷

Although U.S. policymakers had previously agreed that they would consult British officials, efforts to hold talks with the French pertaining to defense issues went forward. Pompidou's visit to Washington in February 1970 served as the framework for the Nixon administration's decision on how to approach the French's strategic nuclear assistance request. Conversations between Nixon and Pompidou reveal that both leaders wanted to re-start U.S.-French relations and were particularly interested in discussing defense policy. Nixon rejected the view that Paris and Washington had irreconcilable differences and called for a "new spirit of Franco-American relations."⁹⁸ Pompidou agreed with Nixon's approach and both leaders supported the notion of finding ways to coordinate U.S. and French military policy while maintaining each country's independent positions. While Pompidou did not explicitly ask for any type of U.S. nuclear assistance, he emphasized France's weak nuclear capabilities by noting that French missiles were unlikely able to reach their targets. He hoped that France would be able to overcome its strategic weakness once they had acquired nuclear missile submarines and tactical nuclear weapons. Nixon later noted Pompidou that the "nuclear question" could be a subject of talks on cooperation.⁹⁹ Consistent with Kissinger's demands, Nixon promised Pompidou that the U.S. would explore the possibility of nuclear cooperation without the condition of the French changing its military position towards NATO. Both leaders agreed that cooperation should move forward, and they would review progress on a periodic-basis.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume XLI, Western Europe; NATO, 1969–1972, Document 139.* <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v41/d139>

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, Document 141. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v41/d141>

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

To follow up his meeting with Pompidou and explore what was feasible from a U.S. military standpoint, Nixon approved Kissinger's request for Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) General Andrew Goodpaster to explore opportunities for greater cooperation with the French military, and requested the Pentagon to provide advice on "courses of action and difficulties associated with them" that could be taken in the missile assistance area.¹⁰¹ Laird also proposed that Foster meet with Armaments Minister Jean Blancard in Paris for exploratory talks to help the U.S. gain a deeper understanding of exactly what the French requested. The discussions between Foster and Blancard in June 1970 generated a more specific nuclear assistance wish-list from the French, who wanted to find ways to "save time and money" in developing their land-based intermediate-range ballistic missile (IRBMs) and submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBM) for both types of missiles, the French sought information from the U.S. on better more reliable solid-fuel engines, and material for re-entry vehicles that would be more resistant to nuclear effects, fabrication techniques.¹⁰² The French were also seeking the U.S. government to lift existing restrictions on the use of powerful and advanced U.S. computers, and the import of U.S. computer components, in France's nuclear program to "produce more reliable and effective nuclear weapons."¹⁰³ Additionally, the Department of

¹⁰¹ "Memorandum from Henry A. Kissinger to President Nixon, 'Follow-up Actions on Military Cooperation with the French'," March 10, 1970, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, National Security Council Files (NSCF), box 676, France vol. V 01 Feb 70-Apr 70. Obtained and contributed by William Burr and included in NPIHP Research Update #2. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/113682>

¹⁰² "Deputy Secretary of Defense Packard to Kissinger, enclosing 'US/French Interchange in Area of Ballistic Missiles'," February 20, 1970, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, National Security Council Files (NSCF), box 676, France Vol. V Feb '70-Apr '70. Obtained and contributed by William Burr and included in NPIHP Research Update #2. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/110253>

¹⁰³ "Memorandum from Helmut Sonnenfeldt to Henry Kissinger, 'Franco-American Military Relations'," August 03, 1970, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Nixon Presidential Library, National Security Council Files (NSCF), box 676, France Vol. V Feb '70-Apr '70 and Vol. VI May-Sep 70. Obtained

Defense speculated that the French would later ask for “information on improvements...to MIRV (Multiple Independently Targetable Reentry Vehicle)...Minuteman III and Poseidon.”¹⁰⁴

III. Formalizing U.S.-French Nuclear Assistance

On September 1, 1970, President Nixon issued another National Security Memorandum titled “Military Cooperation with France” (NSSM 100) in order to clarify the reasons for U.S. aid to France, the various actions that Washington could take, and analysis of political areas of potential conflict.¹⁰⁵ Between June to September 1970, France’s request sparked ongoing debates and discussions among top U.S. officials regarding the advantages and disadvantages of U.S. offering aid to France. An examination of the NSSM 100, policy reviews, and internal documents between members of the NSC and the Department of Defense, reveal that international and domestic concerns, rather than technical security issues, were more contentious and dominated discussions. From a technical and security standpoint, Foster noted that Washington could not help the French would star-tracker technology because it would grant France counterforce capabilities, but guidance on reliability and re-entry materials could be explored without compromising systems and “without revealing information which, should it fall into Soviet hands, would be major concern to us.”¹⁰⁶ Most notably, the Department of Defense

and contributed by William Burr and included in NPIHP Research Update #2.

<http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/111358>

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ “Report of the National Security Council Staff, 'NSSM 100 – Military Cooperation with France (Analytical Summary)',” December, 1970, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Nixon Presidential Library, National Security Council Institutional Files (NSCIF), box 174, NSDM 100 (3 of 3). Obtained and contributed by William Burr and included in NPIHP Research Update #2.

<http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/113792>

¹⁰⁶ "Memorandum from Melvin R. Laird to Henry A. Kissinger, 'Assistance to the French Ballistic Missile Program'," July 14, 1970, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, FOIA Release. Obtained and contributed by William Burr and included in NPIHP Research Update #2.

<http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/113689>

concluded that in the U.S. would not gain much from the French “in the technical field, but a political return could be considered.”¹⁰⁷

While offering nuclear assistance to France supported President Nixon’s desire to improve relations with France, some officials perceived the program potentially threatening other U.S. foreign policy objectives and having grave international ramifications. Not surprisingly, the least supportive government official of this initiative was the director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency (ACDA) and chief U.S. delegate to the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) Gerard C. Smith, who pleaded to Kissinger that “With twenty years of weapon cooperation scars on my head... I send along the friendly advice ‘please don’t.’”¹⁰⁸ The political dilemmas linked to the U.S. offering nuclear assistance to France were ones that similarly appeared in prior administrations, such as America’s commitment to the nuclear nonproliferation regime and U.S.-Soviet relations. On the domestic front, officials had to grapple with the question of if, and how, nuclear aid could be carried out within the confines of existing legal and policy restrictions. As noted earlier, the NSAM 294 restricted the U.S. from offering any assistance to France's ballistic missile program.¹⁰⁹ Second, the any assistance that required the transfer of restricted data on nuclear weapons information required Congress to approve an “Agreement for Cooperation.” A formal revocation of the national security memorandum, as well as a review of French forces, would likely to provoke Congressional opposition. Overall,

¹⁰⁷ "Memorandum from Helmut Sonnenfeldt to Henry A. Kissinger, 'Assistance to the French Ballistic Missile Program'," April 16, 1970, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, National Security Council Files (NSCF), box 676, France Vol. V Feb '70-Apr '70 and Vol. VI May-Sep 70. Obtained and contributed by William Burr and included in NPIHP Research Update #2. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/113685>.

¹⁰⁸ "Letter from Gerard C. Smith to Henry A. Kissinger," June 30, 1970, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, FOIA Release. Obtained and contributed by William Burr and included in NPIHP Research Update #2. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/113687>

¹⁰⁹ "Memorandum from Henry A. Kissinger to President Nixon, 'Follow-up Actions on Military Cooperation with the French'," March 10, 1970.

officials that had reservations about Franco-American nuclear cooperation argued on the basis that such initiative could damage U.S. relations with the Soviet Union, its European allies.

IV. Reconciling Tensions: Nixon's Program of "Negative Guidance"

U.S. policymakers spent over one year conducting policy reviews of military aid to France before agreeing to offer aid under the specific condition of "helping to improve the operability and reliability of existing French systems."¹¹⁰ In March 29, 1971, Nixon approved offering "minimal aid," where the U.S. would assist the French in "non-sensitive" areas such as nuclear safety and computer exports but not extend cooperation to all the nuclear fields that the French had requested. For example, Washington would redefine "advanced computers" to allow some France to gain some access certain computer parts. As the majority of the text on existing documents remain sanitized, one is unable to further details regarding what types of technical assistance for their ballistic missile program were approved and not approved. However, the National Security Memorandum 103 (NSSM) reveals that Washington would not help France develop new types of missiles or "provide France with a distinct new capability." The most notable aspect of this assistance program was that it was relatively limited at first to improving the reliability of the then current generation of French missiles. While offer such proposals was undoubtedly controversial within the U.S. government, it was less contentious than proposals for aid on nuclear weapons safety procedures. In comparison to U.S.-U.K. nuclear cooperation, France would not obtain access to weapons designs.¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ "Letter from Melvin R. Laird to Henry A. Kissinger, 'Summary of Agreement for US Assistance to French Missile Program'," July 29, 1971, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, FOIA Release. Obtained and contributed by William Burr and included in NPIHP Research Update #2. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/112255>

¹¹¹ Robert H. Ullman, "'The Covert French Connection.'" *Foreign Policy*, no. 75 (1989): 13.

The U.S.-French nuclear assistance program official began in June 1971. How did the Nixon administration attempt to overcome these legal constraints, and appear to continue to uphold the nuclear nonproliferation regime without provoking domestic, allied, and Soviet backlash? One could argue that the Nixon administration did not need to actively mitigate these political tensions because they were able to prevent Congress or any European ally from obtaining knowledge of this program through a process that would become formally known as “negative guidance.” Nixon’s executive branch sought to indirectly circumvent the Atomic Energy Act restrictions against the transfer of nuclear weapons design information by having the French send summaries of the technical problems. The U.S. would then respond with advice on whether the technological steps the French were taking or were contemplating were in the right direction, and follow-up talks would ensue. In “The Covert French Connection,” Ullman reveals how the French received U.S. advice on nuclear weapons development: “Typically, a request would come from the Elysee to the White House for specific categories of information requiring the cooperation of officials in the Pentagon. They would cut the list down so as to stay within their view...of what might be done under existing legislation.”¹¹² Through this strategy, U.S. could assist France without the consent of Congress, or violate its commitments to SALT, the NPT, and the Limited Test Ban Treaty (LTBT).

Between 1968-1973, the French pressed the U.S. for further aid, eventually expanding their list to include the hardening of RVs, penetration aids, multiple warheads for submarine missiles, weight/size of booster triggers, and assistance with underground testing.¹¹³ As a result of such assistance, the French were able to build a more effective and reliable nuclear force while remaining out of the NATO defense structure.

¹¹² Ibid., 12.

¹¹³ Ibid., 11.

V. Conclusions

When Princeton Professor Robert Ullman broke the story of the Nixon administration's nuclear assistance to France in his *Foreign Policy* article titled "The Convert French Action" in 1989, he characterized the program as shocking and unprecedented.¹¹⁴ However, an examination of the both the decision-making and policy implementation process reveals that U.S. nuclear assistance to France unfolded slowly and was somewhat cautious. Nixon officials were aware that America's investment in France's nuclear arsenal did not come without potential controversies and political dilemmas. Consequently, they designed the assistance program in a way that would grant them plausible deniability. As detailed above, the Nixon administration did not come to the conclusion to aid France under one coherent strategic or security interests. Rather, policymakers appeared to weight the risks of the nuclear aid program alongside U.S. interests of concluding SALT and maintaining good relations with its European allies. The following chapter will evaluate the decision and strategic debates related to nuclear assistance program to assess the theories of nuclear assistance.

¹¹⁴ Due to legal restrictions at French archives, documents that detail France's role and perspectives in this cooperation remain unavailable. Ullman's account primarily challenges the French myth of "Force de frappe," and the notion that only the Britain was the only recipient of U.S. direct nuclear assistance.

Chapter IV: To Offer or Not Offer Nuclear Aid?: Assessing the Nixon Administration’s Nuclear Assistance Decision

	President Dwight Eisenhower	President John Kennedy	President Lyndon Johnson	President Richard Nixon
Strength of Nuclear Nonproliferation Norms	Low	Low	Low	Mixed
Strength of U.S.-NATO relations	Strong	Weak	Weak	Weak/Recovering
Soviet Threat	High	High	High	Low
Political Opportunism in U.S.-French Relations	Low	Low	Low	High
Nuclear Assistance to France	No	No	No	Yes

Table 2: Summary of Conditions and U.S. nuclear assistance to France, 1953-1969

As U.S. policymakers assumed that France would become a nuclear “power of some significance” whether the U.S. government assisted the country or not, there were two different policy options that the each administration could have chosen to adopt towards the French nuclear assistance: formal opposition or support.¹¹⁵ This chapter addresses and evaluates the

¹¹⁵ "Memorandum from Helmut Sonnenfeldt to Henry Kissinger, 'Franco-American Military Relations'," August 03, 1970, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Nixon Presidential Library, National Security Council Files (NSCF), box 676, France Vol. V Feb '70-Apr '70 and Vol. VI May-Sep 70. Obtained

series of competing theories in explaining U.S. officials' decision to offer nuclear aid to France. I argue that the theories pertaining to nuclear nonproliferation norms, the Soviet threat, and strength of NATO alliance, fail to explain both the timing, decision-making process, and final decision of whether the U.S. offered nuclear aid to France across all four administrations. In periods where there was a low Soviet threat and/or weakened NATO alliance relations, the U.S. offered nuclear assistance to France when we would least expect it. Conversely, in periods characterized by high Soviet threat and strong NATO relations, U.S. officials fell short of offering nuclear aid to France. Given such contradictory outcomes, I argue that the U.S. formulated its nuclear assistance program in response to particular political opportunities and incentives that were connected more to bilateral relations with France at the time rather than grand theories related to the threat level in the international environment, robustness of nuclear nonproliferation norms, or the strength of the NATO alliance.

I. Strength of Nuclear Nonproliferation Norms

According to theories of nuclear nonproliferation, as the norm against nuclear proliferation strengthens over time, this should reduce a country's incentive offer nuclear assistance to another state because the reputational costs increase. Although there was a succession of initiatives beginning in the 1950s that sought to check nuclear proliferation, I argue that the Treaty on Nuclear Nonproliferation (NPT) marks the most significant agreement that generated the international norms against nuclear nonproliferation by serving as the foundation for a near-universal nuclear nonproliferation regime. Thus, prior to the ratification of the NPT in 1968, U.S.

and contributed by William Burr and included in NPIHP Research Update #2.
<http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/111358>.

officials should have offered nuclear assistance to France. The permissive international environment, characterized by weak norms against nuclear proliferation and the lack formal U.S. commitment to the nuclear nonproliferation regime, should have prompted U.S. policymakers to offer nuclear assistance to France because there were little to no costs to implementing such initiative. After the implementation of the NPT, the U.S. should not have offered nuclear assistance to France because it would have generated significant international backlash for appearing to violate its commitment to nuclear nonproliferation.

At a first glance, the Eisenhower administration's pursuit of the MLF and NATO stockpile plan to increase allied' access to nuclear weapons appears to be consistent with this theory of nonproliferation norms. In the 1950s, the Eisenhower administration demonstrated its strong support for nuclear sharing and assistance by approving the provision of ballistic missile designs to NATO allies, and embraced the notion of providing the British with intermediate-range ballistic missile (IRBMs). U.S. policymakers even expressed an interest in providing West Germany with effective control over American nuclear weapons.¹¹⁶ Eisenhower and other U.S. officials believed that the idea of denying nuclear weapons away from its allies was "almost insane" and "silly."¹¹⁷ These initiatives were designed to pave the way for "an independent and ultimately purely European nuclear force, whose use would not be subject to an American veto."¹¹⁸ Likewise, President Johnson's formal opposition to offering France nuclear assistance in 1964 appears to parallel his administration's efforts at the time regarding arms control agreements with the Soviet Union. This suggests that nuclear nonproliferation norms may have

¹¹⁶ Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace*, 207-210.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 197.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 215.

influenced the Eisenhower and Johnson administration's broad attitudes towards offering nuclear assistance to a state.

However, the validity of the argument that norms associated with the NPT could explain U.S. nuclear assistance is contested when one examines Eisenhower's divergent nuclear assistance policies between Britain and France. Given the absence of the NPT in the 1950s, we would expect the Eisenhower administration to offer nuclear assistance to both European states. Yet Britain was the only beneficiary of the amended Atomic Energy Act in 1954 and 1958, which allowed the U.S. to share substantial nuclear information and materials to aid Britain's construction of nuclear submarines. In contrast, France was "frozen-out" of this growing special nuclear relationship between the U.S. and U.K.

The theory of nuclear nonproliferation norms also fails to explain why President Nixon offered nuclear assistance to France two years after the U.S. signed the NPT. Although Nixon and Kissinger had ambivalent attitudes towards nuclear nonproliferation because both policymakers placed "a higher priority on superpower geopolitics," their support of the NPT and pursuit of other arms control policies (i.e.: Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, SALT) suggests that they did not advocate for proliferation to every country that wished to acquire nuclear weapons.¹¹⁹ Given the administration's foreign policy objective of preventing the spread of nuclear weapons and weapons technology, the timing of Nixon's decision to offer nuclear assistance to France is puzzling. As argued by Martha Finnemore, hypocritical policy decisions and actions can constrain a state's legitimacy and power in the international system by "undermining the willingness of other states to accept or defer to the actions of the power."¹²⁰ In

¹¹⁹ Miller, *Stopping the Bomb: The Sources and Effectiveness of U.S. Nonproliferation Policy*, 69.

¹²⁰ Martha Finnemore, "Legitimacy, Hypocrisy, and the Social Structure of Unipolarity: Why Being a Unipole Isn't All It's Cracked up to Be." *World Politics* 61, no. 1 (2009): 73.

this logic, it is unclear then why the Nixon administration was willing to secretly support the development of France's arsenal, as such action risked contradicting America's commitment to existing arms control agreements. Given these unexpected outcomes, it seems implausible to argue that nuclear nonproliferation norms were a plausible factor driving U.S. decision-making regarding nuclear assistance to France across all four administrations.

II. Relative Strength of the NATO Alliance

Based on alliance politics theories, as the strength of an alliance increases, this will lead states to cooperate more in general. Conversely, the weakening or breakdown of an alliance would result in greater mistrust and thus less cooperation between the members of an alliance. The relative strength of any alliance is difficult to test and measure, as one could argue alliances are rarely in absolute harmony or discord. In particular, U.S. relations with its NATO allies have always been in flux since its formulation in 1949. However, for the purposes of this thesis, I define "strong alliance relations" as periods where relations between NATO members are relatively cooperative. This is demonstrated by the presence of collaborative security efforts within the NATO alliances, such as the adoption of multilateral treaties and agreements. Conversely, I define "weak alliance relations" as periods where relations among allies are tense and fractured, determined by the presence of disagreements and disengagement. In the case of NATO, we should expect the nuclear assistance to be offered at moments when transatlantic relations were strong and U.S. and European policymakers had favorable attitudes towards NATO institutions. During periods of transatlantic tensions and institutional strife within NATO, we would expect the U.S. to not offer nuclear assistance. Within the context of U.S.-French nuclear relations, nuclear assistance should thus exist prior to 1960, when France was still

integrated in NATO's military command and before the Vietnam War and European Economic Community (ECC) introduced significant tensions in the NATO relationship.

The 1950s was arguably period of "strong" alliance relations between the U.S. and its NATO allies. Most notably, the U.S. military went to great lengths to assure its allies' security in this period, stationing tens of thousands of U.S. troops on European soil and provisioning large sums of military aid.¹²¹ NATO adopted its strategic military doctrine of "massive retaliation" (MC 48/2), the idea that if any member was attacked, the U.S. would respond with a large-scale nuclear attack. Thus, President Eisenhower's willingness to offer nuclear assistance to America's NATO allies through the MLF policy, NATO stockpile initiative, and amendments to the Atomic Energy Act during this period appears to reflect the notion that strong alliance relations could encourage more cooperation in the nuclear realm. As Wohlstetter argues, Congress' liberalization of the Atomic Energy act "seem[ed] to offer incentives to our other [Western European] allies to demonstrate a nuclear capability of their own, and so to become eligible for help."¹²² Given strong NATO relations, we would expect U.S. officials to offer nuclear assistance to France in this period. However, as noted above, Eisenhower administration had divergent attitudes about offering nuclear assistance to Britain and France. The French were denied the same extent and type of nuclear assistance that was offered to Britain. These two differing nuclear policy outcomes suggest that despite "warm" U.S.-NATO relations in the 1950s, the strength of the intra-alliance had little correlation with Eisenhower's decision not to offer nuclear assistance to France.

While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to sufficiently detail and outline the state of transatlantic relations during the Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon administration, several significant

¹²¹ Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement 1945-1963*, 146.

¹²² Albert Wohlstetter, "Nuclear Sharing: NATO and the N+1 Country." *Foreign Affairs* 39, no. 3 (1961): 356.

historical events reveal that U.S.-NATO relations reached one of its lowest points in the 1960s. As summarized by Ludlow, Europe's economic recovery and Washington's preoccupation with other regions of the world endangered the unity of the alliance. French and German leaders persistently doubted the durability and credibility of U.S. security guarantees. In particular, French leaders criticized and challenged the uneven distribution of power and leadership positions within NATO's military command.¹²³ In January 1963, de Gaulle rejected Britain's entry into the ECC. Three years later, de Gaulle undermined the unity of NATO by withdrawing all French troops from NATO's military command. Therefore, one can characterize the 1960s as a period of "uncertainty and doubt" for the NATO alliance.¹²⁴

President Johnson's formal opposition to French nuclear assistance in 1964 suggests a plausible correlation between the strength of an alliance and the likelihood of nuclear assistance. In the NSAM 294, officials asserted that it was not in America's interest to assist French's nuclear warhead capabilities because it was outside the NATO nuclear force: "it is the policy of this government to oppose the development of nuclear forces by additional states, other than those whose forces would be assigned as part of a NATO nuclear force, targeted in accordance with NATO plans."¹²⁵ One could argue that this statement suggests the Johnson administration did not offer nuclear assistance to France because an additional independent European nuclear force would further undermine a NATO alliance that was already weak and in disarray. However, the alliance politics theory is challenged when it is applied to assess U.S. government

¹²³ S. D. Kertesz, "NATO's Disarray and Europe's Future." *Review of Politics* 28, no. 1 (1966): 3.

¹²⁴ Evanthis Hatzivassiliou, *NATO and Western Perceptions of the Soviet Bloc: Alliance Analysis and Reporting, 1951-69* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 124.

¹²⁵ "National Security Action Memorandum, NSAM 294, McGeorge Bundy to Secretary of State, 'US Nuclear and Strategic Delivery System Assistance to France,'" April 20, 1964, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, National Security Council Files (NSCF), box 676, France vol. V 01 Feb 70-Apr 70. Obtained and contributed by William Burr and included in NPIHP Research Update #2. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/110246>

decision-making processes in other presidential administrations. Kennedy and Nixon's consideration and favorable attitudes towards the idea of offering nuclear assistance to France despite the tense U.S.-NATO relations is arguably the most perplexing. Although Kennedy publicly opposed offering nuclear aid to Paris in fear that this would encourage Bonn to seek its own independent nuclear deterrent outside of NATO, it is critical to note that Kennedy privately demonstrated an interest in offering nuclear assistance to France. Likewise, it is perplexing why Nixon offered nuclear assistance after France left NATO, an act that severely damaged the unity of NATO.

A more nuanced explanation might argue that the U.S.-French nuclear assistance initiative during the Nixon administration may have been designed to repair a fragmenting NATO alliance. After France left NATO's military command in 1966, Nixon officials actively sought ways to improve America's political and defense relations with its European allies. However, if such broad desires to strengthen NATO relations drove U.S. policymakers to offer nuclear assistance, we would expect evidence of U.S. policymakers to tie nuclear assistance to France to political preconditions of France rejoining NATO's military structure. However, internal documents reveal that officials intentionally avoided tying U.S. nuclear assistance to France to NATO. As noted in Chapter 3, Kissinger explicitly informed Nixon not to discuss or mention NATO with the French prior to his meeting with Pompidou. In another conversation between Kissinger and Pompidou, Kissinger assured the French leader that "[Nixon] would not bring up anything relating to the return of France to the military organization of NATO."¹²⁶

The alliance politics argument is also quite difficult to sustain when one examines the Nixon administration's perceived function of the NATO alliance. When NATO was established

¹²⁶ *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume XLI, Western Europe; NATO, 1969–1972. Document 139.* <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v41/d139>

in 1949, its primary purpose was to deter Soviet expansionism. However, by the Nixon administration, officials expressed a desire to transform and reshape NATO beyond a defense alliance. For example, Nixon's speech to members of the North Atlantic Council in Brussels for NATO's 20th anniversary outlined the need for a new military, political and a social dimension to NATO's role of "collective security," as opposed to its previous objective of "collective defense."¹²⁷ As U.S. officials perceived and publicly presented NATO more as a political institution than an effective defense structure, it seems unlikely that Washington would have been willing to undertake such significant and risky effort as a way to bolster the NATO alliance. Overall, the empirical evidence provides little support for the idea that the strength of the NATO alliance determined the U.S. decision to offer nuclear assistance to France.

III. Changes in the Soviet Threat

The third alternative explanation focuses on changes in the Soviet threat as the crucial factor driving U.S. policymakers' decision whether or not to offer nuclear assistance to France. We would expect that as the Soviet threat increases, U.S. officials would pursue nuclear assistance as a way to strengthen its extended nuclear deterrence. Thus, as Soviet conventional and nuclear parity in the early 1960s challenged America's extended deterrence commitments to its allies, the assumption is that U.S. policymakers would offer nuclear assistance to France as a way to create independent nuclear forces in Western Europe. As scholars have noted, the U.S. and Soviet Union reached nuclear parity by the Cuban missile crisis. Thus, we would expect the U.S. to not offer nuclear assistance until after 1963. In contrast, the easing of tensions in U.S.-

¹²⁷ Nichter, *Richard Nixon and Europe*, 7.

Soviet relations by 1969 would decrease the level of the Soviet threat and result in the U.S. not offering nuclear assistance.

The Eisenhower's pursuit of the MLF plan, and demonstrated willingness to offer nuclear assistance to France and Britain during a period when European allies questioned the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence, appears to fit the Soviet threat theory. However, the Soviet threat theory fails to explain why the Nixon administration would offer nuclear assistance to France during a period of détente with the Soviet Union. His administration was undergoing the SALT negotiations with the Soviets in 1969, an international agreement that sought to freeze the number of strategic ballistic missile launchers at existing levels to curb the race in strategic offensive arms. The agreement also prohibited the transfer of anti-ballistic missile systems to other states, as well as providing "other States technical descriptions or blueprints of the ABM systems prohibited by the Treaty."¹²⁸ Since the U.S.-French nuclear assistance program would violate the no transfer component of the treaty, officials did note that this could have a negative consequence for the prospects of the SALT deal.¹²⁹ Sonnenfeldt's remark below suggests sensitivity to U.S.-Soviet tensions, noting that although aiding France could "make life more complicated for the Soviets," other U.S. foreign policy interests would suffer if the initiative was leaked and made aware to the Soviets:

"Those who point to SALT as an inhibition on our policies have a legitimate point. If SALT effort is aimed at creating a more stable and strategic relationship with the USSR, it is not compatible with a simultaneous effort to create additional nuclear power centers in the West, which could be in time destabilizing (as far as the Soviets are concerned) and

¹²⁸ "NPT Treaty Text," http://www.nti.org/media/pdfs/aptnpt_1.pdf?_=1430761933

¹²⁹ "Memorandum from Helmut Sonnenfeldt to Henry A. Kissinger, 'Assistance to the French Ballistic Missile Program'," April 16, 1970, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, National Security Council Files (NSCF), box 676, France Vol. V Feb '70-Apr '70 and Vol. VI May-Sep 70. Obtained and contributed by William Burr and included in NPIHP Research Update #2. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/113685>

perhaps jeopardize the basic SALT understanding"¹³⁰

Given that détente was one of his top foreign policy priorities, we would expect the Nixon to not offer nuclear assistance to France because such initiative would have increased U.S.-Soviet tensions. Yet the Nixon administration interestingly separated the question of France's nuclear arsenal from U.S.-Soviet ties.

IV. Political Opportunism in U.S.-French Relations

The alternative explanations outlined above only offer binary expectations, implicitly suggesting that U.S.' decision to offer nuclear assistance to France was straight-forward and deterministic. However, the available empirical evidence highlights how U.S. decision-making towards offering nuclear assistance fluctuated. Exploratory talks included instances where the U.S. considered and favored French nuclear assistance but fell short of implementing such initiative. I argue that political opportunism within U.S.-French bilateral relations can capture and explain the initial ambivalent attitudes towards nuclear assistance, as well as why the U.S. only offered nuclear assistance to the French during the Nixon administration.

While the Eisenhower administration did not offer nuclear assistance to France, U.S. officials demonstrated a strong willingness to pursue such initiative. It is critical to note that Eisenhower was "not convinced that a French nuclear capability was detrimental to U.S. interests."¹³¹ Rather, empirical evidence suggests that the Eisenhower did not offer nuclear

¹³⁰ "Memorandum from Helmut Sonnenfeldt to Henry Kissinger, 'Franco-American Military Relations'," August 03, 1970, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Nixon Presidential Library, National Security Council Files (NSCF), box 676, France Vol. V Feb '70-Apr '70 and Vol. VI May-Sep 70. Obtained and contributed by William Burr and included in NPIHP Research Update #2. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/111358>

¹³¹ Miller, *Stopping the Bomb: The Sources and Effectiveness of US Nonproliferation Policy*, 148.

assistance to France because of domestic and international constraints. From a legal perspective, the amendments made to the Atomic Energy Act in 1954 restricted any form of nuclear assistance to only Britain. According to the act, the U.S. could only offer aid another country's nuclear program if the country had already made "sufficient progress" in the development of their nuclear arsenal prior to aid. Aside from the congressional constraints that legally prohibited the U.S. from offering nuclear assistance to other European allies, France's domestic and international political developments made its efforts in establishing a national nuclear deterrent appear unattractive and risky to U.S. policymakers in comparison to the British case. Officials perceived France's political instability as a sign of lack of capability to act responsibly with nuclear arms, and feared that France would use nuclear weapons to protect and maintain its overseas colonies.¹³² Moreover, de Gaulle's continued challenge against "American security design" for Europe undermined Eisenhower's ongoing efforts at controlling the spread of nuclear capabilities within the NATO alliance.¹³³ Finally, if Eisenhower offered nuclear assistance to France, it would have been helping France *acquire* a nuclear weapon and not *refine* an existing capability. Thus, the overall opportunity to offer nuclear assistance to France was not compelling in this period.

Likewise, the Kennedy administration's privately may have been open to offering nuclear aid to France, but a hostile domestic and international environment appears to be the most compelling explanation for why it fell short of offering nuclear assistance. Similar to the Eisenhower administration, U.S. officials at this time were still concerned about nuclear proliferation to West Germany. Kennedy expressed this sentiment to British Prime Minister

¹³² At this time, France was struggling to maintain its colonial territories in Southeast Asia and dealing with the insurgency in Algeria. Keith W. Baum, "Two's Company, Three's a Crowd: The Eisenhower Administration, France, and Nuclear Weapons," 316.

¹³³ *Ibid.*

Harold Macmillan, asserting: “If we were now to provide aid to France and thus signify a major reversal in our opposition to Nth country programs the likelihood that the Germany would eventually wish to acquire a nuclear weapons capability would be significantly increased.”¹³⁴ These remarks suggests that concerns about how West Germany would perceive U.S. nuclear assistance to France thwarted any efforts towards implementing an official nuclear assistance program. As summarized by President Kennedy, “The United States...had not supported the French in the nuclear field and the result of this policy had been to sour American relations with France. Rightly or wrongly they had taken this attitude because of this Germany. If the United States did help France then pressure in Germany for similar help would rise.”¹³⁵ Thus, while “pragmatism compelled Kennedy” to consider nuclear assistance to France, the ongoing Berlin crisis narrowed his choice for dealing with France’s nuclear program.”¹³⁶

While there remains a significant limitation to available sources that traces the Johnson administration’s attitudes towards the French nuclear arsenal, one could speculate that the Johnson administration’s sudden shift from ambivalence to hostility was due to the following international events: China’s nuclear test in 1964, the Gilpatric Commission, France’s 1966 withdrawal from NATO’s integrated military command, and a growing U.S. involvement in Vietnam. The Gilpatric Committee warned that “The world is fast approaching a point of no return in the prospects of controlling the spread of nuclear weapons...The recent Chinese Communist nuclear explosion has reinforced the belief, increasingly prevalent throughout the world, that nuclear weapons are a distinguishing mark of a world leader, are essential to national

¹³⁴ State Department telegram 5245 to U.S. Embassy United Kingdom, Top Secret, sending message from President Kennedy to Prime Minister Macmillan, May 6, 1961, Top Secret <https://assets.documentcloud.org/documents/4364689/Document-05-State-Department-telegram-5245-to-U.pdf>

¹³⁵ Ibid, 39-40.

¹³⁶ Erin Mahan, *Kennedy, de Gaulle and Western Europe* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 84.

security, and are feasible even with modest industrial resources.”¹³⁷ Given the timing of the Johnson administration’s implementation of the NSSM 294, this restricted international environment appeared to pressure U.S. officials to formally oppose rather than support nuclear assistance to France.

On the surface, Nixon appears as the least likely candidate to have risked nuclear assistance, given the state of NATO and détente. However, the Nixon administration arguably had the most political space and flexibility in U.S. nuclear policy. What was different about the political context in 1970 that allowed for the U.S. to offer nuclear assistance to France? I argue that three factors paved the way for nuclear assistance. First, the change in the French government signaled a new opportunity for the U.S. officials to work with the French in the nuclear realm. In February 1970, Georges Pompidou succeeded de Gaulle as the president of France. There is indeed evidence that suggests that Nixon administration saw Pompidou’s leadership as an advantageous opportunity to restart U.S.-French policy, as Pompidou was “was a Gaullist but he was not de Gaulle.”¹³⁸ As observed by Trachtenberg, the Nixon administration:

“admired Pompidou as a person. They liked the way the French tended to think in cool, realistic, power political terms. They tended to view France as the most “European” of the European allies, saying things that the other European governments did not dare to say out loud—and that meant that in dealing with France as something of a privileged partner, they were really in a sense dealing with western Europe as a whole.”¹³⁹

Second, the period of “strategic parity” with the Soviet Union presented an opportunity to offer nuclear aid to France without undermining U.S. national security or risk provoking Soviet backlash. As Teriff writes, throughout the 1950s and the first half of the 1960s, the U.S.

¹³⁷ *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968, Volume XI, Arms Control and Disarmament, Document 64.* <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v11/d64>

¹³⁸ Trachtenberg, “The French Factor in U.S. Foreign Policy during the Nixon-Pompidou Period, 1969–1974,” 4.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

deployed a large strategic nuclear arsenal to maintain a position of nuclear superiority against the USSR.¹⁴⁰ However, by 1969, the USSR almost reached the same number of land-based ballistic missiles as the U.S., challenging the era of U.S. nuclear supremacy.¹⁴¹ Sonnenfeldt's positive assessment of U.S. nuclear assistance draws on this notion, arguing that: "It is also true that the French forces.. cannot be regarded as very threatening in a world that permits the U.S. and USSR 2,000 missiles and heavy bombers."¹⁴² Likewise, Nixon's NSC concluded that a U.S.-French nuclear assistance program "it is not predicted that the Soviets could... withdraw from an agreement [SALT] once made, if this were the only point at issue and if the assistance could not realistically be interpreted as substantially changing the strategic balance."¹⁴³

Third, on the U.S. domestic front, an examination of internal discussions and debates reveals that the Nixon administration had a receptive bureaucracy in comparison to earlier administrations. Aside from the head of the ACDA, Nixon officials were generally supportive of offering nuclear assistance to the French. There was a persistent and an unwavering belief that U.S nuclear assistance to France could be done "below the board" and in a way that was deniable. Overall, a combination of these three factors played a critical role in pushing the U.S. to assist the French arsenal in 1970.

The argument for political opportunism is further supported during the later years of the U.S.-French nuclear assistance program. In 1973, U.S. and French officials expressed an interest

¹⁴⁰ Terry Terriff, *The Nixon Administration and the Making of U.S. Nuclear Strategy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 18.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² "Memorandum from Helmut Sonnenfeldt to Henry Kissinger, 'Franco-American Military Relations', " August 03, 1970,

¹⁴³ "Report of the National Security Council Staff, 'NSSM 100 – Military Cooperation with France (Analytical Summary)'," December 1970, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Nixon Presidential Library, National Security Council Institutional Files (NSCIF), box 174, NSDM 100 (3 of 3). Obtained and contributed by William Burr and included in NPIHP Research Update #2. <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/113792>

in the possibility of deepening the nuclear relationship, but such requests came at a time when U.S.-French relations were threatened by Kissinger's "Year of Europe" initiative.¹⁴⁴ French foreign minister Michel Jobert perceived the "Year of Europe" as a plan to bring France's nuclear weapons back into NATO.¹⁴⁵ As noted by Burr, Kissinger attempted to "use" the French to break European unity, thus encouraging an "orientation" that was more compatible with U.S. interests. By exacerbating the Anglo-French nuclear rivalry, Kissinger could "keep Europe from developing their unity as a bloc against us."¹⁴⁶ Confronted with difficulties over the "Year of Europe," it appears that Kissinger may have desired to use military aid to tie France closer to the United States to strengthen U.S.-French relations during a period where it was most advantageous to the U.S. Given this political context, it would have been puzzling if nuclear relations between Paris and Washington did not improve dramatically under the Nixon administration.

V. Conclusions

As demonstrated above, the existing theories of nuclear proliferation do not provide satisfactory explanations for the character, timing, and the conditions under which U.S. decided nuclear assistance to France occurred. While theories of alliance politics, the Soviet threat and nuclear nonproliferation norms can explain the lack, or presence of, U.S. nuclear assistance to

¹⁴⁴ Trachtenberg, "The French Factor in U.S. Foreign Policy during the Nixon-Pompidou Period, 1969–1974," 30-31.

¹⁴⁵ Burr, "U.S. Secret Assistance to the French Nuclear Program, 1969-1975: From "Fourth Country" to Strategic Partner."

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

France in some cases, it cannot be broadly applied. The evidence presented in this chapter largely supports the theoretical argument that political opportunism drove the Nixon administration's decision to offer aid to France. This theory also offers a more compelling explanation for both the wide variation in U.S. nuclear assistance policies towards France. During the Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson administration, U.S. officials were restrained by domestic and international politics, in which French interests appeared to conflict with broader U.S. foreign policy interests. However, under the Nixon administration, the coincident of U.S.-French interests allowed for nuclear assistance to occur. The following chapter concludes with implications of this thesis' findings and proposes avenues for further research.

Chapter V: Conclusion

This thesis reveals that existing theories fail to explain why the U.S. offered nuclear assistance to France in 1970. Arguments that contend that states are driven to provide nuclear assistance to an ally by economic profit and security motives do not find strong support in the empirical evidence. I demonstrate that in order to explain the shift in U.S. nuclear assistance to France, one must look and consider the broader political context of U.S. foreign policy decision-making. Overall, the picture we observe is one more of continuity from Eisenhower through Nixon than previously assumed. Despite shifts in the Soviet threat, NATO alliance, and nuclear nonproliferation norms, U.S. policymakers surprisingly and consistently demonstrated a willingness to offer nuclear assistance to France. In addition, the Nixon administration's decision to offer nuclear assistance to France was more cautious and careful than one might have imagined. These findings have implications for U.S. nuclear policy and potential research, which will be discussed below.

Implications for Nuclear Theories and Avenues for Future Research

The current conventional wisdom is that after a state successfully conducts its first nuclear test, it immediately poses significant threat to the security of the U.S. and its allies. Thus, inhibiting nuclear proliferation has been a critical and pertinent aspect of U.S. foreign policy since the Cold War. However, this notion has not always been the case. The U.S.-French nuclear assistance case challenges the traditional historiography on U.S. nuclear policy by revealing that a) the U.S. did not always condemn actions that would contribute to nuclear proliferation during the Cold War and b) the U.S. did not perceive the risks of nuclear proliferation to its allies to the same extent as unaligned and adversary states.

On a broader note, the thesis' analysis suggests that a state's decision to offer nuclear assistance is driven less by strategic concerns about the level of the threat in the international system or the state of alliance politics. However, the uniqueness of the U.S.-French nuclear assistance case raises three critical questions that should be explored in further research. First, it is worth testing the applicability of the political opportunism theory to other historic cases of nuclear assistance. Second, due to the limited access to archival sources, this thesis is unable to trace or track the debates that may have existed in different bureaucracies. Yet a plausible explanation to the U.S.-French case is that members of the Defense Department pushed for such initiative. Third, given that offering nuclear assistance inherently contributes to nuclear proliferation, it remains unclear what are the costs and consequences of a state offering nuclear assistance, and whether the extent and type of assistance generates different outcomes. Although the U.S.-French case did not spark any international backlash due to its secretive nature, critics have argued that the current civilian nuclear assistance program between the U.S. and India has undermined U.S. nonproliferation efforts and risks provoking an arms race in Asia. Given current weakened and tense U.S. relations with its allies that have expressed a desire for independent nuclear forces, such as South Korea and Japan, the theory of political opportunism may also shed light on when the U.S. may offer such security assistance. Therefore, scholars should further investigate these puzzles in order to refine and enrich our understanding of the dynamics of nuclear assistance in international politics.

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