

DEPARTMENT OF STATE

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Memorandum of Conversation

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Approved by White House
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DATE: December 4, 1962

4:30 p.m.
White House

SUBJECT: NATO; Nuclear Matters

PARTICIPANTS: The President
Per Haekkerup, Foreign Minister of Denmark
Count Kield Gustav Knuth-Winterfeldt, Ambassador of Denmark
William C. Burdett, Deputy Assistant Secretary, EUR

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- G/PM 15
- DOD/ISA 16
- Amembassy Oslo 17
- Amembassy Reykjavik 18
- Amembassy Copenhagen 19

DEC 29 1962

The President asked whether the Foreign Minister intended to attend the NATO Ministerial Meeting. The Foreign Minister replied affirmatively. The President dwelt upon the difficulties we were encountering in trying to convey to NATO our thinking about the need to build up conventional forces. Our NATO partners seemed to believe that our emphasis on this subject meant that we are unwilling to employ nuclear weapons. The President noted that a nuclear exchange would result in 300 million dead within 24 hours. This did not make nuclear weapons a very attractive alternative. With the existing economic strength in Europe combined with our own, we should be able to build up a conventional force which would provide us with a meaningful alternative. The Soviet Union would then have to go quite far before we would be obliged to reply with nuclear weapons. The President pointed out that the Cuban crisis illustrated the importance of conventional forces. In the Caribbean area we were clearly superior in conventional forces. The Soviets backed down because they would have been obliged to resort to nuclear weapons first. It would be horrible to face the choice of seeing Europe overrun or resorting to nuclear weapons.

The Foreign Minister pointed out that Denmark had recently increased its defense budget. He realized that Denmark was doing little - compared

SECRET

-2-

compared to other NATO countries. However, one had to take into account Denmark's neutralist tradition. Considered in this light, he thought his country had made considerable progress. Thanks to its own efforts and generous help from the US, Denmark had created a certain force, although he realized it was not big enough to defend the country on its own. The Foreign Minister concluded that he was personally not satisfied with the extent of the Danish defense effort.

The President observed that it might in practice be impossible to build up sufficient conventional forces. NATO should decide, however, one way or another. If it were impossible, we should recognize this and stop talking about it because such talk might lessen the credibility of the nuclear deterrent. The President then commented on the poor equipment of one-half of the NATO divisions and on the flagging defense efforts of several countries. The Foreign Minister inquired whether the US planned to raise this subject at the NATO Ministerial Meeting. The President replied that we would be talking about it but again remarked that we had not had much success in putting our point of view across. He thought we should recognize that over the next eight years at least the Soviets would be constantly pushing us in one place or another.

Ambassador Knuth-Winterfeldt referred to Kissinger's book on tactical nuclear weapons. The President said that once one resorts to nuclear weapons one moves into a whole new world. There is no way to prevent escalation once the decision is made to employ nuclear weapons.

At another point in the conversation the President emphasized that we should concentrate on making the NATO Council as strong as it could be, and should include on it people who had real influence at home. The Council should concern itself more with economic and aid programs. It is not logical for the US to be asked to extend so much aid to Africa when Latin America is on the brink. The Foreign Minister said that the President was right but that Denmark found the consultations in the Council of great value. Those discussions provided it with information on the military and political thinking among the big powers. He doubted that it would be possible to go much further at present, and in this connection cited the French views.

-The President

SECRET

SECRET

-3-

The President asked whether Mr. Haekkerup thought Europe should have its own nuclear deterrent. From the point of view of logic there was no reason why the President of the United States should have the decision on whether to use nuclear weapons. History had given him this power. Does Europe want a nuclear force of its own, and if so, is it prepared to meet the high cost? We feel the present situation is satisfactory. The US is intimately tied into Europe. We think that if the USSR decided to attack it would strike us first. We do not see a strong need for a European nuclear force from a military point of view. The Foreign Minister replied that Denmark was quite satisfied with the present situation. It would not like to see any other countries become atomic powers. It was prepared to see the US retain the power and the responsibility. The President pointed out that if Europe acquired a nuclear force it must then decide who would give the order to fire. Ultimately this would come down to one man. The only real argument he saw for a European nuclear force is pressure from Germany. The Foreign Minister concurred, saying that this was the only argument which could convince Danish political parties. He did not know how strong the pressure was from Germany, especially since the departure of Strauss.

The President observed that Britain possesses nuclear weapons but this has not given it a greater political role. In fact, France now plays a larger role in Europe. Our position is that if Europe decides it wants a nuclear force and is prepared to pay the cost, we will support this and pay a part of the cost, even though we do not see a military need. There may be a political need. The President added that he had never agreed with General Norstad's concept of a land-based force. It would be better for the force to be at sea. The Foreign Minister said that he also would prefer a sea-borne force.

The President stated that we appreciated very much the assistance Denmark was extending to us by according facilities for such important installations as the Dew Line. The Foreign Minister replied that this was Denmark's contribution as a member of NATO.

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