

Correspondence

The United States and West Germany's Quest for Nuclear Weapons

Jonas Schneider
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To the Editors (Jonas Schneider writes):

In "Alliance Coercion and Nuclear Restraint," Gene Gerzhoy argues that the Lyndon Johnson administration used brute, coercive threats to obtain West Germany's signature to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT).¹ In particular, Gerzhoy asserts that in February 1968 the Johnson administration threatened to abandon West Germany militarily if it did not sign the NPT and, moreover, that these threats were instrumental in prodding German leaders toward accepting the treaty. Three pieces of evidence, however, show that this interpretation is inconsistent with the historical record.

First, contrary to Gerzhoy's claim, President Johnson's national security adviser, Walt Rostow, did not threaten West Germany's abandonment absent NPT accession in a conversation with Rainer Barzel, a senior lawmaker who had traveled to Washington as a personal envoy of Chancellor Kurt Georg Kiesinger to discuss the NPT. As evidence for a threat of abandonment Gerzhoy quotes Rostow as saying, "If you [i.e., Germany] would not sign [the NPT] and decided to defend yourself with your own nuclear weapons, you would a) tear apart the Alliance [and] b) face a very difficult period during which you might well be destroyed" (p. 123).² Importantly, this statement refers to a hypothetical scenario in which Bonn not only rejects NPT membership, but also undertakes to build a national nuclear force. Yet in 1968, the idea of a national West German nuclear force had been dropped for several years even by the fiercest German critics of the NPT. In terms of possible nuclear futures for Germany, the NPT debate in Bonn centered solely on whether West Germany could take part in a future multilateral European nuclear force. Even in this scenario, Germany would not have manufactured nuclear weapons, but would have only had a say in French decisions to employ nuclear weapons.³ Notably, Rostow was fully aware of these more limited nuclear goals. As he

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1. Gene Gerzhoy, "Alliance Coercion and Nuclear Restraint: How the United States Thwarted West Germany's Nuclear Ambitions," *International Security*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (Spring 2015), pp. 91–129. Subsequent references to this article appear parenthetically in the text.

2. Rostow-Barzel conversation, February 23, 1968, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968*, Vol. 15: *Germany and Berlin* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1999), p. 637.

3. See, for example, Daniela Taschler, *Vor neuen Herausforderungen: Die außen- und deutschlandpolitische Debatte in der CDU/CSU-Bundestagsfraktion während der Großen Koalition (1966–1969)* [Confronting new challenges: The Christian Democrats' debate on foreign and unification policy during the Grand Coalition, 1966–1969] (Düsseldorf: Droste, 2001); and Hans-Peter E. Hinrichsen,

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confided to Barzel in the same conversation, Rostow was “sure there is no group in Germany that wants to manufacture nuclear arms.”⁴ Against this backdrop, Rostow’s supposed threat appears to have been an offhand remark that was inconsequential to the true tenor of the two policymakers’ conversation: Rostow did not foresee a dissolution of the U.S.-German alliance as long as Bonn refrained from seeking a national nuclear force—a goal which, at that point, no German leader was pursuing.

Second, Gerzhoy’s interpretation that Rostow intentionally threatened Barzel with military abandonment if Bonn refused to join the NPT runs contrary to the Johnson administration’s strategy for obtaining West Germany’s signature to the treaty. As early as March 1967, President Johnson and Secretary of State Dean Rusk had made the strategic decision that the United States would seek to obtain West Germany’s consent to the NPT not through threats and strong-arm tactics, but solely, according to Rusk, through “patience, explanation, and friendly persuasion.”⁵ This approach is also reflected in how Glenn Seaborg, who had been closely involved in the Johnson White House’s policy on the NPT as chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission, described the administration’s approach to Bonn’s NPT accession. According to Seaborg, when it came to the NPT, “there was a great reluctance in the administration, from President Johnson on down, to treat the Germans other than with kid gloves.”⁶

Third, and most important, there is no evidence that even a single West German decisionmaker felt coerced by what Rostow had said to Barzel in February 1968. In fact, Barzel’s trip to Washington had been top secret, so the vast majority of political leaders in Bonn were unaware of Rostow’s statement. After meeting Rostow, Barzel wrote a two-page memorandum about the conversation and had a personal aide deliver it to Chancellor Kiesinger, thus keeping even the German embassy and the foreign ministry out of the loop. Crucially, in this highly confidential memorandum Barzel did not hint at any U.S. effort to push him to obtain West Germany’s signature on the NPT, let alone detail any threats to terminate the alliance. Rather, Barzel reported proudly that he had “strongly impressed” Rostow with Bonn’s firm conditions for joining the NPT.⁷ Even Barzel’s handwritten notes about the meeting contain no hint at U.S. pressure.⁸ Consequently, there is nothing to suggest that Barzel felt threatened by what Rostow had told him in Washington. Moreover, the moderate tone of Barzel’s report suggests that

Der Ratgeber: Kurt Birrenbach und die Außenpolitik der Bundesrepublik Deutschland [The adviser: Kurt Birrenbach and the foreign policy of the Federal Republic of Germany] (Berlin: VWF, 2002).

4. Rostow-Barzel conversation, February 23, 1968, p. 633.

5. This quotation is from a letter to William C. Foster, director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, from Secretary of State Rusk. Quoted in Makreeta Lahti, “Security Cooperation as a Way to Stop the Spread of Nuclear Weapons? Nuclear Nonproliferation Policies of the United States toward the Federal Republic of Germany and Israel, 1945–1968,” Ph.D. dissertation, University of Potsdam, 2008, p. 334.

6. Glenn T. Seaborg, *Stemming the Tide: Arms Control in the Johnson Years* (Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath, 1987), p. 300.

7. Letter to Kiesinger from Barzel, February 23, 1968, Kurt Georg Kiesinger Papers, Archiv für Christlich-Demokratische Politik, St. Augustin, Germany, I-226/2.

8. Handwritten notes by Barzel, nd., Rainer Barzel Papers, Bundesarchiv, Koblenz, Germany, NL 1371/74.

Kiesinger could not have felt threatened by Rostow's words. Finally, even apart from this particular episode, ample evidence indicates that leaders in Bonn did not feel threatened by Washington over the NPT.⁹

In sum, instead of facing overt U.S. threats, as Gerzhoy asserts, West German decisionmakers confronted a more benign situation: Rostow did not threaten Barzel with the abandonment of West Germany over the NPT; the Johnson administration's overall strategy toward obtaining Bonn's approval of the treaty did not involve coercive threats; and West German leaders did not feel threatened at all by Washington toward consenting to the NPT.

—Jonas Schneider
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Gene Gerzhoy Replies:

Jonas Schneider raises three objections to the argument that U.S. coercive pressure contributed to West Germany's signing of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT): (1) that U.S. coercive threats were linked to German acquisition of nuclear weapons, not to Bonn's refusal to sign the NPT; (2) that the Johnson administration refrained from coercion to obtain German adherence to the treaty; and (3) that German leaders did not feel coerced over the NPT.¹ While challenging and thought-provoking, Schneider's arguments do not stand up to closer scrutiny.

Schneider's first argument overlooks the close link in the minds of U.S. officials between the signature of the NPT by the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and the country's nuclear intentions. In January 1968, U.S. Ambassador George McGhee telegraphed the State Department with a leaked account of a German National Defense Council meeting, during which Finance Minister Franz Josef Strauss stated that Germany "should not box itself in" with the NPT because "Europe could not afford to be left without a nuclear defense."² From the U.S. perspective, the NPT did not forbid the nuclear option for a future United Europe. Accordingly, U.S. officials saw German non-signature of the treaty as a signal of potential weapons ambitions. As Secretary of State Dean Rusk told Strauss, "If the FRG did not sign [the NPT], they would still be open to accusations" about their nuclear weapons intentions. Furthermore, Rusk noted, these accusations would "not just come from the East but from the

9. For numerous private statements of German policymakers from all parties that explicitly deny any coercive U.S. pressure over the NPT, see Jonas Schneider, *Amerikanische Allianzen und nukleare Nichtverbreitung: Die Beendigung von Kernwaffenaktivitäten bei Verbündeten der USA* [American alliances and nuclear reversal: Why U.S. allies abandon their nuclear weapons activities] (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2016), pp. 137–170.

1. Gene Gerzhoy, "Alliance Coercion and Nuclear Restraint: How the United States Thwarted West Germany's Nuclear Ambitions," *International Security*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (Spring 2015), pp. 91–129.

2. McGhee to Rusk, January 23, 1968, National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book, doc. 10, <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/nukevault/ebb253/doc10a.pdf>.

West."³ Walt Rostow's threat of abandonment, which connected non-signature of the NPT with German pursuit of nuclear weapons, reflected the perceived linkage between the two.

Second, Schneider's contention that the Johnson administration was reluctant to use coercive pressure raises the question of why Rostow would employ an explicit threat while discussing the NPT with a senior West German envoy. Evidence suggests that Rostow's threat was not made as an "offhand remark," but rather reflected earlier high-level deliberations about how to manage German nuclear weapons ambitions. Specifically, in 1965 the final report of the Gilpatric Committee on Nuclear Proliferation stated that "it could be made clear to the Germans that the maintenance of United States forces in Germany would be inconsistent with [its] independent possession of nuclear weapons."⁴ In light of the perceived implications of German refusal to sign the NPT, senior Johnson administration officials were evidently willing to accompany reassurances and persuasion with coercive pressure.

Third, that Rainer Barzel did not inform Chancellor Kurt Georg Kiesinger of Rostow's threat is unsurprising, given that Kiesinger had already privately acquiesced to the treaty. Rostow's threat was more likely aimed at Strauss. Nevertheless, Kiesinger's reluctant assent is difficult to explain without reference to U.S. pressure. In early 1967, Kiesinger had publicly decried the NPT as an act of "atomic complicity"; informed the United States that the NPT was a Soviet plot to "keep Germany down";⁵ and told French President Charles de Gaulle that Germany would "not sign it."⁶ Yet by the following year, Kiesinger had privately expressed his intention to prove that the FRG "is a good ally," and not to "stand in the way" of the NPT.⁷ Kiesinger's reversal is unlikely to have resulted from domestic pressure; as a November 1967 report to Rostow stated, "[A]mong the 50 or 60 top politicians and officials [in Germany], there is not one who supports the NPT."⁸ It is more likely that Kiesinger understood that as a militarily dependent nation, Germany could not oppose the NPT in the face of heavy U.S. pressure, particularly when senior U.S. officials had stated that non-signature would expose the FRG to "accusations" of military intent. Accordingly, while U.S. assurances and consultations regarding the treaty were doubtless important, Schneider underestimates the role of explicit and implicit U.S. pressure in explaining Germany's begrudging adherence to the NPT.

—Gene Gerzhoy
Washington, D.C.

3. Memorandum of Conversation, July 23, 1968, *Foreign Relations of the United States* [FRUS], 1964–1968, Vol. 11: *Arms Control and Disarmament* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office [GPO], 1997), doc. 259.

4. "A Report to the President by the Committee on Nuclear Proliferation," January 21, 1965, *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. 11, doc. 64.

5. Rostow to Johnson, March 6, 1967, *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. 13: *Western Europe Region* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1995), doc. 239.

6. Francis J. Gavin, *Nuclear Statecraft: History and Strategy in America's Atomic Age* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2012), p. 97.

7. McGhee to Rusk.

8. Fried to Rostow, November 3, 1967, *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. 11, doc. 235.