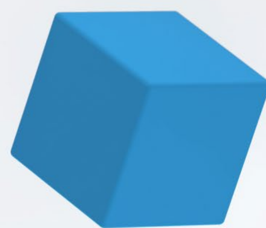
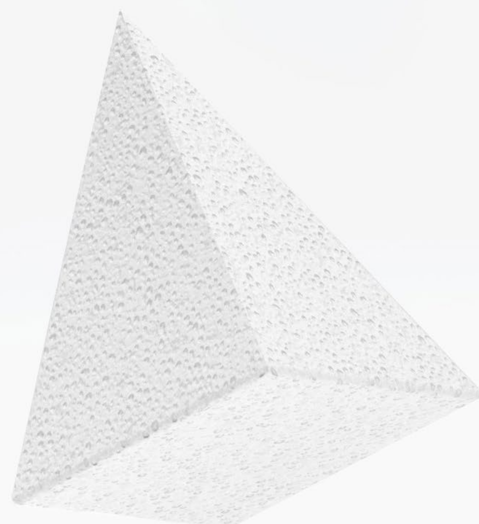
Stuck Onshore: Why the United States Failed to Retrench from Europe during the Early Cold War





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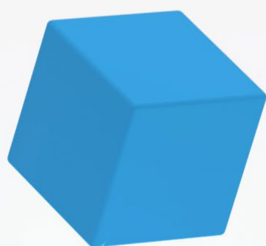


A growing number of scholars and policymakers are showing interest in a grand strategy that calls on the United States to retrench from key global regions while devolving the burden of checking the expansion of hegemonic aspirants to local allies. I highlight the military vulnerability of allies as an underappreciated variable that can compromise the leading power's efforts to phase out of an "onshore" military role. The regional great-power adversary is unlikely to sit idly by while a weaker neighbor converts its material resources into new military capabilities with the faraway leading power's sponsorship. Instead, it will be tempted to forcefully nip the neighbor's militarization in the bud. Insofar as allies are sensitive to the risks of incurring costly preventive aggression, they have incentives to undermine the leading power's efforts to build up their combined military strength as a substitute for the forces it currently has stationed in the region. Using a wide range of primary and secondary sources, I trace the process by which American plans to retrench from Europe were frustrated in the first decade of the Cold War, finding powerful support for my argument. This analysis suggests lessons for the debate on whether the United States could pursue an orderly military withdrawal from Europe and East Asia.

Can the United States check the expansion of powerful adversaries in distant regions while shedding the military and political costs of doing so? An influential group of intellectuals argues that the answer is a resounding "yes." Although the United States holds a vital interest in thwarting the rise of a peer competitor in Europe or Asia, their argument runs, it could achieve this aim on the cheap by devolving the task to regional allies and withdrawing its military commitments. As Christopher Layne argues, when U.S. allies are no longer able to "free ride on the back of U.S. security guarantees," they will surely "step up to the plate and balance against a powerful, expansionist state in their own neighborhood." This is eminently feasible, the analysis continues, since allies such as Germany, France, Japan, and South Korea are among the richest and most technologically advanced countries in the world and could surely acquire the military wherewithal to check aspiring hegemons if they chose to do so.[1] Some of the most prominent international relations scholars in American academia have long voiced support for adopting this grand strategy of retrenchment in key regions.[2] They have been joined by a chorus of sympathetic policymakers and

1 See Christopher Layne, *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007), esp. chap. 8 (quotes from 170, 181).

2 In the U.S. grand strategy debate, this strategic orientation approximates the ideal-type strategies of "restraint" and "offshore balancing." Strictly speaking, restraint and offshore balancing are distinct grand strategies, departing primarily in how sanguine they are about the likelihood that a hostile Eurasian hegemon will emerge to jeopardize vital U.S. interests. That said, the two strategies are united in the idea that the United States could normally rely on regional balancing dynamics to thwart the rise of such powers, and many scholars treat them as variations of the same strategy when comparing broad grand strategic alternatives. For example, see Emma Ashford, "Strategies of Restraint: Remaking America's Broken Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs* 100, no. 5 (September/October 2021): 128–41; and Paul C. Avey, Jonathan N. Markowitz, and Robert J. Reardon, "Disentangling Grand Strategy: International Relations Theory and U.S. Grand Strategy," *Texas National Security Review* 2, no. 1 (November 2018): 28–51, https://tnsr.org/2018/11/disentangling-grand-strategy-international-relations-theory-and-u-s-grand-strategy/. Following van Hooft, I use "retrenchment" to refer to the strategic vision espoused by these ideal-type strategies, with the caveat that it might be useful to distinguish the two for some analytical purposes. See Paul van Hooft, "All-In or All-Out: Why Insularity Pushes and Pulls American Grand Strategy to Extremes," *Security Studies* 29, no. 4 (2020): 701–29, https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2020.1811461. On offshore balancing, see John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, "The Case for Offshore Balancing," *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 4 (July/August 2016): 70–83, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2016-06-13/case-offshore-balancing. On restraint, see Eugene Gholz, Daryl G. Press, and Harvey M. Sapolsky, "Come Home, America: The Strategy of Restraint in the Face of Temptation," *International Security* 21, no. 4 (Spring 1997): 5–48; and Barry R. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014).

think tanks in recent years, representing an "alliance of domestic libertarians, balance-of-power realists and the anti-imperialist liberal left" disillusioned with the excesses of U.S. foreign policy in the post–Cold War era. As Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry observe, the "restraint-realists" have thereby secured "the resources to weigh in assertively and authoritatively on American foreign-policy choices" over the coming decades.[3]

One historical episode that has received scant attention in the growing debate on retrenchment is America's failed attempt to pull its troops out of Western Europe during the first decade of the Cold War. The overarching ambition of successive U.S. administrations during this period was to build up core European allies — particularly France and the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany) — into a "solid power mass" that could independently stand up to the Soviet threat, the realization of which would obviate the need for an American military presence on the continent.[4] This has been uncontroversial among specialists of the early Cold War for some time now. As Marc Trachtenberg writes, "The intensity and persistence of America's desire to pull out as soon as she reasonably could" from Europe "comes through with unmistakable clarity" in the primary documents of this period, including declassified minutes and memoranda, Congressional records, and the private musings of top decision-makers found in diary entries and memoirs.[5] Michael Creswell likewise notes that "a supranational European army led by French and German ground forces" replacing the American troop presence on the continent was "the projected backbone of U.S. national security policy for Western Europe" during the Cold War's initial decade.[6] However, few international relations scholars have attempted to mine this case for theoretical insights on grand strategic retrenchment. This neglect reflects the assumption — widespread even among chief retrenchment advocates — that early Cold War Europe represents a clear-cut case in which orderly U.S. retrenchment was infeasible due to the overwhelming material inferiority of the Western European (NATO) allies vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. In the words of Eugene Gholz, Daryl Press, and Harvey Sapolsky, "The Soviet Union could have driven [the European allies] into bankruptcy" had the United States evacuated the continent.[7]

This article reappraises Washington's failure to retrench from Western Europe during the early Cold War from a new theoretical angle. It highlights the *military vulnerability* of local allies as an underappreciated variable that can compromise a leading great power's efforts to withdraw from a key global region in an orderly fashion, as prescribed by the grand strategy of retrenchment. The strategy assumes the presence of friendly local powers that could, in due time, collectively generate the military capabilities needed to check the expansion of a hostile great-power adversary without the leading power's direct involvement. But the adversary is unlikely to sit idly by while a weaker neighboring state converts its material resources into new military capabilities with the leading power's sponsorship. Instead, it will be tempted to take forceful measures to nip the ally's militarization in the bud. Insofar as regional allies understand how vulnerable they are to the risks of costly preventive aggression, they will go to great lengths to frustrate the leading power's efforts to build up their combined military strength as a substitute for its "onshore" capabilities.

I use this theory to explain why the United States ended up in what President Dwight D. Eisenhower lamented was "a greater position of responsibility than was necessary" in Europe during the early Cold War despite its determination for grand strategic retrenchment.[8] Contrary to some popular accounts, the chief inhibition European allies faced in becoming an independent counterweight to Soviet power was not grounded in a fundamental material dearth or an inclination to "cheap-ride" on U.S. security

3 Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, "Misplaced Restraint: The Quincy Coalition Versus Liberal Internationalism," *Survival* 63, no. 4 (2021): 8–9, https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2021.1956187.

4 "Memorandum of Discussion at the 267th Meeting of the National Security Council," November 21, 1955, *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) 1955–1957, National Security Policy*, vol. 14 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1990), 150.

5 Marc Trachtenberg, *History and Strategy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 167.

6 Michael Creswell, "Between the Bear and the Phoenix: The United States and the European Defense Community, 1950–54," *Security Studies* 11, no. 4 (Summer 2002): 89. See also Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945–1963* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), esp. chap. 4; James McAllister, *No Exit: America and the German Problem, 1943–1954* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002); Mark S. Sheetz, "Exit Strategies: American Grand Designs for Postwar European Security," *Security Studies* 8, no. 4 (Summer 1999): 1–43; and Michael Creswell, "With a Little Help from Our Friends: How France Secured an Anglo-American Continental Commitment, 1945–54," *Cold War History* 3, no. 1 (October 2002): 1–28. To my knowledge, only one serious scholar has tried to challenge this consensus among specialists. Christopher Layne argues that the United States pursued "extraregional hegemony" in Europe beginning in World War II, and that U.S. leaders "had zero intention of allowing Western Europe to become a truly autonomous pole of power in the international system." Layne, *Peace of Illusions*, 196–97. In my view, the archival material and historiography available today make this argument virtually impossible to defend.

7 Gholz, Press, and Sapolsky, "Come Home, America," 47.

8 "Memorandum of Discussion at the 424th Meeting of the National Security Council," November 12, 1959, *FRUS 1958–1960, Western European Integration and Security, Canada*, vol. 7, pt. 1 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1993), 509.

largesse.[9] Instead, West Germany's vulnerability to Soviet preventive aggression — and the behavior that U.S. allies adopted in view of this vulnerability — played a key role in undermining Washington's retrenchment plans. Several historians have documented how heavily this concern weighed in the minds of early Cold War decision-makers.[10]

The present study brings this empirical material to bear on theoretical debates surrounding grand strategic retrenchment and the possibility of new security arrangements in Western Europe and East Asia. Its findings help refine our understanding of the conditions under which a leading great power might be able to retrench from strategically vital regions. As historian Hal Brands writes, "the greatest risk" inherent in a grand strategy of retrenchment is that "a key region might not be able to maintain its own balance following U.S. retrenchment."[11] Modern advocates of retrenchment have taken this insight to heart, arguing that the risks of retrenchment can be mitigated by grooming regional allies into independent poles of military power ahead of the pullout. I posit, however, that the threat of preventive aggression against vulnerable allies may impose stark limits on how far this grooming can proceed. Thus, even materially abundant allies may fail to accommodate the military capabilities needed to enable orderly retrenchment.

Grappling with this insight can help scholars get a better sense of what might become of U.S. efforts at grand strategic retrenchment in the 21st century. In important ways, contemporary arguments about U.S. retrenchment from key regions mirror those made by American decision-makers in the immediate postwar period: The common assumption is that retrenchment should be feasible inasmuch as local allies have the economic and technological capacity to develop military capabilities that could substitute for those provided by the leading power. Following this criterion, many proponents of retrenchment argue that the grand strategic shift can be implemented in virtually every key global region of the 21st century.[12] But as I detail in the concluding section, taking the risks of preventive aggression into account complicates this picture.

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows. I begin by clarifying the assumptions and prescriptions of the retrenchment grand strategy in its standard formulation. Next, I explain how the risk of preventive aggression against vulnerable local allies can derail the leading power's efforts to devolve military capabilities and tasks to the region — a prerequisite for orderly retrenchment. I then use the theory to narrate the outcome of U.S. efforts at grand strategic retrenchment from Western Europe in the first decade of the Cold War, comparing its explanatory power against important alternative arguments. I conclude with takeaways for the contemporary U.S. grand strategy debate: While Europe remains a good candidate for U.S. military retrenchment, East Asia portends more uncertainties.

Grand Strategic Retrenchment: Counterhegemonic Objectives, Devolutionary Policies

Grand strategy is a deductive framework that identifies the state's fundamental security objectives in a given corner of the globe and prescribes the military means required to achieve them. In a nutshell, the "political-military means-end chain" envisioned by advocates of grand strategic retrenchment calls for the United States to prevent the rise of a regional hegemon on the Eurasian continent (i.e., the "end") by supporting and relying on the military efforts of local powers (i.e., the "means").[13] Below I describe each of these elements in turn.

Retrenchment strategists largely agree that the paramount objective of U.S. extraregional security policy should be to prevent the consolidation of one or more of Eurasia's major industrial and population centers — Western Europe and East Asia in particular — by a rival great power. The central concern is that a hostile state could amass enough power to "either mount an attack across the oceans or threaten U.S. prosperity by denying America access to the global economy."[14] Either event would undermine the security the United States has traditionally enjoyed by virtue of its isolated geographic location — buffered by vast oceans on both sides — and regional military primacy. One scholar goes as far as to argue that

9 On cheap-riding, see Posen, *Restraint*, 35–44.

10 See, in particular, Michael Creswell, *A Question of Balance: How France and the United States Created Cold War Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); Michael Creswell and Marc Trachtenberg, "France and the German Question, 1945–1955," *Journal of Cold War Studies 5*, no. 3 (Summer 2003): 5–29; and Marc Trachtenberg and Christopher Gehrz, "America, Europe, and German Rearmament, August–September 1950," *Journal of European Integration History* 6, no. 2 (2000): 9–36.

11 Hal Brands, "Fools Rush Out? The Flawed Logic of Offshore Balancing," *Washington Quarterly* 38, no. 2 (2015): 21, https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2015.1064705.

12 For a review, see Miranda Priebe et al., *Implementing Restraint: Changes in U.S. Regional Security Policies to Operationalize a Realist Grand Strategy of Restraint* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2021).

13 On grand strategy as a "political-military means-end chain," see Barry R. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany between the World Wars* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), 13.

14 Gholz, Press, and Sapolsky, "Come Home, America," 46.

"the *only* American strategic interest at stake" outside the Western hemisphere "is preventing the emergence of a Eurasian hegemon."[15]

If America's faraway allies have the material potential to check hegemonic threats in their neighborhoods, why do they often seem reluctant to do so? According to leading retrenchment scholars, the answer is that the United States undercuts allied incentives to militarize by coddling them with its security guarantees.

At the same time, retrenchment strategists argue that the United States should strive to achieve this goal by devolving counterhegemonic tasks to local allies and retrenching to an "offshore" military position. As Paul MacDonald and Joseph Parent observe, the core logic that undergirds this prescription is "solvency." Overextending military commitments abroad is a recipe for slowed economic growth and hastened decline. A great power can thus improve its economic and political vitality by "paring back military expenditures, avoiding costly conflicts, and shifting burdens onto others."[16] Barry Posen further points out that even great powers that are not suffering from acute relative decline are susceptible to a long and agonizing "death of a thousand cuts" if they maintain costly military commitments beyond what is essential for their vital security interests.[17] Applied to the U.S. case, a successful strategy of retrenchment should allow America to husband its power resources while upholding the objective of preventing the rise of a regional hegemon in Europe or East Asia.

Importantly, retrenchment advocates are sanguine that such a strategy will succeed. The key reason has to do with regional powers that have ample incentive and ability to check threats of hegemony in their neighborhood. In the most systematic study of great-power retrenchment to date, MacDonald and Parent argue that retrenchment is more likely to succeed, among other things, when a great power "can retract its forces and hand over responsibilities for maintaining the status quo to capable allies."[18] Other scholars have similarly identified the availability of potential "buck-catchers" or "successor states" as a crucial prerequisite for successful retrenchment.[19] Embracing this insight, Gholz, Press, and Sapolsky maintain that the smaller states of Europe and Asia are more than capable of balancing against aspiring hegemons in their region with minimal U.S. involvement. In East Asia, for example, one would need to make "astounding assumptions" about the military potential of prosperous countries like Japan and South Korea vis-à-vis their nearby adversaries to justify an indefinite heavy-lifting role for the United States in their security affairs.[20] Layne likewise observes that "in World War II's immediate aftermath, it made sense for the United States to allow [allies in key regions] to shelter *temporarily* under its strategic umbrella while they got back on their feet," but today, "Western Europe, Japan, and South Korea ... have the economic and technological wherewithal to provide fully for their security."[21]

If America's faraway allies have the material potential to check hegemonic threats in their neighborhoods, why do they often seem reluctant to do so? According to leading retrenchment scholars, the answer is that the United States undercuts allied incentives to militarize by coddling them with its security guarantees. Gholz and colleagues argue that "America's alliances reduce the strategic risks that its allies face and, therefore, eliminate their need to engage in internal balancing."[22] Posen likewise holds that "[m]any middle and small powers 'cheap ride' on the U.S. security effort and underspend on defense because the United States seems very willing to carry the burden of securing them against their regional adversaries." The problem, in short, boils

15 Layne, *Peace of Illusions*, 160 (emphasis in original). See also Posen, *Restraint*, 70–71; Nicholas John Spykman, *The Geography of the Peace*, introduction by Frederick Sherwood Dunn, ed. Helen R. Nicholl (1944; repr., Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1969); John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), chap. 7; and Sebastian Rosato and John Schuessler, "A Realist Foreign Policy for the United States," *Perspectives on Politics* 9, no. 4 (December 2011): 803–19, https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/perspectives-on-politics/article/abs/realist-foreign-policy-for-the-united-states/AF0AF37406D1D2D297B815752AA95FBE.

16 Paul K. MacDonald and Joseph M. Parent, "Graceful Decline? The Surprising Success of Great Power Retrenchment," *International Security* 35, no. 4 (Spring 2011): 19, https://direct.mit.edu/isec/article-abstract/35/4/7/12010/Graceful-Decline-The-Surprising-Success-of-Great?redirectedFrom=fulltext. See also Paul K. MacDonald and Joseph M. Parent, *Twilight of the Titans: Great Power Decline and Retrenchment* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018).

17 Posen, *Restraint*, 175.

18 MacDonald and Parent, *Twilight of the Titans*, 38.

19 See Mearsheimer, *Tragedy*, 269–72; Layne, *Peace of Illusions*, 25; and Kyle Haynes, "Decline and Devolution: The Sources of Strategic Military Retrenchment," *International Studies Quarterly* 59, no. 2 (September 2015): 492, https://www.jstor.org/stable/43868289.

20 Gholz, Press, and Sapolsky, "Come Home, America," 20.

21 Layne, *Peace of Illusions*, 169 (emphasis in original).

22 Gholz, Press, and Sapolsky, "Come Home, America," 16.

down to the fact that the United States is an excessively "good ally"[23] that doles out what amounts to "welfare for the rich."[24]

Note that, in this standard formulation of the retrenchment strategy, the chief hurdle to relieving the burden of checking expansionist powers in distant regions arises *endogenously* within the U.S.-led alliance system. It is the perverse allied incentives produced by the U.S. obsession with being a "good ally" that inhibits the operation of regional balance of power dynamics. Washington could thus go a long way toward successfully offloading its military responsibilities by explicitly bespeaking withdrawal in a not-too-distant future while sponsoring the growth of independent military capabilities among its regional allies.[25] As I elaborate below, U.S. leaders unambiguously embraced the core assumptions and policy prescriptions of the retrenchment strategy in their early Cold War dealings with Western Europe. Why did they fail to achieve the goal of retrenchment?

How Allied Military Vulnerability Can Derail Retrenchment

I posit that the military vulnerability of key local allies sometimes imposes *exogenous* constraints on their ability to accommodate the prescriptions of an extraregional leading power's retrenchment strategy. Contrary to claims about "cheap riding," allies that reside in a high-threat environment have baseline incentives to cooperate with the leading power when it offers to help them become militarily powerful and independent. Given the uncertainty endemic to the international system, most states understand they would ultimately be better off acquiring the capabilities needed to practice military self-help.[26] However, unlike the leading great power, who can contemplate a serious fight against any state in the international system,[27] weaker allies must often worry a great deal about the risks that attend their militarization efforts. These risks are grounded in the ally's military vulnerability, defined by its susceptibility to costly military predation.

Preventive Risks, Geography, and the Opportunity to Militarize

Assessments of military vulnerability matter tremendously for smaller allies facing a great-power adversary in their vicinity, primarily due to the understanding that their efforts to gain military advantages might stoke the adversary's incentives for preventive aggression. The fundamental problem for the ally is the "nonnegligible period of time between the decision to invest [in additional military capabilities] and the moment these capabilities become available."[28] Following Charles Glaser, it is important to distinguish between the *material resources* a state can potentially mobilize for military use — e.g., wealth, population, and technology — and its *military capabilities*, that is, the forces it currently has available to carry out military missions against the adversary.[29] A state that is abundantly endowed in material resources may still be militarily weak and vulnerable if it has yet to fully translate its resources into assets that can shape results in battle. This effort is bound to take time.[30] During the interval, the adversary is likely to seriously consider using force to arrest the ally's moves to bolster its military capabilities.[31] Such preventive countermeasures may include limited military actions that introduce the specter of catastrophic escalation, as well as full-scale invasions aimed at conquering the ally's territory or replacing its regime. A small power will only pursue the benefits of significantly augmented military capabilities if the risks of suffering unbearably costly prevention in the intervening period are deemed sufficiently low.

Smaller allies vary in how susceptible they are to the risk of preventive aggression based on their geographic location. All else equal, the fear of inviting a

23 Posen, *Restraint*, 14. This is an extension of the logic of Olsonian collective goods theory to the alliance setting. See Mancur Olson, Jr., and Richard Zeckhauser, "An Economic Theory of Alliances," *Review of Economics and Statistics* 48, no. 3 (August 1966): 266–79.

24 Barry R. Posen, "Pull Back: The Case for a Less Activist Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs* 92, no. 1 (January/February 2013): 121, https://www.jstor.org/stable/41721009.

25 Layne, *Peace of Illusions*, 189.

26 On this point, see Avery Goldstein, "Discounting the Free Ride: Alliances and Security in the Postwar World," *International Organization* 49, no. 1 (Winter 1995): 39–71; and Joseph M. Parent and Sebastian Rosato, "Balancing in Neorealism," *International Security* 40, no. 2 (Fall 2015): 51–86, https://www.jstor.org/stable/43828295.

27 Mearsheimer, *Tragedy*, 32–36.

28 Alexandre Debs and Nuno P. Monteiro, "Known Unknowns: Power Shifts, Uncertainty, and War," *International Organization* 68, no. 1 (January 2014): 6.

29 Charles L. Glaser, *Rational Theory of International Politics: The Logic of Competition and Cooperation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 41–42.

30 This is especially true given the financial, organizational, and political hurdles states routinely face in adopting new military capabilities. On the first two hurdles, see Michael C. Horowitz, *The Diffusion of Military Power: Causes and Consequences for International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010). A classic study of the political hurdle is Fareed Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power: The Unusual Origins of America's World Role* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998).

31 Glaser, *Rational Theory*, 62.

devastating preventive attack — or sparking a crisis that might culminate in such a disaster — is especially acute for allies located in closer proximity to the great power adversary. The assumption of the "primacy of land power" in international politics suggests that the adversary should be extremely sensitive to the adverse implications of a geographically proximate neighbor's militarization.[32] Meanwhile, the same proximity increases the likelihood that the adversary's preventive strike will succeed. Not only does the adversary then encounter lower physical barriers to aggression, but it can also more easily deploy capabilities that blunt the leading power's ability to militarily intervene on behalf of its frontline ally. Therefore, even when they enjoy the formal protection of a great power, some weak states cannot rule out the possibility that their hostile neighbor might attempt a swift, decisive attack in the hope of presenting their patron with a fait accompli.[33] This dampens the incentives states normally have for maximizing their military competitiveness. It is not necessarily the case that these states lack the *preference* for military self-help. Nor do they lack the material base that would allow them to acquire the capabilities needed to achieve this, provided their buildup is allowed to run its course. Instead, frontline allies are often denied the *opportunity* to engage in a full-fledged military buildup. Their efforts to actualize their latent capabilities are likely to invite preventive countermeasures from the great power adversary that leave them worse off than they would have been otherwise.[34]

By contrast, even weak states may conclude that they possess sufficient leeway to compete effectively against the adversary when they are relatively insulated from its land power by a robust territorial or maritime buffer. These states are well positioned to take advantage of the leading power's devolutionary efforts to pursue military self-help. At the same time, however, they may be wary of the likelihood that the same policies could trigger preventive aggression when extended to a frontline ally in their vicinity, particularly if the frontline ally's territory is functioning as the buffer that insulates them from the adversary's military forces. In essence, geographically privileged allies fear that *they* will become the frontline ally should the unfortunate incumbent — i.e., the "buffer state" — succumb to the adversary's preventive aggression.[35]

When push comes to shove, the allies cannot afford to privilege the leading power's strategic preferences over the realities of their local security environment.

Therefore, while proceeding with its own military buildup, a relatively privileged ally may have incentives to spoil the leading power's efforts to militarize its frontline neighbor. Such an ally should be mindful of the fact that an alliance that depends on the frontline state's military capabilities will significantly increase the adversary's incentives for preventive aggression. Following the logic of the security dilemma, such a situation lowers "offense-defense distinguishability" for the adversary because neighboring states often find their security interests "hard[er] to mesh" — military actions meant to defend core territorial interests tend to take on offensive characteristics when viewed from the other side. The security dilemma thus intensifies.[36] By contrast, as John Schuessler, Joshua Shifrinson, and David Blagden argue, the insular position of the leading power vis-à-vis the region in question "sterilizes" its immense power from the perspective of local actors, including the adversary.[37] It follows that alliance efforts centered on the offshore leading power's military dominance is less likely to trigger preventive aggression than autonomous militarization by local powers.[38] To the extent they understand this dynamic, allies have incentives to frustrate and delay the implementation

32 See Mearsheimer, *Tragedy*, chap. 4.

33 See Dan Altman, "By Fait Accompli, Not Coercion: How States Wrest Territory from Their Adversaries," *International Studies Quarterly* 61, no. 4 (December 2017): 881–91, https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqx049.

34 A key assumption here is that the frontline ally's material potential is such that translating it into concomitant military capabilities would portend a sizable negative power shift from the perspective of the adversary. On the importance of the magnitude of the power shift, see Brett V. Benson and Bradley C. Smith, "Commitment Problems in Alliance Formation," *American Journal of Political Science* 67, no. 4 (October 2023): 1012-25.

35 On the importance of buffer states for the security of states involved in international rivalry, see Tanisha M. Fazal, *State Death: The Politics and Geography of Conquest, Occupation, and Annexation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), esp. 38–42.

36 See Robert Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (January 1978): 167–214, and esp. the discussion on 183–86.

37 John M. Schuessler, Joshua Shifrinson, and David Blagden, "Revisiting Insularity and Expansion: A Theory Note," *Perspectives on Politics* 21, no. 4 (December 2023): 1308–9, https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/perspectives-on-politics/article/revisiting-insularity-and-expansion-a-theory-note/74790B104F0AE3ECBDD42098FB598139.

38 More generally, scholars have argued that states typically have fewer incentives to balance against disproportionately powerful powers that reside outside of their immediate "continental system." See Jack S. Levy and William R. Thompson, "Balancing on Land and at Sea: Do States Ally against the Leading Global Power?" *International Security* 35, no. 1 (Summer 2010): 7–43, https://www.jstor.org/stable/40784645.

of the leading power's retrenchment plans.[39]

In the ensuing bargain over the proper distribution of military effort, the security interests of the regional allies are likely to win out over the leading power's grand strategic preferences. The allies do risk being unilaterally abandoned if they fail to accommodate the leading power's demands on their collective capabilities. However, the risk of inviting unbearable punishment from the adversary is an even more salient concern in the near term. When push comes to shove, the allies cannot afford to privilege the leading power's strategic preferences over the realities of their local security environment. On the other hand, while the leading power prefers to check the adversary's power on the cheap by devolving the task to its allies, it can feasibly compromise on this preference when the alternative is to risk losing the vital region due to the shortfall in local military capabilities. This is thus a situation in which the "balance of interests" — the extent to which each side values its preferred bargaining outcome — is skewed in favor of the small local allies.[40] Accordingly, although allied efforts at foot-dragging may not fundamentally alter the leading power's desire to retrench, they could induce it to extend its military involvement in the region's security.

Allied Military Vulnerability and Retrenchment Outcomes

Figure 1 integrates the above insights into a model of leading power retrenchment outcomes. Borrowing Nina Silove's terms, allied military vulnerability complicates the leading power's efforts to translate its grand strategic "plans" into grand strategic "behavior."[41]

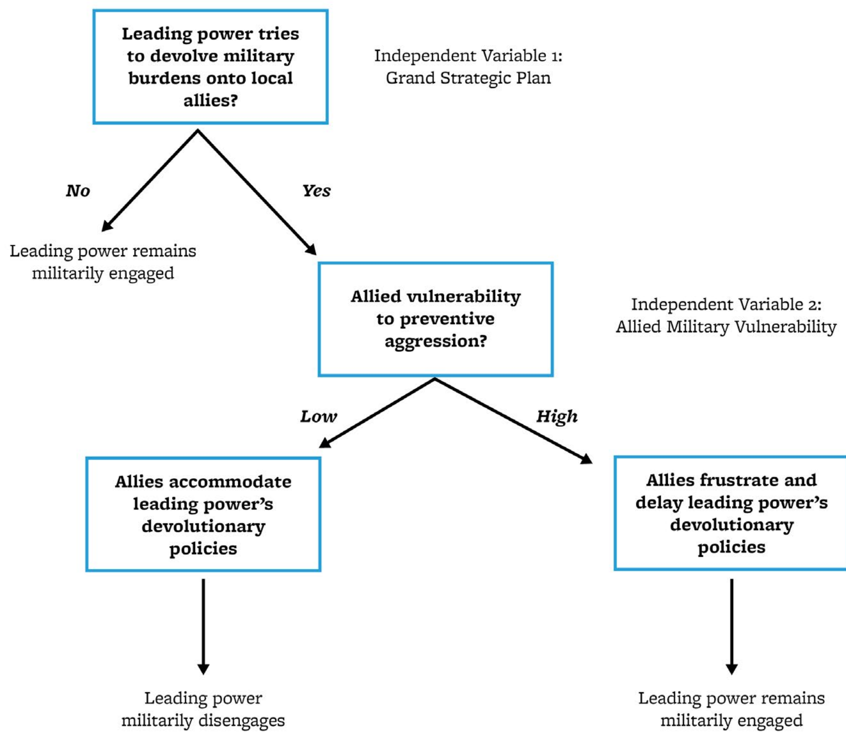


Figure 1: *Allied Military Vulnerability and the Outcomes of Leading Power Retrenchment Plans*

When allies understand that trying to build up the capabilities of a vulnerable state may trigger the adversary's preventive temptations, they will work together to maintain a regional security architecture in which the leading power plays a heavy-lifting "onshore" military role in lieu of a fully militarized frontline ally. With this alternative, they ensure the capabilities necessary to deter the adversary's expansion while taming its incentives to aggress in the near term. Importantly,

39 Lisa Koch elaborates the benefits of policies that frustrate or delay another state's ongoing strategic efforts, although her discussion focuses on the context of nuclear nonproliferation. See Lisa Langdon Koch, "Frustration and Delay: The Secondary Effects of Supply-Side Proliferation Controls," *Security Studies* 28, no. 4 (2019): 773–806, esp. 775–76, https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2019.1631383.

40 Glenn H. Snyder, *Alliance Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 170–72. Scholars noted that such situations were common during the Cold War. See, for example, Robert O. Keohane, "The Big Influence of Small Allies," *Foreign Policy*, no. 2 (Spring 1971): 161–82.

41 Nina Silove, "Beyond the Buzzword: The Three Meanings of 'Grand Strategy'," *Security Studies* 27, no. 1 (2018): 27–57, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09636412.2017.1360073.

insofar as core allies are unwilling to accept the risks of *collectively* pursuing a full-scale military buildup, and insofar as such collective militarization is necessary for the leading power to pursue retrenchment while checking the adversary's expansion, the leading power itself is likely to grudgingly settle on this alternative for the time being.

The chief obstacle to the full-scale allied military buildups that would allow for leading power retrenchment is *exogenous* to the alliance in this model. This distinguishes my logic from the argument typically found in the writings of retrenchment scholars, in which allies stop short of maximizing their military capabilities because they prefer to cheap-ride on the security largesse extended to them by the leading power.[42] In my framework, it is the specter of preventive aggression by the external adversary on the vulnerable ally that inhibits full-fledged militarization. In the counterfactual where all key allies are relatively invulnerable to military predation by the adversary in the near term, they would be much more likely to accommodate the leading power's devolutionary grand strategy and see it retrench into an offshore military posture.

Several clarifications are in order. First, some may argue that the leading power can shield the vulnerable frontline ally from the adversary's preventive aggression while it augments its capabilities, thereby allowing it to circumvent the risks of militarization. Often, however, there are limits to how much a leading power can assuage the concerns of vulnerable allies with its extended deterrence commitments. The problem is that the vulnerable ally's sheer exposure to the adversary's countermeasures often undermines the leading power's ability to reliably protect it. For example, China's growing anti-access/area denial capabilities in the western Pacific concern U.S. policymakers because they may render U.S. military intervention in the region prohibitively costly, particularly when it comes to smaller allies situated closer to the Chinese mainland (e.g., South Korea). When there is doubt about the level of capabilities the leading power could muster to defend the ally in a timely manner, signaling the "resolve" to do so may not do much good.[43] Nor will allies find it easy to believe that the faraway leading power's extended nuclear deterrence will reliably keep the adversary from acting against them, given that the adversary typically has more obvious stakes in local security dynamics than the leading power.[44] In short, the adversary's ability to punish its vulnerable neighbor's militarization attempt before the leading power can decisively intervene on its behalf can impart a relative fixity to the ally's military situation.

Second, it is worth pondering why the leading power would try to implement plans for military devolution and strategic retrenchment in the first place if the preventive dangers implied in the ally's vulnerability are so obvious. The answer is that there are inherent uncertainties surrounding estimates of just how vulnerable the ally is and how likely the adversary is to exploit this vulnerability. As Keir Lieber points out, military net assessment can at best identify a fuzzy "range of possible outcomes" that may follow an armed clash and depends critically on assumptions about "strategic wildcards" that cannot be fully apprehended prior to combat.[45] Even if all parties agree that a given ally is highly vulnerable, then, there is room for subjective judgment on how much risk the alliance can afford to take on—or should take on—in trying to build up its military capabilities. In statistical terms, a leading power strongly committed to a grand strategy of retrenchment will be tempted to work with "lower bound" estimates of the risks of preventive aggression, while local allies are likely to take "upper bound" estimates more seriously. Considerable time and political jockeying may thus be required for the alliance to settle the question of what the "goldilocks" level of militarization might be for the vulnerable ally.[46]

Research Design

I substantiate these arguments by process-tracing how American plans to retrench from Western Europe were foiled in the first decade of the Cold War.[47] I do not claim to offer a comprehensive or definitive

42 See, for example, Posen, *Restraint*, Olson and Zeckhauser, "Economic Theory of Alliances," and Gholz, Press, and Sapolsky, "Come Home, America," discussed above.

43 On this point, see Brian Blankenship and Erik Lin-Greenberg, "Trivial Tripwires? Military Capabilities and Alliance Reassurance," *Security Studies* 31, no. 1 (2022): 92–117; and Dan Reiter and Paul Poast, "The Truth about Tripwires: Why Small Force Deployments Do Not Deter Aggression," *Texas National Security Review* 4, no. 3 (Summer 2021): 33–53, https://tnsr.org/2021/06/the-truth-about-tripwires-why-small-force-deployments-do-not-deter-aggression/.

44 Contrary to traditional "nuclear revolution" arguments, recent research finds that it is quite difficult to reliably deter conventional aggression with nuclear retaliatory threats. See Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, *The Myth of the Nuclear Revolution: Power Politics in the Atomic Age* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020), esp. chap. 4.

45 Net assessment refers to the exercise of "analyzing the interaction of opposing forces in realistic battle scenarios in order to determine strategic vulnerabilities and opportunities against a given adversary in a given theater of operations." See Keir A. Lieber, "Mission Impossible: Measuring the Offense-Defense Balance with Military Net Assessment," *Security Studies* 20, no. 3 (2011): 454–55, https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2011.599193.

46 Lieber, "Mission Impossible," 456.

47 On process tracing, see Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), chap. 10.

account of this multi-faceted event.[48] Rather, my goal is to show that a theory centered on allied vulnerability to a nearby adversary's preventive threats illuminates critical aspects of the case that have been hitherto underappreciated by international relations scholars. This, in turn, offers new insights for the contemporary retrenchment debate.

By reexamining the case with this in mind, we can derive new insights about the conditions under which the United States might be able to successfully retrench from key regions in the modern era.

Indeed, this case is worth revisiting for the simple reason that it has been relatively neglected in the international relations literature on the retrenchment grand strategy. In my view, retrenchment theorists have been rather too quick to dismiss early Cold War Europe as a case that plausibly fits their scope conditions for successful retrenchment. Gholz, Press, and Sapolsky argue that "three stringent conditions" must be simultaneously satisfied to justify a large-scale commitment of U.S. military might in a distant region: (1) "an aggressive state must develop the conventional capabilities for rapid conquest of its neighbors"; (2) "the aggressor state must threaten to bring together enough power after its conquests to either mount an attack across the oceans or threaten U.S. prosperity by denying America access to the global economy"; and (3) "any potential aggressor must solve the 'nuclear problem' ... return[ing] the world to pre–World War II conditions in which hostile states could accumulate significant power through rapid conquest."[49] Western Europe between 1945 and 1955 met the first and second conditions but not the third, as the United States enjoyed nuclear superiority over the Soviet Union throughout this entire period.[50] Yet, as noted earlier, Gholz and colleagues take for granted that the Western European allies would not have been able to build the capabilities needed for autonomous defense, necessitating continued U.S. engagement.[51]

As I make clear below, U.S. policymakers in the early Cold War did not think this way. Not only did they believe the Europeans had the material potential to become militarily self-sufficient in the near future, but they also were willing to bet that America could exploit its nuclear superiority to shield the allies from Soviet preventive aggression while they translated their material resources into formidable military capabilities. They were also willing to issue extraordinarily heavy-handed threats of abandonment to get the Western European allies on board with this strategy — threats that were perceived as quite credible on the receiving end. Therefore, although underappreciated by most international relations scholars, America's sheer determination to withdraw from Europe coupled with the presence of materially abundant local allies should arguably make this an "easy" case for the grand strategy of retrenchment in its standard formulation. By extension, a theory that expects retrenchment to fail in such cases — as mine does — is presented with a "tough" test.[52] By reexamining the case with this in mind, we can derive new insights about the conditions under which the United States might be able to successfully retrench from key regions in the modern era.

U.S. Plans for Retrenchment and the German Problem

American policymakers originally envisioned the U.S.-led NATO alliance as a stopgap measure to bide time for the Western Europeans to build up their own defenses against the Soviet threat. Their drive for military devolution and retrenchment ran up against European concerns about West Germany's vulnerability to Soviet countermeasures.

U.S. Retrenchment Plans and the Case for West German Rearmament

America's early grand strategy in Western Europe was an archetype of the retrenchment strategy. To be sure, there was widespread agreement among top U.S. officials that preventing Soviet domination of Europe was vital to U.S. national security. As historian Melvyn Leffler writes, the "omnipresent theme behind all conceptions of American national security in the immediate postwar years" was the idea that a Soviet Union that

48 As I explain in later sections, evidence for my interpretation sits alongside those that support certain alternative variables identified as important in previous research. Especially important among these were French fears of West Germany's future strategic expansion.

49 Gholz, Press, and Sapolsky, "Come Home, America," 46–47.

50 For a detailed analysis, see Marc Trachtenberg, "A 'Wasting Asset': American Strategy and the Shifting Nuclear Balance, 1949–1954," *International Security* 13, no. 3 (Winter 1988/89): 5–49.

51 Gholz, Press, and Sapolsky, "Come Home, America," 47. See also Posen, *Restraint*, 34.

52 See Aaron Rapport, "Hard Thinking about Hard and Easy Cases in Security Studies," *Security Studies* 24, no. 3 (2015): 431–65, https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2015.1070615.

had arrogated the industrial and demographic resources of Western Europe would be too powerful a foe for the United States to effectively compete against.[53] "Of the nations that were previously able to deploy" significant power resources, the Central Intelligence Agency observed in 1949, "[i]t is only Western Europe as a group of nations that can now be considered capable of [re]attaining this status within a reasonable amount of time." The basic problem confronted by U.S. policymakers was thus one "of keeping the still widely dispersed power resources of Europe … from being drawn together into a single Soviet power structure."[54]

At the same time, virtually every leader in Washington took for granted that the United States should not directly involve itself in Europe's balance of power for long. Instead, the overarching objective of U.S. foreign policy was to accelerate the economic and military recovery of the allies to enable a "European solution" to the Soviet menace.[55] It is difficult to overstate how single-minded senior U.S. officials were in pursuing this strategic vision. George F. Kennan, the State Department's director of policy planning, wrote in his memoirs that

> [*My objective was*] *to get us as soon as possible out of the position of abnormal political-military responsibility in Western Europe which the war had forced upon us. … [W]e were not fitted, either institutionally or temperamentally, to be an imperial power in the grand manner, and particularly not one holding the great peoples of Western Europe indefinitely in some sort of paternal tutelage. …* [*The basis of Western European security*] *would have to yield to something more natural — something that did more justice to the true strength and interests of the intermediate European peoples themselves.*[56]

Other leaders agreed with this sentiment. In April 1949, when asked by a senator whether the creation of NATO meant that the United States was "expected to send substantial numbers of troops [to Western Europe] as a more or less permanent contribution," Secretary of State Dean Acheson replied that "[t]he answer to that question … is a clear and absolute 'No.'"[57] Likewise, while serving as the first Supreme Allied Commander Europe, Dwight Eisenhower wrote that "[w]e cannot be a modern Rome guarding the far frontiers with our legions if for no other reason that because these are *not*, politically, *our* frontiers. … If in ten years, all American troops stationed in Europe for national defense purposes have not been returned to the United States, then this whole [NATO] project will have failed."[58]

Washington's commitment to retrenchment yielded specific prescriptions for allied military capabilities. First and most obviously, the allies had to acquire powerful armed forces in the shortest possible time. "The Strategic Concept for the Defense of the North Atlantic Area" (MC 3), the first unified strategy document approved by NATO's military committee, not only stated that each member state should "develop its military strength to the maximum extent" but also stressed that the "hard core" of the alliance's battlefield forces would have to "come from the European nations."[59] Cultivating "elements of independent power" in Western Europe accordingly became the "cardinal point" of U.S. foreign policy. For strategists like Kennan, the "chief beauty" of initiatives like the Marshall Plan was that they "outstandingly [had] this effect."[60] U.S. leaders saw this as the fundamental purpose of NATO itself. Upon becoming president in 1953, Eisenhower consistently stressed that "the stationing of American troops" in NATO "was a temporary expedient … a stop-gap operation to bring confidence and security to our friends overseas."[61]

That said, NATO military planners also recognized that it would take "many years" for the European allies to develop forces on par with those commanded by the Soviet Union, which was assumed to have "maintained, if not increased, her technical, military, and economic capabilities" after the war. For the foresee-

53 Melvyn P. Leffler, "The American Conception of National Security and the Beginnings of the Cold War, 1945–48," *American Historical Review* 89, no. 2 (April 1984): 374.

54 "Review of the World Situation," January 19, 1949, Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Records Search Tool (CREST), CIA-RDP67-00059A000500080014-3, 2, 6.

55 Trachtenberg, *Constructed Peace*, 114.

56 George F. Kennan, *Memoirs: 1925–1950* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1967), 464.

57 Quoted in "Senate Consideration of the North Atlantic Treaty and Subsequent Accessions: Historical Overview," Congressional Research Service Report for Congress, https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/19971208_97-1041_464c8034c93f87a58bd9be3989734f33c59bca6d.pdf, 3.

58 Letter to Edward John Bermingham, February 28, 1951, in *The Papers of Dwight David Eisenhower: NATO and the Campaign of 1952*, vol. 16, ed. Louis Galambos (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 77 (emphasis in original).

59 NATO Military Committee, "Revised Strategic Concept for the Defense of the North Atlantic Area," MC 3/2, November 28, 1949, in *NATO Strategy Documents 1949–1969*, ed. Gregory W. Pedlow (Brussels: Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe, 1997), 44, 47.

60 Quoted in David Mayers, *George Kennan and the Dilemmas of U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 132.

61 "Memorandum by the Special Assistant to the President (Cutler) to the Secretary of State," September 3, 1953, *FRUS 1952–1954, National Security Affairs*, vol. 2, pt. 1 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1984), 456.

able future, then, "[s]pecial emphasis" would have to be placed on "methods to compensate for numerical inferiority."[62] It soon became clear that the only viable method was to ensure that NATO forces would fight under conditions of sufficient strategic depth while exerting maximum initiative and mobility, since fixed positions would be quickly overrun by a Soviet blitzkrieg. In practice, this meant that European NATO territory would have to be defended "as far to the east" as possible — that is, on West German soil.[63]

The realization that a forward defense represented the only realistic plan for NATO's security had a very important implication: In order to devolve the task of European defense to the Europeans, the United States had to harness West Germany's latent military capabilities. As Trachtenberg summarizes, "Including German territory in the area of military operations was necessary if the western armies were to have any room for maneuver at all … but if West German territory were included in the area to be defended, even more troops would be required, and no one but Germany could supply them."[64] To be sure, France — America's most materially substantial ally in continental Europe — had committed itself to a massive three-year rearmament plan to quadruple its army divisions from five to 20 on the continent by the end of 1953.[65] Nonetheless, U.S. analysts estimated that the number of trained military personnel at the disposal of the continental NATO powers would still only amount to about 78 percent of that of the Soviet Union and its Eastern European satellites. Corresponding figures for artillery pieces and armored combat vehicles were around 10 percent and 30 percent, respectively.[66] Concerns about military shortfalls intensified as France's military buildup appeared to approach the limits of what its economy could sustain.[67] At the same time, U.S. analysts estimated that "[i]f no restrictions were imposed on the size of West German armed forces … a peacetime force of about a million men could be supported by the present manpower and financial resources of the country without causing serious economic dislocation."[68] A consensus thus arose in Washington that realizing the U.S. vision of retrenchment would, for all intents and purposes, require building up West Germany's military capabilities.[69]

Europe's Military Vulnerability: The Risks of Soviet Preventive Action against West Germany

NATO's early years were frightening times for Western Europe. From the immediate aftermath of World War II to 1949, Western policymakers believed that the Soviet Union's conventional military superiority was such that it could conquer most of Europe in a matter of months, and that the "terrific and immediate retaliatory power" of the U.S. nuclear arsenal was the main factor keeping it at bay.[70] Even this margin of safety was diminished by the Soviet nuclear weapons test of August 1949, and the sense that NATO had entered a period of dangerous military inferiority gripped Washington and European governments alike.[71]

62 NATO Military Committee, "Strategic Guidance for North Atlantic Regional Planning," MC 14, March 28, 1950, in *NATO Strategy Documents*, 90.

63 North Atlantic Defense Committee, "North Atlantic Treaty Organization Medium Term Plan," DC 13, April 1, 1950, in *NATO Strategy Documents*, 167. On the disadvantages of "static defense," see John J. Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), 48. For details on the origins of the forward strategy, see Jeffrey H. Michaels, "Visions of the Next War or Reliving the Last One? Early Alliance Views of War with the Soviet Bloc," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 43, no. 6-7 (2020): 990–1013.

64 Trachtenberg, *Constructed Peace*, 101–2.

65 See David Mark Thompson, "Delusions of Grandeur: French Global Ambitions and the Problem of the Revival of Military Power, 1950–1954" (Ph.D. diss., University of Toronto, 2007), 96.

66 It was believed that this figure, if anything, underestimated the "marked advantage" enjoyed by the Soviet Union since "the system for rapid mobilization of trained manpower is more highly developed in the Soviet Bloc, particularly in the USSR itself, than in the West." See CIA, "Comparison of Selected Items in U.S. and USSR Military Strength and Industrial Production," May 29, 1952, U.S. Declassified Documents Reference System (DDRS).

67 For a contemporary analysis, see "The Deteriorating Position of France," June 1, 1953, CREST, CIA-RDP91T01172R000200310002-5.

68 "The Outlook in West Germany," July 14, 1953, CREST, CIA-RDP79R01012A002700030001-0, 7.

69 For further documentation, see David Clay Large, *Germans to the Front: West German Rearmament in the Adenauer Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), chap. 2. The evidence here complicates Lord Ismay's supposed quip that NATO was created to "keep the Soviet Union out, the Americans in, and the Germans down." Note that there is no record that Ismay ever uttered this over-cited comment. See Timothy Andrews Sayle, *Enduring Alliance: A History of NATO and the Postwar Global Order* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019), 3. In any case, it is crucial to understand that U.S. leaders in the early Cold War had little interest in keeping America "in" or Germany "down" over the long term.

70 Acheson, in "United States Minutes of the Second Meeting between President Truman and Prime Minister Pleven," January 30, 1951, *FRUS 1951, Europe: Political and Economic Developments*, vol. 4, pt. 1 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1985), 318. For a typical example of early Western estimates of Soviet military capabilities, see "Note by the Secretaries to the Standing Group on the Preparation of the NATO Short Term Plan," SG 27/5, June 29, 1950, NATO Archives, https://archives.nato.int/preparation-of-nato-short-term-plan-5. In an influential 1983 article, Matthew Evangelista argued that Western policymakers exaggerated Soviet conventional capabilities during the early Cold War to justify expansive security policies. Matthew A. Evangelista, "Stalin's Postwar Army Reappraised," *International Security* 7, no. 3 (Winter 1982/83): 110–38. Analysis based on subsequently declassified sources, however, has dispelled this claim. These documents make clear that Western analysts "correctly judged that available NATO forces in Western Europe were incapable of defending against a Soviet invasion of Europe without a major conventional buildup or early use of nuclear weapons." See Phillip A. Karber and Jerald A. Combs, "The United States, NATO, and the Soviet Threat to Western Europe: Military Estimates and Policy Options, 1945–1963," *Diplomatic History* 22, no. 3 (Summer 1998): 402.

71 See "Memorandum by the Counselor (Bohlen)," September 21, 1951, *FRUS 1951, National Security Affairs; Foreign Economic Policy*, vol. 1 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1979), 172.

To be sure, this did not mean so much that Soviet leaders were aching to initiate major hostilities with NATO as that "in choosing among the possible courses of action, they will not necessarily reject such courses as carry the risk of armed conflict."[72] Crucially, many policymakers worried that West German rearmament might just be the factor that "tip[s] the balance" for Moscow to launch a preventive attack.[73] European officials, in particular, articulated repeatedly in private settings their fear of provoking the Soviets into taking forceful action against what they would quite reasonably perceive as the military revival of a deadly adversary. France, dreading the prospect of facing the "Russians on the Rhine" if the West German buffer was lost, was the most vocal.[74] A central question for "every thoughtful Frenchman," Prime Minister René Pleven told U.S. leaders in January 1951, was "why the Russians, who are fully informed on the military build-up in the West, [would] not attack in Europe before this program is completed," given that the Soviets would presumably have "a real fear of a Germany once again able to inflict terrible damage on the Soviet Union similar to that done during the last war."[75] Foreign Minister Robert Schuman likewise felt that NATO's military strength was not "such that we could stop any moves which the Russians might take should we discuss the German units question."[76]

But in fact, assessments produced by other Western powers tended to concur that West Germany was highly vulnerable to Soviet preventive aggression.

The salience of the German front in NATO's military assumptions gave French policymakers good reason to avoid incentivizing Soviet aggression against West Germany. Western planners during this period believed that a Soviet attack, once initiated, would not stop with the conquest of Germany. Instead, as indicated in the 1948 U.S. joint intelligence committee report entitled "Soviet Intentions and Capabilities," a Soviet invasion of West Germany was thought to represent only "Phase I" of its Western European campaign. Once the invading forces had "consolidate[d] west of the Rhine from D plus 5 to D plus 10," phases II to IV would involve thrusts aimed at conquering France, reaching the Pyrenees 50 to 60 days after the outbreak of hostilities.[77] Since a series of quick defeats across the continent was likely to follow the collapse of the German front, the prospect of triggering a Soviet attack against West Germany was not to be taken lightly. The fates of France and West Germany were inextricably linked.

The Western powers initially granted West Germany only limited input into the alliance's rearmament discussions.[78] However, West German leaders made clear through both private and public channels that they were mindful of their own vulnerability as well. In a discussion with French statesman Jean Monnet in August 1950, senior diplomat Herbert Blankenhorn argued that, without strengthening deterrence along the border with East Germany, the allies may "not be able to undertake even the limited rearmament that had been planned" since "[p]reventive measures by the Soviet Union could not then be ruled out."[79] A 1951 U.S. national intelligence estimate thus found that "[t]he first and currently most important factor influencing the West German people against rearmament is their belief that it may provoke the USSR to war. ... The West Germans are acutely conscious of their weak and exposed position and of the present inability of the Western Powers to defend them against Soviet invasion."[80]

A reader might wonder whether French and West German policymakers were overstating the risk of triggering a Soviet preventive attack as an excuse to avoid costly rearmament. This suspicion would be more

72 "Soviet Capabilities and Intentions," November 15, 1950, CREST, 0000269240, 7.

73 194th meeting of the British Chiefs of Staff, cited in Trachtenberg, *Constructed Peace*, 111n54.

74 Dietmar Hüser, cited in Trachtenberg and Gehrz, "America, Europe, and German Rearmament," 12.

75 "Second Meeting between Truman and Pleven," 318, 326.

76 "Minutes of a Private Conference of the French, British, and United States Foreign Ministers and their High Commissioners for Germany," September 14, 1950, *FRUS 1950, Western Europe*, vol. 3 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1977), 296. The French had been concerned about Soviet preventive motives even before the German rearmament question rose to the top of the political agenda. When French President Vincent Auriol was briefed by Foreign Minister Georges Bidault on the military organization envisioned by the Treaty of Brussels, signed between France, the United Kingdom, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg in March 1948 as a prelude to the North Atlantic Treaty, he cautioned the minister to refrain as much as possible from agitating Moscow: "Precipitate nothing; it would be a disaster." Quoted in John W. Young, *France, the Cold War, and the Western Alliance, 1944–49: French Foreign Policy and Post-war Europe* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 183.

77 Joint Intelligence Committee, "Soviet Intentions and Capabilities 1949, 1956/7," December 2, 1948, in *Records of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Part II: 1946–1953, The Soviet Union*, ed. Paul Kesaris (Washington, D.C.: University Publications of America, 1979), reel 3, slides 14–105, annex A, 41.

78 See Hans-Peter Schwarz, *Konrad Adenauer: German Politician and Statesman in a Period of War, Revolution, and Reconstruction*, vol. 1: *From the German Empire to the Federal Republic, 1876–1952* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1995), 520.

79 Schwarz, *Konrad Adenauer*, 536.

80 "German Attitudes on Rearmament," NIE-24, May 15, 1951, DDRS, 2–3.

persuasive if analysts in other states that cared less about French and West German rearmament burdens independently assessed the European situation to reach more "objective," sanguine conclusions. But in fact, assessments produced by other Western powers tended to concur that West Germany was highly vulnerable to Soviet preventive aggression. U.S. High Commissioner for Germany John J. McCloy wrote to Acheson in June 1950 that German rearmament "would, no doubt, be regarded by them as sufficiently provocative to warrant extreme countermeasures."[81] The Central Intelligence Agency agreed in a dedicated analysis:

> *It is unlikely that the Soviets believe that a program of Western German rearmament, once well under way, will stop short of complete remilitarization. They will have faith neither in the ability nor the desire of the western powers to limit Germany to purely defensive forces. ... If the methods of diplomacy and propaganda ... prove insufficient to halt the rearmament of Western Germany, the Soviets will probably adopt more drastic measures, involving if necessary progressively greater risks of war.*[82]

The report went on to state that the Soviets had a range of military options available to them. In addition to "[m]ilitary and para-military demonstrations" designed to convey "the seriousness with which the USSR views the problem[,]" Moscow might employ "[i]ntensified harassing tactics in Berlin, designed to make the allied position difficult or untenable." Beyond this, the Soviet Union was likely to "seriously consider going to war whenever it becomes convinced that progress toward complete Western German rearmament ... has reached the point where it cannot be arrested by other methods."[83] In view of such dangers, a State Department memo of December 1950 advised that Washington "handle with the greatest care our efforts to organize and train Western German military units."[84] British intelligence likewise concluded that "the re-arming of Germany is one of the developments which might provoke the Soviet Government to start a preventive war."[85]

Finally, available evidence on Soviet attitudes at the time suggests that Western fears were not unfounded. As historian Vladislav Zubok writes, there was a consensus in Moscow "that the USSR should remain an unchallenged land power in Europe, without even a shadow of countervailing power represented by another state or a group of smaller states."[86] Not surprisingly, Moscow went to great lengths to stoke anxieties about a Soviet preventive strike against West Germany's remilitarization. On Oct. 19, 1950, it issued a note addressed to the American, British, and French governments declaring that the Soviet Union would "not acquiesce in such measures ... aimed at reviving the German Regular Army in Western Germany."[87] Also in late 1950, a Soviet diplomat told a Swiss counterpart in London that the decision to rearm West Germany would be regarded as "equivalent to the crossing of the Thirty-eighth Parallel by U.N. forces," which had precipitated Chinese intervention in the Korean conflict.[88]

The European Defense Community Debacle and the Origins of the "Atlantic, Not the European" Security Framework

In the first half-decade following NATO's founding in 1949, concerns about West Germany's military vulnerability motivated a concerted effort by both France and West Germany to frustrate and delay American plans to rapidly reconstitute its frontline ally's armed forces. This effort undermined American plans for retrenchment, leading to the birth of a U.S.-centered security architecture in Western Europe.

France Obstructs U.S. Efforts at West German Rearmament

U.S. decision-makers insisted on pushing ahead with West German rearmament despite the risks of

81 June 13, 1950, quoted in Trachtenberg, *Constructed Peace*, 111.

82 "Probable Soviet Reactions to a Remilitarization of Western Germany," December 27, 1950, CREST, CIA-RDP79R01012A000400020001-3, 1–2.

83 "Probable Soviet Reactions," 2. U.S. Army Intelligence (G-2) added its view that, if confronted with the choice between "adjust[ing] itself to the restoration of" West German capabilities or taking "military action to prevent it[,]" the Soviets would likely "resort to military action rather than make the required adjustment." See "Soviet Courses of Action with Respect to Germany," February 1, 1951, CREST, CIA-RDP98-00979R000100120001-7, 2–3.

84 "Memorandum Prepared by the Policy Planning Staff," December 9, 1950, *FRUS 1950, National Security Affairs; Foreign Economic Policy*, vol. 1 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1977), 465.

85 "Foreign Office to Sir J. Le Rougetel (Brussels)," December 18, 1950, *Documents on British Policy Overseas (DBPO)*, sr. 2, vol. 3, *German Rearmament, September-December 1950* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1989), 380.

86 Vladislav Zubok, "The Soviet Union and European Integration from Stalin to Gorbachev," *Journal of European Integration History* 2, no. 1 (1996): 85.

87 "Soviet Reply to the United States Note of 23 May 1950 Regarding the German Police in the Soviet Zone," October 19, 1950, in *Documents on Germany under Occupation, 1945–1954*, ed. Beate Ruhm von Oppen (London: Oxford University Press, 1955), 521.

88 French diplomat René Massigli to the Foreign Ministry, December 18, 1950, quoted in Trachtenberg, *Constructed Peace*, 112n56.

Soviet retaliation. Characteristically, Acheson was an "uncompromising hawk" on the matter.[89] During a discussion with French Prime Minister Robert Schuman, he agreed that the allies "must be careful" regarding the question of German rearmament and, in particular, that they should not "give the USSR cause to do something they would not otherwise do."[90] However, he downplayed the concern about "the USSR starting a preventive war," claiming that the Soviets would be deterred "by the fear of atomic bombing."[91] Acheson was even more brazen during an internal State Department meeting:

> *It has been suggested that doing something along this line might provoke the Russians to military action which they might not otherwise take. ... If there should be an attack, I presume it would come from Russian fear that we were gaining strength. ... [But c]ertainly that is not going to deter us. We are not going to stay weak because if we get strong enough to resist attack we may bring it on. That is a chance we have to run.*[92]

This attitude was widely internalized among chief U.S. policymakers. Paul Nitze, Acheson's director of policy planning, later recalled that the guiding idea in his State Department was to "accelerate the program" of NATO's massive rearmament to achieve "a satisfactory solution of our relations with the U.S.S.R. while her stockpile of atomic weapons was still small." The United States was willing to accept "increased risks of general war" toward this end.[93] Then, from 1953, President Eisenhower himself became the driving force behind U.S. efforts to rearm West Germany. Eisenhower observed that "*inspired* leaders" were needed to push through the U.S. vision of retrenchment "[b]ut everyone" in Europe was "too cautious, too fearful."[94] Regardless, he was determined to create an independent Western European security bloc and bring an end to the U.S. military commitment. His view was that the United States "could afford to do almost anything to support and make successful such a venture, because by this act, our entire objectives in this region could be almost instantaneously achieved."[95]

There was thus a serious concern that the Americans might try to bypass the French and unilaterally rearm the West Germans.

Empowered by this consensus at the highest levels of U.S. government, Acheson proposed at a September 1950 meeting of NATO foreign ministers that the United States would temporarily increase its troop presence in Europe, but only if the Europeans agreed to the participation of West German units in a European defense force.[96] French policymakers were utterly dismayed and promptly began a campaign to obstruct and delay West German rearmament. It was not so much that France was opposed to the very principle of a West German military contribution, Defense Minister Jules Moch explained, but rather that "the creation of these units [should] not or tend not to become a risk which might be mortal to the democracies." He stressed that NATO had to "be careful not to place on the same level or plane those countries which are unfortunate enough to have a common front with the Soviet Union, those countries which are near the Soviet Union, and those countries which are further away. We must act prudently and do nothing which can be interpreted as an act of aggression."[97] Schuman likewise argued that West German rearmament would be a "necessarily spectacular decision" that "would cause new dangers" in the eyes of the Soviets and their Eastern European satellites. "Germany must some day join her effort to ours," he went on, but "only when we can be certain that this German contribution, instead of strengthening our security, will not compromise it instead."[98]

At the same time, France also recognized that it

89 The description is from Omar N. Bradley and Clay Blair, *A General's Life: An Autobiography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), 519.

90 "Minutes of a Private Conference," September 14, 1950, *FRUS 1950*, vol. 3, 2, 297.

91 "Minutes of a Private Conference," 298.

92 "The Secretary of State to the Acting Secretary of State," September 17, 1950, *FRUS 1950*, vol. 3, 320.

93 September 15, 1954, quoted in Trachtenberg, *History and Strategy,* 112n41.

94 Eisenhower diary entry, June 11, 1951, in *Papers of Dwight David Eisenhower,* 341 (emphasis in original).

95 Letter to William Averell Harriman, June 30, 1951, in *Papers of Dwight David Eisenhower*, 398.

96 "Minutes of a Private Conference," 296. On the origins of this "single package" proposal, see Christopher Gehrz, "Dean Acheson, the JCS, and the 'Single Package': American Policy on German Rearmament, 1950," *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 12, no. 1 (March 2001): 135–60.

97 "North Atlantic Defense Committee Meeting Held at 1000, Saturday, 28 October 1950," Record-DC-004, October 28, 1950, NATO Archives, https://archives.nato.int/record-of-meeting-of-north-atlantic-defence-committee-held-on-28-31-october-1950, 36, 7.

98 "Statement made by M. Schuman before the North Atlantic Council," September 16, 1950, C/5-VR/3, NATO Archives, https://archives.nato.int/third-meeting-verbatim-troisieme-reunion-proces-verbal, 4, 6.

could not be a mere "spoiler" in the Western European militarization effort for long.[99] Acheson and Eisenhower were clearly not afraid to manhandle the allies, and frustrated murmurs in Washington were indicating that U.S. patience with French obstructionism was wearing thin. Acheson was adamant that "[t]here isn't much time to hesitate about [German rearmament]. … with that thought I am through."[100] There was thus a serious concern that the Americans might try to bypass the French and unilaterally rearm the West Germans. Armand Bérard, France's deputy high commissioner for Germany, accordingly reported that "[it is] of the utmost urgency for us to come up with our own solution to this problem while the Americans are still open to suggestion."[101]

But rather than acquiesce to U.S. demands, France settled on a strategy of miring the German rearmament agenda in protracted negotiations. This was the motivation behind the Pleven Plan — France's October 1950 proposal for the creation of an integrated European army.[102] The original French proposal for what came to be known as the European Defense Community required all West German troops to be organized at a level no greater than the battalion (i.e., between 250 and 1,000 personnel) and placed under the strict oversight of a supranational council of ministers. All other European Defense Community member states, by contrast, would be allowed to maintain independent defense ministries and forces outside of the supranational framework.[103] This amounted to "military and political nonsense" given the restrictions it implied for West Germany's substantive capabilities.[104] As General Omar Bradley observed, "An international army, if it is to be efficient, must be broken by nationalities into units no smaller than a division. Differences of language, temperament, procedure, habit and training would otherwise produce only wild disorder."[105] The French, however, had proposed the plan fully aware of its deficiencies. As the British joint staff mission in Washington noted, although the Pleven plan "apparently implied acceptance by the French of the principle of German rearmament[,]" it was obvious that their real aim was "to play for time" on the issue.[106] Senior French policymakers like Moch later acknowledged that "the plan was a subterfuge concocted for the sole purpose of preventing German rearmament."[107]

The West Germans Step Up and the Americans Give In

Remarkably, despite initial misgivings, the United States accepted a modified version of the French proposal in December 1950. The revised plan limited West Germany's contributions to the future European Defense Community to 12 divisions and prohibited Bonn from manufacturing nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons, any type of guided missile beyond the short-range variety, and aircraft for its 85,000-man air force.[108] The fact that the United States accepted this plan — known as the Spofford compromise — was again indicative of how committed its policymakers were to promoting Europe's growth into an independent bloc of military power and withdrawing its forces from the continent in the near future. As Trachtenberg notes, U.S. leaders during this period tended to support "whatever pointed in that general direction."[109]

Around the same time the Spofford compromise was reached, however, the West Germans stepped up their own delaying tactics.[110] Chancellor Konrad Adenauer now demanded that the postwar occupation regime for West Germany be replaced by "a system of contractual relations" in exchange for its military contribution to the European Defense Community.[111]

99 The term is from William I. Hitchcock, *France Restored: Cold War Diplomacy and the Quest for Leadership in Europe, 1944–1954* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 127.

100 "Secretary of State to the Acting Secretary of State," 320.

101 Quoted in Mark S. Sheetz, "Continental Drift: Franco-German Relations and the Shifting Premises of European Security" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 2002), 136.

102 The plan derived its name from René Pleven, then France's minister of defense.

103 See Large, *Germans to the Front,* 91–95.

104 Comment by French Embassy official, in "Calendar to No. 84," October 25, 1950, *DBPO*, sr. 2, vol. 3, 220.

105 General of the Army Omar N. Bradley, "Is Russia Winning the Battle for Europe?" March 6, 1954, CREST, CIA-RD-P80R01731R000400490002-7, 7.

106 "B.J.S.M. (Washington) to Ministry of Defence," October 28, 1950, *DBPO*, sr. 2, vol. 3, 227.

107 Quoted in Victor Gavin, "Were the Interests Really Parallel? The United States, Western Europe, and the Early Years of the European Integration Project," *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* 8, no. 1 (March 2010): 36.

108 Creswell, *Question of Balance*, 91.

109 Trachtenberg, *Constructed Peace,* 114.

110 Norrin Ripsman shows that French policymakers only accepted the Spofford compromise because Adenauer had informed them in advance that he would not be going along with it. Norrin M. Ripsman, *Peacemaking by Democracies: The Effect of State Autonomy on the Post–World War Settlements* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002), 201.

111 "The United States High Commissioner for Germany (McCloy) to the Secretary of State," November 17, 1950, *FRUS 1950, Central and Eastern Europe; The Soviet Union,* vol. 4 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1980), 781.

While the Germans might have been content to move gradually toward a more equal political status vis-à-vis the other Western allies in the past, Adenauer argued, "something more impressive" had to happen if they were being asked to put soldiers on the line for Western defense.[112] These new demands embroiled the Western German rearmament agenda in another lengthy series of complicated negotiations. "The Germans are the crux" now, Eisenhower lamented, "[i]f we are going to fight east of the Rhine and if the Germans do not want to fight, this is an extremely bad situation."[113]

In short, Soviet policymakers were vehemently opposed to any Western European security order that depended on the full-fledged revitalization of West Germany's military strength, but the U.S.-led NATO was an arrangement they could tolerate.

Why did West Germany suddenly decide to slow down the progress toward its own rearmament? The key reason was that, like the French, the Adenauer government was sensitive to West Germany's vulnerable situation and sought to avoid measures that might trigger harsh reactions from the Soviets. The European Defense Community was certainly preferable to independent West German forces in this respect. As Adenauer remarked in 1954, he was "fully convinced that [a] German national army … will become a great danger for Germany and Europe."[114] And yet even the qualified rearmament envisioned by the European Defense Community plan seemed too dangerous. Instead, Adenauer believed that the pressing task for the moment was to lay the basis for "a strong Atlantic [i.e., American] Army in Europe" rather than prematurely reconstituting West German military power, which he feared might give "encouragement to the Russians."[115] This view accorded well with those held by French policymakers. After a private conversation with Blankenhorn, Adenauer's top foreign policy advisor, Bérard reported "a certain parallelism between the position of France and that of West Germany with regard to the defense of the West." Both countries were "concerned above all with making sure that they are not invaded and that their territory does not serve as a battleground." By extension, both felt "very strongly that the West should hold back from provoking the Soviets, before a Western force, worthy of the name, has been set up."[116]

The new array of complications introduced by West Germany ensured that European Defense Community talks would drag out for several more years. In the meantime, the United States agreed to deploy a substantial contingent of additional troops to the continent, along with an American general to head NATO's integrated multinational military command structure. These arrangements had originally been made contingent on West Germany's early rearmament, but policymakers like Acheson had become convinced that the United States "had gone too far in thinking we should insist on this." Adenauer's new demands suggested that the potential consequences of West German militarization were not solely feared by the French. The West Germans also had little faith that "they have a chance to survive," and this meant that rearmament would have to be put "on ice for a little while."[117]

The European army vision met its final demise on Aug. 30, 1954, when the French National Assembly declined to ratify the European Defense Community treaty by a vote of 319 to 264.[118] U.S. policymakers were outraged and briefly considered cutting off all military assistance to France.[119] However, admitting that a robust defense of Western Europe was impracticable without Franco-German participation, they resigned themselves to an alternative suggested by France's Pierre Mendès-France government: West Germany would be rearmed within the NATO framework dominated by U.S. military power.[120] Thus the allies agreed to incorporate West Germany into NATO on May 5, 1955, and to terminate the occupation regime. However, its new allies retained extensive rights to

112 Quoted in Ronald J. Granieri, *The Ambivalent Alliance: Konrad Adenauer, the CDU/CSU, and the West, 1949–1966* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2004), 40.

113 "Memorandum of Telephone Conversation, by Miss Barbara Evans, Personal Assistant to the Secretary of State," December 15, 1950, *FRUS 1950*, vol. 3, 578. See also Creswell, *Question of Balance*, 35–39.

114 Quoted in Konrad Kellen, "Adenauer at 90," *Foreign Affairs* 44, no. 2 (January 1966): 288.

115 "Sir O. Harvey (Paris) to Mr. Bevin," October 25, 1950, *DBPO*, sr. 2, vol. 3, 210n5.

116 October 17, 1950, quoted in Trachtenberg and Gehrz, "America, Europe, and German Rearmament," 13.

117 "Memorandum of Telephone Conversation," 579.

118 On the role that the Soviet threat played in bringing about this outcome, see Pierre Guillen, "The Role of the Soviet Union as a Factor in the French Debates on the European Defense Community," *Journal of European Integration History* 2, no. 1 (1996): 71–84.

119 "Memorandum of Conversation, by the Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs (Merchant)," August 30, 1954, *FRUS 1952–1954, Western European Security,* vol. 5, pt. 2 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1983), 1118.

120 On the French origins of this alternative, see Trachtenberg, *Constructed Peace*, 124.

intervene in West Germany's domestic and foreign affairs. The allies also strengthened the powers of the American Supreme Allied Commander Europe to constrain the nascent Bundeswehr's freedom of action. Moreover, NATO placed significant restrictions on the size of the West German armed forces and the kinds of armaments they could build.[121]

Rearming West Germany within the NATO framework was more acceptable to the Europeans than the European Defense Community plan largely because it was more acceptable to the Soviet Union. The fact that West Germany would be rearmed within a military alliance explicitly centered on American (rather than European) capabilities mattered a great deal for Moscow's security calculus. Historian Caroline Kennedy-Pipe's explanation is worth quoting at length:

> [T]*he Soviet leadership differentiated in this period between purely European defense institutions and NATO. ...* [A]*s a solely European body,* [*the European Defense Community*] *would be dominated by the most economically powerful European state, West Germany. In the Soviet view, as a military organization it could only engender German revanchism. ...* [*But NATO meant that*] *American troops were installed in continental Europe in a system which would ensure that they would remain there. ... The remnant of the German threat, the Federal Republic, was occupied by United States forces and could not be expected to demonstrate any aggression beyond that which Washington might itself display.*[122]

In short, Soviet policymakers were vehemently opposed to any Western European security order that depended on the full-fledged revitalization of West Germany's military strength, but the U.S.-led NATO was an arrangement they could tolerate. Soviet Ambassador to the United States Georgy Zarubin articulated this point to his U.S. counterpart in July 1955, stressing the need to find "some sort of modus vivendi in Europe based on the status quo" — that is, one with the two great powers firmly at the helm of their respective alliance systems. The "complete departure of U.S. forces from Europe" had to be regarded as "a very long term proposition."[123] Leaders in Paris and Bonn intuitively understood this sentiment, which was why they colluded to undermine U.S. efforts to rebuild West German power as a substitute for the American military commitment. As a note drafted by high-ranking French diplomats in 1953 argued, the U.S. strategic vision notwithstanding, Western European security had to be built "in the Atlantic, not the European, framework."[124]

Summary and Epilogue

American leaders in the early Cold War were fiercely committed to a grand strategy of retrenchment in Western Europe. While recognizing that Soviet expansion had to be contained one way or another, they sought to achieve this by sponsoring the development of independent military capabilities among key European allies and to withdraw U.S. forces from the continent as soon as this buildup was complete. Consistent with my theory, however, concerns about Soviet preventive aggression against West Germany motivated a concerted effort by policymakers in Paris and Bonn to derail this plan. In a counterfactual where West Germany's postwar vulnerability was less extreme, the Western powers could well have formed an alternative alliance structure in which the military center of gravity rested in Europe rather than the United States.

While this article focuses on the immediate postwar decade, it is worth briefly considering how its logic sheds light on the broader trajectory of U.S. retrenchment efforts during the Cold War. U.S. officials did not give up on retrenchment after the defeat of the European army plan. Reflecting on its failure, they came to believe that the central reason that extended nuclear deterrence had not assuaged French and West German concerns about Soviet aggression in the first half of the 1950s was that the allies had had little faith that nuclear weapons would be reliably used on their behalf in desperate times. As Central Intelligence Agency deputy director Charles P. Campbell recounted after talking with Adenauer in August 1956, the chancellor was unsure that rearmament was worth its risks while "those who dispose of nuclear power will alone make [the] decision affecting his country's fate."[125] This foreshadows the insight that nuclear weapons often fail to deter adversaries who possess overwhelming conventional superiority unless states make arrangements to ensure "asym-

121 For details, see Trachtenberg, *Constructed Peace*, 125–28; and "Protocols to the Brussels Treaty," October 22, 1954, *FRUS 1952–1954*, vol. 5, pt. 2, 1443–56.

122 Caroline Kennedy-Pipe, *Stalin's Cold War: Soviet Strategies in Europe, 1943 to 1956* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1995), 178.

123 "Memorandum of a Conversation, Geneva," July 19, 1955, *FRUS 1955–1957, Austrian State Treaty; Summit and Foreign Ministers Meetings, 1955,* vol. 5 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1988), 387, 386.

124 Quoted in Creswell, *Question of Balance*, 106.

125 "Memorandum from the Acting Director of Central Intelligence (Cabell) to the Secretary of State," August 28, 1956, *FRUS 1955–1957, Central and Southeastern Europe*, vol. 26 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1992), 148.

metric escalation" to the nuclear level at the locus of conventional aggression.[126]

Acknowledging this point, from 1956 to 1960, the Eisenhower administration attempted to realize its grand strategic vision of retrenchment by giving France and West Germany nuclear capabilities of their own. But as shown in previous studies, U.S. efforts to groom a militarily independent Europe through "nuclear sharing" — involving gradually devolving control over U.S.-made nuclear weapons to major allies as well as supporting indigenous moves toward nuclear acquisition — failed because it triggered preventive dynamics akin to that highlighted in this article.[127] Both France and West Germany tried to secure nuclear forces of their own under the auspices of American grand strategy. France succeeded, acquiring an independent nuclear force and doctrine by the early 1960s. West Germany's nuclear pursuit, however, was rudely interrupted by Soviet preventive countermeasures. Bonn had initially been tempted to cooperate with America's nuclear sharing policies, its confidence presumably informed by West Germany's improved military capabilities after 1955. However, the specter of large-scale Soviet aggression during the second Berlin crisis in the 1958–62 period forced West German leaders to come to terms with the fact that continued militarization might trigger a disastrous preventive war on West German territory. Indeed, allied reluctance to accept such risks played a key role in convincing U.S. leaders to reevaluate their grand strategic plans for the region. As Secretary of State John Foster Dulles admitted in January 1959, the Eisenhower administration's "entire NATO concept ... require[d] drastic review" if "the will is lacking" in Europe to make it work.[128]

Finally, under the John F. Kennedy administration, the United States relinquished its plans to retrench from Europe. As John Schuessler and Joshua Shifrinson observe, then, it was only in the early 1960s that the United States finally "resigned itself to staying" on the continent.[129] This was part of a larger superpower bargain in which the Soviet Union agreed to respect the status quo in Western Europe in exchange for America's agreement to keep

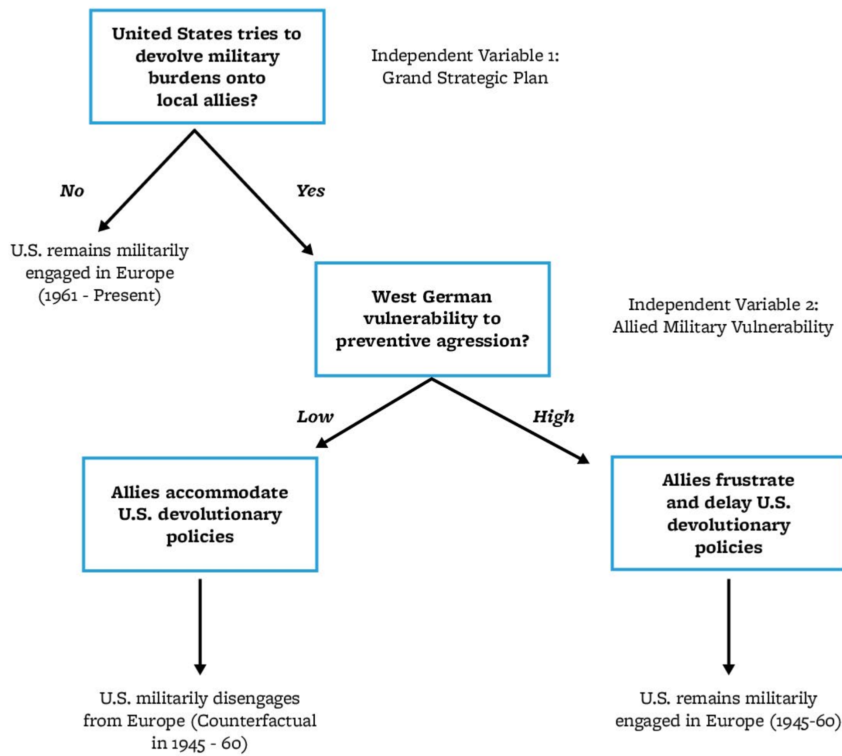


Figure 2: *West German Military Vulnerability and the Outcomes of U.S. Retrenchment Plans*

126 See Lieber and Press, *Myth of the Nuclear Revolution,* chap. 4; and Vipin Narang, *Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era: Regional Powers and International Conflict* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

127 See, in particular, Trachtenberg, *History and Strategy,* chap. 6.

128 January 26, 1959, quoted in Trachtenberg, *History and Strategy,* 214

129 John M. Schuessler and Joshua R. Shifrinson, "The Shadow of Exit from NATO," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 13, no. 3 (Fall 2019): 46, https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/SSQ/documents/Volume-13_Issue-3/Schuessler.pdf.

West Germany's military potential under its thumb over the long haul.[130] The implicit "settlement" that France and West Germany had maneuvered the Eisenhower administration into accepting in 1954 had finally been stabilized.[131] In short, as figure 2 depicts, my framework fits the broad pattern of American retrenchment efforts in Cold War Europe quite well.

Alternative Explanations

It should be clear by now that any theory that claims to explain the U.S. failure to retrench from Western Europe during the first decade of the Cold War must explain the crux of the matter: why Washington was unable to get its core regional allies to develop the collective military capabilities to substitute for its troop presence on the continent. While some of the previous explanations remain powerful, none offer a complete account of this failure unless combined with a theory that foregrounds West Germany's vulnerability to Soviet preventive aggression. This section examines some important alternative arguments, again focusing on the process leading up to the demise of the European Defense Community plan and the establishment of a U.S.-dominated security architecture in Western Europe embodied by NATO.

U.S. Security Patronage and Threats of Abandonment

The standard explanation for the European allies' ostensibly lackluster military efforts during the early Cold War is that they were exploiting the generosity of the leading alliance power's security guarantees. Robert Endicott Osgood captured this conventional wisdom, writing that "the basic difficulty" facing the United States in NATO was the allies' "natural reluctance ... to rearm in peacetime."[132] They preferred to rely "upon America's atomic deterrent" rather than pursue military self-help "at the sacrifice of domestic economic and social objectives."[133]

This argument fails to explain variation in the degree to which the core continental allies accommodated Washington's demands for militarization during this period. Unlike West Germany, France took significant strides toward revamping its armed forces under the auspices of America's devolutionary grand strategy. As Chief of the Defense Staff General Charles Léchères put it, France aimed to "accelerate armament and put its forces back on their feet" with the goal of becoming "the mainspring [*cheville ouvrière*] of the ground action" in the event of a Soviet attack."[134] U.S. leaders at the time were generally pleased with French efforts "to build up [the] morale, strength, organization and equip[ment]" of its armed forces.[135] West Germany's military buildup was less impressive, but this had much more to do with the constraints imposed by its security environment than a fundamental lack of willpower. Indeed, there are strong reasons to believe that, had it faced fewer externally imposed risks, West Germany would have rebuilt its armed forces much sooner — and much more powerfully — than it was allowed to in 1955. As historian Hans-Peter Schwarz observes, the Adenauer government's "determination to build up the Bundeswehr, equipped with the most modern weapons ... [was] one of the few constants in [its] otherwise confusing tactics in foreign affairs."[136]

The American public in the early Cold War was highly suspicious of foreign policy schemes that smacked of permanent U.S. leadership in distant regions and its attendant implications of higher taxes and deficit-driven inflation.

More broadly, NATO in its early years should arguably have become the benchmark case for the standard formulation of the retrenchment strategy. To begin with, Western Europe had sufficient material resources to develop the capabilities that could plausibly substitute the U.S. military commitment. As Sebastian Rosato demonstrates, a "continental combination including France, West Germany, and the smaller west European states" would certainly not have been "on the wrong end of a gross power

130 See Trachtenberg, *Constructed Peace,* chap. 9.

131 As Trachtenberg notes, the U.S.-dominated NATO system that emerged in the mid-1950s could not yet become a stable arrangement because "the American government had no interest in playing that kind of role on a permanent basis." Trachtenberg, *Constructed Peace,* 145.

132 Robert Endicott Osgood, *NATO: The Entangling Alliance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 64.

133 Osgood, *NATO*, 146.

134 Circa July 1950, quoted in Thompson, "Delusions of Grandeur," 92.

135 "The Secretary of State to Embassy in France," June 22, 1950, *FRUS 1950*, vol. 3, 1378.

136 Hans-Peter Schwarz, *Konrad Adenauer: German Politician and Statesman in a Period of War, Revolution, and Reconstruction*, vol. 2: *The Statesman, 1952–1967* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1997), 341.

mismatch."[137] In fact, U.S. analysts recognized early on that "[t]he potential military strength of the Old World in terms of manpower and in terms of war-making capacity is enormously greater than" what Washington could ever hope to commit to the region.[138] Thus, foreshadowing the views of today's retrenchment scholars, U.S. leaders thought it ludicrous that economically capable countries like France and West Germany should be indefinitely held in "paternal tutelage" under the American security umbrella.[139] European leaders themselves sometimes acknowledged this rationale, taking for granted that a militarily united Western Europe could, in principle, hope to deter the Soviets without American forces. "The United States would not for ever keep troops in Europe and Europe itself must therefore take lasting and effective measures against Soviet expansionism," Adenauer told British diplomats in August 1951. "This was only possible if Europe was genuinely united."[140]

Moreover, more so than any other time in its postwar history, the United States was dedicated to offloading the burden of European defense and had no qualms about making naked threats of abandonment toward that end. Secretary of State Acheson, a chief architect of American foreign policy in the early Cold War, was especially prone to dealing with the allies "with the gloves off," telling them outright that any substantial U.S. military support for Europe would be contingent on West Germany's full-scale rearmament.[141] Acheson's roughness with the allies was sometimes off-putting even to his friends and supporters. "Y've got the right idea, me lad," British Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin reportedly told him after one foreign ministers meeting, "but you do go about it the hard way."[142] Acheson's successor Dulles took the same approach. As he once explained to General Bradley, "The French and Germans [had] to see that" relinquishing them as allies "would be tolerable for us. … [This] would create pressures on them which would not exist if they think we are so committed that we must carry the entire load in the area."[143] Thus, in one historian's words, U.S. policymakers during this time were willing to suspend any pretense of "run[ning] the Western alliance as a democracy" and resort to "bribing and bullying tactics" to get the Europeans to take charge of their own security.[144]

Also important was the fact that U.S. domestic sentiment was conducive to retrenchment.[145] The American public in the early Cold War was highly suspicious of foreign policy schemes that smacked of permanent U.S. leadership in distant regions and its attendant implications of higher taxes and deficit-driven inflation.[146] Even the outbreak of the Korean War did not do away with this suspicion. As Aaron Friedberg observes, "Within a matter of months [following the North Korean invasion], opposition to financial extraction began to mount, and by the end of 1951, military planners had been forced to revise downward their expectations of the kinds of forces they could expect to maintain on a permanent basis once the fighting had ended."[147] Thus, when seeking approval for the deployment of additional ground troops to Europe in 1951, Truman administration officials bent over backward to reassure Congress that this did not mean "we would not within 10 or 20 or 30 years be able to withdraw from Europe," since the allies "would certainly have had time, with their populations and their arms production, to build up their own defense long before that."[148] All this is to say that neither the typical American voter nor legislator would have been terribly disappointed to see U.S. troops in Europe come home. That the domestic political climate was highly conducive to Washington's abandonment threats is indicated in

137 Sebastian Rosato, *Europe United: Power Politics and the Making of the European Community* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), 46. See table 1 in this book for a detailed comparison of material capacities (44).

138 Joint Chiefs of Staff, April 29, 1947, quoted in Rosato, *Europe United* (emphasis added).

139 Kennan, *Memoirs*, 464.

140 Quoted in McAllister, *No Exit*, 215.

141 "The Secretary of State to the Acting Secretary of State," September 15, 1950, *FRUS 1950,* vol. 3, 1229.

142 Quoted in Gehrz, "Dean Acheson," 135.

143 "Memorandum of Discussion of State-Mutual Security Agency-Joint Chiefs of Staff Meeting," January 28, 1953, *FRUS 1952–1954, Western European Security*, vol. 5, pt. 1 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1983), 712–13.

144 Gehrz, "Dean Acheson," 155.

145 Barbara Elias and Alex Weisiger argue that domestic pressures for withdrawal within the leading power can be important for securing compliant behavior from local allies. Barbara Elias and Alex Weisiger, "Influence through Absence in U.S. Counterinsurgency Interventions? Coercing Local Allies through Threats to Withdraw," *Civil Wars* 22, no. 4 (2020): 512–42, https://doi.org/10.1080/13698249.2020.1809193.

146 Aaron L. Friedberg, *In the Shadow of the Garrison State: America's Anti-Statism and Its Cold War Grand Strategy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), chaps. 2-4.

147 Friedberg, *In the Shadow*, 115.

148 Eisenhower, quoted in U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations and Committee on Armed Services, *Assignment of Ground Forces of the United States to Duty in the European Area, Eighty-Second Congress, Hearings, First Session, February 1951* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1951), 19.

the remarkable congressional declaration of July 1953, which stipulated that the United States would help the European Defense Community members procure military materiel "but delivery of the assistance shall not take place until the organization is formed."[149]

Seen in this light, U.S. foreign policy during NATO's early years can be described as an instance where American policymakers failed to achieve the goal of the retrenchment strategy despite meticulously following its standard prescriptions under relatively favorable conditions. Washington was by no means too sparing with its abandonment threats. And as hinted earlier, there is evidence that the Europeans took these threats seriously. The French, for one, proposed the European army plan out of fear that the United States might try to unilaterally build up the West German army in its haste to withdraw from Europe. At the end of the day, however, the allies did not calibrate their military policies primarily based on their assessment of what Washington would or would not do for them. Instead, the local security environment — shaped in large part by the threat of Soviet preventive aggression vis-à-vis West Germany — was the foremost consideration. Dulles thus took a lesson in humility from the European Defense Community debacle: "[W]e cannot always force people to do things they don't want to do."[150]

Domestic Politics

Another cluster of explanations focuses on domestic politics. Norrin Ripsman argues that France obstructed the birth of the European army because its leaders were vulnerable to punishment by their domestic constituents. While concurring with the need for a German military contribution, their hands were tied by a public staunchly opposed to any kind of German rearmament. The loss of popular support would "threaten the survival of the fragile governing coalition."[151] Historian Michael Creswell also finds some evidence for the importance of public opinion in both France and West Germany. "Four years under the yoke of German occupation," he writes, "left the French public understandably wary of any revival of German power and independence." A December 1950 poll indicated that nearly 70 percent of West Germans were opposed to rearmament as well.[152]

There is no question that public opinion was important for French and West German leaders. That said, "bottom-up" pressures from domestic constituencies do not fully explain why the West German military buildup stopped short of American ambitions. Most importantly, the preponderance of evidence suggests that European policymakers resisted U.S. plans to rearm West Germany primarily based on strategic considerations. Indeed, Ripsman acknowledges that the fear that "German rearmament might provoke the USSR and spark a war for which the West was ill-prepared" was a key reason why France spoiled Washington's devolutionary efforts. Public hostility to the European army plan was significant in good part because it provided French policymakers with yet another high card to play at the bargaining table to this end.[153] The same was true of West Germany, which played the decisive role in derailing the progress of the European Defense Community negotiations in late 1950. As Trachtenberg writes, Adenauer "felt it was important not to provoke the Soviets at a time when the West was so weak. … And the way to slow things down was to stress his very real domestic political problems, and to insist that a defense contribution would be politically possible only if the Federal Republic were treated as more of an equal."[154]

Moreover, arguments centered on domestic opinion are often unclear as to which domestic constituents will prevail over others. In France, for example, influential interest groups such as the military and industrial leadership strongly supported German rearmament. Policymakers arguably had incentives to accommodate their preferences to avoid civil-military ruptures and secure dividends for the French armaments industry.[155] Explanations that focus on domestic preferences thus offer indeterminate predictions in this case unless joined by an account of the local security dynamics that shaped the direction in which decision-makers sought to accommodate (and exploit) these preferences.

Another strand of reasoning highlights shifts in

149 "The Secretary of State to the Embassy in France," July 13, 1953, *FRUS 1952–1954*, vol. 5, pt. 1, 797; see also 797–98 for further details on this so-called Richards Amendment to the European Defense Community treaty.

150 "Memorandum of Discussion at the 216th Meeting of the National Security Council," October 6, 1954, *FRUS 1952–1954,* vol. 5, pt. 2, 1382.

151 Norrin M. Ripsman, "The Curious Case of German Rearmament: Democracy, Structural Autonomy, and Foreign Security Policy," *Security Studies* 10, no. 2 (Winter 2000/01): 29, https://doi.org/10.1080/09636410008429429.

152 Creswell, *Question of Balance*, 35–36.

153 Ripsman, "Curious Case of German Rearmament," 28. To be sure, Ripsman includes this fear as one of several strategic concerns that motivated French policymakers. Other scholars have pushed the inference a step further. Creswell and Trachtenberg argue that, on balance, the evidence suggests that "[the fear of provoking the Soviets into preventive war] was perhaps the most important reason that they believed West German rearmament needed to be delayed." Creswell and Trachtenberg, "France and the German Question," 21.

154 Trachtenberg, *Constructed Peace,* 112–13.

155 Creswell, *Question of Balance*, 5–6. See also Michael H. Creswell and Dieter H. Kollmer, "Power, Preferences, or Ideas? Explaining West Germany's Armaments Strategy, 1955–1972," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 15, no. 4 (Fall 2013): 55–103, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26924364.

domestic political coalitions. Helen Milner argues that changes in the composition of the French governing majority from 1952 from 1954 were decisive in sinking the European army plan. An especially important development was that the progenitors of the European Defense Community concept — leaders like Schuman of the *Mouvement Républicain Populaire* — gradually lost allies within government and were themselves ejected from the ruling coalition by 1954. Milner thus holds that while the European Defense Community treaty could have been "ratified in 1952 and perhaps even in 1953[,]" by the time it was submitted for vote by Mendès-France, "[i]ncreasing divisions in government and lack of endorsement prevented cooperation in this area."[156] In a similar vein, Benjamin Martill writes that the centrist politicians of the *Mouvement Républicain Populaire* were ideologically committed to containing the Soviet Union and broached the European Defense Community plan to "move France in a more pro-European and pro-Atlantic direction."[157] However, their efforts were torpedoed by the rise of an "anti-[European Defense Community] platform in the latter months of 1953" held together by politicians like Mendès-France who favored "disengaging" from the superpower competition and opposed the crystallization of the trans-Atlantic military alliance.[158]

As with his predecessors, Mendès-France's intent was not to undermine the birth of a Western military coalition involving West Germany but instead to ensure that the coalition would revolve around American rather than West German power.

These accounts betray several confusions. The first has to do with the degree of sincerity with which leaders like Schuman pursued the European army concept. Milner portrays Schuman's *Mouvement Républicain Populaire* as having been "internally united in favor of the [European Defense Community]" in the early 1950s.[159] As I have shown, however, French leaders proposed the European army plan not as a genuine alternative for European defense but as a means to "play for time" on West German rearmament. A second confusion lies in overstating the extent to which the defeat of the European Defense Community represented a victory for the political factions that opposed strong alignment with a U.S.-led military alliance. Martill argues that Mendès-France was a "notable [European Defense Community] skeptic" and that "French strategy would have experienced a turn toward disengagement" from NATO had he stayed in power after 1954.[160] It is certainly true that Mendès-France deliberately killed the European Defense Community treaty in the National Assembly.[161] In doing so, however, he was simply following through on a policy of obstruction maintained by "successive French prime ministers" since the beginning of the European army negotiations.[162] As with his predecessors, Mendès-France's intent was not to undermine the birth of a Western military coalition involving West Germany but instead to ensure that the coalition would revolve around American rather than West German power. If Mendès-France wanted wholesale "disengagement" from the West, it is unclear why he proposed the NATO solution as an alternative to the European Defense Community in August 1954 before anyone else did.[163]

French Fears of a Resurgent West Germany

A third possibility is that France derailed U.S. grand strategy because it feared West Germany's potential military resurgence. James McAllister argues that French policymakers worried about "how powerful Germany would be ten or twenty years later."[164] Mark Sheetz likewise writes that "relative gains [were] a major concern" in France's opposition to West Germany's military buildup.[165] I also argued

156 Helen V. Milner, *Interests, Institutions, and Information: Domestic Politics and International Relations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 195, 200.

157 Benjamin Martill, "Center of Gravity: Domestic Institutions and the Victory of Liberal Strategy in Cold War Europe," *Security Studies* 28, no. 1 (2019): 135, https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2018.1508636.

158 Martill, "Center of Gravity," 145.

159 Milner, *Interests, Institutions, and Information*, 194.

160 Martill, "Center of Gravity," 146–47.

161 See Large, *Germans to the Front*, 212.

162 Guillen, "Role of the Soviet Union," 83.

163 Trachtenberg, *Constructed Peace*, 124.

164 McAllister, No Exit, 75.

165 Sheetz, "Continental Drift," 199.

in my earlier work that France sought to obstruct Bonn's military revitalization out of fear that the materially superior West Germany, once rearmed, would soon come to dominate the Western security architecture at the expense of France.[166]

As alternatives to the theory laid out in this study go, this argument is the strongest. Even French leaders who were most clear-eyed about the primacy of the Soviet threat expressed significant concern that the German threat might be revived at some point in the future as well. One particularly serious concern was that even if the rearmed West Germany did not use force against its neighbors, it might try to draw on its increased bargaining leverage to drag NATO into a costly diplomatic or military confrontation with the Soviets to recover its lost eastern territories. The British ambassador to France recounted this fear after meeting with one French foreign ministry official in October 1950: "[H]e was sure that in two years Germany would have the largest army in Europe and would be in a position to dictate to us once more. … [they] might seek to detach themselves and threaten to go over to the East if we did not support them, or alternatively, they would push us into an aggressive war for the restitution of the lost provinces."[167] As Sheetz observes, "The weight of the evidence … is too massive to dislodge" the traditional view that France's behavior was driven by anxieties about West Germany's relative expansion.[168]

However, it is important to situate French concerns about West Germany within its fears about potential Soviet aggression against Western Europe. To a certain extent, as Creswell and Trachtenberg argue, French policymakers tended to publicly exaggerate their concerns about German military resurgence for instrumental purposes. At a time when the Atlantic alliance was woefully unprepared to meet the Soviet threat head-on, it made sense to portray its collective defense efforts as being aimed at containing a potential German threat rather than the Soviet one.[169] Foreign Minister Georges Bidault, who was adamantly opposed to any kind of German rearmament in public, privately characterized the idea of a renewed military threat from West Germany as a "useful myth" that could help the Europeans avoid needlessly antagonizing the Soviets.[170] As Bidault emphasized in April 1950, the real concern was "that a rearmament of Germany at present would provoke the Russians to war."[171] In fact, barring this concern, French policymakers sometimes highlighted a different kind of relative gains problem. They believed "it would be ridiculous" in the long run, one U.S. official reported after speaking with a senior French diplomat, "for the other European nations to make substantial, additional military efforts and to cut back normal production and consumption while Germany was permitted to manufacture on a 'peace time basis' for its internal consumption and for markets abroad."[172]

More importantly, France's concern about West Germany's future bargaining leverage was inextricably linked to the larger fear of provoking aggressive reactions from the Soviets. President Vincent Auriol articulated this connection to Prime Minister Pleven in August 1951, stressing that West German rearmament would be casus belli for Moscow since the Germans would then acquire the leverage to involve the allies in its claim to the lost territories. The Soviets would have ample reason to "accelerate the course of events" before this outcome materialized.[173] In a letter to Acheson in January 1952, Schuman likewise expressed concern about how the rearmed West Germany's enhanced stature vis-à-vis its allies would be perceived externally. "When the [Atlantic] pact was signed," Schuman reminded Acheson, "the statesmen of all the participating countries, beginning with those of the U.S., solemnly affirmed that the new alliance … presented a strictly defensive character. C[ou]ld we renew this affirmation with the same persuasive force if there were to be included in the Atlantic Council a power which — in contrast with all the other members — would be led by its very structure to advance territorial claims?"[174] In short, although France was genuinely afraid of West Germany's future bargaining clout, this fear should not be isolated from the fear of triggering Soviet aggression.

Finally, a theory that centers allied military vul-

166 Joshua Byun, "Regional Security Cooperation against Hegemonic Threats: Theory and Evidence from France and West Germany (1945–1965)," *European Journal of International Security* 7, no. 2 (May 2022): 143–63, https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/european-journal-of-international-security/article/abs/regional-security-cooperation-against-hegemonic-threats-theory-and-evidence-from-france-and-west-germany-194565/87BD2D99CFE014E470613FE242DFDC15.

167 "Sir O. Harvey (Paris) to Foreign Office," October 1, 1950, *DBPO*, sr. 2, vol. 3, Microfilm Supplement, Calendar 54i.

168 Mark S. Sheetz, "France and the German Question: Avant-garde or Rearguard? Comment on Creswell and Trachtenberg," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 5, no. 3 (Summer 2003): 37, https://doi.org/10.1162/jcws.2003.5.3.37.

169 Creswell and Trachtenberg, "France and the German Question," 7–16.

170 Creswell and Trachtenberg, "France and the German Question," 9.

171 "The Ambassador in France (Bruce) to the Secretary of State," April 22, 1950, *FRUS 1950*, vol. 3, 62.

172 "The Ambassador in France (Bruce) to Secretary of State," July 28, 1950, *FRUS 1950*, vol. 3, 157.

173 Note by Auriol to Pleven, August 27, 1951, quoted in Guillen, "Role of the Soviet Union," 74.

174 "Foreign Minister Schuman to the Secretary of State," January 29, 1952, *FRUS 1952–1954*, vol. 5, pt. 1, 10.

nerability is supported by the behavior of West Germany itself. Recall that it was Adenauer and not Schuman who played the key role in delaying the European army plan after the Spofford compromise of December 1950. A theory centered on the relative gains problem between France and West Germany has difficulty explaining why Bonn decided to throw a wrench into the process of its own rearmament.[175] The same behavior makes sense, however, when one recognizes the "parallelism" that existed between France and West Germany on the dangers of provoking the Soviets.[176] Adenauer's explanation to his party leadership was that "we Germans … should be careful not to lift a finger, lest it be smashed. … [We] should understand that we really do not matter much in world history these days."[177]

Implications for U.S. Grand Strategy

The stakes of the debate on the feasibility of U.S. global retrenchment are enormous, and scholars must look for insights wherever they can. In this article, I have reexamined Washington's failure to devolve its military burdens to core European allies and retrench from the continent during the first decade of the Cold War through a novel theoretical lens. Contrary to standard accounts that focus on Europe's material dearth or local incentives for cheap-riding, I have argued that Washington's plan for grand strategic retrenchment was derailed by allied efforts to avoid triggering costly preventive aggression against the highly vulnerable West Germany.

While the goal of this article is to shed light on an underexamined aspect of the early U.S. failure to retrench from Europe, my reinterpretation of this important case can help widen the aperture of the contemporary retrenchment debate in useful ways. American grand strategic plans in the first decade of the Cold War entailed the most systematic and determined effort in U.S. history to retrench from a key global region by devolving military responsibilities to local allies. No one who is properly read in the strategic thinking of this era can conclude that this scheme came to naught due to Washington's lack of trying. Instead, the retrenchment strategy failed in large part because one especially important ally — West Germany — was too vulnerable to acquire the military capabilities needed to make it work. In the 21st century, assessing how vulnerable local allies would be to preventive aggression during the process of military devolution, rather than their material potential per se, remains crucial for judging the feasibility of American retrenchment from key regions.[178]

Several region-specific conjectures follow. First, it stands to reason that the major countries of Western Europe could take up the mantle of regional collective defense should the United States decide to militarily retrench in the near term. This takeaway aligns with the virtually unanimous position of contemporary retrenchment advocates.[179] The success that the weak and exposed Ukraine has had in repelling Russia's full-scale invasion with only indirect U.S. and European military aid[180] underscores the possibility of a more generalized scheme of U.S. military withdrawal from — and offshore sponsorship for — the European continent. Russia is clearly in no position to take prohibitively costly countermeasures against the region's more substantial powers should they try to revamp their military capabilities.

But the essential question, in my view, is whether the East Asian allies can cope with the risk of preventively motivated countermeasures while military devolution proceeds, not whether they have the economic and technological capacity to potentially achieve self-help if the militarization is allowed to run its course.

The picture in East Asia is less straightforward. Most retrenchment advocates believe that a strategy combining gradual withdrawal with the devolution of military assets and responsibilities should work in this region as well. As a recent RAND study notes, the argument that the United

175 I thank Marc Trachtenberg for pointing this out to me in private correspondence.

176 October 17, 1950, quoted in Trachtenberg and Gehrz, "America, Europe, and German Rearmament," 13.

177 May 22, 1953, quoted in Granieri, *Ambivalent Alliance*, 74.

178 Of course, determining whether retrenchment would be *feasible* from a military point of view is only one component of the broader question of whether such a pullback would result in net political and economic gains for the United States, which I do not address in this article.

179 See Priebe et al., *Implementing Restraint*, chap. 2.

180 See Joshua Yaffa, "Inside the U.S. Effort to Arm Ukraine," *The New Yorker*, October 17, 2022, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/10/24/inside-the-us-effort-to-arm-ukraine. Ukraine's successes should be considered decisive evidence against the claim that contemporary Europe would not be able to take charge of its own security in the event of U.S. retrenchment. For this claim, see Hugo Meijer and Stephen G. Brooks, "Illusions of Autonomy: Why Europe Cannot Provide for Its Security if the United States Pulls Back," *International Security* 45, no. 4 (Spring 2021): 7–43, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00405.

States should sustain or even increase its military presence in East Asia — espoused by scholars like John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt — has become a "minority view" among realists who generally oppose a U.S. grand strategy of military activism.[181] Optimism about U.S. retrenchment is largely based on assessments of the collective power potential of America's regional allies. As Barry Posen observes, "The principal and middle powers in Asia … have, or soon will have, the capability to" take the lead in checking an expansionist China.[182]

But the essential question, in my view, is whether the East Asian allies can cope with the risk of preventively motivated countermeasures while military devolution proceeds, not whether they have the economic and technological capacity to *potentially* achieve self-help if the militarization is allowed to run its course. Two distinct outcomes are possible here. On the one hand, the allies enjoy significant sources of strength that may enable them to fully accommodate the capabilities needed for U.S. retrenchment to proceed. Gholz and colleagues observe that, on top of its existing troop presence, America can mitigate the dangers of military devolution by "maintain[ing] its current nuclear commitments while it pulls out of Asia."[183] This echoes the attitudes of U.S. leaders toward early Cold War Europe. East Asia also carries important advantages that NATO did not have during the Cold War: Given their noncontiguous geographic position vis-à-vis China, no core U.S. ally in East Asia faces the prospect of massive land invasion like the Western Europeans did during the Cold War.[184] By moving forward with grand strategic retrenchment in East Asia, the United States would be betting that local allies will take sufficient comfort in such advantages to move ahead with decisive military buildups that can substitute for the U.S. military presence.

On the other hand, at least two factors caution against this bet. First, the continued growth of China's anti-access/area denial and naval capabilities is widening the "contested battlespace" in the Western Pacific wherein U.S. forces might not be able to secure

181 Priebe et al., *Implementing Restraint*, 51.

182 Posen, *Restraint*, 96–97.

183 Gholz, Press, and Sapolsky, "Come Home, America," 23.

184 For a good example of campaign analyses that emphasize this point, see Michael Beckley, "The Emerging Military Balance in East Asia: How China's Neighbors can Check Chinese Naval Expansion," *International Security* 42, no. 2 (Fall 2017): 78–119, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00294.

freedom of air or surface movement during wartime.[185] The United States faced the Cold War with a secure foothold on the European continent that streamlined force projection into NATO's all-important central region. The problem then was numerical inferiority rather than access. Today, the United States enjoys marked superiority vis-à-vis its main adversary on most dimensions of military power. However, the challenge that China's new capabilities poses to U.S. strategic and operational mobility could make regional allies — particularly those located closer to the Chinese littoral — question whether Washington will be able to reliably concentrate forces in their theater during a serious crisis. In this respect, the maritime character of the East Asian battlespace may exacerbate the military vulnerabilities perceived by some U.S. allies rather than mitigate them. Just as West Germany in the early Cold War did not believe that America's overall military might would properly shield it from Soviet preventive aggression, frontline states like Taiwan or South Korea may fear getting "picked off" by Chinese preventive coercion in isolation from allied support. This could make them think twice before antagonizing China with ambitious military buildups.[186] One veteran policymaker in South Korea, for example, expresses doubt that Seoul will be able to pursue ambitious force enhancements targeting China partly because "it would probably be difficult for us to withstand China's blatant attempts at coercion unless the United States is willing to provide especially powerful assurances." He fears that South Korea might find itself "on the receiving end of China's wrath" while U.S. support is constrained.[187]

Some may argue that the U.S. nuclear umbrella should quell such concerns. However, recent studies challenge the view that extended nuclear deterrence can always reliably shield allies from costly aggression.[188] U.S. allies are typically sensitive to the limits of extended nuclear deterrence, which is why they took cold comfort in the American argument during the early Cold War that the Soviets would refrain from launching a preventive attack against a West German military buildup. This was so even though the United States enjoyed unambiguous nuclear superiority over the Soviet Union during most of those years. U.S. allies in East Asia today harbor similar skepticisms, which is why thorny questions involving the great-power adversary's incentives to shore up its security situation by force remain as relevant today as they were during the Cold War.

Second, to the extent the United States needs to cultivate a "federated network" of allied capabilities in East Asia to pursue an orderly military withdrawal, it may not be able to simply write off relatively vulnerable allies and partners from its East Asian strategic planning.[189] Recall that West Germany was indispensable for Western military efforts due to both its material potential and its critical geographic location; the Soviet Union would have found itself in a radically improved position to attack or coerce the rest of Western Europe once West Germany had fallen into its orbit. In a similar vein, several experts have argued that constructing a robust network of counterhegemonic capabilities in East Asia will become much more difficult without keeping vulnerable frontline territories like Taiwan in friendly hands.[190] In fact, Japanese security experts have long feared the implications of the People's Liberation Army operating "out of" Taiwan's eastern ports. A former consultant for Japan's National Security Secretariat argues that key U.S. allies like Japan and South Korea might be "relegated to the status of small 'enclaves' in a sea dominated by Chinese power" in such circumstances, adding that "China's [anti-access/area denial] capabilities are [already] said to make many forms of U.S. military intervention prohibitively costly for some areas in the East Asian littoral." Should China seize Taiwan, he continues, "the zone for which this logic applies would expand dramatically. Thus, Taiwan's security isn't strictly 'divisible' from that of Japan."[191]

This discussion of how preventive dynamics might impact the prospects of U.S. military retrenchment from East Asia is necessarily cursory. In the final

185 Stephen Biddle and Ivan Oelrich, "Future Warfare in the Western Pacific: Chinese Anti-access/Area Denial, U.S. AirSea Battle, and Command of the Commons in East Asia," *International Security* 41, no. 1 (Summer 2016): 12.

186 Joshua Byun and Do Young Lee, "The Case against Nuclear Sharing in East Asia," *Washington Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (Winter 2022): 67–87, esp. 77–78, https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2021.2018793. See also Robert S. Ross, "Balance of Power Politics and the Rise of China: Accommodation and Balancing in East Asia," *Security Studies* 15, no. 3 (2006): 355–95, https://doi.org/10.1080/09636410601028206.

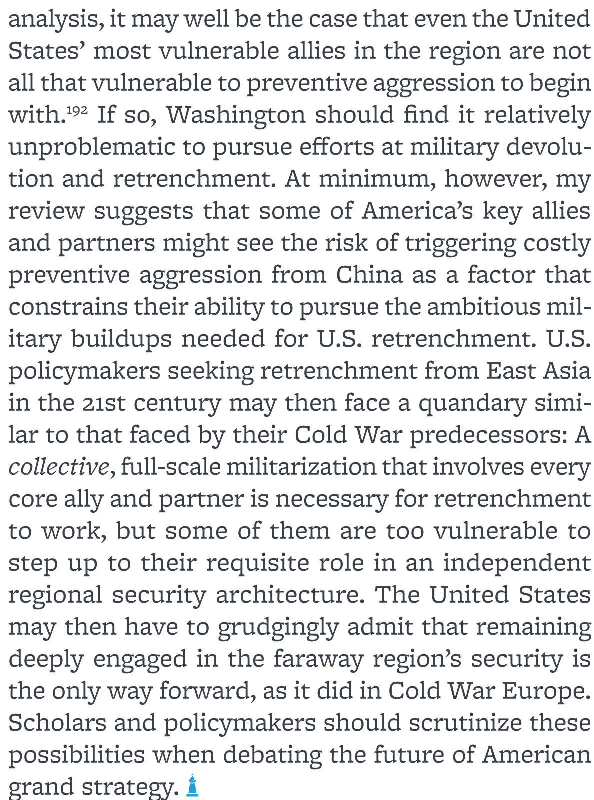
187 Former Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Sung-han Kim, July 23, 2019, quoted in Byun and Lee, "Case against Nuclear Sharing," 78. Kim subsequently served as South Korea's national security advisor.

188 Lieber and Press, *Myth of the Nuclear Revolution*, chap. 4.

189 The quoted term is from Nina Silove, "The Pivot before the Pivot: U.S. Strategy to Preserve the Power Balance in Asia," *International Security* 40, no. 4 (Spring 2016): 65, https://www.jstor.org/stable/43828314. While largely optimistic about U.S. retrenchment, MacDonald and Parent acknowledge that the strategy may face challenges in today's East Asia partly because local powers may not be able to "combine power and proximity to effectively check China on their own." MacDonald and Parent, *Twilight of the Titans*, 198.

190 The most comprehensive recent analysis is Brendan Rittenhouse Green and Caitlin Talmadge, "Then What? Assessing the Military Implications of Chinese Control of Taiwan," *International Security* 47, no. 1 (Summer 2022): 7–45, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00437.

191 Author interview with Satoru Mori, December 22, 2023.



analysis, it may well be the case that even the United States' most vulnerable allies in the region are not all that vulnerable to preventive aggression to begin with.[192] If so, Washington should find it relatively unproblematic to pursue efforts at military devolution and retrenchment. At minimum, however, my review suggests that some of America's key allies and partners might see the risk of triggering costly preventive aggression from China as a factor that constrains their ability to pursue the ambitious military buildups needed for U.S. retrenchment. U.S. policymakers seeking retrenchment from East Asia in the 21st century may then face a quandary similar to that faced by their Cold War predecessors: A *collective*, full-scale militarization that involves every core ally and partner is necessary for retrenchment to work, but some of them are too vulnerable to step up to their requisite role in an independent regional security architecture. The United States may then have to grudgingly admit that remaining deeply engaged in the faraway region's security is the only way forward, as it did in Cold War Europe. Scholars and policymakers should scrutinize these possibilities when debating the future of American grand strategy.

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Image: *Central Intelligence Agency*[193]

192 See Beckley, "The Emerging Military Balance in East Asia."

193 For the image, see https://www.flickr.com/photos/59094030@N08/8054639344.