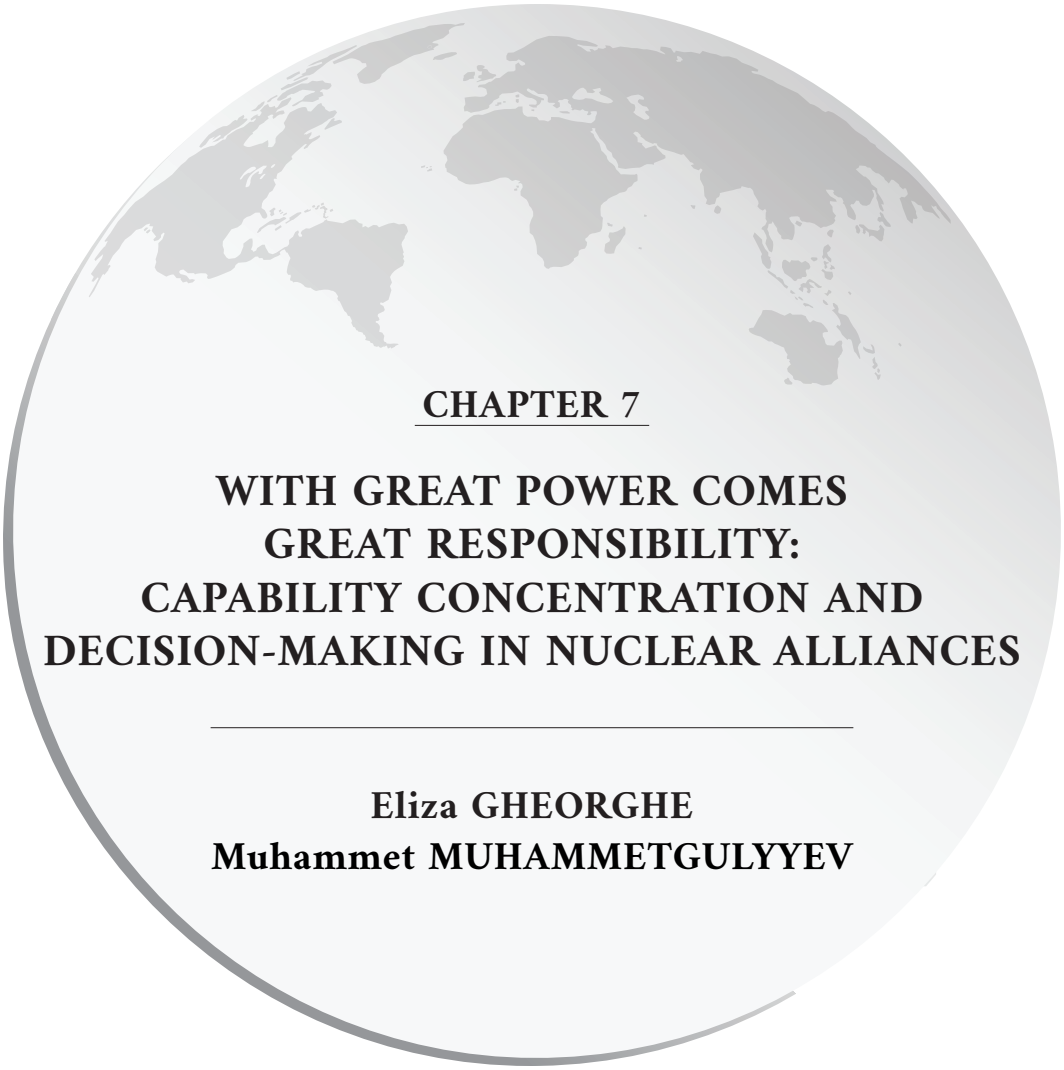

CHAPTER 7

WITH GREAT POWER COMES GREAT RESPONSIBILITY: CAPABILITY CONCENTRATION AND DECISION-MAKING IN NUCLEAR ALLIANCES

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Abstract

Why, when, and how do nuclear-armed patrons involve their junior partners in making decisions about nuclear weapons? We argue that nuclear alliances' decision-making styles are a function of the concentration of capabilities among the member states. We draw on the history of NATO and the Warsaw Pact during the Cold War to shed light on how nuclear decision-making processes in these alliances evolved from unilateralism to multilateralism against the background of power shifts. We show that both NATO and the Warsaw Pact initially had high levels of power concentration, which meant the hegemon of each alliance could unilaterally impose decisions involving nuclear weapons on the junior partners. However, as capability concentration decreased over time, both alliances agreed to increasingly split the process and authority over nuclear weapons between the hegemon and individual allies. They transitioned to bilateralism and then to multilateralism and balanced two important goals: preserving the position of the hegemon as 'primus inter pares' while conceding a significant share of decision-making power to junior partners. Both alliances had to deal with the threat of atomisation, which eventually they managed to avoid. We also discuss the current challenges faced by NATO, in particular vis-à-vis Russia. We look at the request made by Poland to join NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements and assess the likelihood of Washington agreeing to this request. The chapter concludes by emphasizing the responsibility that comes with decision-making authority over nuclear weapons and the need for junior partners to consider this responsibility as they gain more strength within the alliance.

Keywords
Alliances, Nuclear Weapons, NATO, Warsaw Pact, Cold War

DOI: 10.53478/TUBA.978-625-6110-04-5.ch07

In March 2023, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced that Russia would transfer tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus, in a move he likened to NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements. The deployment follows a 2021 offer by Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko to host Russian nuclear weapons. Lukashenko has insisted that Belarusian pilots and missile crews are trained to use the forward deployed Russian nuclear warheads (TASS, 2023). This development has caused great alarm among NATO members, especially Poland, which shares a border with Belarus. At the 2023 NATO summit in Vilnius, Polish Prime Minister Mateus Morawiecki has requested that the United States deploy B61 nuclear bombs on Polish soil (Łukaszewski, 2023).

Why would Belarus and Poland want to host forward nuclear weapons on their territory? Poland is covered by NATO's Article 5, even without B61s on its territory, just as Belarus has benefitted from Russia's nuclear umbrella without the forward deployed nuclear weapons. Using tactical nuclear weapons on the battlefield would spell disaster for both Minsk and Warsaw, so the military utility of these weapons is questionable (Horovitz, 2014; Suchy & Thayer, 2014). But forward nuclear deployments send powerful political signals (Fuhrmann & Sechser, 2014). They give junior partners a say in the nuclear decision-making process, providing for a more equitable rapport between patron and protégé. Why would nuclear-armed states like the United States and Russia agree to involve their partners in the decision-making process of nuclear alliances? This paper argues that the decision-making style of nuclear alliances is a function of power concentration among the allies.

The rest of this paper is divided into six sections. The first part presents the theory, followed by a discussion of alternative explanations in the second section and of methodology in the third segment. In the fourth part, the paper draws on empirical evidence from NATO and the Warsaw Pact during the Cold War to test the theory, using recently declassified documents from both sides of the Iron Curtain. The fifth section discusses how well alternative theories explain the empirics. The conclusion summarises the findings and discusses current issues in NATO, including the likelihood of nuclear sharing with Poland.

Theorising Decision-Making on Nuclear Use

Alliances bring together nations interested in achieving a common security goal or gaining mutual benefits (Poast, 2019, p. 4; Walt, 1987, p. 5). In the military realm, alliances take the form of intergovernmental organizations charged with executing formalised security guarantees between states. Nuclear alliances embody a commitment made by a country armed with atomic weapons to protect others from external aggression.[1] The patron takes upon itself the task of deterring attacks and retaliating against adversaries' encroachments by leveraging its nuclear arsenal, thus providing extended deterrence to the other members.[2] The weaker states in the alliance are its junior partners, whose role within the organisation is commensurate with their strength.

The decision-making style of the alliance varies with the level of power concentration among the member-states. Thus, alliance decision-making reflects the idea that "with great power comes great responsibility." The superior strength of the hegemon within the alliance obliges it to take on the duty of providing security to the other member states. In this capacity, the protector expends its resources to acquire the weapons systems necessary for defending the alliance as a whole. It also picks the targets, chooses when to initiate war, calibrates the level of military force employed, and takes care of wartime planning. In exchange for assuming the role of protector, the hegemon expects to preserve a preponderance of power within the alliance. In this respect, it seeks to be at the centre of the decision-making process and have the last word on waging war. It does not want other countries to join the nuclear club and seeks to pair its monopoly on atomic weapons with being the only actor with the finger on the trigger (Maddock, 2010; Coe & Vaynman, 2015; Gheorghe, 2019).

1 For a discussion of other rationales for alliance formation, see Sayle (2019, pp. 1–3).

2 States armed with nuclear weapons can refrain from offering nuclear security guarantees to their allies, preferring instead to provide protection only with conventional means. Conventional extended deterrence falls outside the scope of this article, whose sole focus is on nuclear security guarantees. For an overview of both conventional and nuclear extended deterrence, see Lee (2021).

The junior partners depend on the hegemon for security and benefit from the protection their patron offers with its atomic arsenal. Their experience is completely different from the hegemon's: with weakness comes little responsibility. Lack of strength frees them from burden (Walt, 1987, p. 30). Since they do not have impressive deterrent or retaliatory capabilities, they are far from being the first-port-of-call when conflict begins. Their ability to shape the course of war, especially when it is conducted at the atomic level, is limited, as they have little say over who, when, where, and how uses nuclear weapons.

The different levels of power concentration within an alliance determine the range of decision-making styles on nuclear use - unilateral, bilateral, multilateral, and atomised.[3] When power is concentrated in the hands of the hegemon, it maintains sole authority over nuclear weapons and the alliance adopts a unilateral style of nuclear decision-making. The patron neither discloses its nuclear capabilities and war plans to its allies, nor informs the junior partners about the location of its weapon systems and the timing of launching a war, even if the allies' own territories are concerned.

As power concentration decreases, the alliance adopts a bilateral decision-making style, with decisions being made by the hegemon and individual allies within separate dyads. Bilateral arrangements divide authority on nuclear weapons between patron and protégé. The hegemon deploys atomic warheads on the territory of the junior partners and provides them with the necessary delivery systems under dual-key arrangements. Thus, these atomic weapons cannot be launched without the agreement of both parties, thus giving the junior partner equal say with the patron.

With a further decline in power concentration, alliances adopt a multilateral style of decision-making, which entails participation in nuclear weapons deliberations by all alliance members. The hegemon and the junior partners choose a particular course of action by consensus, a procedure that creates a level playing field for all alliance members. Allies do not need to host the patron's atomic warheads to be part of the process.

If power ceases to be concentrated, the alliance develops an atomised decision-making style. Every alliance member individually determines and pursues the course of action it prefers. This style is akin to a collection of unilateral processes, with each actor making decisions about nuclear weapons independently of the others. It occurs in alliances where all members have nuclear arsenals of their own and exercise sole control over them. Each devises plans for fighting a nuclear war on their own, and does not need to involve other alliance members in determining the targets, timing, or number of atomic weapons used in conflict.

Rational Choice, Regime Type, and Cognitive Processes

Other scholars have theorised about the decision-making process within nuclear alliances by focusing on three clusters of explanatory variables: rational choice, regime type, and psychology. Rational choice theories propose that when two alliances compete with each other, decision-making should entail complete decentralization to maximize member states' security. Following the "more may be better" logic, alliances should allow their members to get their own nuclear arsenals to deter adversaries (de Mesquita & Riker, 1982; Mearsheimer, 1990; Waltz, 1981). Doing otherwise amounts to boxing with one arm tied behind one's back.

Regime type theories argue that organisations take on the political character of their constituents (Ikenberry, 2000; Lanoszka, 2013, p. 389). Alliances comprised of liberal democracies make decisions democratically, while alliances that bring together totalitarian regimes make decisions autocratically (Hyde & Saunders, 2020). In democratic alliances, members have the opportunity to express their preferences and choosing the course of action favoured by the majority (Gaubatz,

3 Gheorghe (2022) argues that "decisions inside an alliance are reached either through bargaining, which involves consultation and accommodation, or diktat, which entails dismissal and coercion" (p. 94). This article goes beyond the bargaining-coercion framework to examine how many parties are involved decision-making.

1996). In autocratic alliances, one or a few members control the process to elicit the desired outcome while suppressing dissent (Kramer, 1985). If the ruler(s) determine(s) that the utilization of nuclear weapons is necessary, then the alliance must oblige. A popular view in the literature is that NATO, as a democratic alliance, made decisions democratically, while the Warsaw Pact, as an autocratic alliance, made decisions autocratically (Heuser, 2006; Lake, 2009, p. 146; Liska, 1968; Morgenthau, 1976; Risse, 1997; Walt, 1987, p. 280).

The Cognitive Decision-Making Paradigm emphasizes operational codes, defined as psychological filters through which the organization perceives, processes, and responds to external or internal stimuli (Leites, 1977, 2007). Differences in style can stem from cultural codes, belief systems, and socialization (Egeland, 2020; Schein, 1996; Winter & Stewart, 1977).

Methodology

This paper employs historical case studies of NATO and the Warsaw Pact to test the proposed theory of nuclear decision-making against the alternatives. The two alliances are amenable to being analysed using a "most different systems design" given the above-mentioned conventional wisdom. The independent variable – centralization of power in an alliance – is measured through the capability concentration index (Bennett, 1997; Gibler & Rider, 2004).[4] The index ranges from 0 (equal distribution) to 1 (monopoly of capabilities by one alliance member). The dependent variable – nuclear decision-making styles – is measured by looking at the dispersal of authority among alliance members over nuclear weapons. The empirical section is divided into two sections, one for each Cold War alliance. Both NATO and the Warsaw Pact went through three distinct phases, corresponding to changes in the power concentration between the hegemon and the junior partners and decision-making style.

Empirics

NATO

Phase I (1949 - 1955)

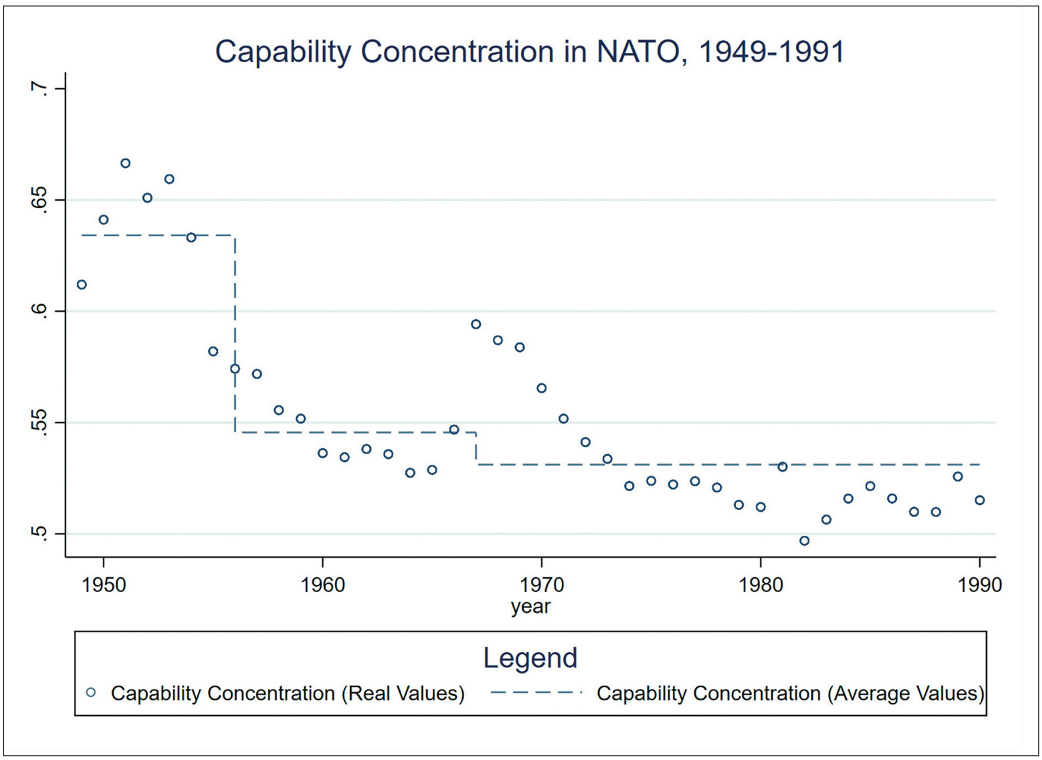
In the aftermath of World War II, the United States and its allies in Western Europe stood in sharp contrast to each other. On the one hand, the US experienced rapid post-war economic growth due to the lack of infrastructural damage, had apparent conventional military superiority, and for several years enjoyed a monopoly on nuclear weapons. On the other hand, Europe was still recovering from the damages of war, France was going through political turmoil, and West Germany was an occupied rather than sovereign state.

Faced with the challenge of communism, propagated by the Soviet Union and its Eastern European satellites, the Western world unified their efforts and formed the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Without the US, the balance of power between Continental Western Europe and USSR was tipped in Moscow's favour (Ismay, 1954, p. 29). This asymmetry, combined with the US conventional and nuclear military superiority within the Western bloc, prompted the Europeans to enter a nuclear alliance with the United States. In this period, power within NATO was concentrated in the hands of the US, which possessed undisputed military superiority, as shown in figure 1.

The US had certain privileges stemming from its status as hegemonic protector. The significant gap in capabilities between the US and its allies translated into a unilateral nuclear decision-making process. From the year of the alliance's creation until roughly 1955, the US had the power to unilaterally make and impose decisions regarding the placement and use of nuclear weapons. Moreover, the US had the privilege of maintaining secrecy and ambiguity in its considerations of the alliance's extended nuclear deterrence and wartime planning in general.

4 Capability concentration is calculated using the National Material Capabilities dataset created by David Singer. See Singer (1988).

Figure 1
Capability Concentration in NATO, 1949-1991



The Western allies demanded transparency and consultation in the nuclear weapons decision-making process of the alliance. Among the less successful of demands were the ones voiced by still-occupied West Germany. When the issue of unanimity was raised in September of 1950, it was deemed impossible because it would mean veto power for Germany (Schwarz et al., 1997a, p. 339). Neither the US nor other European powers wished for this scenario. Nevertheless, in November of the same year, American decision-makers indicated that the US would favour participation – without the intention of national remilitarization – of West Germany in a European force (Schwarz et al., 1997b, pp. 420–424). The US interest in German participation was a unilateral demand from the hegemon, since Germany was not involved in the decision-making process and was not allowed to have a nationally controlled military force (Schwarz et al., 2000, pp. 9–12). Up until 1955, West Germany remained an occupied power, which already meant Washington's unilateral decisions regarding the use and placement of weapons on German territory went unquestioned. When the US High Commissioner took this issue up with Chancellor Adenauer on July 12, 1954, the Germans indicated that "the reserved powers and military rights in the Bonn Conventions could be interpreted to give [the US] the right to store and use atomic weapons from our bases without formal consent of the German Government" (Unger, 1955).

In the early unilateral phase of NATO, even the 'special' allies were repeatedly denied opportunities at bilateral or multilateral consultation. Indeed, the United States government was very careful on the interpretations of the word "consult" not to be expressed synonymously with "consent". Congress was keen to avoid any commitments that would delay the implementation of a nuclear use decision by the US President. The United States thus denied Canadian and British requests for consultation, and delayed convening a tripartite meeting so as not to find itself under combined pressure (Aandahl, 1979a, pp. 811–814). In case of the UK, the counterforce to the US hegemonic position within the alliance stemmed from the British Parliament's desire for equality and ultimate independence regarding security decisions. Some British MPs even demanded veto power over US atomic attacks (Aandahl, 1979b, pp. 866–874). Meanwhile, the US refused to "enter into any agreement or commitment or procedure that would imply a commitment, even a commitment to talk or to follow any given procedure" (Matthews, 1951). The British

consequently responded by dividing the issue of nuclear use into two scenarios: a surprise attack by the Soviets, where it is clear the US should take immediate action without consultation, and a more general issue of military strategy, where the British felt consultation was necessary (Arneson, 1952). From this the United States understood that allied governments were prepared to let the US use their territories and facilities as long as they received firm commitments that the actual strikes from their territories will be a joint decision (US Department of State, 1952). Still, the US firmly held on to unilateral nuclear decision-making. It did acknowledge in 1954 that "the Executive Branch of the US government must be prepared to give assurances that nuclear weapons in the hands of US forces in NATO will be in sufficient quantity and available to support NATO plans" (Slany, 1983, pp. 529–532). But at the same time, in a meeting with senior advisers on December 8, 1954, President Eisenhower made it clear that the United States would be the controlling voice in any NATO nuclear decision: the "US must retain freedom to use atomic weapons on its own decision in the event of threat to our own forces" (Goodpaster, 1954). If the US was to keep troops in Europe, "we must and will retain the freedom to initiate use of these weapons" (Goodpaster, 1954).

The back-and-forth between the British and the Americans is characteristic of alliances where power is concentrated in the hands of the patron. The US was aware and actively benefiting from the advantages provided by unilateral decision-making when dealing with France during the same period. The Department of State preferred not to initiate discussions about consultation with the French – as well as the other allies – since "there is no point in whetting the appetites of other NATO countries in this regard" (Arneson, 1953). The reasoning was guided by the "fear that premature discussion on this issue either bilaterally with the French or multilaterally in NATO, would deter, rather than facilitate, the grant of the rights we intend ultimately to obtain and would also serve to hold up the construction of airbases urgently needed" (US Department of State, 1952).

Phase II (1956 - 1966)

The second, bilateral phase of NATO coincided with West Germany joining the alliance, which marked its "return to sovereignty" (Schwartz, 1991, p. 155). This stage was brought about by a decrease in power concentration between the hegemon and the junior partners as can be seen in figure 1. America's allies experienced a significant improvement in the equipment and training of their armed forces, and a strengthening of economic power (Schwarz et al., 2001, pp. 414–417). Consequently, the US put in place the 1956 US-NATO information agreement that allowed a fuller transfer of information and training for atomic weapons (Sayle, 2020, p. 926). The modifications aimed at increasing the defence capabilities of the alliance also served as a source of nuclear decision-making power for individual junior partners vis-à-vis the hegemon in a bilateral context.

The bilateral nuclear decision-making process led to President Eisenhower's 1957 offer to deploy nuclear warheads on some NATO allies' territories (Sayle, 2020, p. 926). These weapons were controlled through a 'dual key' system, premised on the distinction between nuclear warheads and their delivery systems. In the unilateral phase, both of these components were under exclusive US ownership and custody. In the bilateral phase, the US retained the physical control of the nuclear warheads, while the delivery systems – and consequently the decision to employ them – were under the control of the host government.

Various individual allies hosted different amounts of nuclear warheads and were sold different types of delivery systems. For instance, the US established bilateral arrangements through which Italy and Türkiye hosted IRBM's on their territory (Osgood, 1962, pp. 1–2). To the UK, on the other hand, the United States agreed to sell submarine-launched Polaris missiles in December 1962. West Germany, Belgium, and Netherlands, primarily due to their strategic location, each received aircraft that could deliver American gravity bombs. However, there were junior partners that refused Eisenhower's 'dual key' arrangements. First among those was France, which rejected the idea of hosting nuclear warheads without being delegated physical control over them (Osgood, 1962, pp. 1–2). In 1960, Norway and Denmark also expressed their refusal (Sayle, 2020, p. 929).

French reasoning reminded the US of the greatest risk of nuclear sharing arrangements: the possibility that a junior partner might seize control of the nuclear weapons provided through 'dual key' agreements. Moreover, the same fears existed among some junior partners in regards to others, for instance the alliance-wide concerns of German remilitarization and the prospect of them nationalizing the American nuclear weapons. The US, on the other hand, viewed the 'dual key' arrangement with FRG as a way to retain control over future German nuclear developments and to "head off any possible desire by the FRG to develop its own nuclear capacity" (Sayle, 2020, p. 930). In order to ensure and tighten US control over the nuclear weapons under 'dual key' arrangements, the Kennedy administration installed permissive action links (PALs) on the forward deployed atomic warheads (Weber, 1992, p. 673).

With the separation of authority over the two components of nuclear weapons secured, decisions over nuclear use became truly bilateral. That is, both the hegemon and the host government had mutual veto power on the decision to launch nuclear weapons. The advantage of bilateralism was that the allies could cooperate with their protector on a one-on-one basis in making decisions around their vital interests. Thus, the allies were granted more say in questions of military strategy. The equalisation through mutual veto, however, came with its costs. If in the unilateral phase, the US could immediately make the decision to use nuclear weapons for the defence of the alliance, the bilateral agreements created both the need to wait for a positive response from a junior partner hosting nuclear weapons and the risk that the decision would get vetoed at a critical moment.

Moreover, the fact that the US did not establish bilateral agreements with all its junior partners, and that the individual arrangements varied in their terms, led to confusion and stratification within the alliance. For allies that refused to host nuclear weapons on their territories, such as France, the lack of 'dual key' arrangements directly translated into a lack of involvement in alliance's strategic decision-making process. The burden of establishing bilateral arrangements while at the same time unilaterally accommodating the security needs of those junior partners that did not host nuclear weapons placed the US in an increasingly disadvantageous position.

Phase III (1967 - 1991)

As NATO allies began to increase their conventional forces in 1962, the concentration of capabilities inside NATO declined even further, reaching its lowest value, as shown in figure 1. In this phase, the alliance evolved towards multilateralism. The most prominent idea put forward was the plan of establishing a Multilateral (Nuclear) Force (MLF). The idea of a multilateral nuclear sharing arrangement emerged during the end of the Eisenhower administration. The Nassau meeting between Kennedy and British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan in December 1962 detailed what the MLF would entail: "a naval fleet of some 25 surface ships, nuclear armed, most probably with Polaris A3 missiles, to be manned, owned, and 'controlled' by various subscribing nations" (Priest, 2007, p. 149). It is evident from the proposal that the "US is prepared to accept, as legitimate in political terms, an allied desire for a greater role in the nuclear field, the role is fulfilled in a military framework which links it to other alliance nuclear forces and through a genuinely multilateral form" (US Department of State, 1962). It is important to note that the US intended to solve several political rather than military issues of the alliance. First and foremost, the MLF would strengthen European cohesion, which was damaged by French defiance. Further cohesion would be achieved as the MLF brought the UK in closer cooperation with West Germany and Italy (Keefer, 1994b, pp. 155–156). Second, the MLF was seen as a way to address the German issue. Namely, it gave Germans political equality with nuclear-armed France and Britain, granting them military security while discouraging a German national nuclear deterrent and preventing the formation of a Franco-German axis (Keefer, 1994a, pp. 502–506; Patterson, 1999, pp. 323–325).

In order to test the feasibility of – and gain allied support for – the MLF, in June 1964 the United States initiated a Mixed-Manned Demonstration (MMD) aboard a US destroyer. The *Biddle*, soon recommissioned as the USS *Claude V. Ricketts*, hosted a multinational crew from seven NATO member states – the United States, the UK, the FRG, Italy, Greece, Türkiye, and Netherlands – for eighteen months and patrolled North Atlantic and Mediterranean waters (Priest, 2005, p. 761). Despite the MMD's relatively successful conclusion, the exercise failed to make a strong case for MLF supporters.

With US personnel comprising half of the crew, and the ship, captain, and administrative and logistical support for the MMD being provided by the United States, it was hard to claim the demonstration to have been truly multinational and, consequently, multilateral (Priest, 2005, p. 787).

The demonstration aboard the *Ricketts* also indirectly allowed a crucial structural distinction. The MLF aimed to multilaterally involve junior partners joined through alliance-wide nuclear sharing. In principle, this arrangement would have ensured equal contribution and decision-making through consensus. However, despite the aims of equality and unity, the MLF only magnified existing tensions in Europe. On the one hand, the UK was interested in preserving its privileged position within the alliance. Although the British agreed to commit their Polaris submarines to the MLF, the US indicated that this would fall short of the minimum degree of participation required from the UK. The British presented a counterproposal - the Atlantic Nuclear Force (ANF), which, as Prime Minister Harold Wilson himself admitted, was designed to kill the MLF (Priest, 2007, p. 150). In the end, both proposals failed to materialise.

Another reason behind the MLF's failure was the continued fear of West German nuclear ambitions. The first to voice this concern were the British. When President Kennedy asked Prime Minister Wilson about the views on MLF, he responded that "the only circumstances in which Labour government would support the MLF would be if this were the only way to prevent Germany from acquiring a national nuclear force" (LaFantasie, 1995b, pp. 458–461). But the British soon concluded that the MLF was equivalent to "putting the German finger on the nuclear trigger" (LaFantasie, 1995b, pp. 458–461). Apparently, not enough emphasis was placed on the implication that the atomic warheads would never be transferred to national control (Patterson, 1997, pp. 64–65). The Americans, on the contrary, were anticipating the FRG losing enthusiasm once they became aware how little leverage the costly MLF would grant them (Keefer, 1994a, pp. 502–506). The Americans had to respond to the same fears expressed by the French by stating that the US never contemplated a bilateral agreement with Germany (LaFantasie, 1995a, pp. 108–109). When expressing these concerns, the French Ambassador to the United States viewed the MLF, in sharp contrast to the proposal's purposes, to be the most divisive problem for NATO (LaFantasie, 1995b, pp. 92–93). With each member possessing a separate deterrent, the decision for nuclear use would lay in the hands of individual allies and the process would become atomised.

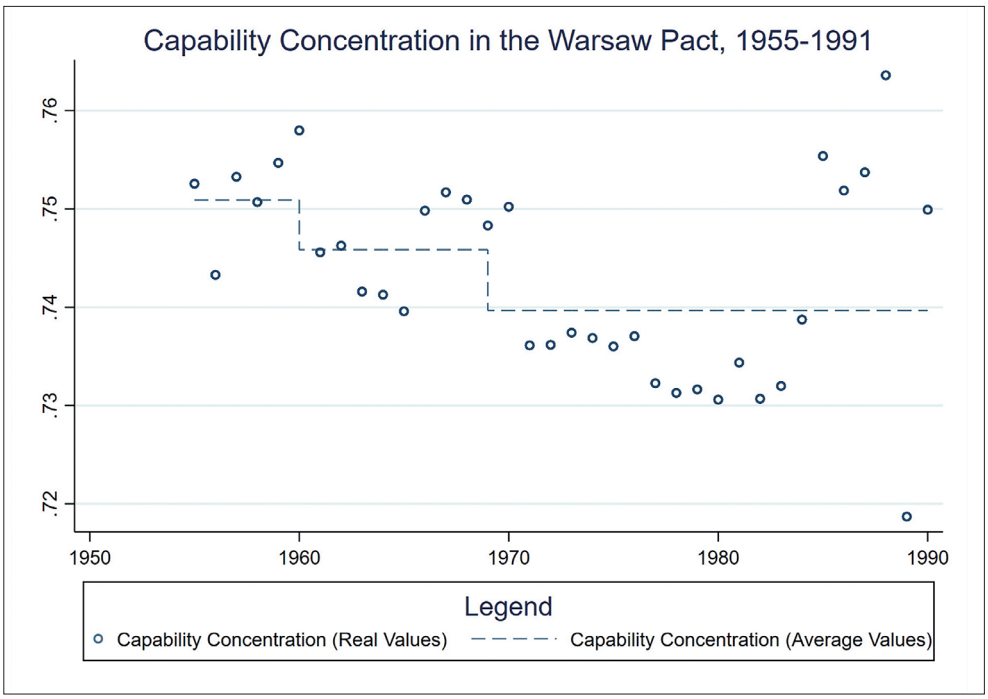
As the failure of MLF and ANF alleviated the risk of atomisation, NATO had the opportunity to construct another multilateral arrangement. In November 1965, a meeting involving the United States, Canada, Belgium, Denmark, FRG, Greece, Türkiye, the Netherlands, Britain, and Italy resulted in the rapid development of the idea of a nuclear consultative group. Several mechanisms were established to engage in multilateral consultation on the alliance's nuclear resources, on data exchange regarding nuclear weapons, and on communication among allies (Priest, 2007, p. 154). Most importantly, two permanent bodies were established: the Nuclear Defence Affairs Committee (NDAC) for policy, and the Nuclear Planning Group (NPG) for more detailed discussions. By 1967, the NPG had four permanent members – the United States, the UK, Italy, and the FRG – and three seats occupied by other allies on a rotational basis (Priest, 2007, p. 156). The crucial difference between the NPG and the MLF is that the former operates on the principle of multilateral consultation without the requirement of possessing or hosting nuclear weapons. For the US, the creation of the NPG essentially meant conceding decision-making power and adopting a multilateral style without giving up control over nuclear warheads to its allies.

Warsaw Pact

Phase I (1955 - 1959)

When the Warsaw Pact alliance was formed in 1955, the Soviet Union was its undisputed leader. Although devastated by WWII, the Soviets were in much better shape than their Eastern European allies. The quick recovery of military capabilities, as well as the monopoly on nuclear weapons, ensured the Soviets' ability to dominate the decision-making process. During the earliest years of the Pact, capability concentration was high, deriving primarily from the preponderance of power of the USSR, as seen in figure 2. In the first phase of the Warsaw Pact, dating from 1955 to 1959, the Eastern European allies had no capacity to oppose the Soviets in the realm of nuclear decision-making.

Figure 2
Capability Concentration in the Warsaw Pact, 1955-1991



The Soviets' decision-making monopoly transpires in the command structure, deployments, and atomic war planning of the Warsaw Pact. The Secret Statute of Unified Command, which outlined the command structure of the alliance, was sent to the allies as a finalised decision. It gave disproportional powers to the supreme commander, who was a Soviet officer (Mastny & Byrne, 2005, p. 5). Combined with the system of Soviet military advisors present in each member state, it gave the USSR complete control over nuclear-related decisions inside the Warsaw Pact. The subordinate position of the East European states is evident in a draft field manual issued in 1959, which specified that in case of war, missile units were not to be attached or made subordinate to the fronts. Instead, the decisions regarding their use were to remain only in the hands of the Warsaw Pact Supreme Command (Gavrilov, 2012).

Unilateralism in nuclear decision-making – creation of missile sites, placement of nuclear warheads, choice of targets, and eventually the launch – is evident in the case of the first nuclear weapons deployed outside the USSR. Between 1953 and 1955, the Soviets were exploring possible missile sites in Romania, Bulgaria, and the GDR. Then, in 1955, a draft decision was prepared for stationing in Bulgaria and East Germany, with no agreement obtained from the latter. The GDR's Fürstenberg and Vogelsang became the first missile sites to host Soviet nuclear weapons outside the USSR. In 1959, 37% of all operational nuclear missiles of the USSR were located on German territory, but no one except the Soviets participated either in site preparation or military drills involving those missiles. The choice of targets remained with the Soviet leadership. The nuclear weapons served exclusively to promote Soviet political demands at the height of Berlin crisis, and threatened to target American bases in Europe, British ports, and capitals of several Western European NATO members. Therefore, with de-escalation in Berlin in May 1959, the missiles were redeployed on Soviet territory in August of the same year (Uhl, 2001, pp. 236–241).

At the broadest level, the Warsaw Pact inherited the atomic war plans the Soviet Union had prepared as it became obvious that détente with the West was not in the cards (Mastny, 2003). In September 1954, the USSR conducted a military exercise involving the detonation of a real nuclear weapon in the proximity of the armed forces of several socialist countries taking part in the exercise. Defence Ministers of European Soviet allies were present at the exercise as observers, but not involved in the decision-making process. The site – Totskoye range in Orenburg province – was chosen specifically for its "similarity in topology and fauna to the European areas of the Soviet Union and to other European countries" (Zelentsov, 2006, p. 18). The lessons drawn from this exercise made their way

into Warsaw Pact war plans. The Soviets were explicitly training for fighting a nuclear war in Europe, but gave no say over the conduct of such a conflagration to the very Europeans that would have to fight together with the Red Army against imperialism.

Soviet nuclear war plans for the European theatre entailed several major strategic offensive operations against NATO countries. Warsaw Pact forces would use atomic weapons in response to enemy aggression, with allied troops in Poland, East Germany, and Czechoslovakia fighting on the Western front, and those in Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and Albania waging war on the Southern front (Hoffenaar et al., 2012, p. 183). Until the USSR acquired ICBMs in 1957, the physical presence of Soviet troops on the territory of the Eastern European allies was crucial, as these contingents had in their possession theatre nuclear weapons that only they could use. The unilateral prerogative Moscow arrogated to itself meant that the withdrawal of Soviet armed forces from Eastern Europe exposed and undermined Warsaw Pact defences. Therefore, when the communist leadership in Bucharest asked Nikita Khrushchev in 1955 to pull the Red Army from Romania's territory, the Soviet leader "got hot under the collar," and rebuffed the request (Khrushchev, 2007, p. 672). Khrushchev later indicated that the Kremlin had already determined the plan of battle involving Romania: Soviet troops there were necessary to repel "an imminent threat from Türkiye" and "if Soviet troops were not in Romania, the USSR would not have had enough time to efficiently come to Romania's help" (ANIC, 1962). Similarly, when Imre Nagy, the leader of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, demanded the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Hungary and vowed to leave the Warsaw Pact, the Kremlin refused. Honouring his request would have led to a rupture in the South Western flank of the alliance, as a neutral Hungary would have prevented the USSR from conducting strategic offensive operations against Italy and France. Therefore, Moscow decided to use military force to restore a pro-Soviet communist regime in Budapest. As Khrushchev put it, "the Soviet Union could not at any price allow a 'breach in the front' in Eastern Europe" (Granville, 2004, p. 188).

During the invasion of Hungary, Romania provided the Soviet Union with extensive military and strategic support, thus currying favour with Moscow. The USSR granted Bucharest its troop withdrawal request in 1957 (Crump, 2015, p. 41). Then, Khrushchev later explained, "the USSR had long-range missiles […] which could be used in a counter-attack from Soviet territory" (ANIC, 1962). Once again, the Kremlin made the key decisions about nuclear use, unilaterally planning to retaliate with IRBMs and ICBMs against an enemy attack. The junior partners had no say in planning the conduct of nuclear warfare.

Phase II (1960 – 1968)

By 1960, capability concentration inside the Eastern bloc alliance decreased. The shift was initiated by the hegemon with Khrushchev's 1960 announcement of large-scale reductions of Soviet conventional forces. Then, at the February 1960 PCC meeting, he raised the possibility of withdrawing Soviet forces from Hungary and Poland (Mastny & Byrne, 2005, p. 14). Moreover, the Soviet Union was also the one to advocate for the increase of junior partners' conventional capabilities. Around the time of Khrushchev's announcement, the PCC approved a resolution providing for a large-scale restructuring and modernization of the alliance's armed forces. It called for shortening alert times, creating stockpiles of supplies and ammunition, reviewing the organisation, size, and equipment of troops, and reviewing the rules of engagement in the air and at sea (Mastny & Byrne, 2005, p. 17). The effects of these two-pronged decisions are reflected in the lower level of capability concentration within the alliance during the period, as seen in figure 2.

Provisions for nuclear combat capability required by the PCC resolution of March 29, 1961, were supplied by the Soviet Union through bilateral agreements with individual junior partners. The USSR provided nuclear-capable delivery systems, including Luna/FROG missile units and R-11/SCUD missile brigades (Uhl, 2006). Selling tactical delivery systems to individual junior partners changed the nuclear decision-making process. Previously, the Soviets would unilaterally order and execute a nuclear strike. In the updated procedure, on the other hand, an allied country's commander of Missile Forces would first receive special assembly brigades with special ammunition, which would then be transferred to the engaged front (Mastny & Byrne, 2005, p. 160). The overall decision-making power was split into two: the decision to use nuclear weapons with the Soviet Union, and the decision to deliver the warheads with a junior partner.

An ally that was excluded from these provisions was Albania, due to a dispute between Moscow and Tirana. The Albanian leader Enver Hoxha accused Khrushchev of betrayal, arrogance and unwillingness to consult (Mastny & Byrne, 2005, p. 16). The Soviets in retaliation severed diplomatic ties with Albania on December 19, 1961, thus abandoning their junior partner (Mastny & Byrne, 2005, p. xxviii). Albania demanded the creation of a Warsaw Pact Multilateral Nuclear Force, but its requests went unheard (Council of Ministers of the People's Republic of Albania, 1965). Having ended its participation in Warsaw Pact meetings in 1962, Albania formally withdrew from the alliance in 1968, after the invasion of Czechoslovakia. Moscow let Albania break away from the alliance, instead of keeping it in the Pact by force, as it did in 1956 with Hungary or in 1968 with Czechoslovakia. Albania remained isolated for much of the Cold War, offering an example of the dire consequences of challenging the nuclear decision-making process.

The GDR and Poland, on the other hand, played by the rules and enjoyed their bilateral arrangements with the Soviets. The GDR was able to exert disproportionate pressure on the USSR and was comfortable tying its security to the hegemon by hosting its nuclear warheads (Mastny & Byrne, 2005, p. 18). Khrushchev in turn reiterated the strength of the Soviet commitment in his March 1963 statement: "and if you attack the GDR would imply you attacking us as well, and we will respond to your attack with all powerful means in our possession" (N. S. Khrushchev & Groepper, 1963). Similarly, Poland enjoyed the hegemon's accommodations, as well as the process of bilateral consultation. Therefore, although the Poles underlined the need to reform the Warsaw Pact, they were interested in doing so through consultation and "strove for their country's recognition as a privileged ally" (Mastny & Byrne, 2005, p. 10).

Meanwhile, Romania combined characteristics of Albania, the GDR, and Poland. The Romanians were also supposed to receive nuclear-capable delivery systems and Soviet nuclear warheads from the USSR but the Soviets decided to withhold the deployment of atomic warheads on Romanian territory (Opriș, 2012). The main reason was that the USSR, just like the US, placed the atomic warheads in the custody of Soviet military officers. With the withdrawal of the Red Army from Romania in 1958, the possibility of hosting atomic warheads on Romanian soil disappeared. Deprived of the advantages inherent in bilateral arrangements, the leadership in Bucharest did not miss an opportunity to complain about the Warsaw Pact's nuclear arrangements. Romania's dissatisfaction was not just with the Soviets' reversal on forward deployed nuclear weapons but also with the privileged status and disproportionate influence exerted by other junior partners, in particular Poland and East Germany (ANIC, 1965).

The East Germans and the Poles fought for the preservation of bilateral decision-making, whereas the Albanians and the Romanians, having little influence over the decision-making process, tried to push for atomisation (Mastny & Byrne, 2005, p. 27). At the June 1966 Bucharest conference, Poland argued that Romanian proposition to change the nuclear decision-making process within the Warsaw Pact would "paralyze the alliance and transform its organs into noncommittal discussion clubs" (Mastny & Byrne, 2005, p. 30). Ultimately, advocates of the bilateral style of decision-making prevailed, and the new arrangements Moscow put in place empowered some junior allies. Those who did not host nuclear weapons resented this shift in the realm of nuclear use.

Phase III (1969 – 1991)

By the late-1960s, as the concentration of capabilities reached its lowest value in the alliance's lifespan, the Warsaw Pact experienced another change in the decision-making process, as seen in figure 2. Several options were available, and preferences varied from radical nuclear sharing arrangements resulting in atomised decision-making to moderate multilateral arrangements that would give the junior partners more say while allowing the Soviet Union to remain the hegemon. That the alliance stood at a crossroads was evident in Moscow's contradictory statements. On the one hand, the Soviets expressed confidence in their nuclear monopoly, stating that "the presence of nuclear weapons in the hands of one socialist country – the USSR – already firmly guarantees the security of the entire socialist camp: in case of attack on any socialist country, the Soviet Union will defend it with all means, like [it would defend] itself" (Sudarikov, 1964). On the other hand, East European allies were told that "in case of emergency you will receive the necessary missile-nuclear weapons and you will use them as you wish" (Baev, 2017, p. 134). Seeing an opportunity in the hegemon's mixed messages, the allies engaged in active debates to push forward their preferred vision of reform.

Albania had advocated for the most radical reform – a Multilateral Nuclear Force for the Warsaw Pact. Tirana demanded the annulment of the 1963 Nuclear Test Ban Treaty and placing nuclear weapons under the individual authority of all alliance members (Mastny & Byrne, 2005, p. 175). This meant that Albania was aiming for complete atomisation of the alliance's nuclear decision-making. As mentioned above, the radical proposal failed and resulted in Albania's exclusion.

A more moderate multilateral structure of the alliance was put forth by the Romanians. At the core of the revision was the 1966 proposal of a rotational command, which the Romanians borrowed from a 1956 idea ventured by the Poles. If the proposal quickly failed in 1956, in 1966 Romanians succeeded to place their proposal at the centre of the debate about the alliance's future. Khrushchev's successor, Leonid Brezhnev, encouraged increased participation of junior partners in discussions about reforming the Pact. The main changes put forward included the creation of a secretariat, a military council, a foreign ministers committee, and changes in the status of the Supreme Commander and the Chief of Staff (Crump, 2015, p. 136). The Romanians found these reforms insufficient and favourable only for the disproportionately privileged allies – the GDR and Poland. Therefore, Bucharest continued to insist on the creation of a rotational command for the Pact's armed forces, including its nuclear deterrent. Ceaușescu's vision of rotational command included the possibility of 'acquisition through transfer' and this scenario led to Soviet opposition (ANIC, 1966). Moreover, Romania insisted on a unanimous voting system, which reflected its desire to preserve the right of veto on all Warsaw Pact matters (ANIC, 1968).

The position of the privileged allies that Romania antagonized – the GDR and Poland – was more in line with the one of the Soviet Union. In regards to the command structure, they preferred multilateral consultation instead of a rotational command. As for the placement of nuclear weapons, they favoured the preservation of the bilateral system that was already in place. Regarding decisions about wartime planning, however, the Poles and the East Germans sided with the Romanians in their wish for unanimity. Therefore, Poland and the GDR advocated for a multilateral Warsaw Pact without aspirations to atomise the alliance.

These views and proposals were discussed at the March 1969 meeting of the Political Consultative Committee in Budapest. By that time, the Soviets were exhausted by the Romanian opposition. The back-and-forth between junior partners eventually yielded results and changed the structure of the alliance. The Soviets agreed to Bucharest's key demand and the rotation of the Supreme Commander position to other members of the Warsaw Pact. However, the USSR also pushed through an article that stipulated that the Supreme Commander could only issue recommendations, not orders (Crump, 2015, p. 277). Moreover, the Warsaw Pact established a Committee of Defence Ministers and a Military Council, which served as forums for consultation and deliberation, including on war planning and operational control (Lewis, 1982, p. 5). Alliance members had equal standing within it, which meant they could veto Warsaw Pact decisions they did not agree with, even if the Soviets were pushing for them. Thanks to these consultative mechanisms, the Warsaw Pact evolved into a multilateral alliance, as the junior partners got more influence in the decision-making process.

Alternative Explanations

This chapter seeks to explain how alliances make decisions about nuclear weapons. How do alternative explanations fare compared to our theory? Rational choice theories propose that the best decision-making style for an alliance is one that maximizes every member's utility. Against the background of the bipolar competition between nuclear alliances, this approach amounts to each ally having independent command and control over nuclear weapons, because doing so would ensure survival, the ultimate form of utility. The historical record shows that the United States and the Soviet Union went to great lengths to prevent NATO and the Warsaw Pact from adopting this style of decision-making by blocking MLF-type arrangements. Their opposition indicates that rational choice theories cannot account for the decision-making style employed by NATO and the Warsaw Pact.

Other scholars, such as Ikenberry and Lanoszka, point to regime type as the key to understanding nuclear decision-making styles. Following this line of reasoning, scholars such as Gaubatz and Kramer would assume that NATO – an alliance of democracies - and the Pact – an alliance of autocracies - should have adopted different decision-making styles. The two alliances, however, showed striking similarities in their approaches to decision-making. Both went from unilateral to bilateral, and eventually multilateral decision-making. An explanation based on regime type cannot explain this similarity in decision-making styles.

Finally, the Cognitive Decision-Making Paradigm stresses the psychological filters that lead to various decision-making styles. Egeland, Schein, Winter and Stewart underlined how different operational codes and belief systems lead to different decision-making styles. As shown above, the empirical record does not warrant such a conclusion. NATO and the Warsaw Pact made decisions similarly despite their distinct cultures, norms and values. Others argued that the Warsaw Pact learned how to make decisions from NATO. This explanation also does not hold up to scrutiny. On multiple occasions, decision-makers within the Eastern bloc explicitly rejected the NATO template, arguing that it did not behove socialist countries to take after an imperialist organisation (Mastny, 2001). Nevertheless, the decision-making styles of the two alliances were strikingly similar.

All things considered, instead of the differences predicted by the alternative explanations, this chapter found that the two alliances made decisions in strikingly similar manners. This finding suggests that the proposed theory, centred on the concentration of capabilities has more explanatory power than the alternatives.

Conclusion

This analysis has shown that the two Cold War alliances, despite their sharp contrast in rhetoric and ideology, were very similar in their nuclear decision-making styles. Both NATO and the Warsaw Pact gradually evolved from unilateralism, to bilateralism, and eventually to multilateralism. Moreover, both alliances faced – and successfully avoided – the threat of atomisation. NATO and the Warsaw Pact started out with high levels of power concentration. Consequently, the hegemon of each alliance in the initial phase enjoyed the privilege of unilaterally imposing decisions concerning nuclear use. As capability concentration decreased over time, the US and the USSR concluded a series of bilateral agreements – 'dual key' arrangements - that split the process and the authority over nuclear use between the hegemon and individual junior allies. Having avoided nuclear sharing arrangements with complete transfer of nuclear weapons to junior allies, both NATO and the Warsaw Pact adopted multilateral nuclear decision-making. The US and the Soviet Union preserved their veto over nuclear use but also conceded a significant share of their decision-making power to junior partners.

The difference between the two nuclear alliances, however, is that the Warsaw Pact collapsed together with its hegemon, while NATO remains a nuclear alliance with a multilateral nuclear decision-making style still at its core. Russia's war against Ukraine has posed significant challenges for the Western alliance. One of them is the need to reassure the junior partners that the United States will defend them from a Russian invasion. As mentioned earlier, Poland has asked to join NATO's nuclear sharing arrangements. What is the likelihood that Washington will agree? Given projections of increased defence spending by non-US allies such as Poland, it is not inconceivable that Warsaw will receive the B61s it requested. President Joe Biden has announced a permanent military presence in Poland, which would create the basis for such a deployment (Ministry of National Defense of Poland, n.d.). Such a move would prompt other NATO members, such as the Baltics or Romania, to make similar requests. As non-US allies get stronger and have a higher chance of seeing their demands met, they must remember the responsibility that comes with decision-making authority over nuclear weapons.

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