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NATO's Dual-Track Decision (December 12, 1979)

NATO foreign and defense ministers convened a special meeting in 1979 to discuss the arms buildup in the Soviet Union and the states of the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact. In response, they adopted the "dual-track decision," which threatened the deployment of additional nuclear arms from 1983 onward in the event that the stationing of SS-20 missiles had not stopped by that time.

Ministerial Communiqué: Special Meeting of Foreign and Defense Ministers, Brussels

1.
At a special meeting of Foreign and Defence Ministers in Brussels on 12th December 1979:
2.
Ministers recalled the May 1978 Summit where governments expressed the political resolve to meet the challenges to their security posed by the continuing momentum of the Warsaw Pact military build-up.
3.
The Warsaw Pact has over the years developed a large and growing capability in nuclear systems that directly threaten Western Europe and have a strategic significance for the Alliance in Europe. This situation has been especially aggravated over the last few years by Soviet decisions to implement programmes modernizing and expanding their long-range nuclear capability substantially. In particular, they have deployed the SS-20 missile, which offers significant improvements over previous systems in providing greater accuracy, more mobility, and greater range, as well as having multiple warheads, and the Backfire bomber, which has a much better performance than other Soviet aircraft deployed hitherto in a theatre role. During this period, while the Soviet Union has been reinforcing its superiority in Long Range Theatre Nuclear Forces (LRTNF) both quantitatively and qualitatively, Western LRTNF capabilities have remained static. Indeed these forces are increasing in age and vulnerability and do not include land-based, long-range theatre nuclear missile systems.
4.
At the same time, the Soviets have also undertaken a modernization and expansion of their shorter-range TNF and greatly improved the overall quality of their conventional forces. These developments took place against the background of increasing Soviet inter-continental capabilities and achievement of parity in inter-continental capability with the United States.

5.

These trends have prompted serious concern within the Alliance, because, if they were to continue, Soviet superiority in theatre nuclear systems could undermine the stability achieved in inter-continental systems and cast doubt on the credibility of the Alliance's deterrent strategy by highlighting the gap in the spectrum of NATO's available nuclear response to aggression.

6.

Ministers noted that these recent developments require concrete actions on the part of the Alliance if NATO's strategy of flexible response is to remain credible. After intensive consideration, including the merits of alternative approaches, and after taking note of the positions of certain members, Ministers concluded that the overall interest of the Alliance would best be served by pursuing two parallel and complementary approaches of TNF modernization and arms control.

7.

Accordingly Ministers have decided to modernize NATO's LRTNF by the deployment in Europe of US ground-launched systems comprising 108 Pershing II launchers, which would replace existing US Pershing I-A, and 464 Ground Launched Cruise Missiles (GLCM), all with single warheads. All the nations currently participating in the integrated defence structure will participate in the programme: the missiles will be stationed in selected countries and certain support costs will be met through NATO's existing common funding arrangements. The programme will not increase NATO's reliance upon nuclear weapons. In this connection, Ministers agreed that as an integral part of TNF modernization, 1 000 US nuclear warheads will be withdrawn from Europe as soon as feasible. Further, Ministers decided that the 572 LRTNF warheads should be accommodated within that reduced level, which necessarily implies a numerical shift of emphasis away from warheads for delivery systems of other types and shorter ranges. In addition they noted with satisfaction that the Nuclear Planning Group is undertaking an examination of the precise nature, scope and basis of the adjustments resulting from the LRTNF deployment and their possible implications for the balance of roles and systems in NATO's nuclear armoury as a whole. This examination will form the basis of a substantive report to NPG Ministers in the Autumn of 1980.

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11.

The Ministers have decided to pursue these two parallel and complementary approaches in order to avert an arms race in Europe caused by the Soviet TNF build-up, yet preserve the viability of NATO's strategy of deterrence and defence and thus maintain the security of its member States.

[. . .]

Source: Ministerial Communiqué: Special Meeting of Foreign and Defense Ministers, Brussels (December 12, 1979); reproduced on the website of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation: www.nato.int/docu/comm/49-95/c791212a.htm.