INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to analyze how NATO’s identity was shaped between 1952 and 1954 by decisions taken on two issues of crucial importance for the alliance, namely its strategic posture and its geographic limitation. In these years both these matters came under severe scrutiny and repeated questioning: eventually NATO adopted a military strategy relying heavily on nuclear weapons, and its member states agreed by default that the alliance was meant to be applicable only to European matters. This chapter argues that such conclusions, questionable as they might be, and in spite of several later attempts to rediscuss them, have subsequently become identified with the very core of NATO’s identity.

NATO AND THE ‘NEW LOOK’: THE ORIGINS OF NATO’S ‘NUCLEAR ADDICTION’

This part of the chapter focuses on the interaction between NATO and the ‘new look’ of the Eisenhower administration. It is not intended as an original contribution to the extensive body of literature concerned with the never-ending debate about the theory of massive retaliation – a contribution which would be quite unnecessary – but as a brief recapitulation of the problems that NATO faced in adapting to that policy, and above all of the alternative courses of action debated at the time. The insistence on alternative solutions, in particular, is not meant as an exercise in counterfactual history but rather as a way to provide a better understanding of the context in which the solutions were adopted.

Born of a feeling of inferiority towards the massive Soviet military presence across Eastern and central Europe, the Atlantic Alliance had since its conception relied heavily on American nuclear supremacy to redress the imbalance of power in the old continent. The acquisition of a nuclear capability by the Soviet Union in late 1949, however, had persuaded the Truman administration to promote a revision of its military strategy, which by and large advocated a massive nuclear counter-offensive in case...
of Soviet aggression. The process ended with one of the most famous
documents of the cold war, National Security Council (NSC) 68, and sub-
sequently with the adoption by the Lisbon session of the North Atlantic
Council of the programme of heavy conventional rearmament necessary
to implement a forward strategy.¹ Both measures aimed at limiting the
chances of nuclear war by reinforcing the alliance’s conventional posture
and therefore its capability to defend its territory.

No sooner was the Lisbon session concluded, however, than its pro-
grammes and objectives began to be the object of a heated debate that
would continue for almost two years. The European members of the
Atlantic alliance in fact, held a very ambiguous position toward the eco-
nomically expensive programme of conventional rearmament. In spite of
a growing resentment against American influence, and in particular against
American pressure for an increase in their military spending, most European
members of NATO preferred to maintain the Lisbon goals rather than
accept their drastic revision, but they hoped that the gap between the
goals and their own limited capabilities of rearmament would be filled by
American programmes of military assistance. As Assistant Secretary of
State David Bruce remarked, the Europeans were interested in showing
the largest possible gap in order to force the US to contribute as much as
possible to their rearmament, and to this purpose they stressed the need
to expand NATO forces as well as to set ‘unrealistically high’ force goals.²

The Truman administration was very much aware of the European in-
tention to have rearmament largely financed by the US, and for this reason
was inclined to a slight revision of the Lisbon goals.³ It remained deeply
committed, however, to the conventional strategy advocated by NSC 68,
and was not willing to discuss a radical reformulation of its approach to
Western defence. Thus when the British Chief of Air Staff Sir John Slessor
met with the JCS in the summer of 1952 in order to suggest a revision of
Western strategy, his recommendation to put more emphasis on nuclear
weapons was regarded as insufficient to meet the needs of Atlantic security.⁴
The Truman administration felt that the ‘new weapons which will only
become available in quantity in 1956, will not reduce the need for con-
ventional weapons and troop strength required for 1953–1954’.⁵ The main
result of the US-British discussions was the decision of the JCS to make
available to the Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, General Ridgway,
‘the latest forecast of the availability of atomic weapons from 1956’, and
to order him to conduct a study on the effects of the availability of these
weapons upon NATO’s force requirements.⁶

Throughout the second half of 1952 these different national perspectives
prevented NATO from setting the force goals for the following years. By
the end of 1952 many American diplomats noted a growing feeling of
frustration within the alliance, due to the difficulty of ‘steering a middle
course between the twin dangers of a Soviet attack finding the West