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The NATO That Once Was

NATO was not part of the initial post–World War II design. Initial planning for the postwar order focused on the creation of global entities—the United Nations (UN), the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank—and enforcement by the “Four Policemen”: the United States, Great Britain, the Soviet Union, and China.¹ Several key elements of this plan did not survive Roosevelt’s death in 1945; some parts did not survive the decade; and still other parts, rather amazingly, survive to this day.

NATO was born of necessity as postwar euphoria gave way to ever-increasing tensions with the Soviet Union in Europe and with North-east Asia. Communist success in China and China’s open, although short-lived, embrace of Moscow only fueled the need for action. Plans for global security arrangements, created during the middle to waning days of World War II, gave way to two distinct camps: East and West. NATO would become the centerpiece of security cooperation for the West.²

But the all-too-apparent need for NATO did not mean that creating the alliance would be simple or seamless. At the heart of the debate was deep-seated concern over what role defeated and occupied Germany should play in the new alliance. France, in particular, was at the center of the debate.

¹ John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1982, p. 10.

² Of historical note, plans for a North Atlantic Treaty came from the Europeans themselves (Gaddis, 1982, p. 72).

Although most understood that the Federal Republic of Germany needed to be anchored in a new transatlantic relationship, there was genuine concern about Germany's military role in the alliance. Many observers thought that Germany should be relegated to a passive recipient of security that would be provided by the victorious allies. Many harbored deep anxieties about German rearmament.³

Given demonstrable Soviet expansionist designs and growing Soviet and Warsaw Pact military capabilities, the question of risks and rewards in the newly formed alliance seemed relatively straightforward: In exchange for acknowledgment of U.S. leadership and for the allies' contributions to the common defense, the United States was prepared to demonstrate its share in Western Europe's security risks by committing itself militarily to the defense of NATO Europe. That commitment included the potential use of U.S. and, later, NATO-controlled nuclear weapons. In essence, NATO's European partners acceded to becoming importers of security, with the United States becoming the predominant exporter. Over time, however, the United States wanted more than a leadership role for its contributions. It also expected NATO's European members to be active, not passive, contributors to Europe's defense. Year after year, decade after decade, American leaders would lament that, although risks were being shared, as had been conceived in the earliest days of the alliance, the burdens (of making good on commitments) were not. As the European NATO states emerged from their immediate postwar destruction, becoming prosperous, thriving economies, the chorus of these American concerns grew louder. That chorus continued through the final days of the Cold War.⁴

³ For more on the rearmament debate and France's concerns in particular, see "Sound and Fury: The Debate over German Rearmament," Ch. 5 in William I. Hitchcock, *France Restored: Cold War Diplomacy and the Quest for Leadership in Europe, 1944–1954*, Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1998, pp. 133–168. See also Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation*, New York: Norton and Company, 1969, pp. 608–609.

⁴ In the earliest days of the alliance, Washington was concerned that NATO Europe would sacrifice economic reconstruction for military preparedness. By the mid-1960s, these concerns would abate, and new concerns would arise about Europe's "insufficient" contributions to North Atlantic security. See, for example, Earl C. Ravenal, "Europe Without America: The Erosion of NATO," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 63, No. 5, Summer 1985.

And the United States wanted more. The United States also expected broader political support for its varying agendas beyond Europe. The United States maintained strong pressure on selected NATO partners to decolonize.⁵ It opposed certain British and French roles in the Middle East; sought support for U.S. military involvement in Southeast Asia; and, later, tried to solicit support for U.S. policies in the Middle East.

Nuclear weapons would remain a central and enormously sensitive topic. Although American and European leaders alike understood and accepted the rationale for relying on nuclear weapons and a tangible threat of escalation to compensate for a perceived conventional inferiority, they were also wary about the role nuclear weapons might play in an actual crisis or war. When Charles DeGaulle purportedly asked whether “any U.S. President is prepared to sacrifice New York to save Paris,”⁶ he gave voice to broader European anxieties about the risks the United States might be willing to take on behalf of its European partners but presented only half the debate. The other half seized on what it saw as the distinct possibility that Washington might actually be willing to use nuclear weapons in a European war, might actually be willing “to fight to the last European”—to avoid risking the U.S. mainland.⁷ The argument ran that Washington might be willing to incur great risks to protect its allies, but its foremost priority was to protect the population of the United States. One had to presume Washington would not shrink from any option available to do so. This tension was managed throughout the Cold War years but never resolved.

Still, throughout the Cold War, the United States never allowed policy differences with its European partners, including France, to overshadow its abiding interests in containing Soviet influence and deterring Soviet military threats to Europe. Washington’s European partners, for their part, found ways to achieve a workable balance between being led by the United States and being treated as equal partners.

⁵ This policy, of course, predated the establishment of NATO.

⁶ “The Frustrated West,” *Time*, May 19, 1961.

⁷ Roger Cohen, “Over There; Why the Yanks Are Going. Yet Again,” *New York Times*, November 26, 1995.

Although NATO seemed to be in perpetual crisis,⁸ its crises focused almost entirely on how to achieve lasting security in Europe, not on whether security was worth achieving.

The fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of the Warsaw Pact, and the disintegration of the Soviet Union created a degree of euphoria in Europe perhaps never before experienced in its long and turbulent history. These events also raised questions about the future of the alliance that had been so successful in bringing about the circumstances that seemed more a dream than reality. German unification would be the first test.

Much like the debate over Germany's role in NATO and German rearmament, the idea of German unification generated trepidation in many circles, not just in Moscow, but also in Paris and London. If the expressed purpose for NATO was to protect members against Soviet aggression, an implicit role was to link Germany inextricably to its Western partners to preclude repetition of the two calamitous wars of the 20th century. As Lord Ismay, NATO's first Secretary General, reportedly stated, NATO's purpose was to "keep the Americans in, the Russians out and the Germans down."⁹ Those opposing rapid German unification did so largely on the grounds that a united Germany had much more potential to become an independent Germany, capable of separating from its NATO partners. Those arguing in favor of rapid unification maintained that a united Germany would be linked to the West not only through NATO but, more importantly, through the European Community (soon to become the European Union [EU]).¹⁰ At the same time, internal instability in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) was steadily increasing and threatening to tear the country apart. As a result, Helmut Kohl's government viewed unifica-

⁸ See, for example, Henry A. Kissinger, *The Troubled Partnership: A Re-Appraisal of the Atlantic Alliance*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965.

⁹ Andrés Ortega and Tomas Valasek, "Debate: Are the Challenges NATO Faces Today as Great as They Were in the Cold War?" *NATO Review*, Winter 2003.

¹⁰ See, for example, Philip D. Zelikow and Condoleezza Rice, *Germany Unified and Europe Transformed: A Study in Statecraft*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997, pp. 157–160.

tion with the Federal Republic of Germany as a better approach than attempting to reform and democratize the GDR.¹¹ Concerns about the stability of East Germany trumped the broader debate over the implications of a unified Germany; consequently, unification proceeded quickly, and the GDR's fate was settled within a year.¹²

With the German question settled—or least muted for the time being—attention turned rapidly to the issue of NATO's identity and purpose after the Cold War.¹³ With Central and Eastern Europe unthreated and the Balkans simmering, many began arguing for a broadened NATO role. The tagline “out of area or out of business” expressed a school of thought that held that NATO needed to embrace Central and Eastern Europe and help bring stability to the Balkans lest it face bankruptcy as an institution.¹⁴ According to this view, it was vital that NATO demonstrate its relevance to the most pressing security issues Europe faced. Were it not up to the task of extending stability, NATO would not long survive.

Looking back now, after three post–Cold War rounds of NATO enlargement and two reasonably successful interventions in the Balkans, expanding NATO's reach to the periphery of Europe seems natural and inevitable, even though each initiative prompted opposition from Moscow. But the decision to enlarge NATO in the first place was a close call, with debate circling largely around potential risks. Those

¹¹ In hindsight, it is now clear that Helmut Kohl was the driving force behind the West German position. See Zelikow and Rice, 1997.

¹² Zelikow and Rice, 1997.

¹³ As an attempt to revitalize NATO's purpose, the alliance agreed on and publicly released the new Strategic Concept at the NATO meeting in Rome in November 1991 (previous versions were classified). The concept took into account the changing security environment, German unification, ongoing transformation in the former Soviet Union, and arms control issues. It restated the purpose of NATO and laid out the fundamental tasks of the alliance. Similarly, in 1999, the Strategic Concept was updated to describe a NATO that was more flexible and able to conduct new missions outside its members' territories, such as in Kosovo and Bosnia, and that was larger and prepared to address such new security threats as weapons of mass destruction and terrorism. See NATO, “Strategic Concept,” web page, last updated July 31, 2010f.

¹⁴ See Ronald D. Asmus, *Opening NATO's Door*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2002.

opposed to enlargement questioned what NATO was taking on, both in terms of cost and mission.¹⁵ Those opposed to intervention in the Balkans raised their objections largely on the basis that, once NATO was involved, it would never be able to extricate itself. Opponents, in particular, were quick to raise Bismarck's famous quip that the Balkans were "not worth the bones of a Pomeranian grenadier."¹⁶

The Kosovo experience, in particular, produced deep divisions inside NATO—and in the U.S. administration—because NATO was being committed not merely to enforce a peace settlement but to create conditions for change through the coercive use of force.¹⁷ As the bombing of Serbia and Serbian forces in Kosovo continued from days to weeks to months,¹⁸ several of NATO's now 19 members grew increasingly uneasy about the mission the alliance had adopted and the possible outcomes. Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic finally did capitulate after 79 days of bombing, but the alliance itself had been shaken greatly by the experience. An implicit lesson for many in the United

¹⁵ As the debate on NATO membership for the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland unfolded, one question was whether it would simply cost these nations less to join NATO than to develop their own defenses individually. Similarly, NATO members also asked how much it would cost NATO to bring the candidate nations' defenses up to alliance standards. Several members were concerned about NATO's overall mission and whether enlargement was a move in the right direction. Those against enlargement argued that NATO did not face a threat that warranted enlargement, which would in turn only aggravate relations with Russia and create more problems than solutions. Despite these concerns, in the end, consensus emerged that it would be in NATO's interests to accept candidates into the alliance that met the stated requirements for NATO membership because the benefits of their membership would outweigh the costs. See Linda D. Kozaryn, "Mr. NATO' Explains Enlarge-ment," American Forces Press Service, April 1998.

¹⁶ See, for example, François de Rose, "A Future Perspective for the Alliance," *NATO Review*, Vol. 43, No. 4, July 1995.

¹⁷ See Daniel L. Byman, Matthew C. Waxman, and Eric Larson, *Air Power as a Coercive Instrument*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MR-1061-AF, 1999, and Stephen T. Hosmer, *The Conflict Over Kosovo: Why Milosevic Decided to Settle When He Did*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MR-1351-AF, 2001.

¹⁸ Then-NATO commander General Wesley Clark, along other allied leaders, assumed Serbian leaders would capitulate within three days. For further discussion, see Hosmer, 2001, pp. 17–18.

States and Europe was that, when it came to the coercive use of force, NATO would not be up to the task again anytime soon.¹⁹

¹⁹ See, for example, Benjamin S. Lambeth, “Lessons from the War in Kosovo,” *Joint Force Quarterly*, Vol. 30, Spring 2002; Daniel L. Byman and Matthew C. Waxman, “Kosovo and the Great Air Power Debate,” *International Security*, Vol. 24, No. 4, Spring 2000; and Bruce R. Nardulli, Walter L. Perry, Bruce Pirnie, John Gordon IV, and John G. McGinn, *Disjointed War: Military Operations in Kosovo, 1999*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MR-1406-A, 2002.

