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The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in Transition

Introduction

At the end of the Second World War, major European powers—Germany, France and Great Britain—were in varying states of devastation and exhaustion from a long, bitter war. A power vacuum existed in Europe. With Germany defeated and under allied occupation, and Britain and France preoccupied with reconstruction, only the United States and the Soviet Union were in a posture to assert themselves. The United States, from across the Atlantic, and the Soviet Union, from the eastern periphery of Europe, would soon be engaged in a struggle for the fate of Europe. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) would become a major factor in determining the outcome of this struggle referred to as the Cold War.¹

This paper reviews the evolution of NATO and the adjustments underway and foreseen to keep NATO a relevant and viable defense alliance. Fundamental U.S. interests in a stable and secure Europe underlie continued U.S. military involvement in NATO military structures.

Cold War Origins

NATO was formed at the height of the post-World War II tensions between the West, led by the United States, and the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union, pursuing a policy of expansion which had begun long before the end of the Second World War, had, by 1945, annexed almost 180,000 square miles of territory with a population of more than 23 million people.² This territory included the Baltic states of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, which were annexed in 1940, together with parts of Finland, Romania, eastern Poland, northeastern Germany and eastern Czechoslovakia.

The Soviet Union also carved out a sphere of domination over the other countries of Eastern Europe. These countries, on whose soil Red Army troops had pursued the retreating Germans, came under the political domination of Moscow. The Communist parties in these countries, in close consultation with Moscow, came to dominate the governments of these states. All of Eastern Europe “from Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic”—Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Romania, Bulgaria, Albania, Hungary and the remainder of Poland—came under the control of the Soviet Union.

The Soviet Union undermined efforts to reach international agreements on a postwar settlement for Europe. After the war, peace treaties were required to resolve such issues as territorial claims and reparations between the Allies—Britain, the United States, France, the Soviet Union and the 17 other members of the United Nations—and the defeated Axis countries. The treaties between the Allies and the “Axis-satellite” powers of Italy, Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary and Finland were not concluded until February 1947, nearly two years after the war. This long delay was largely due to Soviet intransigence. Three of the treaties, of course, were practically meaningless because Romania, Bulgaria and Hungary were under Soviet occupation. A treaty with Austria was not signed until 1955. The “Final Settlement with Respect to Germany,” known as the Two-plus-Four Treaty, was not reached until after the Cold War, in 1990.³

The future status of Germany became a particularly bitter source of division among the former Allies of World War II. In June 1948, the Soviet Union, in response to British and American efforts to consolidate their zones in western Germany, began a blockade of all lines of ground transportation linking the Western zones of Germany with the capital, Berlin. The West, led by the United States, responded to the “Berlin Blockade” by beginning a major airlift of food and supplies to the beleaguered population in the Western sectors of Berlin. This airlift, which lasted over nine months, ended in victory for the West when, in May 1949, the Soviets finally called off the blockade.

It was in this postwar atmosphere of Soviet intransigence and tensions that the West Europeans began organizing for their mutual defense.

European Efforts at Self-Defense

On March 4, 1947, Britain and France signed the Dunkirk Treaty. This treaty was one of “alliance and mutual assistance” and it provided for closer consultations in the economic, political and social affairs of the two countries.⁴ The Dunkirk Treaty was also a treaty of mutual defense. The signatory parties agreed to unite in the event of any renewed attempt at aggression by Germany. Though the treaty was aimed at Germany, the Soviet Union posed a more direct and immediate threat.

On March 17, 1948, Britain, France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Belgium took a further step in providing for their security by signing the Brussels Treaty.⁵ This treaty, which was one of mutual assistance and defense, established the Brussels Treaty Organization, the forerunner of the present-day Western European Union (WEU). It was less directed at a renewal of German aggression than a signal of Western European resolve to stand up to Soviet aggression.

The Brussels Treaty also served as a signal to the United States that Western Europe was making an effort to provide for their own security. This show of effort was necessary to get assistance from the United States. The entry of the United States into a peacetime military alliance with a European power would be an action without precedence in the history of U.S. foreign policy. One of the U.S. negotiators of the North Atlantic Treaty stated that the conclusion of such a treaty “would constitute one of the most far-reaching changes in our foreign policy in U.S. history.”⁶

The Vandenberg Resolution. On June 11, 1948, the U.S. Senate passed a resolution sponsored by Michigan Republican Senator Arthur H. Vandenberg, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, by a vote of 64 to 4. This resolution, which recommended “the association of the United States, by constitutional process, with regional and other collective arrangements as are based on continuous and effective self-help and mutual aid, and as affect its national security,” would serve as the basis for negotiations which led to the establishment of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).⁷

The North Atlantic Treaty was negotiated and established on the basis of Article 1 of the United Nations Charter, which allows for national collective and self-defense. The need for a political and military commitment by the United States for the defense of Western Europe in the face of a clear Soviet political and military threat was obvious. Only the United States could provide the necessary resources—political, economic and military—to counterbalance the Soviet Union and its Eastern European satellites.

Formation of NATO. The North Atlantic Alliance was formed on April 4, 1949, when the leaders of 12 nations, meeting in Washington, DC, signed the North Atlantic Treaty. The 12 countries were: the United States, Canada, Iceland, Great Britain, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Portugal, Italy, Norway and Denmark. This treaty became the foundation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

Article 10 provided for the accession of new members. On October 22, 1951, NATO member states signed a protocol which provided for the admission of Greece and Turkey, and on February 18, 1952, the two countries acceded to the treaty. A subsequent protocol, signed on October 23, 1954, provided for the admission of West Germany on May 9, 1955. On May 30, 1982, Spain was admitted, bringing the total membership to 16.⁸ Membership remained at 16 nations until the advent of the dramatic events that evolved following the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Purpose and Structure of NATO

The purpose of the alliance, as stated in the North Atlantic Treaty, is to “promote stability and well-being in the North Atlantic area.” The parties to the treaty stated their determination “to safeguard the freedom, common heritage and civilization of their peoples, founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law.” They also reaffirmed “their faith in the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations and their desire to live in peace with all peoples and all governments.”⁹

The treaty itself is a short document, consisting of only 14 articles. The heart of the treaty is Article 5, which states that an armed attack on any one of the parties to the treaty shall be considered an attack on all of them, and further, that each of them shall “assist the Party or Parties so attacked” by taking immediate and all action deemed necessary to “restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area.” The parties also agreed, as stated in Article 2, to coordinate their economic policies and strengthen their free institutions.¹⁰

The North Atlantic Council. In order to institutionalize the alliance, the North Atlantic Council was established, under Article 9 of the treaty. The purpose of the council is to “consider matters concerning the implementation of this Treaty.”

The council was also given the authority to establish subsidiary bodies for the purpose of implementing the provisions of the treaty. The council is thus the core institution of NATO.

The council is the supreme operating authority of NATO. It consists of representatives from each of the member states, with the NATO Secretary General serving as the chairman. Each member state sends a permanent representative with ambassadorial rank to attend the weekly council meetings. Twice a year, council meetings are held at the Minister of Foreign Affairs (Secretary of State) level. Occasionally meetings are held at the level of heads of government; these are often referred to as “NATO summits.”

The council serves as the central forum for consultation and cooperation among the member governments. The representatives discuss matters over a wide range of issues relating to the security of the member nations. The issues of discussion, however, are not limited to NATO’s geographic area; the only topics excluded from discussion are those relating to the purely internal affairs of member countries.

NATO is not a supranational organization. Therefore, all decisions are made by the common consent of all the members. Once decisions are made by the council, however, they become binding and can only be reversed by the council itself.

The Military Committee. The Military Committee, established by the North Atlantic Council at their first session on September 7, 1949, is composed of the chiefs of staff of each country, who meet three times each year. (Iceland has a civilian representative.) The committee is responsible for advising the council, the Secretary General, the Defense Planning Committee and the Nuclear Planning Group on military matters, and also provides military guidance to allied commanders and subordinate military authorities.

The strategic area covered by the North Atlantic Treaty is now, as a result of recent reorganization, divided between two regional commands: Allied Command Europe and Allied Command Atlantic. There is also a Regional Planning Group for North America, whose defense plans are developed by the United States and Canada.

In December 1997, at a meeting of the Military Committee, defense ministers of the major countries decided to reduce the number of major NATO commands from three to two—European and Atlantic. They decided to create two strategic commands, with Allied Command Europe having two regional commands. Allied Command Atlantic will consist of three regional commands.¹¹

Each major command has a supreme commander. The Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) is responsible for the European area of the Allied Command Europe (ACE). SACEUR's headquarters, known as SHAPE (Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe) is located in Casteau, Belgium. The Supreme Allied Commander Atlantic (SACLANT) is headquartered at Norfolk, Virginia.

France, Spain and NATO. In 1966, the President of France, Charles de Gaulle, announced France's withdrawal from the integrated military command of NATO. President de Gaulle also ordered the removal from French soil of all NATO installations, including NATO Headquarters, which was then situated in Paris. Accordingly, NATO Headquarters was moved to Brussels, Belgium, and NATO military installations were removed from France in 1969.

NATO and the Post-Cold War Era

The events of recent years, particularly since 1989, have drastically changed the strategic, political, military, economic and social landscape of Europe. The dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, the withdrawal of Soviet military forces and the emergence of the democratic process in Eastern Europe, the dissolution of the Soviet Union itself, the coming to power in Russia through free elections of a president dedicated to free-market reform and a nonhostile foreign policy toward the United States and the West have greatly altered the general security environment in Europe today.

There is no longer a threat of a massive Soviet Warsaw Pact invasion of Western Europe. Today, a massive invasion of Western Europe of any dimension is highly unlikely. Even if there were a drastic change in the political situation in Russia—should hardline nationalists seize power, or a successful military coup be followed by an attempted military assault on Europe—NATO would have a much longer warning time to prepare for and counter such a contingency.

Still, threats to Europe's stability continue to exist as ethnic strife in Bosnia and Kosovo challenges the nations of that continent to keep those conflicts from spreading to other areas.

Debate on NATO's Future. At the beginning of the decade, the end of the Cold War and the improbability of a military attack on Western Europe brought into question the existence of NATO itself. Some argued that with the disappearance of the Soviet threat, NATO had lost its *raison d'être*. After all, the sole reason that NATO was formed was to counter the Soviet threat, and its purpose for existence throughout the Cold War remained solely to counter that threat.

Others, however, argued that NATO was about more than just countering the Soviet threat. They pointed to the fact that nowhere in the North Atlantic Treaty is the Soviet Union even mentioned by name. The treaty's purpose, as stated in the preamble, is "to promote stability and well-being in the North Atlantic area" and "to safeguard the freedom, common heritage and civilization of their peoples, founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law."¹²

NATO proponents argue that the end of the Cold War has brought a whole new host of problems and threats, particularly long-term threats, to Europe's security and well-being. NATO, as Europe's primary security organization, can continue to play a constructive role in meeting these challenges and threats.

NATO is well-equipped for these new roles. Its common infrastructure of "installations and facilities such as airfields, communications and information systems, military headquarters, fuel pipelines, and storage, radar and navigational aids, port installations, missile sites, forward storage and support facilities for reinforcement," and its high level of military and political consultations make NATO unique among Europe's security institutions and among alliances in general.¹³ Proponents argue that NATO can and should continue to provide for the security and well-being of its member states.

NATO, however, cannot remain a static organization; it must adjust to the new security environment. NATO has thus far met this challenge by changing and adjusting its force structure to meet the new challenges and threats which confront the alliance. Among these new challenges and threats are instabilities in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union; the proliferation of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction; national, ethnic and religious conflicts; and political instabilities, mass migration, economic instabilities and other threats that may emanate from regions that have traditionally been outside NATO's area of interest as defined in Article 6 of the North Atlantic Treaty.

In order to meet these new challenges, NATO began a process of transformation which was given great impetus at the 1990 London and 1991 Rome summits of the heads of states and governments of the North Atlantic Council, and has continued throughout the decade. The Washington Summit in April 1999 will culminate this adaptation process and prepare the Atlantic alliance for the 21st century.

The London and Rome Summits. In July 1990, the heads of state and government of the NATO member countries met in London for a session of the North Atlantic Council. At this London Summit the leaders agreed to take major steps to transform the alliance. In recognition of the new post-Cold War security environment in Europe, the leaders issued and published the "London Declaration on a Transformed North Atlantic Alliance," reflecting the changed situation in Europe and the determination of the alliance to adapt to the new environment. It reaffirmed the defensive nature of the alliance while recognizing that more than ever, security could not be defined in strictly military terms. The council stated its intention to enhance the political dimension of the alliance as provided for by Article 2 of the North Atlantic Treaty.

The alliance leaders then took practical steps by: (1) calling for the establishment of regular diplomatic liaison with the countries of the former Warsaw Pact and a new partnership with these countries; (2) announcing a fundamental review of NATO strategy; (3) announcing the intention to fundamentally change the integrated force structure of the alliance to conform with the new strategy; and, (4) recommending measures to strengthen the CSCE (Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe) process.¹⁴ (The CSCE [now known as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, or OSCE] was established in 1975 to promote contacts and dialogue among all European states and North America. The process involves the establishment of confidence-building measures in the political, economic and security areas.)

At the November 1991 Rome Summit of heads of state and government, the NATO leaders built upon the decisions of the London Summit and took further steps to transform the alliance to meet the challenges of the new era. In the "Rome Declaration on Peace and Cooperation," the leaders called for a "new security architecture" for Europe. The declaration stated that "the challenges we will face in this new Europe cannot be comprehensively addressed by one institution alone, but only in a framework of interlocking institutions tying together the countries of Europe and North America."¹⁵

At Rome, the alliance also published a new "Strategic Concept." This strategy provided for the capability to meet "any potential risks to our security which may arise from instability or tension," while at the same time maintaining an overall strategic balance in Europe.¹⁶

The new "Strategic Concept" called for a fundamental restructuring of alliance military forces to meet the new "diverse" and "multi-directional" risks that confront the new Europe. It called for an overall reduction of forces and enhanced "flexibility," "mobility" and an "assured capability for augmentation" of remaining forces.¹⁷ These capabilities were designed for crisis management—managing and resolving

crises at an early stage in their development and preventing their spill-over. This new concept, combined with an increasing political role for the alliance, conforms to the principle, outlined in the Rome Declaration, of a "broad approach to security."¹⁸

NATO's resulting structuring emphasized multinational organizations, reflecting the changed security environment in Europe and reduced military assets available to NATO. Toward this end, the first U.S./German and German/U.S. multinational corps were activated on April 22, 1993, when the German 5th Panzer Division was assigned to the U.S. Army V Corps and the U.S. 1st Armored Division was integrated into the German II Corps.

The Rome Declaration also called for the establishment of the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC). The purpose of the NACC, as stated in the Rome Declaration, was to "develop a more institutional relationship of consultation and cooperation on political and security issues" with NATO's former Warsaw Pact adversaries. The NACC included the former Warsaw Pact countries of Eastern and Central Europe, the former Soviet Union, and the independent states of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, with Georgia and Albania to become members at a later date. The foreign ministers of these countries met with the 16 NATO foreign ministers in December 1991 in the inaugural meeting of the NACC.

Following that inaugural meeting, the NACC met on several other occasions. At these meetings the participants discussed a broad range of issues, including "political, military, economic, scientific, and environmental subjects." They also discussed "specific topics for cooperation [including] defense planning, conceptual approaches to arms control, democratic concepts of civilian-military relations, civil-military coordination of air-traffic management, defense conversion, and enhanced participation in NATO's 'Third Dimension' scientific and environmental programs."¹⁹

New Roles and Missions. In addition to the steps taken in London and Rome, NATO also considered other new roles and missions to confront new "diverse" and "multi-directional" risks. Among these were peacekeeping, peacemaking and humanitarian missions. These missions could possibly be performed by NATO on the basis of mandates from other multilateral institutions, in particular the United Nations and the OSCE.

At their January 1994 summit, NATO leaders continued along the path toward new roles and missions for the alliance. Foremost among these was the concept for a "Partnership for Peace," in which those nations participating in the North Atlantic Cooperation Council would be invited to participate in a broad series of practical cooperative activities, mainly in the military-to-military field, designed to enhance those nations' capabilities to perform peacekeeping, crisis management and humanitarian missions in cooperation with NATO.

This summit also decided to create a significant new crisis management tool by authorizing the concept of Combined Joint Task Forces (CJTFs), which would allow Western European Union-led operations to be provided NATO support in responding to a broad range of possible missions, to include collective defense and peacekeeping. The practical implication of this decision was to allow the European members of the alliance to carry out operations without having large United States involvement, an important enhancement to the creation of a stronger "European Pillar" and stronger European Security and Defense Identity (ESDI). ESDI is particularly important to the members of the WEU as they seek to deepen that institution.

A final outcome of this summit was a decision for the alliance to promote confidence-building and dialogue between NATO and non-NATO countries in the Mediterranean region.

In June 1996, the North Atlantic Council built upon these decisions by adopting measures that would construct procedures designed to facilitate using NATO assets in support of WEU-led missions, and further the arrangements for the European members to have a larger role in the alliance's command structures. This was in complement to another decision by the council to direct NATO's Military Committee to streamline the command structure to better prepare for likely future missions.

A final step in the adaptation of the alliance to prepare for future new missions were the decisions made at the Madrid Summit of July 1997. The alliance deepened its mechanisms for consultation with Russia and Ukraine through the establishment of a NATO-Russia Permanent Joint Council (PJC) and a NATO-Ukraine Charter. They also enhanced the NACC by reestablishing it as the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council with increased ability to give focus and weight to discussions concerning multilateral political and security-related issues. Most importantly, the alliance's leaders underlined the new politico-military landscape of Europe by inviting three former members of the Warsaw Pact—Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary—to begin accession talks for eventual NATO membership. These talks have now been completed and all the current 16 members of NATO have ratified the new memberships, which will be formally concluded during the April 1999 Washington Summit of the alliance.

Conclusion

In this post-Cold War era of fundamental political, economic and social change in European and world history, the North Atlantic Alliance has so far proven itself capable of adapting to the changes. The challenge for NATO is to continue to prove its relevance by continuing to provide for the "security and well-being" of its members.

The threat of a single power—formerly the Soviet Union and now Russia—gaining predominance over the European continent may have been the main reason that the United States entered into the North Atlantic Alliance. Now that this threat has virtually disappeared, the United States must redefine the role it is willing to play in Europe in the context of the new roles and missions that NATO is adapting itself to perform.

U.S. vital interests in a stable, secure Europe remain. In this regard, U.S. involvement in NATO will continue because NATO offers an international forum to resolve conflicts and a mechanism for coalition military forces to meet threats in vital areas, particularly the Middle East. NATO's military infrastructure and the integration and participation of U.S. forces in the NATO military command structure will greatly facilitate crisis responses in Europe as well as in adjacent regions.

Future NATO missions will likely continue to be designed to contain and prevent religious, ethnic and nationalistic conflicts in Eastern Europe; prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; and facilitate the integration of former Eastern Bloc countries politically, economically and militarily, to the West.

A current example of these kinds of missions is the decision by the alliance in December 1995 to authorize the creation of an "Implementation Force" (IFOR) in Bosnia as a means of enforcing the Dayton Peace Accords, designed to bring an end to the ethnic conflict that had torn that former Yugoslav Republic during the preceding four years. This "out-of-area" operation by the alliance, which was very effective in bringing an end to the hostilities, continues to the present through the use of a "Stabilization Force" (SFOR). As was the case with the IFOR, the SFOR makes use, under NATO command, of alliance member forces and those of Partnership for Peace countries, to include Russia and Ukraine.

NATO is continuing this active involvement in European security missions through the recent authorization for the use of NATO forces in bringing an end to the ethnic conflict in the Yugoslav Republic province of Kosovo.

Europe and the world are undergoing an era of transition. The Cold War clearly defined that era's security threat in Europe: a Soviet/Warsaw Pact attack on Western Europe. Today, however, the security situation in Europe is fundamentally different. Threats to security are more diffuse and unpredictable. NATO is adapting to this new security situation in order to continue its relevancy to the future security needs of the member states.

Endnotes

1. The term "Cold War" was coined by Herbert Bayard Swope, who wrote speeches for Bernard M. Baruch. On April 16, 1947, Baruch first used the term in a speech he delivered at the unveiling of his portrait in the South Carolina legislature in Columbia. He stated: "Let us not be deceived—we are today in the midst of a cold war." Source: *Respectfully Quoted: A Dictionary of Quotations Requested from the Congressional Research Service*, ed. Suzy Platt (Washington D.C.: Library of Congress, 1989), pp. 48-49.
2. *North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Facts and Figures* (Brussels: NATO Information Service, 1981), p. 15.
3. *The Foreign Affairs Chronology of World Events, Second Edition, 1978-1991* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1992), p. 432.
4. *NATO, Facts and Figures*, 1981, p. 19.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
6. Gregory F. Treverton, *America, Germany, and the Future of Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 53.
7. *Documents on American Foreign Relations, Volume X*, ed. Raymond Dennett and Robert K. Turner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950), pp. 583-584.
8. *NATO, Facts and Figures*, 1981, p. 21.
9. *North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Facts and Figures* (Brussels: NATO Information Service, 1976), p. 300.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 300-301.
11. *NATO Handbook* (Brussels: NATO Information Service, 1998), p. 263.
12. *NATO Facts and Figures*, 1981, p. 264.
13. *NATO Handbook* (Brussels: NATO Information Service, 1992), p. 42.
14. *U.S. Department of State Dispatch*, December 28, 1992, Vol. 3, No. 52, p. 930.
15. *NATO Review*, Vol. 39, "Rome Declaration on Peace and Cooperation," December 1991, pp. 19-22.
16. *NATO Review*, Vol. 39, December 1991, pp. 25-32.
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
19. *U.S. Department of State Dispatch*, December 28, 1992, Vol. 3, No. 52, p. 935.

(This updated *Background Brief* was originally prepared in January 1994 by Mr. Rick Brix, an intern with the Institute of Land Warfare participating in the American University, Washington Semester study program.)