

AN OBSOLETE ALLIANCE

E. Wayne Merry

It is axiomatic that nothing in government is so long lasting as temporary measures. Policies, programs and appropriations initiated to respond to a transitory issue take on lives of their own, spawning institutions which not only outlive their purpose but themselves create new problems to justify their continued existence.

On the international stage today, the most egregious example of this principle is the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). An alliance created in response to the devastation of the Second World War in Europe and the onset of the Cold War is now approaching its seventh decade, two generations beyond the restoration of Europe's economy plus a large measure of European unity and a full generation beyond Gorbachev's acceptance of failure in the Cold War. Over the years, NATO has turned its back on its inherently defensive and conservative origins to become a shameless hustler after engagements to justify its own perpetuation. Rather than defending European territory or deterring threats to North Atlantic interests, NATO has followed with a vengeance the advice of Manfred Woerner, its Secretary General in the early 1990s, that it "must go out of area or go out of business."

A cynical American might still accept NATO as a useful complement to other international engagements, except that NATO has become a net liability to the United States and one this country need no longer sustain. NATO's contributions to our interests are more apparent than substantive, while the costs of our transatlantic welfare program remain huge. Worst of all, NATO



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subordinates American power and influence to European interests and preferences under the false rubric of “shared values.”

What is an “alliance” anyway?

Any discussion of NATO should begin with clarity about what it is. NATO is an alliance, based on the Treaty of Washington of 1949. It began as an alliance should, in response to the real and shared security requirements of its members, and undertook mutual obligations to assure their interests. Unfortunately, the words “alliance” and “ally” currently are employed without precision or even meaning. An alliance is a concrete undertaking of states in a defined context to do certain things if required. The best alliances (albeit not all) are codified in treaties, so there can be reference to what its purposes are—and are not. The Founders of the American Republic were rather fussy in this regard, wishing to spare this country the frivolous and often secretive deals among monarchs which engendered almost unending inter-state violence in the Europe of their day. The North Atlantic Treaty was the product of difficult and protracted negotiations (the record of which is now largely declassified) and was subject to serious scrutiny and debate by the United States Senate before achieving ratification.

The Washington Treaty is purely defensive; nothing in it can legitimize use of force other than in response to a direct attack against its members. Article V, contrary to popular myth, does not even commit its members to the use of force. The Treaty is not a substitute for U.S. constitutional prerogatives, nor for the role of the Security Council under the United Nations Charter (to which the Treaty

often defers). The Alliance is, therefore, conservative in the most precise sense of the term: it is a mechanism for sharing risk. The Treaty is not expansive in either purpose or geographic application (so-called “out of area”). Those who want NATO to play an ever-increasing role as global policeman or intervention force should, if they are honest, seek renegotiation under Article XII to give the Alliance these additional functions and obtain ratification by national legislatures. A “global NATO” without such treaty revision is nothing short of a silent political *coup d'état*, and a clear demonstration that its supporters care little about legal constraints, whether international or American.

Sadly, recent transatlantic “dialogue” has trended in the opposite direction. NATO is now routinely portrayed as a mechanism to combat global warming, for international law enforcement, as a substitute for other international treaties (such as that on the nonproliferation of nuclear weapons), and for a variety of humanitarian purposes. A case in point is a recent study by the International Institute of Strategic Studies, whose European and American authors explicitly advocate an almost unlimited agenda for “the transatlantic alliance.”¹ The authors use the term “alliance” interchangeably with “partnership,” “relationship” and even “solidarity.” These are *not* the same thing, however, and to treat them as synonymous warps rational policy debate.

Any war will do

Conflating the Alliance with other transatlantic issues is pernicious, but it has deep roots. NATO lost its basic *raison d'être* years ago, as Europe's need for American troops ended long before the Cold War did. The European members of NATO

collectively dwarfed the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact within a generation of the signing of the Treaty. However, proposals for a reduction in American forces, such as from Senator Mike Mansfield in the early 1970s, elicited near-hysterical denunciations from European governments which, with few exceptions, had never met even their rather modest military obligations to the Alliance.

However, NATO really went off its rails with the Soviet collapse, which left it without threat or legitimate purpose. Although by logic NATO should have voluntarily followed the Warsaw Pact into history, the survival instinct which unites amoebas and bureaucracies prevailed. NATO took on a mentor role for the militaries of its former adversaries, prepared to become a peacekeeping strike force, and expanded inexorably eastward. In doing so, it exacerbated inter-state tensions with Russia, rather than ameliorating them. There was almost no debate as to whether the United States even had a legitimate security role in post-Cold War Europe, or if it was not time for Europeans to reassume responsibility for their own continent.

For NATO, the collapse of Yugoslavia was a gift from heaven. The largest European state which had sat on the fence during the Cold War ironically supplied the rationale for a Cold War alliance to become an international peacemaking force, something its founders never conceived and the U.S. Senate never would have ratified. The fighting in the western Balkans certainly challenged Europe in many ways (such as refugee flows), but it did not threaten its security—at least not as defined by Article V. More to the point, the Yugoslav wars did not compromise the security of the United States at all. Whatever our humanitarian concerns, the Republic

was not endangered. Managing the Balkan mess was therefore appropriately a job for Europe, not NATO.

The ensuing “hour of Europe” was a sad display of bickering and indecision, with poor appreciation of Balkan realities and faulty application of force in a fraught political environment. (Europeans who gloat over our mismanagement in Iraq might recall their own in Bosnia.) However, the capacities of the European powers were more than adequate to the task. Sadly, after decades of deference to the United States on almost all things military, the Europeans were unwilling (not unable) to muster the force necessary to restrain fifth-rate Balkan powers. What the Europeans did want, as one of their diplomats bluntly put it, was “American blood on the ground” in Yugoslavia.² They wanted Americans to do the dirty work, again.

Supporters of NATO rejoiced at the opportunity to demonstrate its continuing “relevance.” They ignored the lack of legal authority for the Alliance to intervene in Balkan ethnic fighting (although some governments, notably that of Germany, did require parliamentary approval for their respective roles). While the misuse of NATO in Bosnia was bad enough, the ensuing conflict over Kosovo was much worse. An American president took the United States to war with a foreign state (Serbia) which had not attacked or threatened us, and proclaimed legitimacy for doing so not in the Constitution nor in the United Nations Charter, both of which do contain applicable authority, but in the North Atlantic Treaty, which does not.

The public relations rationale for NATO’s first actual use of force was even more inverted than the legal legerdemain. On both sides of the

Atlantic, the Kosovo war was justified as a way to preserve NATO's "credibility." Ponder that logic: a defensive alliance initiates a non-defensive war to give itself legitimacy, or at least the appearance of viability. In short, NATO bombed Belgrade to show that it could bomb. The rationale for war was weakened still further by the scare tactics and inflation of the humanitarian crisis in Kosovo, where brutal villains abounded on both sides, and because NATO ignored far more pressing humanitarian crises elsewhere.

These precedents are frightening. Where, now, is the limit to what may be justified under the rubric of NATO? What prevents a future American president from initiating war via NATO for almost any purpose, anywhere? The implications for our republican form of government are daunting.

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Allies, auxiliaries or hangers-on?

However, critics might protest, does not NATO greatly enhance American power in the world? Is not NATO, as some have expressed it, a "toolbox" for the United States to supplement our own forces? The record on both scores is decidedly mixed.

Europe remains a net security consumer from America. Despite the large forces maintained by the European states and the existence of some excellent units, their collective security quotient is fairly modest. European militaries remain organized on

a national—rather than regional—basis, with vast duplication, overlap and waste of resources. Many European "militaries" exist more for prestige and domestic job creation than for force projection. Indeed, the very concept of projecting military force remains toxic in many European countries and in almost all political parties of the left. In Germany, conscription actually supplies more young men to the national health program through alternative service than it sends to the armed forces.³ While the much-vaunted "European pillar" of NATO can tabulate more soldiers, tanks and airplanes than we, the effective whole of Europe's forces remains much less than the sum of its parts.

The American security contribution to Europe is not free, and the balance is clearly in Europe's favor. Europe absorbs more security from the United States than it contributes. European elites are well aware of the benefits they enjoy from NATO and of the transfer of wealth which the American working class through its taxes and sons provides to the European middle and upper classes. Whenever there is American discussion of closing or reducing U.S. facilities or deployments in Europe, the European reaction is negative and couched in terms of money, not security. The Americans provide a low-cost service which frees European public funds for more popular programs, such as subsidized health care and opera. So, when Europeans acclaim the "shared values" of NATO, it may be the value of American manpower and defense spending they enjoy sharing.

As there is no credible military threat to Europe now or on the horizon, NATO justifies itself through "out-of-area" operations, although the Treaty is explicitly limited to

“the North Atlantic area.” Under the “NATO as toolbox” concept, Europeans should be useful auxiliaries for America’s non-European engagements. However, experience shows the “toolbox” is not always Washington’s to employ—and may not contain the appropriate tools anyway.

After all, an alliance is only as good as its performance in a crisis, and NATO has shown several times it can stymie American efforts to mobilize European support. Even during the halcyon days of the Cold War, our European allies refused U.S. requests to use our NATO bases or even to overfly their territory when the issue involved the Middle East (i.e., the 1973 Arab-Israeli war and the 1986 U.S. bombing of Libya). U.S. forces labored under allied restrictions even on routine operations which might offend Europe’s southern neighbors. Nor did the United States receive NATO support in either Persian Gulf war, although a number of members participated on a national basis. European governments refused U.S. efforts to involve NATO because operations against Iraq were not covered by the North Atlantic Treaty. The lesson is clear: Europeans can and do say “no” when Washington wants to use NATO for purposes they do not share.

A model not to follow

Afghanistan is often portrayed as the acid test of the “new NATO,” and in perverse ways it is. Afghanistan was appropriately America’s war, not Europe’s. We had been attacked and pursued our attackers to their refuge. Washington did not want to remake Afghanistan, but to destroy al-Qaeda. Over time, however, objectives have shifted. Today, bin Laden and his senior associates remain at liberty, while the Taliban is resur-

gent in many parts of the country. This happened because the United States did not follow through on its initial military success, but diverted into a “nation-building” mission of dubious utility. Had the United States concentrated on its limited initial goals in Afghanistan, the local population might reasonably have seen its self-interest as linked to ours. A prolonged occupation by foreigners, by its very nature, must eventually exhaust its welcome.

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Ironically, NATO participation in Afghanistan has contributed to this failure. The offer of European forces encouraged American policymakers to turn away from the pursuit of al-Qaeda and its local allies—a job that should have been the top priority of the U.S. defense establishment until achieved. Sadly, however, U.S. operations in Afghanistan quickly assumed secondary importance to preparations for the Iraq war, and were starved of specialist personnel and key resources during critical months of the campaign. It is difficult to believe Washington would have done this had it not expected NATO to pick up the slack. While European governments certainly did not seek such an outcome, the practical effect of NATO engagement in Afghanistan was to allow the United States to fumble in that conflict, at incalculable long-term cost.

Many European units deployed to Afghanistan contain high-quality

personnel who have done excellent (and often heroic) work. However, the governments which sent them were always more interested in influencing Washington than in transforming Afghanistan. (Whether the latter is possible or even desirable is another issue entirely.) Indeed, the very invocation of Article V for the first time after 9/11 was highly dubious, as the Treaty obviously envisages an attack by a state, rather than a terrorist group. Many previous attacks on European territory by Palestinian groups had not provoked NATO's retaliation on Middle Eastern countries sheltering them. Nor was Article V invoked in response to IRA attacks in the United Kingdom, including one in 1984 which almost killed much of the British government including Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (and the Alliance did not contemplate occupying Ireland).

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What made the terrorist attacks of September 2001 different for NATO was concern by Europeans that American attention would turn away from them. The goal for European governments was to "prove" NATO's continuing worth to increasingly skeptical Americans. The solution was modest national contingents in Afghanistan under NATO aus-

pices. In reality, many of the deployments fell short of commitments and have operated under national rules of engagement which severely restrict their utility on the ground. Nonetheless, the policy was a success, in that it is cheaper to send a few men to Southwest Asia than to replace the huge American security subsidy of Europe. That some Europeans serve in Afghanistan with distinction cannot obscure the ulterior motives which sent them there.

Thinking the eminently thinkable

What would a post-NATO European security system look like? Would it not revert to the endemic conflict of previous centuries without an American *ordnungsmacht* to enforce peace, or might it not fall prey to Russian domination? Neither fear reflects reality.

European integration, while imperfect, has effectively eliminated armed conflict among its participants, while almost the least militarized power in the Western world today is once-menacing Germany. That a unified Germany threatens none of its neighbors and feels threatened by none of them is a great historic achievement, for which the United States can rightfully assume some credit. Whatever its shortcomings, the European Union is unlikely to collapse if American uniforms were no longer on the continent. Having encouraged and shielded the process of European unity, America should not now worry that Europe is unable to live in peace. How Europeans would then choose to transform NATO into a European regional security system is entirely for them to decide, not for us. The legates of Talleyrand, Palmerston and Bismarck are up to the job.

The principal security concern for many Europeans is Russia. Yet Russia, though in a resurgent nationalist phase, is incapable of major military adventures. Behind the glitter of oil and gas wealth is a country with 170 deaths per 100 live births (the corresponding figure for Italy is 103/100).⁴ The twin crises of demographics and health are the central challenge for Russia in this century, even if its leaders have their eyes fixed on restored greatness. No country can be expansionist with a fertility rate at half of replacement, a rapidly shrinking conscription pool of young men weakened by endemic childhood vitamin and calcium deficiencies, and an economy based largely on commodity exports. It is noteworthy that little of the oil and gas money amassed by the Kremlin in recent years has gone to the Russian military, or is planned to. The Russian Army has not even replaced the conventional equipment and munitions it expended in Chechnya, while the planned construction of new strategic missiles and submarines will result in a still faster decrease of the country's nuclear deterrent force than took place under the tenure of Boris Yeltsin. The Russian Air Force must worry not only about aging aircraft but even more about aging pilots, while all the armed services continue to hemorrhage young officers and officer cadets, who correctly foresee a life of penury in uniform. As a military power, then, Russia is in a position to saber-rattle toward its former Soviet possessions, but not much more.

To be sure, Russia does have other instruments of national policy. Whereas in the late nineteenth century it was said in Russia that it had only two friends, its army and navy,

today those have been replaced by oil and gas. To the evident surprise of many Europeans, Russia's leaders employ their limited national assets as means of influence and geopolitics rather than as strictly commercial undertakings. This demonstrates only that Europeans, who often like to lecture Americans about dealing with Moscow, still see what they want to see in Russia. Europe will face continuing challenges in dealing with Russia on energy issues, but three realities are clear. First, NATO is of no use in that calculus; there is nothing in the Alliance arsenal that can affect hydrocarbon pipeline routes, throughput, price or availability. As an American labor leader once said, you cannot dig coal with a bayonet. Second, Europe has none to blame but itself for its difficulties with Russia. The European Union dwarfs Russia by any relevant index, but can only exercise its strategic weight if it does so united. This is a European, not a transatlantic, task that Europe must face up to. Third, global energy markets are changing rapidly. Russia will decline as a petroleum exporter while its piped natural gas exports will face real competition in price and availability from liquefied gas. To be sure, Russia is and will remain a problem for Europe, but not one of mass armies or nuclear intimidation. The appropriate responses to Moscow now and for the foreseeable future are political and economic, not military.

European purposes in NATO are clear: to subordinate American power and resources to their interests and to maintain a mechanism by which to constrain the United States.

The dubious value of “values”

What purpose, then, does NATO now truly serve? According to its adherents, the Alliance is a mechanism for exporting democracy and a vehicle for “shared values.” The signatories of the 1949 Treaty would surely have reacted to such rhetoric with incredulity. The member states vary widely in their forms of democracy, but all share basic rule of law and citizen rights. While such concepts warrant wider application in the world, recent experience casts doubt whether they can be successfully promulgated at gunpoint. Modern militaries are good for a number of things, but persuading other cultures to emulate our own is not one of them. In any case, America’s military has commitments far beyond its reduced force structure. If this country is to have armed forces able to fight and win our wars (which inevitably will come again), we need to let them concentrate on that ultimate task.

Whether superpower or hyperpower, the United States does not possess limitless power. We need not maintain a foreign obligation just because we did so in a very different past.

European rhetoric about “values” to justify NATO plays on enduring American gullibility. The underlying message is “you should support and subsidize our security, doing tasks we are quite capable of if we chose to spend the resources, because thereby we together are spreading American ‘values’ around the world.” One could admire the cleverness of this gambit

were it not so shameless. European elites do not share American values and never have. This is true of both the political right and left. America represents a rejection of European values, which revolve around inherited national identities and a social order defined by inherited social classes. America is a created nation (many Europeans deny we even are a nation, or could be), revering individual liberty and opportunity, and rejecting class warfare as unnecessary and destructive. The European right always detested America as a threat to the legitimacy of their neo-feudal privileges and inherited status. The European left dislikes the American experience because it challenges their faith in social revolution and the class struggle. The popular American notion that our country was widely admired in Europe in the past is false. Europeans as individuals have often done so, and many have chosen to join us. But Europe as a whole, and elites especially, long disliked and feared America as inimical to their own way of life and their centrality in world affairs. Europeans embraced America when they needed us, not to emulate us. That many Europeans today, especially among the best-educated, define themselves in anti-American terms is a reversion to an historic norm, rather than a departure from it.

NATO was a continuation of Europe’s need for American power to prevent its own systemic collapse. In two World Wars (both of European origin) and the Cold War (the product of European ideologies), Europe could not bring order out of chaos without imported power. Europeans sought to harness American resources to serve European interests. In the First World War, French and British military and political leaders planned to use our

troops in their own force structures and were genuinely shocked when informed the Americans intended to fight under their own flag and command. European leaders in both wars conceived of the United States as comparable to their own colonies and dominions, albeit larger and richer. For them, America was an extension of Europe and a replacement for deficits of European manpower and money. Despite greatly altered circumstances, this basic perception remains: America is (or should be) essentially European and the servant of Europe. Americans see their country and themselves in quite different terms, however. Certainly, the United States has been a European power for most of the past century, but it is not a European country, society or culture. America is not European, and there the “shared values” rationale for NATO dies.

An America able to say “No”

European purposes in NATO are clear: to subordinate American power and resources to their interests and to maintain a mechanism by which to constrain the United States. Whether a European policy judgment may be wise in any particular case is largely irrelevant. The subordination of American policy is a clear infringement of our national sovereignty and freedom of policy choice. If our policies are ill conceived or executed, it is our responsibility to rectify them, rather than to surrender our judgment to that of Europe, whose historical record is hardly one that bears emulation.

Europe today is inward-looking and regional in ambition, while the United States (for better or worse) has global interests and responsi-

bilities. Any reasonable assessment of the century ahead indicates our future is more likely to be linked with the emerging destinies of Asia than of Europe. It is noteworthy that our image is significantly more favorable in most Asian societies than in European ones; there is a basic affinity between Asian countries and our own, if we can recognize it. Even the American demographic is shifting away from European origins at a rapid pace, making America increasing a global nation of nations. Europeans hate this trend, for it foretells an America that will cease to feel the historical European affinities from which they profit so much.

Security is the most fundamental aspect of public affairs, and European unity can never become fully mature until Europeans provide it for themselves. NATO is not a vehicle for European security integration; it is an impediment to it.

The transatlantic relationship (“relationship,” not “alliance”) will doubtless remain of immense importance to the United States. Europe and North America are linked by a dense web of economic and other ties which remain robust and are likely to thrive for generations to come. Together we constitute something like half the global economy and most of the developed world. However, economic relationships do not require military ties to flourish. To believe they do is Cold War thinking, not supported by either American or European history. No other country defines its external economics as inexorably linked

to military deployments and alliance obligations. America need not and should not do so.

Whether superpower or hyperpower, the United States does not possess limitless power. We need not maintain a foreign obligation just because we did so in a very different past. It is often noted that America possesses much more of the world's wealth than our share of its population, but rarely is the liability side of the ledger shown. Today, the asymmetry of America's global security obligations in comparison with those of other centers of wealth and power is striking. Our commitments are excessive, both when gauged against our capacities and the benefits accrued to the Republic. Obviously, some global burdens come with a global role, but there must be reasonable limits based on a sober assessment of national interest and of the capacities of other countries.

After almost a century of carrying Europe's water, it is time to stop. The Washington Treaty obligated this country to NATO for 20 years (Article XIII); thus, for almost four decades our role has exceeded our commitment. Europe is more than capable of looking out for itself and maintaining security in surrounding areas, including the Mediterranean and Black Seas plus much of Africa. Europe has the institutions, talent, technology and finances to manage the security of its corner of the planet. If (as seems likely) Europe does not choose to play a broader global security role, that is probably just as well. A provincial Europe is not a bad thing. What is not sustainable is that a restored Europe should remain a security protectorate of the United States. Security is the most fundamental aspect of public affairs, and European unity

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America remains the global leader in many fields including military power, but that is a national asset better husbanded than expended. Our armed forces need replenishment and a wiser choice of commitments. European security is one military burden America can and should lay down.



1. Dana H. Allin et al., "Repairing the Damage: Possibilities and Limits of Transatlantic Consensus," *International Institute of Strategic Studies Adelpi Paper* no. 389, October 2007.
2. Private conversation with the author, 1996.
3. See, for example, "Defense Economics Reform IV: Budgets and Expenditure Choices in the Post Cold War," Conference sponsored by the Conference Center of the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies and the NATO Economics Directorate; Wildbad Kreuth, Germany; September 15-18, 2002.
4. M. G. Field, "The Health Crisis in the Former Soviet Union: A Report from the 'Post War' Zone," *Social Science and Medicine* 41, no. 11 (1995), 1469-1478.