

NATO's Role in the U.S. Grand Strategy: Should Europe Remain the Prime Focus of U.S. Foreign Policy?

by Dov S. Zakheim

Not for many years have so many factors affecting the viability and nature of the North Atlantic Treaty Alliance been in such an advanced state of flux. NATO's internal relationships seem to be changing politically, militarily, and economically at breakneck speed.

In the past several weeks alone, the Federal Republic of Germany has exercised an unprecedented degree of political assertiveness and forced a major crisis over the question of short-range nuclear missiles. At the same time, France has been forced to reevaluate the political and military viability of its independent status within NATO. French planners have found themselves forced to grapple simultaneously with NATO's readiness to negotiate limits on aircraft, which threatens the force structure of France's nuclear bomber force, as well as with recent revelations of longstanding American assistance for the development of its supposedly independent *force de frappe*. Britain likewise must struggle with NATO's seemingly implicit readiness to negotiate away at least part of the U.K. deterrent, while at the same time London must cope with a change in tone, if not substance, in the "special relationship" with the United States.

The Alliance as a whole finds itself struggling with its first serious negotiations on conventional forces even as the superpowers inch closer toward a START agreement. And the economic dimensions of NATO military cooperation, characterized by the phrase "the two-way street," continue to take on new meaning as the European Community, aiming for a Europe without borders in 1992, moves cautiously but purposefully into the area of defense industry cooperation.

Almost Daily Changes. The externalities affecting NATO's posture – the threat against which it was created – likewise continue to undergo major change on virtually a daily basis. Coupled with the now familiar pronouncements emanating from Moscow on the twin themes of glasnost and perestroika comes the spectacle of open, heated, and vibrant debate in a Congress, the likes of which has never been seen in Russia, apart from the briefest of moments during the heyday of the revolutions of 1905 and 1917. Vociferous nationalism continues to manifest itself in the Baltics, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. And the Soviet leadership puts these expressions of yearning for freedom together with promises – and some action – to reduce force levels in Europe. Meanwhile, Poland is experimenting with electoral democracy and rejecting communism by overwhelming margins. Hungary's borders seem to become more open daily, and even East Germany, always a special beneficiary of its sister state within the European Community, announces troop cuts of its own.

Dov S. Zakheim, a former Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Planning and Resources, is President and Chief Executive Officer of System Planning Corporation, Inc., Arlington, Virginia.

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Temptation to Disregard Larger Context. For the U.S., these developments create both temptations and opportunities. And both the temptations and the opportunities address the same sets of policy options – whether, when, and how to withdraw forces from Europe; whether, when, and how to negotiate troop reductions; whether, when, and how to reduce domestic defense budgets. The opportunities are manifest, but the temptation is to exploit the opportunities too quickly without placing American action vis-à-vis Europe in a larger policy and strategy context, the context within which the U.S. became involved in Europe in the first place.

Europe was not America's natural habitat. As a proportion of its history, the U.S. can claim to be as neutral as the Scandinavian states. Until late in second World War, the U.S. continued to heed George Washington's admonition in his Farewell Address that America avoid entering entangling alliances. Only then, when it became clear that U.S. failure to join the international community after World War I had contributed to the wreckage of Europe shortly thereafter, did the United States determine that it no longer could pursue its international interests on a unilateral basis.

Despite having fought a two-front World War, the U.S. assigned to Europe its highest political and strategic priorities after the war's end. It was in Europe that Soviet Communism posed the greatest threat to Western values. America had learned what Palmerston and Castlereagh had known years earlier: a Europe dominated by a single hostile power threatened America's own integrity. Containment thus focused initially on the Soviet Union in Europe. Other parts of the world were viewed as of distinctly secondary importance – to the degree that Acheson could dismiss the strategic importance of Korea shortly before America went to war on that peninsula.

Rethinking Containment. The Korean War led to a reformulation of the notion of containment. No longer was containment directed at Soviet Communism alone. Communism in general – that is, Chinese Communism as well – needed to be firmly contained wherever and whenever it manifested itself. Containment became the basis for Dulles's web of alliances – SEATO, CENTO, and the like – as well as for Eisenhower and then for Kennedy's involvement in Vietnam.

All the while, Europe remained the central focus of American strategy, though, in practice, the era of detente allowed the U.S. to go so far as to reduce its stocks in Europe in order to resupply Israel – a non-ally – during and after the 1973 Yom Kippur war. Moreover, the nature of the American commitment began to change by the 1960s, when massive retaliation, like worldwide containment, a legacy of John Foster Dulles, gave way to the flexible response policy that NATO formally adopted in 1967.

Flexible response was always a policy cocooned in paradox. Designed to reassert the credibility of the American deterrent at a time when the USSR appeared capable of destroying the U.S. with its own nuclear systems, it never went as far as the Lisbon proposals in 1952. These proposals, aired at a time when the West retained nuclear superiority, nevertheless propounded a NATO defense consisting of 96 active divisions, 35 of them ready for conflict on the Central Front. Flexible response merely toughened the NATO tripwire that had accompanied massive retaliation and, in particular, enshrined the principle of a relatively robust American land and air force presence in Europe. Nevertheless, that presence and, indeed, NATO's defenses were still viewed as a deterrent rather than as a truly defensive force. They were coupled with a theater nuclear presence, consisting of various nuclear systems – ranging from atomic demolition munitions, to artillery shells, to air-and-ground based missile systems that were meant to serve as the link

between the conventional defenses and the strategic nuclear capability that continued to embody the ultimate U.S. shield for the Alliance.

Calls for Realignment. The Mansfield proposals of the 1960s, congressional rumblings in the 1970s, the Nunn proposals of the early 1980s were all manifestations of a growing unease with the artificiality of the American contribution to NATO's deterrent. With a burden that seemed ever more onerous relative to that of the increasingly prosperous Europeans, with a defense that NATO military leaders continued to insist was not credible in conventional terms alone, yet whose conventional component was a far greater drain on American resources than the nuclear contribution, more and more voices were heard calling for not merely a restructuring of the members' contributions to NATO, but also for a realignment to a more efficient form of contribution. The Europeans, it was argued, could more efficiently supply manpower; the comparative U.S. advantage was in high technology and in flexible forces. European reluctance to engage in joint operations outside the so-called NATO area, regardless of the degree to which European interests were also threatened, only reinforced the claims of those who advocated a reapportionment of NATO tasks and contributions.

As noted at the outset of these remarks, recent developments only reinforce the frustrations of those who have long sought a different U.S. role within NATO. The issue is not, however, one of seeking a diminished U.S. role. Nor does it truly involve a change in the priority that U.S. defense policy and strategy must assign to Europe. Whatever the outcome of conventional force negotiations and reductions, the Soviet Union will remain primarily a European power, as well as the only power capable of destroying the U.S. as we now know it. Moreover, whatever the nature of the conventional force treaty that is finally adopted, and however effective the verification measures attaching to it might be, provision for enforcing compliance and dealing with treaty violations is an entirely different matter.

Explaining Away Arms Violations. The relatively feeble American response to the violations of the ABM treaty embodied by the Krasnoyarsk radar is actually the norm, not the exception — actually the way in which democracies have tended to deal with treaty violations that, in themselves, did not constitute a massive change in the balance of forces. Thus, Hitler's seizure of the Rhineland violated the Versailles Treaty provisions regarding its disarmament. Most historians now agree that had the Allies responded more forcefully at the time, as the French had earlier to a somewhat similar situation, Hitler might have been stopped in his tracks. But the war-weary democracies were able to explain the violation away, while the issue of verification never arose since the violation was never in doubt. Will the Allies therefore explain away future violations of a conventional arms treaty that, indeed, have been verified? Possibly — probably. In such circumstances, and given the overriding interest that both superpowers will continue to have in the balance of power on the European continent, NATO must remain the cornerstone of American defense policy and strategy.

The nature of that cornerstone is, however, an entirely different matter. And current developments do afford U.S. policy makers a golden opportunity to reexamine the degree to which American contributions to NATO must be placed not only in the context of arms control developments and of European contributions, but also in that of American responsibilities and requirements elsewhere in the world. As recent developments in China indicate yet again, even when communism puts on its human face for a decade or more, its essence is never discarded and its smile cannot fully cover the fangs that lurk beneath the lips. The euphoria over glasnost should not cloud the essential reality of a system that

cannot cede power under any but the most violent of circumstances and, for that reason, always seeks a monopoly.

This is in no way to question Gorbachev's sincerity, the democratic longings of the Soviet people, or the developments currently taking place in the USSR. It is merely to assert what history has yet to refute: that the anti-democratic nature of communism remains at odds with Western values.

Contributing to NATO's Hedge. What will continue to be required, therefore, is a hedge against reversion to the Soviet (and Russian) expansion of the past. Yet, given their numerical inferiority vis-à-vis the Warsaw Pact, have not NATO forces — at least conventional forces — always been nothing more than a hedge? Indeed, because Europeans, especially Germans, so abhor the thought of another war on their soil, Europe has never wanted its conventional posture to be anything more than a hedge. Accordingly, the U.S. — in light of current developments — can legitimately ask how much of a hedge is enough? Or, more to the point, how much of an American contribution to NATO's hedge is enough?

If NATO and the Warsaw Pact indeed reduce their forces, along the lines of those areas for which there is already agreement in principle — tanks, armored vehicles, and artillery — as well as with respect to aircraft, about which there is considerably more fuzziness, the requirement for a hedge remains, but it changes in degree. Even if there is no agreement, the argument for some reductions remains valid, given the likelihood of greater warning and confidence-building measures. Moreover, from an American perspective, the case for U.S. force reductions, while not undermining either the essence of the longstanding tripwire or the prospects for a negotiated agreement that reduces Pact forces as well, appears particularly strong.

To begin with, U.S. forces have never been deployed at constant levels in Europe. Nor have these levels correlated well with putative NATO policy and strategy. Initially as low as a single division and constabulary in 1950, the advent of NSC-68 and the Korean War led to a fivefold increase in U.S. forces in Europe by 1953. The Eisenhower Administration retained these levels through the period when massive retaliation was U.S. strategy. Following the Berlin crisis of 1961, the U.S. sent an additional 42,000 troops to Europe, only to return 28,000 of them to the U.S. during the Vietnam buildup, just as flexible response was being promulgated. During the era of detente, two additional brigades were deployed in Europe. There was, and is, therefore, no set formula for troop levels in Europe. The tripwire has been thickened and thinned, but it has always been just that, a tripwire.

U.S. Competitor. In the meantime, by all accounts, the ability of Europeans to contribute more heavily to their own defenses has grown considerably. In addition, Europe has become a major competitor of the U.S. in the manufacture and worldwide sale of defense equipment. The Independent European Program Group, which operates within the NATO framework, has been the focal point for continental European industrial cooperation in the face of the old "défi Américain." In turn, the IEPG and now the European Community, are viewed by many in the U.S. defense industry as a vehicle for shutting America out of the European market. However exaggerated this view might be, there is no denying the fact that European governments have subsidized their industrial sales of military systems overseas and that offset arrangements have become the norm for U.S. military sales to Europe (with offsets at times exceeding the nominal value of a given sale). Indeed, during the government-to-government negotiation of such sales, jobs and the flow of foreign exchange overshadow any discussions of the putative threat against which the systems in question are meant to defend.

American contributions to NATO's in-place forces have always constituted an indirect economic subsidy to the European partners. Resources that NATO/Europe might otherwise have spent on its own defense were channeled into far more economically productive enterprises. Whether such indirect subsidies are as justifiable today as they were when Europe was dependent upon the Marshall Plan, when the European Economic Community was a gleam in Jean Monnet's eye, is a moot point.

Finally, the nature of the American contribution has become very sensitive to assumptions about available warning time of a Soviet/Pact attack. The assumption that the U.S. needed to deploy ten divisions to Europe in ten days has become a kind of unassailable axiom — as if it could be proved beyond doubt that nine or eleven days' warning was impossible. That assumption has spurred not only the massive POMCUS prepositioning programs but an emphasis on costly airlift over sealift as well.

Different Military Requirements. In turning to the rest of the world, where the U.S. has been preoccupied by a host of military contingencies for the past forty years, a very different set of developments and military requirements can be discerned. There is far less evidence, for example, of a Soviet willingness to reach accommodation with the West in Third World confrontations. For every drawdown from Mozambique or promise of a lower profile in Nicaragua, there are sales to the Libyans and Syrians and the continued use of surrogates elsewhere, including surrogate assistance to Nicaragua. Moreover, there are other potential threats to U.S. interests outside Europe that may or may not be linked directly to the Soviet Union. The Middle East, Southeast Asia, and the Western Hemisphere have been, and could again be, the scenes of American military combat without Soviet involvement.

To operate in these areas the U.S. needs weapons systems that are far more flexible than those designed for combat in Central Europe. It requires forces that are rapidly deployable yet have some significant level of firepower to cope with the ever increasing technological capability of Third World armies and weapons. It also requires special forces for low-intensity combat that often marks Third World operations, most particularly in our hemisphere. The continental orientation that governs the American posture in Europe and American programmatic decision making is simply beside the point in East and Southwest Asia, where vast stretches of oceans need to be covered or where America remains what geography renders it: a maritime power of continental proportions, a two-ocean state with stakes in a third. In short, a nation with dependencies, citizens, and interests scattered around the globe.

Adapting to the Ebb and Flow of Relations. Given the unchanging essence of communism, the changing face of the European balance, and the potential for new contingencies outside Europe, what is required is not so much to move beyond containment, and to recognize that, once again, containment addresses more than the USSR, and needs to be flexible, so as to adapt to the ebb and flow of relations with different communist powers. One day China is an enemy; another it is a friend; and the next day after it may not be. Vietnamese Communism is not the same as North Korean, neither is the same as Soviet, nor are any of the foregoing the same as the communism of Eastern Europe or of Cuba.

To provide for flexible containment, the U.S. needs flexible forces. With weapons development taking the better part of a decade, it is a mistake for the U.S. to continue to commit marginal resources to systems whose utility may be obviated by an arms control agreement less than two years hence.

Those systems, whose utility is less sensitive to specific changes on the face of the great European divide and whose flexibility renders them useful in a variety of contingencies, including Europe, of course, should now be assigned highest priority. And if I dwell on systems, it is because they provide the wherewithal for the strategy that is meant to realize our policies.

Looking to the Wider World. Does all of this mean that NATO has now been relegated to second place in our policy and strategy pecking order? By no means. What it does mean is that NATO can no longer serve as primary justification for our defense budgets, for the systems those budgets finance and equip. We must look to the wider world, recognizing that we must continue to hedge against a European contingency that might, despite our fondest hopes and expectations, someday materialize. And if our Allies feel that a greater hedge is necessary, by all means let them do something about it. WEU provides one such framework for military cooperation, as the creation of small Franco-German units amply demonstrates. For the U.S., on the other hand, our strategic nuclear deterrent, our sea- and air-based tactical systems in Europe and a residual land-based tactical-nuclear force provide just part of our share of that hedge. In addition, our mobile conventional units, be they ships, tactical aviation, long-range, highly accurate missiles, or rapidly deployable reserves, in addition to whatever land forces remain on the ground after a negotiated agreement, would constitute a further, robust hedge against Soviet and Warsaw pact backsliding.

Moreover, our hedge, indeed that of our Allies, need not be purely military. We can and should do all that is possible to foster democratic change in the Soviet Union, its constituent parts, and Eastern Europe. Yet we must be careful not to be so indiscriminate in our support that ultimately, the USSR's most efficient sector, the military, would be prime beneficiary of Western aid. We need only look to Beijing to realize the risks we run when exporting high technology and resources that are easily exploited for military purposes. Placing prudent restrictions on such exports is as much a hedge against the future as providing battalions on the ground in Europe.

NATO Cornerstone. An arms reduction agreement is far from complete. Yet we must now consider whether small additional troop reductions make sense anyway, prior to an agreement. More important, we must reconsider our decisions to pursue costly programs geared primarily to the lift and operation of heavy land forces in Europe with limited utility for operations anywhere else. For we must husband our resources and apply them carefully to those other areas of the world that remain important to our interests and more likely scenes of future conflict.

Yes, NATO must remain the cornerstone of our strategy. But a cornerstone does not an entire edifice make. To ensure the viability of the U.S. strategic edifice, the bricks that are America's resources and the mortar that is our strategy for their employment must be as interchangeable as possible throughout, so that no one part of the structure suffers from decay. As we contemplate a world in which democracy is either on the march, as in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, or on the barricades, as in China, we must strive to preserve our flexibility, thereby containing threats to democracy wherever and whenever they might arise. In so doing, we will be true not only to ourselves and our ideas but to that very spirit of freedom that inspired NATO's creation in the first place.

