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A. W. DePorte

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# The North Atlantic Alliance: External Threats and Internal Stress

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A. W. DePorte

**D**efensive alliances are formed to deal with threats which the participants perceive to be common to them all. They are brought together in the belief that they can each best deal with the threat by dealing with it together. They are held together for as long as the perception and the belief survive. At the same time, the members of an alliance usually have interests to protect and promote other than the one which it was formed to address. They may pursue policies which, outside alliance business, can be independent of or even incompatible with those of the other members.

The Atlantic alliance has been a classical defensive alliance, but with several important differences. The members' perception of the Soviet threat and the success of their response to it, in continually changing circumstances, have been unprecedentedly durable. At the same time their relations with respect to both alliance and nonalliance policies have been remarkably turbulent. Because the allies have often said that the Soviet threat was global, they created expectations of common global policy-making which have often been disappointed. These failures have misled many into the error of thinking the alliance was doomed. Yet, because of the persistence of a common commitment to meet a persisting common threat in Europe, the alliance has survived and even prospered. The allies have disagreed constantly on the nature of the threat, how to respond to it, and the extent to which they should or could concert their policies about other issues, including East-West trade and Third World and economic problems. But these divisions have not prevented the alliance from addressing its primary business, which is to deter attack or intimidating pressure by the Soviet Union against any member by being prepared to resist such attack or pressure if deterrence fails.

The history of the alliance, as outlined by William Bundy, shows that it has fulfilled this primordial task well while doing much less well with other self-set tasks. There has been no Soviet attack in Europe, no successful intimidation of a West European country, and no change of boundaries or alignments unfavorable to the West. But there has also rarely been a moment

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Following a distinguished career in the Department of State, Dr. DePorte is currently a visiting scholar, Institute of French Studies, New York University.

since 1949 when the allies were satisfied that their cooperation was as effective as they thought it should be. Today, as at almost every other period during the last 35 years, the alliance's achievements and capabilities are obscured by a fog of doubt and complaint. It sometimes seems as if its ability to continue to respond to the Soviet Union in Europe is threatened as much by expectations that it should do more than it has, or can, as by anything else. There is an urgent need to probe the causes of *this* threat if the true strength of the alliance is not to be misjudged, with possibly dangerous consequences.

One of the principal sources of the unending doubts about the alliance's continued efficacy arises from the obvious fact that many things have changed in the world since it was established. The illogical conclusion too often drawn from this fact is that its founding premises have changed so much as to be no longer valid. It is perfectly true that the Europe of 1984 is very different from that of the late 1940s. But beneath the changing surface of things the structure of the European political system has been remarkably stable.

- The Soviet Union, now as then, is vastly more powerful militarily than the countries of Western Europe.

- West European understanding of this fact has not changed any more than the fact itself.

- Nor, as a consequence, has there been any appreciable diminution in West European belief in the need for a security tie with the United States—the alliance—as the necessary element of balance in an otherwise unbalanced European state system.

- The United States continues both to understand the military imbalance in Europe and to believe that if this were ever to lead to Soviet predominance or even a marked increase in Soviet influence, the abiding American interest under all administrations in maintaining a global balance of power with the USSR would be gravely jeopardized. For this reason the American interest in maintaining the alliance tie with Western Europe which provides balance in the European state system has remained qualitatively unchanged, notwithstanding innumerable other changes, since 1949.

These fundamental continuities do not mean that the United States and all the European allies have always perceived the Soviet threat in identical ways. It would be absurd to expect that they should. The United States is a global superpower on the far side of the ocean, the European allies are a diverse group of middle-level and small countries variously located at different distances from the Soviet bloc. The European members have often seemed less concerned about the prospect of actual military attack than the distant United States. This has exasperated some Americans and confused others, leading them to think that the Europeans had lost their perception of a Soviet threat and, therefore, their belief in the usefulness of the alliance.

In fact the allies have maintained a steady state of concern about the Soviet Union. This is based not so much on fear of imminent attack—unlikely to be maintained over decades—as on a permanent sense of dangerous proximity to a totalitarian superpower much stronger than any or all of them and having intentions toward them of which they can never be sure. As a result, the allies did not much agree with the United States that the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan increased the prospects of war or crisis in Europe. But neither were they tempted by “*détente fever*”—so much feared by the United States in the early 1970s—to throw over the alliance even while they were negotiating improvements in the European *status quo* with the Russians. The Europeans seem less inclined than some Americans to pass from alarm to euphoria in their thinking about the Soviet Union. They know that it adjoins them, and will be *where* and remain *what* it is for a long time. Their concern is equally long-lasting and steady and so is their fundamental commitment to the security arrangements which have given them a considerable degree of confidence in face of this enduring threat.

It should be noted in this connection that the European allies do not accept the comparison, often made in the United States, between the American commitment to them and to beleaguered Third World countries. They do not believe that the American resolve to defend Western Europe is “tested” by American behavior with respect to Taiwan, Vietnam, Angola, Iran, Afghanistan or El Salvador. On the contrary, they think that Western Europe is uniquely important to the American policy of containing the Soviet Union, that the Soviet Union knows this and acts in light of the fact. This means they believe also that the United States maintains the alliance not for love of them but for its own self-interest. They are not easily frightened by periodic American threats to withdraw from Europe if the allies fail to satisfy American policy demands. In their judgment, withdrawal from Europe would amount to abandoning the policy of maintaining a global balance of power with respect to the Soviet Union. They cannot believe that the United States will do that. These differences among the allies in perceiving and appraising the Soviet threat explain many of the divisions they have experienced over the years.

The history of the alliance shows that the members have not always agreed on the central issue of how to resist and repel a Soviet attack should it come. If we become absorbed in the alliance’s almost permanent internal debate on this question, we might well overlook the important fact that there has been no attack or successful intimidation. Apparently the allies have been doing some things right. Yet we cannot overlook the roots of their many differences if we are to prepare ourselves for those that the alliance will undoubtedly experience in the future.

Part of the problem lies in simple geographical facts of life. For the United States, Europe is a theater in a global struggle. For the Europeans, it is much

more than that. Everyone wants to deter war. But acute differences can arise between an American propensity to give credibility to deterrence by advertising how war would be conducted across Europe and a natural European malaise in face of a vision that seems to imply the devastation—nuclear or conventional—of their countries. The Europeans want the alliance to have credible means to meet and halt a Soviet attack at any level. But they like neither the prospect of nuclear conflict on their territory nor the costs of the massive conventional buildup needed to significantly reduce that threat. Moreover, they fear that too great an emphasis on nonnuclear conflict might decouple the United States from European security and weaken the nuclear deterrent on which, with all its risks and ambiguities, they rely. For this reason the notion of alliance renunciation of the first use of nuclear weapons had much less appeal in Europe than its American proponents might have expected.

This Scylla and Charybdis of contradictory fears and needs with respect to security policy is muted from time to time by alliance decisions on strategy (and also, during the 1970s, by *détente*). But the march of military technology constantly reanimates this permanent debate among the allies. There seems to be no prospect of a generally satisfactory once-and-for-all resolution of these issues in the absence of an arms control agreement between the superpowers that would be so broad as to end the arms race. That is an unlikely prospect. We must therefore expect that the alliance will continue to have to wrestle with the ever-changing implications of technological progress for the diverse geographical, political and psychological outlooks of a disparate group of allies. In terms of the gravity of the issues, this prospect would seem very disquieting for the future of the alliance. In light of alliance history, however, we have reason to believe that the allies will continue to be able to live with less than perfect agreements on strategic issues, reassured as they are by the fact that the Soviet Union has up to now, through decades of intra-alliance debate, been sufficiently impressed by the strength of the alliance to be deterred from doing whatever it might have done had it been less impressed.

Relations between the allies have been the source of intra-alliance discord in other ways. Trade has been a perennial issue. The Europeans on the whole tend to see trade as mutually beneficial to the parties and as a means of keeping channels open between the two halves of divided Europe. The United States, they think, sometimes overvalues what trade can do with respect to encouraging Soviet good behavior or punishing bad behavior. From this has arisen a series of disputes. The most recent and perhaps most acute was the clash over the Soviet gas pipeline that took place in 1982. In no case, however, have the allies allowed these disagreements to poison security cooperation in the alliance. They continue to negotiate on the limits that should be imposed on East-West trade, which in any case, for quite other reasons, has not grown at a very marked pace even during the heyday of *détente*. Such disputes will

no doubt continue, but there seems no clear reason why they will not also continue to be contained for as long as the allies, beginning with the United States, find the alliance useful to their interests in Europe.

More broadly the allies have shown that they are very well able to coordinate their diplomatic activity towards the East when it is likely to impinge on the viability of the alliance. The most important illustration of this was the cooperation they displayed in managing détente in the early 1970s. There were differences and strains, but on the whole the United States meshed its policy towards the Soviet Union, especially arms control, with the Federal Republic of Germany's *Ostpolitik*—directed to improving relations with the Soviet Union and the German Democratic Republic. At no time did "détente fever" threaten the stability of the alliance. The allies showed then that they could improve their relations with the East in concrete ways without overlooking the persistence of the permanent Soviet threat and while maintaining the alliance as the ultimate bulwark of their security and the underpinning of the relaxation of tension which they were pursuing.

The winding down of détente in the late 1970s, culminating in the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, deepened divisions among the allies about East-West relations. For a time the United States acted and spoke as if it believed that "détente was indivisible," a phrase which implied that Soviet behavior outside Europe warranted cancellation of some or all of the agreements negotiated in the early 1970s. But neither the Carter nor Reagan administration really believed this. The Berlin agreement, the SALT I treaties, the *Ostpolitik* agreements—all these and other fruits of détente went unchallenged despite the sharp rise of East-West tension. Further, it does not seem now that even the United States, and certainly none of the European allies, wants a diplomatic freeze with the Soviet Union. Political contacts continue along with trade and other dealings. It is too soon to foresee a revival of neo-détente, but a neo-cold war of the intensity of the confrontation of the early 1950s has not taken place, notwithstanding circumstances that seemed all too propitious to such a development.

The reasonable success the allies have had in coordinating their diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union in Europe has not been matched by anything resembling a grand strategy to meet an allegedly global threat. In words the allies have set a high standard for the cooperation they expect of each other in dealing with economic and Third World problems that affect their interests in Europe. In practice, however, the history of their divisions is long. We need only think, for example, of the Suez war in 1956, which was perhaps the most serious internal crisis the alliance ever experienced, or the absence of concerted policies in the Middle East, or the lack of European support for American ventures supposed to contain global communism in Indochina and, now, Central America.

These policy differences have reflected not so much divergent interests among the allies—none of them wants Soviet influence to expand in the Third World or Gulf oil to be cut off—as different judgments about the causes and likely consequences of developments in Indochina, the Middle East, Latin America and elsewhere. All American administrations, supported by a large segment of public opinion, have tended to believe that conflicts and upheavals in Third World countries which challenge governments friendly to the United States are essentially stirred up by, or at least serve the interests of, the Soviet Union. These upheavals are seen, therefore, as episodes of the East-West struggle, engaging American prestige even when specific interests seem marginal. They should be dealt with, in the American view, by supporting all regimes, whatever their defects, that are challenged by groups aligned with or supported by the Soviet Union or its allies.

In practice, of course, the United States has not always acted on these premises. There have been cases when it judged that nothing could help the falling friend (China in 1949, the Shah of Iran in 1979) and others when Congress or public opinion would not sanction the indefinite prolongation of US involvement (Indochina in 1975, Lebanon in 1984). But these “abandonments” have often been painful and politically costly. The “loss of China” was a heavy burden to the Truman administration and the Democratic party. It not only inhibited the development of a rational policy toward China for two decades but made it difficult for later administrations to let the dust settle in such cases.

Some Europeans share these American policy premises but the mainstream of opinion does not. To that mainstream there is a kind of inevitability in the replacement of post-colonial regimes friendly to the West with others which are less so. At the same time, Europeans do not believe that these “losses” are necessarily fatal to Western interests and, therefore, do not think that great efforts must be made to prevent what cannot be stopped and what is not so bad after all. Indeed, they would say that for the West to try to halt the inevitable only makes things worse because it further delays the establishment of at least tolerable relations with the next regime. They would point to Communist China, post-Farouk Egypt, post-Hashemite Iraq and others as examples of cases where friendly regimes were replaced by others which, however anti-Western at the start, sooner or later found that they had economic and often security interests in renewing ties with the West. These new regimes, whatever the professed ideology of their leaders and the degree of their initial support by the Soviet Union, have not proved to be Soviet satellites. If the ensuing new relationship was not as pleasing to the West as the old one, at least it was partially supportive of essential Western interests. Does the Soviet Union or the United States have the better reason today to regret that Communists replaced Nationalists as the rulers of China in 1949?

This difference in outlook about the implications of change in the Third World is obviously deep. No number of communiques and no amount of enhanced consultation will terminate it. Because of the widespread instability and diversity in and between many of the countries of the developing world, we must anticipate an indefinite series of developments there which may challenge Western interests.

At the same time, things may not be as bad in practice as they seem to be in principle. The allies will not agree to go along with US policy in important cases simply because it is the senior ally and sometimes thinks of itself as the custodian of their interests. But there are cases where they will defer to the United States to a large extent simply because of its proximity to and their distance from the scene of conflict, as in Central America. This is the more likely, of course, where American action can be quick and successful, as in Grenada. Further, the allies agree in substance more often than we might think. Even France, the most critical of American Third World policy in general, has been perfectly willing to work with, or alongside, the United States when its own interests were at stake, as in Shaba, Chad and Lebanon.

Much more could be said about the things which divide the allies with respect to Third World problems and it should be clear that they are numerous, serious and likely to be persistent. In each case there are, of course, possibilities for better consultation and compromise. Both sides have something to learn from the other. The United States is not always wrong in thinking that the expansion of Soviet influence in the Third World can be dangerous for Western interests and that there are times when something practical can be done to arrest or counter it. But the European allies are not always wrong to think that some Third World upheavals are not of Soviet making, should not be addressed as if they were, will not benefit the Russians in many cases, and cannot readily be stopped by acceptable Western actions.

The consequences of differences about the Third World are most likely to be contained in the future as in the past. Both Americans and Europeans, however high their passions on given issues, believe that a secure and stable Europe is important in itself and should and can be maintained—as it has been for 40 years—in the face of disagreements about many things, including even how to maintain it. For as long as that remains a priority concern of the allies, the alliance should be able to continue to handle its essential job: the deterrence of Soviet attack on or intimidation of Western Europe. That is the threat upon which the alliance was formed. It still must deal with that threat, whatever the Soviet challenges to Western interests elsewhere and however well or badly the allies work together in dealing with them.

Discussion of differences among the allies about Third World problems, as about East-West relations and other issues, thus leads us back to the importance to them of security cooperation in Europe, that is, to the



importance to the United States of European stability and to the European allies of the American tie.

The Europeans on the whole understand the continuing, irreplaceable and practically permanent importance of that tie to their well-being, however irksome and sometimes even demoralizing it may be. While not accepting subservience to the United States as the price of it, because they know that it serves American interests as well as theirs, they will maintain it if they can. The long agitation over deployment of intermediate-range nuclear missiles and its outcome have confirmed this fact once again.

For the United States the calculation about the importance of security in Europe and the value of the alliance is more complex. Americans believe that they could maintain their security without the alliance and, therefore, are of the opinion that they put more into it than they get out of it (a consciousness that is at the root of many of their discontents with the European allies). They may be right as concerns physical security in the narrow sense. But the question of American involvement in Europe is a subordinate issue in the more fundamental question of American involvement in the world. The United States can choose to continue to seek security in a broad sense—that is, to promote a tolerably stable world as the necessary environment for a tolerable national life—by, among other things, trying to maintain a global balance with respect to the Soviet Union, with all the costs, risks and exasperations of that choice. Or, it can withdraw from the game and try to find security by letting the world take its course in the (relative) absence of the United States. What it cannot do is maintain an effective policy of global containment without maintaining the stability and security of a rich, populous, strategic, weak and divided Western Europe.

This fundamental issue of American foreign policy calls to mind the great debate of 1939–41. That debate has never been quite renewed again because the facts of international life since World War II seem so clearly to rule out a return to isolationism pure and simple, or even isolationism tricked out in such guises as hemispheric or Pacific predominance. It is difficult to imagine that a substantial number of Americans would find the costs and risks of this course very attractive. No president has done so, or is likely to. If that is the case, then the long-threatened great debate about the American commitment to Europe may never take place, for it cannot take place outside the broader context of the country's role in the world at large.

It is ironic that the hitherto dominant American concept of the need for a global policy (however debated in practice) to deal with a global Soviet threat inhibits the United States from writing off its commitment to European security. This remains a fact even if the allies, among other provocations, deny that there is such a threat as the United States defines it, or at least refuse to join the United States in dealing with its alleged manifestations. The future of the alliance, therefore, depends not so much on

achieving a better US-European understanding than in the past with respect to the many contentious issues that will divide it (though that should be worked for) as on the continued firm commitment of the United States to maintaining the stability that has been established over the last decades in Europe (and almost nowhere else) as an essential part of its long-term policy of trying to maintain a tolerably livable world.



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