

Naval War College Review

Volume 46
Number 3 *Summer*

Article 4

1993

Nato: Is It Worth the Trouble?

William F. Hickman

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Hickman, William F. (1993) "Nato: Is It Worth the Trouble?," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 46 : No. 3 , Article 4.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol46/iss3/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

Nato

Is It Worth the Trouble?

Captain William F. Hickman, U.S. Navy

FOR OVER FORTY YEARS the North Atlantic Treaty Organization has formed an essential element of international security. Focused squarely on the military threat to the West from the Soviet Union and its allies in Eastern Europe, Nato provided a common focus for the collective defense of Europe and the United States. Despite periodic strains to the fabric of the organization, such as the 1966 French withdrawal from the integrated military structure, and recurrent debates over policy and costs within the populations of the member states, Nato, as an entity, has persevered.

Now that the Cold War is over, however, fundamental questions are quite properly being asked about Nato. What is Nato, really? What was achieved by the massive expenditure of public funds over four decades? In the radically changed international security situation, where communism has been repudiated and democracy is flowering in Eastern Europe, is the organization still relevant? More fundamentally, since the Soviet Union no longer exists, is Nato even necessary? If it is necessary, is it worth the trouble?

These questions are being asked with increasing frequency on both sides of the Atlantic. In the intense debate it is often easy to forget that the answers depend upon one's perspective. This article argues that Nato not only remains relevant and necessary to international security, but more importantly, essential to the security of the United States. To understand how that conclusion is reached, it is first necessary to understand what Nato is, and more importantly, what it is not.

What is Nato?

In 1949 the West perceived a distinct threat from the Soviet Union. By annexing the occupied countries of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, and installing communist governments in the other occupied countries of Eastern Europe, the

Captain Hickman is the Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations and Intelligence to the Commander in Chief Channel and Eastern Atlantic in Northwood, England. He is a 1991 graduate of the Naval War College and a frequent contributor to the *Naval War College Review*.

Soviet Union convinced the West that all European nations were in danger. When the USSR imposed the blockade on Berlin, the political leadership of the Western nations decided that a collective defense designed to deter the Soviets from attacking was the most appropriate response. The North Atlantic Treaty, signed in Washington in April 1949, created the political organization intended to develop that collective defense.

The key point to grasp here is that from the outset Nato has been a *political* alliance of sovereign states. Because of its public military program, Nato is often perceived as a military alliance, but that perception is, quite simply, wrong. Nato is a political organization of sixteen independent nations drawn together for the collective purpose of settling disputes by exhausting all peaceful means before resorting to the more forceful alternatives. All military elements of Nato are derived solely from common political decisions of the sixteen member nations.

The essence of the organization, contained in Article 5 of the treaty, is that an armed attack against one or more of the nations will be considered an attack against them all. The concept of collective defense was not new in international relations; in this case, however, the nations had agreed, in peacetime, to support each other in deterring a Soviet attack, taking whatever action seemed necessary, even military force. Further, each nation had agreed to be bound by collective political decisions, though none had surrendered its sovereignty. These two fundamental points, political consensus and maintenance of sovereignty, had far-reaching complications.

The forums in which this cooperation has been realized are the committees of the alliance, the highest of which—the governing body, where all decisions are ultimately debated and agreed—is the North Atlantic Council. It is significant that the sixteen member nations have equal representation on the council and that major decisions must be agreed upon by all the nations, not just a simple majority. It is this rule of consensus that has given the council, and thus the alliance, its political strength. No matter what size a member nation's contribution to the alliance may be, each nation has the right to say no to proposed policies or courses of action. For this reason, even the smallest of the nations, Luxembourg, has the ability to prevent action by the alliance. Over the years this check on the power of the larger and more powerful nations has been a key factor in keeping all members in the alliance. Ultimately, because all decisions must reflect the united political will of all the member states, bargaining and compromise yield unanimous decisions.

The national representatives to the council are the political leaders, i.e., the heads of state or the foreign ministers of each state. There is no military representation. Subordinate to the council are a series of committees which develop common policy. The most important is the Defense Planning Committee, comprising the ministers of defense of the members states; under it is the Military Committee, composed of the uniformed military chiefs of staff of the

38 Naval War College Review

member states. This third echelon, the Military Committee, represents the highest military involvement in Nato policy. That politicians dominate the alliance reinforces the point that Nato is a political alliance. Major decisions of policy are made by the civilian leadership, but purely military decisions are the responsibility of the Military Committee. It is worth stressing that the Nato commanders, the generals and admirals, with whom the public are most familiar, do not have final responsibility for military decisions. They may only make recommendations to the senior military officers of the individual nations, who then act together in the Military Committee.

What Has Nato Achieved?

So what has Nato achieved in its forty-plus years? It cannot claim credit for the inadequacies of communism or the failures of planned economies, nor can it claim credit for the overthrow of communist regimes in Eastern Europe or the implosion of the Soviet Union. Because these seminal events occurred without the direct intervention of Nato, it seems reasonable to question whether or not it achieved anything worthwhile.

The simple answer to the question is provided by reviewing the original aim of the organization; to deter an attack by the Soviet Union. An attack did not occur, therefore, Nato was successful. To many, however, that logic is faulty. Just because an attack did not occur does not mean that Nato was the reason that it did not. There is no direct evidence to prove it. Or is there?

Since its inception, Nato has developed strategies and plans to deal with the worst possible military situation—a “bolt from the blue” attack by overwhelming Soviet forces driving through Western Europe. It was against this possibility that Nato developed its controversial strategy of “flexible response,” by which the U.S. president and other Nato political leaders could authorize a nuclear response to an overwhelming conventional Soviet attack. It was because of this strategy that the United States could never agree to a “no first use of nuclear weapons” convention with the Soviets. For this reason alone, flexible response was a source of contention; there was also precious little direct evidence that it was actually succeeding. Lacking evidence, the assumption was that since the Soviet attack did not materialize, the strategy must be working. For a number of years this assumption only fueled the controversy, but ever since the Berlin Wall fell, reports have been coming out of the old East Germany and the other former Warsaw Pact states that indicate the assumption was correct.*

* See, for example the official (West) German Report, “Warsaw Pact Military Planning in Central Europe: Revelations from the East German Archives,” *Bulletin, Cold War International History Project, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington, D.C.*, Issue 2, Fall 1992, pp. 1, 13–19.

In July 1992 a small Nato team travelled through Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia to open a dialog and establish working-level contacts with the military leaders of those newly democratic states. The senior military officers in the Baltic States were men who had formerly been senior officers of the Soviet army and navy. In separate conversations, these men, all of whom had been commanding officers of navy ships and large army units, were asked whether or not the Soviets had actually expected Nato to invade. Individually, they all answered yes, absolutely. Up to 1990 there had been carefully laid out plans, which each had seen personally, that detailed a preemptive attack on Western Europe. One officer, who had been the commanding officer of a Soviet tank battalion, said that his unit's orders had been to drive through Western defenses all the way to Dunkirk. Despite the Soviet certainty that Nato would invade, these officers said there were two reasons why the preemptive attack was never launched. First, the Soviets believed that if they invaded, the United States would respond by using nuclear weapons. Together with the other evidence emerging from the East, this response would seem to validate the Nato strategy of flexible response, meaning that Nato had achieved its basic purpose.

What is more interesting, though, is the second reason given by these former Soviet officers. They claimed that the Soviet leadership knew the true state of their armed forces and believed that an attack on the West would ultimately fail. The Soviet forces were not really a hollow shell, but they were nowhere as capable as they appeared to be. Much of their equipment was antiquated and could be overcome easily by the West. As an example, a senior officer in the Estonian army, who had been a lieutenant colonel in the Soviet army and the commanding officer of an SA-3 surface-to-air missile battalion located between Leningrad and Moscow, reflected that the Soviets were certain that this area was a primary flight corridor for Nato attack planes and therefore had positioned many such battalions in the area. This colonel's men referred to themselves as the "self-killers," because the SA-3 was so old. It was a 1950s-technology weapon system that had been upgraded over one hundred times. Early on they had believed it was a good weapon, but after the 1973 Yom Kippur War, when the Israelis used Western equipment and tactics to decimate Arab forces using Soviet equipment and tactics, they realized that the West had discovered how to avoid all of their missiles. His men knew, therefore, that they had virtually no chance of knocking down a Nato aircraft and considered themselves to be sacrifices.

This story points to a key achievement of Nato, one that may not be intuitively obvious but that in fact may be the most important aspect of the North Atlantic Treaty. By agreeing to set aside historical mistrust and animosities to work together to develop common defense policies, the nations of the West were making history. Although each nation tended to produce its own military equipment, common tactics and procedures had to be developed to employ the various weapons in concert. This process brought together fully two generations

40 Naval War College Review

of men and women who would become accustomed to working closely with people from countries that their parents had fought to the death. Thus, cooperation and commonality in Nato can be said to have had a broad influence on international cooperation. This was demonstrated most recently in the Gulf War. The coalition force that was assembled used tactics and procedures developed by Nato. Post-war interviews with military leaders indicate that military units from nations who were unfamiliar with those procedures were quickly familiarized with them. It is not overstating the case to claim that had Nato not provided a baseline of common knowledge, the effectiveness of the Western-led forces might have been dramatically less.

Defense cooperation in Nato has also led to international cooperation in such diverse fields as development aid, science, and the protection of the environment. Moreover, because the forty-plus years which have followed the signing of the treaty have constituted one of the longest periods of peace in modern European history, political relationships have been given the opportunity to mature. The current fractious debate over Maastricht notwithstanding, it is worth noting that historically unprecedented political cooperation among the European states followed the signing of the treaty.

It is important to note that the positive perception of Nato's achievements just presented is not a singular view. Given the questions outlined earlier, it might be surprising to learn that the general perception is one shared by numerous political and military leaders throughout Europe, including the Baltic States. It is, however, a perception that is being challenged.

Is Nato Still Relevant?

The challenge comes from those who question whether Nato remains relevant in the new European security situation. How can an organization which has for so long been focused on a single military threat possibly be relevant when that threat is now gone? Are there not better, more flexible security arrangements that can be set up to replace Nato?

Before trying to answer the questions directly, it is important to understand their implications—the first being the contention that because Nato has been myopically focused on the Soviets it cannot reorient itself sufficiently to deal with the altered international security environment. More fundamentally, the questions imply that the European security situation has stabilized sufficiently to eliminate the need for the organization. Finally, the motives behind the questions need to be discerned.

It is true that in the past Nato was focused solely on the Soviet Union, but that does not mean it is now. At the London Summit in 1990, Nato responded to the rapidly changing situation by declaring that the then-Soviet leadership did not pose a threat to Nato. That new perception allowed the organization to

develop a new, broader approach to European security that fundamentally changed Nato's mission. It recognized that a direct threat from the East no longer existed, but that there were multidirectional, less clearly defined risks appearing. The turmoil in the former Yugoslavia and Soviet Union are good examples. Actions taken by subsequent summits have continued to alter the character of the alliance. In Rome in 1991, Nato heads of state expanded the treaty by creating the North Atlantic Cooperation Council, a forum designed to draw the leaders of the former Warsaw Pact nations into consultation with Nato leaders. In Oslo in July of 1992, Nato offered to support requests for military assistance by the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE). This latest initiative expanded Nato's mission to include peacekeeping activities such as are now done under United Nations auspices.

"Because of its public military program, Nato is often perceived as a military alliance, but that perception is, quite simply, wrong."

The new Nato strategy that has resulted from these changes in mission is an unclassified, public document focused not on an invasion by the Soviets but on the broader issues of crisis management and conflict prevention throughout the Nato area. In recognition of the changing nature of the international situation, it proposes to do this through a combination of political, economic, and military measures. Formerly, a military response was the only option available to Nato, but that has given way to formal recognition that the use of military force is only one option in an international crisis. Developing those non-military options is the province of the political leadership of the sixteen nations, and work is proceeding in this area, both in Brussels and in national capitals.

For the military aspects of the mission of crisis response, Nato has identified a range of tasks that are appropriate for military forces to undertake. In broad terms, these include such tasks as providing communications support to civilian governments, establishing a military presence to ease tension or show alliance solidarity, and even fielding a large military force to keep the peace. To be effective, future Nato forces must be mobile, flexible, and clearly multinational. To meet these criteria, Nato has redesigned its basic force structure and created a new system to react to crises. Military forces of the member nations will be divided into three categories: a small portion designated for immediate reaction to a crisis; a slightly larger but more capable group designated for rapid reaction; and the remaining heavier forces available for augmentation if crisis management fails and hostilities become inevitable.

What all of this means is that Nato has done a great deal to adjust to the new security situation. Despite this, the question remains: Is Nato still relevant or are there options better than Nato available to ensure the security of Europe?

42 Naval War College Review

Fundamentally, Nato recognizes and formalizes a security linkage between North America and Europe. The historic role of the United States in European security may be acknowledged by the treaty, but it is not endorsed by all nations. Historically, the French have maintained that the Europeans themselves should control their security arrangements. Although President François Mitterand has publicly endorsed Nato, and in the wake of the vote of Maastricht is seeking a seat on the Defense Planning Committee (DPC), there is a strain in French politics that runs counter to the official view. This view holds that the United States will eventually withdraw militarily from Europe. When that occurs, full responsibility for the defense of Europe will fall to the Europeans anyway, so why not cut the ties to the United States sooner rather than later? By this thinking, the preferred security organization would be the Western European Union (WEU).

The WEU was created in 1948 by the Brussels Treaty but was subsumed into Nato the following year. In 1984 the organization was reactivated as a means of strengthening the European pillar of Nato and developing a common European defense identity through cooperation in areas of security. Since reactivation, it has served primarily as a forum for consultation, but the French have been strong supporters of widening its role. Through 1991 and 1992, with the support of Germany, they were publicizing the long-established Franco-German Corps as the vanguard of a new European security force outside Nato under the auspices of the WEU.

While the French proposal appeared attractive on its face, it had some basic problems. Despite attempts to portray itself as a pan-European security organization, the reactivated WEU included only some of the nations of Western Europe. Notably, it excluded all of the Nordic countries, as well as Greece and Turkey. Moreover, despite the publicity surrounding the Franco-German force, the WEU has neither an integrated military structure nor military facilities to take the place of those provided by Nato. Because there is no assurance for the other nations of Europe that their military forces would be integrated into a coherent force, all have stated publicly their preference that Nato remain the primary international security organization. It is worth noting that all the newly independent nations of Eastern Europe have endorsed that position by individually seeking membership in Nato.

In November 1992 the WEU Council recognized the difficulty of its position and voted to allow all of the European allies to participate fully in the activities of the WEU as they saw fit, i.e., as full or associate members, or as observers. At about the same time, France and Germany indicated that the Franco-German Corps would be made available for Nato missions. In December the Nato Defense Planning Committee welcomed the revised roles of the WEU and the Corps as reinforcement of the European pillar of the Alliance.

Is Nato Necessary?

Even though Nato has changed and governments have endorsed the organization, public doubts still exist. What fuels the debate is the fundamental question—Is Nato necessary? Since tensions with the East have been so drastically reduced, and the threat of a military invasion is gone, does Europe really need an international security organization?

Stripped to its basics, Nato represents stability. Like a security blanket, it is something with which political leaders are familiar and comfortable. They are content with it, they know how to operate within its framework, and their military organizations are organized around it. When people and nations are faced with radical change they tend to cling to what they know. That is understandable, but it does not deal with the question—Is it really needed?

The answer is yes. The Warsaw Pact may be gone and the Soviet Union dissolved, but that does not mean that the political situation in Europe is stable. While the people of Eastern Europe struggle to establish viable governments, institutions, and economies, they are faced with ethnic, religious, and political tensions that threaten to tear them apart.

Yugoslavia, which was a post-World War I creation arising from the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, has disintegrated into five separate states. The civil war that has enveloped these new political entities is merely a reflection of ancient hatreds and rivalries that were suppressed first by the Serbian monarchy and, after World War II, by the communist government. These go all the way back to the destruction of the Byzantine Empire by the Turks seven hundred years ago. The dividing line ran directly through what is now Bosnia-Herzegovina, with a predominately Muslim population developing in the east, and a Christian population, part of it owing allegiance to Constantinople and the remainder to Rome, in the west.

To this point the warring factions have concentrated their efforts in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, but having attained their goals there, the Serbs are now looking south toward their medieval homeland in Kosovo and the rump state of Macedonia. This has wide implications. Greece, a Nato nation, has warned that it will intervene if the reprehensible Serbian policy of "ethnic cleansing" threatens ethnic Greeks in Macedonia. This is no idle threat. Outside forces are already fighting in the war. Muslim fundamentalists from the Middle East have been identified in units fighting the Serbs, and Iran has been smuggling in men and weapons. The future for this beautiful land is bleak.

Further east, the turmoil in the former Soviet states of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan threatens to draw another Nato nation, Turkey, into the fray to support ethnic Turks in the region. Although it has not been as widely reported in the West as have the problems in former Yugoslavia, this war along the southeastern shore of the Black Sea is just as vicious and has no end in sight.

44 Naval War College Review

In the central region of Eastern Europe, Czechoslovakia, which had been looked upon with great hope by the West because of its relatively benign "velvet" revolution, has recently admitted it cannot overcome centuries of fundamental differences between the two major ethnic groups in its population. Although a peaceful dissolution of the Czechoslovak state has been achieved, there still exist tensions between the two new states which could easily flash into conflict as the Czechs and Slovaks try to divide up their common resources.

To the north the Baltic States are struggling just to exist. Although they have been recognized as independent states, independence from Russia has left their economies in shambles. Their public institutions are so new that there is virtually

"The senior military officers in the Baltic States were men who had formerly been senior officers of the Soviet army and navy. . . . These men . . . were asked whether or not the Soviets had actually expected Nato to invade. Individually, they all answered yes, absolutely."

no infrastructure upon which to build viable economies. While there is no fighting, as there is to the south, each state—Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia—has large concentrations of Russian troops still present. Negotiations to get them out are underway, but the Russians are reluctant, to say the least. A basic problem is that Russian plans for defense of the homeland depend heavily on the military facilities that they built in these states over the past fifty years. To give just one example, virtually all of the Russian submarine operating and training facilities in the Baltic are located at Lepajja in Lithuania, and there is nowhere else for them to go. Further, Russia maintains about 450,000 troops in the Kaliningrad *Oblast*, or district, an area which is essentially a rump Russian state located between Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia.

Forty years of communist rule has left two generations of Eastern Europeans embittered and eager for change but without practical experience in running their own affairs. Moreover, no matter how large a majority of a given population may desire a Western-style free-market economy, as the difficult realities of shifting to it become apparent, many long for the old system, which, if repressive, was at least stable. With this inherent economic tension, therefore, the prospects for a politically stable Eastern Europe are not good.

By itself, the turmoil I have just outlined would justify continuing Nato, but there is more. Western Europe itself is far from stable. Although the Maastricht Treaty is one hopeful sign of political unity, the dissatisfaction that is evident over ratification votes in Denmark, France, and the United Kingdom indicate that Europeans themselves are not unified. In the wake of the Cold War it was widely hoped that Europe would be able to move toward some form of a common political entity, but the real result has been a move toward nationalism,

Germany has turned inward as it deals with the monumental problems of trying to absorb its eastern half, and long-established democratic nations are having difficulties remaining viable. Italy has been unable to establish a stable government, and Belgium is flirting with dissolution between its two dominate ethnic groups, the Walloons and the Flemish. There are, however, even greater troubles.

As a consequence of the war in Yugoslavia, as well as new opportunities to travel for the residents of the former communist states, Europe's refugee population is the largest it has been since World War II. Italy has been inundated with thousands of Albanians fleeing poverty. Germany is awash in refugees from Poland, Czechoslovakia, Turkey, and other Central European states; circumstances are similar for many other European nations, and all of this is inflicting great strain on their social services. In Germany, one very troubling result has been the malicious attacks on foreigners by neo-Nazis. Although this has been soundly condemned by the German government, Europeans worry that a single, highly emotional issue such as this could bring the right wing back to power in the largest and potentially most powerful of the European states. Memories of World War II remain very sharp.

Finally, in the far north, Norway has a special problem. It remains an armed camp. It has watched the breakup of the East with a special concern. Under the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty, vast amounts of former Soviet military equipment are being withdrawn from Central Europe. What frightens Norwegians is that much of this equipment has been relocated to the Kola Peninsula, near their border. They recognize that the intentions of the present Russian government are benign, but believe that as long as the military capability exists, they must be ready to defend against it. Alone among Nato nations, Norway has no plans to cut its defense budget. In fact, it intends to expand it. A recent poll indicated that over sixty percent of the Norwegian population is supportive, believing increases in defense are necessary.

The only real purpose for an international security organization to exist is to provide security to its members against a discernable threat. The threats to stability may be relatively unfocused and difficult to deal with, but they are very real.

Is Nato Worth the Trouble?

Thus, the bottom line: Is Nato worth the trouble? From the European perspective the answer is painfully clear—there is no real alternative. From the U.S. perspective, though, the answer is not so clear. Why should the United States remain in Nato? What are the benefits?

The answer is that the United States benefits greatly from stability in Europe. In the years following World War II, the United States spent billions of dollars

46 Naval War College Review

helping both its former wartime allies and its adversaries rebuild their nations. For a long time after the war the United States was the only economic power in the world, but that is no longer true. The very nations it helped to rebuild are now its most formidable economic competitors. Moreover, because of increasing globalization, the U.S. economy is inextricably entwined with that of Europe. If Europe's economy goes down, the effect in the United States would be devastating.

Furthermore, whether the United States likes it or not, European security is critical to U.S. national security. Twice in this century, political relations in Europe have degenerated into widespread warfare into which the United States was inexorably drawn, with a resulting horrific loss of life and national treasure. As unlikely as it seems in today's international climate, should another general war break out, for whatever reason, the United States will again be drawn into it. And should that happen, it cannot be forgotten that Russia, still the only country capable of devastating the United States in fifteen minutes, is located in Europe.

This means that for its own national reasons, the United States must remain engaged in Europe. The best way in which this can be done, to retain its influence in Europe, is by being an active partner in the international organizations to which it belongs. The United Nations, the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization all give the United States a political voice, but it is only in Nato, with its military component, that the United States is looked upon as an honest broker. Given the degree of anti-American feeling reported in the press, that may seem odd to hear, but there is a widespread official feeling that the U.S. military presence in Europe provides stability that cannot be obtained in any other way. This was brought home by a Dutch admiral who said recently that the Americans are needed badly in Europe. He believes Europeans are still bickering with each other, and that it is only because the Americans are in Europe that the bickering has not led to open warfare.

Nato may be expensive and exasperating, but it is still very much worth the price that must be paid. Nato still has a role to play in the future of Europe, but one very different from what it has been in the past. For the foreseeable future, there is no real alternative.