edition Körber-STIFTUNG

NATO NO LONGER FITS THE BILL
WE NEED A MORE EUROPEAN ALLIANCE

THEO SOMMER

edited by Roger de Weck


edition
Körber-STIFTUNG

NATO No Longer Fits The Bill

We Need A More European Alliance

Theo Sommer

Translated by Alfred Clayton

Preface: Brief Moments of Eternity

There is no such thing as an eternal alliance. And yet someone who enters into a union (such as marriage, for example) will try to suppress in his own mind, in that of his partner, and in the minds of other people the idea that one day it will all come to an end. It is worth remembering that some of the “eternal alliances” in the Middle Ages were broken even before the sealing wax was dry. And let us not forget what the Soviet anthem proclaimed. “Unbreakable Union of freeborn Republics, / Great Russia has welded forever to stand. / Created in struggle by will of the people, / United and mighty, our Soviet land!” In this case forever lasted from 1922 to 1991.

That is the problem with NATO. The Western alliance had only one opponent, and he no longer exists. Its founding fathers may have wanted it to be a “bulwark,” but what is there left to contain? And in any case, the West is no longer the community of values that it used to be. In 2010 the transatlantic alliance adopted a Strategic Concept that has no focus, which Theo Sommer regrets. “Verbiage, repetitiveness and nebulosity have to cover up a blatant lack of unity and concrete facts.”

This was written by someone who knows “the petty meetings in Brussels at which departments and sub-departments spend hours at a time arguing about the

phrasing of a single paragraph.” Notwithstanding the frustration, Sommer’s enduring interest in security policy has always gained the upper hand. Few people understand the subject as well as “Ted,” who in the 1960s studied under Henry Kissinger, and in the 1970s was in charge of Helmut Schmidt’s planning staff at the Ministry of Defence. As late as 2001 Sommer wrote a report on how the German Army handles hazardous substances, and in particular the uranium ammunition used in Kosovo. He visited German and NATO troops in Kosovo and in Afghanistan on a number of occasions, and sat in the command post during a nocturnal gunfight not far from Kundus.

For well on five decades he has taken a theoretical and a practical interest in security policy as an observer, an actor, and a knowledgeable expert who can also look at the subject from a distance, something which makes it so much easier to assess. In this book Sommer sums up his beliefs and opens up new perspectives. Like Helmut Schmidt he considers NATO to be a “giant bureaucratic kraken,” but in contrast to the former German Chancellor he does not (as yet?) consider it to be superfluous, since “one does not give up one’s fire insurance simply because one does not like the fire brigade.”

Sommer believes that debates about the alliance must be wrested from the bureaucratic apparatus in Brussels and restored to the political level. NATO reformers should reduce the prevalence of purely military thinking as practised by the Pentagon; they should define the realistic

borders of NATO's area of operations; and shift from a crippling consensus principle to a "coalition of the willing." Above all the author enters a plea for a European pillar next to the American one. "At any rate the Europeans should resist the tendency, which is especially noticeable in America, to see in the enemies of the past the enemies of the future." Otherwise NATO will continue to be a backward-looking alliance, and will simply "fade away and disappear."

Roger de Weck, Editor of series "Standpunkte"

Preface

Before the end of the Second World War my birth cohort was too young to serve in the Wehrmacht, and after the war it was too old to serve in the Bundeswehr, and I have never been in an army. However, during the fifty years of my career as a journalist I devoted a significant part of my professional life to questions relating to defence and retaliation, the intricacies of nuclear strategy, and the never-ending and recurring disputes within the Atlantic alliance. At the beginning of the 1960s I studied International Relations in the Nuclear Age at Harvard University under a young assistant professor called Henry Kissinger, and at the beginning of the 1970s I was head of the planning staff at the Hardthöhe headquarters of the Ministry of Defence under Helmut Schmidt, then West German Minister of Defence. Thereafter I was a member of two defence structure commissions, the first in Bonn (1970–72) and the second in Berlin (1999–2000), where I served as vice-chairman of the Weizsäcker Commission. For well-nigh twenty years I was a member of the council of the International Institute of Strategic Studies in London. And as an editor of DIE ZEIT I wrote more leaders about the East-West conflict and the balance of tteror, about armament and disarmament and NATO than would fit into

two thick ring files. And the subject has continued and continues to interest me.

For my generation, NATO was of crucial importance. It was the life insurance policy of the West Germans. And in retrospect there can be no doubt about the fact that without the Western alliance the red flag with the hammer and sickle would now be flying over us all. NATO was the most powerful, most reliable and most successful defence alliance the world had ever seen. In the years between 1949 and 1989 it repelled numerous Soviet attacks on the post-war status quo, for example, during the Berlin Blockade in 1948–49, again during the Berlin crisis 1959–1962, and during the missile conflict between 1979 and 1987, which has gone down in history as a domestic and foreign policy dispute concerning the “deployment of medium-range nuclear missiles.” In the end the Atlantic alliance was victorious. It triumphed in the historic struggle between East and West without having fired a single shot. On 9 November 1989 the Berlin Wall came down, and subsequently the Iron Curtain was lifted section by section, the communist system collapsed throughout the eastern bloc, the Warsaw Pact was dissolved in the middle of 1991, and at the end of the year the Soviet Union fell apart into 17 states. Three years later the Red Army left East Germany.

With the disappearance of its opponent in the east the alliance may not at one fell swoop have lost its right to exist, but quite possibly its raison d’être. Since then the

mission, the purpose, indeed even the whole point of NATO have been called into question. Two decades after the end of the Cold War there are still no answers to a series of extremely important questions. Do we actually still need the alliance? And if so, what should be its form, size and organizational level? What should its mission be? Territorial defence, global outreach and intervention as global policeman on an American leash, or as a force kept in reserve for United Nations peacekeeping and peace-creating missions? And what kind of price tag can our nations stomach at a time when the preservation of economic and social stability obviously takes precedence over military entanglements in distant parts of the world, no matter whether they are based on geostrategic and geopolitical considerations or on humanitarian motives?

It is time to formulate an answer to these crucial questions.

I. The Beginnings

Why is NATO no longer needed, or at least NATO as we know it today? At glance at its origins gives us an irrefutable answer: because the world has changed. It has changed so completely that it is no longer possible to deduce in the style of a prayer wheel a justification for “business as usual” by referring to the historical roots of the Atlantic alliance.

Let us think back for a moment to the situation four years after the end of the Second World War. Anxieties about a resurgence of German militarism had subsided; at any rate, they were increasingly overshadowed by a new nightmare, the Soviet threat. The alliance was founded in order to deal with this problem. On 4 April 1949 the foreign ministers of twelve Western countries met in the auditorium of the State Department in Washington and put their signatures to the North Atlantic Pact, which was NATO’s birth certificate.

The then US Secretary of State Dean Acheson described the scene in his memoirs, “Present at the Creation.” Whilst the assembled dignitaries waited for the start of the signing ceremony, he related, the Marine band added an unexpected touch of realism. It so happened that it played two songs from George Gershwin’s musical “Porgy and Bess,” which was popular at the time. They were entitled “I got plenty of nothing” and “It ain’t necessarily so.”

These two hits described the initial state of the Atlantic alliance with startling clarity. After 1945 the member states had swiftly disarmed, and the United States had withdrawn most of its troops from the European continent. The West Europeans also demobilized. They collected the peace dividend and turned their attention to reconstructing their devastated countries.

But then all of a sudden they experienced the truth of an old saying. “The most pious man cannot live in peace if his evil neighbour thinks it’s wrong.” From year to year it became increasingly clear that Stalin’s Soviet Union was not only trying to extend its sphere of influence, but to expand the area over which it held sway far beyond its own borders. In February 1946 Winston Churchill, speaking in Fulton, Missouri, deplored the installation of totalitarian regimes in the whole of eastern Europe, and added that “an iron curtain has descended across the Continent.” In quick succession communists seized power in Bulgaria, Romania, Poland and, finally, in February 1948, in Czechoslovakia. Democratic parties were suppressed and their leaders were persecuted. Show trials, ruthless purges and brutal terror turned the countries which had just been liberated from Hitler’s yoke into Soviet satellites. Eastern Germany – which later became the GDR – had to toe the line from the very beginning. In Greece communist guerrilla units under the command of General Markos unleashed a bloody civil war. Moscow pressed Turkey to accept a Soviet military presence on the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles. And the

Kremlin put pressure on Tito's Yugoslavia to submit to Stalin's diktat. September 1947 saw the foundation of Kominform, which was supposed to coordinate the actions of communist parties in western Europe. These included strikes and propaganda campaigns which in the winter of 1947–48 made it seem that a communist seizure of power in France and in Italy could not be entirely ruled out.

Moscow's aggressive tendencies were a cause of great concern in the West. The response came rather quickly. First of all, the Marshall Plan, which was announced in June 1947, and the ensuing European Reconstruction Programme were supposed to make the Europeans immune to the communist temptation. Yet it became more and more apparent that it would be necessary to contain Soviet expansionism on a military level. After the end of the war the Soviets had not sent their armies home, and had rearmed and modernized them. This need first found expression in the Treaty of Brussels, which was signed on 17 March 1948 and later led to the Western European Union (WEU). True, in this document Britain, France and the three Benelux countries promised to take any measures that might be necessary "in the case of a renewed German policy of aggression." But this was the last time they said anything of this kind. And in the preamble it was impossible to overlook the emergence of a new reason for the alliance, namely to join forces in order to resist "any policy of aggression." This phrase clearly pointed a finger at the Soviet Union.

It was Stalin’s increasingly aggressive policy on Germany and Berlin which goaded the West into action. Three days after the West German currency reform on 20 June 1948 the Russians began to interrupt the movement of goods and people to West Berlin. They argued that West Berlin was a part of their zone of occupation. The Western allies for their part insisted on their rights and on 26 June initiated the airlift, which until May 1949 brought the bare necessities of life to West Berlin.

The Berlin Blockade finally prompted the West to embark with some urgency on the establishment of a defence organization. That meant first and foremost bringing the United States into the Treaty of Brussels and attempting to establish a multi-national army in order to be able to stand up to the Soviets. The Vandenberg Resolution of 11 June 1948, which received bipartisan support from the Democrats and the Republicans in the US Senate, made all this possible. As early as July negotiations between the US, Canada, Britain, France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg began in Washington on an ambassadorial level. In February 1949 they were joined by Norway, and in March Italy, Denmark, Iceland and Portugal – a fascist government but in possession of the strategically important Azores, were also invited to join. On 4 April the Treaty was signed by the foreign ministers and ambassadors of the twelve original member states. In a short speech President Truman expressed the hope that the North Atlantic Pact would “create a shield against aggression and the fear of

aggression – a bulwark which will permit us to get on with the real business of government and society, the business of achieving a fuller and happier life for all our citizens."

The principal provisions of the Treaty of Washington, which continues to be in force unchanged to this day, are contained in Article 3, on the basis of which the parties to the treaty are "to maintain and develop their individual and collective capacity to resist armed attack;" in Article 4, which provides for consultations if one of the parties thinks that its political independence or security is threatened; and above all in Article 5, which sets forth the real security promise. The twelve signatories agreed that "an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all." In the event of such an armed attack all the other parties to the treaty were to assist the party "so attacked." Of course, this duty to provide assistance was formulated in a far more low-key manner than in the WEU Treaty of Brussels. The individual members of the pact were able to decide what kind of "action … including the use of armed force" they deemed necessary "to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area." The reaction to the attack could have ranged from a letter of condolence to dropping a nuclear bomb on Moscow. Nevertheless Stalin got the message. Four weeks after the foundation of NATO he lifted the blockade of Berlin.

Yet the bulwark of which Truman had spoken was not as yet very impressive. In West Germany and Berlin there

were two US divisions, two divisions of the British Army of the Rhine, and a few smaller units of the French Army. They were armies of occupation largely concerned with administrative matters, and territorial defence was not their task. However, at the end of 1949 the twelve decided to build up the joint defence organization envisaged in the Treaty of Washington. The North Atlantic Treaty was transformed into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, NAT into NATO. A joint headquarters, joint planning and operations staff and several regional commands were established in quick succession. At the end of 1950 US General Dwight D. Eisenhower, who later became President of the United States, became the first Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), and in the middle of 1951 he moved into Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE). In the years that followed more and more troops were placed under his command.

When in June 1950 the North Koreans with the blessing of Stalin attacked the southern half of the Korean peninsula, there were fears in Europe and in North America that this might well be the prelude to an attack on western Europe. Everyone was painfully aware of the military weakness of the West. The Americans, the British and the French, making a radical break with their traditions, had already introduced conscription in peacetime after the start of the Berlin Blockade. Now the permanent deployment of Western troops along the Iron Curtain was perceived to be unavoidable. NATO, as