

NATO fiftieth anniversary: Tensions increase between Europe and America

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The fiftieth anniversary celebration of NATO taking place in Washington this weekend was originally intended as a pompous exercise involving military parades, fireworks and show business personalities. The West was to celebrate victory in the Cold War--embodied in the acceptance as new NATO members of the east European states of Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic--and to decide at the same time upon a new strategy which would award NATO the role of a high-handed world policeman.

Nothing came of the plans. The celebrations have been scrapped and the strategy paper reduced to a few vague formulations. Instead, a three-day working meeting will take place to discuss further action in the Kosovo conflict under circumstances where profound differences of opinion, both political and military, have emerged within the alliance.

From a superficial view it was not inevitable that the situation in Kosovo should stand in the way of the NATO celebrations, crowning as it does a course which has been pursued with determination since 1991: the transformation of NATO from a defensive into an intervention force imposing the economic, political and geo-strategic interests of its members on a world scale.

Some commentators even regard such a transformation as the real significance of the war in Kosovo. The Swiss weekly *Weltwoche* writes that for American Secretary of State Madeleine Albright it appears that "the case of the renegade Albanian province ... is the ideal pretext for remodelling NATO on American lines--and imposing its strategy concept on the more reserved Europeans."

Even, however, if this were Albright's intention, the duration of the war, and the fact that no end is in view, has brought profound differences between the various NATO partners to the surface--differences which will determine the future of the alliance for a long time to come.

From its foundation in April 1949, up until the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact in July 1991, the profile of NATO was dictated by the confrontation with the Soviet Union. The United States functioned as a protective umbrella for western Europe and played the leading role inside NATO. This was accepted by the European governments--with the exception of France, which in protest at the domination of America temporarily quit the military alliance in 1966.

With the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact the European requirement for American protection no longer existed, and the tasks and aims of NATO were up for renewed definition. In principle, two paths were possible: the construction of an independent European military alliance which would have eventually led to the dissolution of NATO, or the transformation of NATO into a global intervention force, retaining the dominant role of America.

Already in November 1991, at the Rome conference, the agenda was set in favour of the second option. A proposal by French president Mitterrand to develop a European defence organisation, which would be formally associated with NATO but in a position to act independently from America, received only half-hearted support from Germany and was

rejected by the rest of the other European members.

Later attempts to create a European defence system never went further than a declaration of intent or symbolic gestures. The Maastricht Treaty, for example, envisaged a European defence system. And in June 1996 in Berlin a multinational interventions force under European command and free of American participation was set up. In December of the same year, in Nuremberg, Jacques Chirac and Helmut Kohl announced "a joint German-French security and defence concept," including joint military units.

Why these initiatives never got past the initial stages is partly explained by disunity amongst the European partners themselves. Great Britain especially, relying on its "special relationship" with America as the basis for its own influence in Europe, opposed all of the French-German initiatives. In Germany itself, all parties agreed that European unification should not take place at the cost of the trans-Atlantic alliance. This standpoint was explicable not so much for nostalgic reasons--i.e., the frequently expressed gratitude for America's help to Europe after the war--but rather more by the rapid political and economic collapse of East Europe and Russia, with the ensuing explosive conflicts which made dissociation from America a very risky business.

A second reason for the lack of success of the European initiatives is the enormous military superiority of the US, which would require vast sums of money if European governments decided to catch up. The French newspaper *Le Monde* calculated that the armies of the various countries in the European union have a total of 1.9 million soldiers compared with the American total of 1.4 million. But in comparison to America the same countries spend a fraction of their income on arms and weapons. Germany, Italy and Greece together possess armies totalling 60 percent of the American figure, but the same countries spend just 12 percent of the American total on military hardware.

From the failure of its efforts France has drawn the conclusion that it should integrate itself more closely into NATO. It has the biggest European contingent of soldiers currently active in the present war. A French defence expert, François Heisbourg, justified his country's current tactics as follows: "For France to play a pilot role in the build-up of European defence it must once again be fully integrated into NATO. On the one hand because it finds itself in the reprehensible situation whereby its pilots, and perhaps tomorrow its soldiers, must endure risks arising from commands worked out at a military level in which France does not participate. On the other hand because a NATO in which the Europeans form their own block offers the possibility of braking the growing tendency of the Americans to acting single-handedly, such as they did in Iraq with 'Operation Desert Fox'. It is advisable at the same time to Europeanise NATO while 'Natoising' America. That can only be done when France is present at all levels" (*Le Monde*, 15 April 1999).

The war in Kosovo has created conditions where the old conflict between a European and an Atlantic orientation has re-emerged. In Europe a growing chorus can be heard complaining that the US has drawn its

partners into a war with no end in sight--thereby throwing all of Europe off balance.

Typical in this respect is an article in the latest edition of the German magazine *Der Spiegel*, which reports that German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer only agreed to military threats against Belgrade last autumn because of an ultimatum from Washington. "He knew that he could only become foreign minister when he acceded to this pressure from the Great Powers," wrote *Der Spiegel*.

Chancellor Kohl, defeated in the election but still in office, was also extremely concerned at the time: "Kohl was depressed by the dependence on the USA.... He was not at all happy with the whole course of events, as it became rapidly clear for those who succeeded him." At this point, apart from Great Britain, none of the European countries were ready for an escalation of hostilities.

Der Spiegel gives no source for its report, but it is obviously based on information from government officials. The fact that such reports are now being circulated is a clear sign of the growing uneasiness gripping ruling circles. Two factors play a role in this.

Firstly, the longer the war goes on the more it undermines the position of many European governments. In Greece, where according to opinion polls over 90 percent of the population reject the war and many support Serbia, the government of Prime Minister Costas Simitis is on the brink of collapse.

In Germany, in opposition to the party's support for the war, members of the Greens are leaving the party in droves. On May 13 the Greens plan a special conference on the issue, and should they decide against the war, then the ruling coalition of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and Greens is finished. In France and Italy, parties which officially reject the war are also involved in the government.

Secondly, an escalation of the war threatens to increase tensions with Russia and draw all of eastern Europe into the tumult. The consequences of such a development in terms of economic and defence policies, and in the form of new waves of refugees, would above all affect the European members of NATO.

The European government themselves, with a few exceptions such as Greece and Norway, are at present refraining from public criticism of the NATO course. Such opposition would be regarded by the dominant powers in NATO, especially in Washington, as encouragement for Milosevic and sabotage of the war aims.

However the press and politicians no longer directly involved in government are increasingly making their opinions public. In the German newspaper *Die Zeit*, Helmut Schmidt, German chancellor from 1974 to 1982, wrote an article with the headline: "NATO does not belong to America", in which he accused the American government of attempting to ensure with their new NATO "that the Europeans are also dominated by Washington in the new century". This expectation, according to Schmidt, "has only a limited probability of realisation. For the ruthlessness, largely dictated by domestic political pressures, with which Washington imposes its current interests and domination, will increasingly antagonise many Europeans."

Schmidt accuses the Americans of having "no long-term worked-out overall strategy". The only thing that is clear is their "conception of their own future political and military world role". He ends by saying that the partnership between Europe and North America remains urgently desirable. "However the European Union should not become a strategic satellite of Washington."

The veteran SPD politician, Egon Bahr, one of the architects of détente between East and West Europe in the '70s, expressed himself even more bluntly at a recent meeting in Berlin. He vigorously opposed the intervention of ground troops in Kosovo because this would lead to an unpredictable escalation of the war, threatening to destroy everything which had been established since 1975 in terms of détente.

Bahr warned that a ground war would lead to new tensions between East and West Europe, Europe's own need for protection by the US would grow and Europe could forget about playing any independent role in world politics.

The French press is also full of articles accusing the US of striving towards hegemony. An article in *Le Monde Diplomatique* begins with the words: "Under conditions where NATO has outlived its initial role of opposing the 'Soviet Threat', the Atlantic alliance has become more than ever an instrument through which America imposes its hegemony in Europe."

And in *Le Monde*, which has opened its pages to regular guest commentators from politics and science, Alain Joxe, a former Socialist Party minister in the Mitterrand government, described a military victory in Kosovo as a political defeat for the Europeans: "In the case of a complete victory one has to say that would be a great military victory for NATO and thereby for the USA, and at the same time an irremediable humanitarian catastrophe and therefore political defeat for Europe." He proposed the immediate creation of an independent European command structure, eventually including Russia.

On a political level the growing tensions inside NATO are expressed in European demands for the inclusion of Russia and the United Nations in a solution to the war. These are the two key elements of the so-called "German peace plan", which has been supported by the European Union while meeting a rather cold response in Washington and London.

Through the inclusion of the UN and Russia the aim is to limit the leading role of the US. Herrman Scheer, one of the few German MPs to openly oppose the war, declared in a contribution to the recent SPD conference in Bonn: "There is a major reason for the fact that it is so difficult for the German government to get American agreement for a peace plan including UN secretary-general Kofi Annan and Russia: every attempt to resolve the conflict with the help of Russia and the UN would be synonymous with the failure of the attempt by the USA to establish its dominance over the UN and the USA-led NATO over the OECD."

The war in Kosovo has thrust to the surface the tensions existing between the Great Powers. Its consequences stretch far beyond the borders of Yugoslavia and the Balkans. More and more the situation recalls the beginning of the century when the conflict in the Balkans unleashed a global war. Taken together the danger of an uncontrolled escalation of the war, increasing conflicts between the leading powers in the war, and the ruthlessness and thoughtlessness of the politicians involved constitute an explosive mix.



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