

NATO expansion and the political crisis in Europe

Part two

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This concludes the two-part series on NATO expansion which began June 10.

For most of the post-war period the European powers have attempted to overcome their relative weakness against the US by creating a single European market, currency and trade bloc, a process that was broadly encouraged by America as a means of stabilising Western Europe as a bulwark against the Soviet Union.

During the Cold War the European powers and America, in their common hostility towards the USSR, were able, despite occasional fallings out, to achieve a significant amelioration of their antagonistic interests. The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) was one of the primary expressions of this, acting as a powerful and binding US-led intra-imperialist military organisation.

But despite the fact that NATO was established as an anti-Soviet alliance, it has never been busier since the liquidation of the Soviet Union in 1991. Over the proceeding years NATO has been engaged in a series of active military operations, including, with its presence in Afghanistan, areas previously considered beyond its theatre of operations.

The dismantling of the USSR created a power vacuum in the region previously under the Kremlin bureaucracy's control, opening up new vistas for world capitalism. This provided a bonanza for Western big businesses and banks, which, in conjunction with the local ex-Stalinist and gangster elites, have ruthlessly bled the region for the past decade. At the same time, the liquidation of the Soviet Union also created the conditions for the resurgence of inter-imperialist conflicts that the post-war institutions such as NATO had sought to contain.

Throughout the 1990s NATO exerted the economic and geopolitical interests of its principal members in regions formerly closed to imperialism, culminating in the NATO bombardment of Serbia in 1999. But the positions of the NATO powers have increasingly diverged, primarily due to the increasing unilateralism and belligerence of the US, with Washington on one side and the weaker powers of France and Germany on the other.

Of central importance in this renewed power struggle is control of the vast oil and gas reserves concentrated in the Middle East and Central Asia. In 1997 Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Carter's National Security advisor, published an article, "A Geostrategy for Asia" in which he stated one of the central aims of US foreign

policy in the current period.

"America's emergence as the sole global superpower," Brzezinski wrote, "now makes an integrated and comprehensive strategy for Eurasia imperative," a task that would involve extending a "benign American hegemony" over the weaker European powers that would assist US dominance of the continent in return for being allowed to play a secondary role.

For this, Brzezinski suggested, NATO would be maintained as a ready-made structure of "American political influence and military power on the Eurasian mainland," which should be expanded to envelop the countries of the former Stalinist states and thus enhance the position of the US.

Brzezinski also proposed that NATO be used to ensure that the attempts at eastward expansion by the European powers could be kept in check by a simultaneous expansion of the alliance: "A wider Europe and an enlarged NATO will serve the short-term and longer-term interests of US policy. A larger Europe will expand the range of American influence without simultaneously creating a Europe so politically integrated that it could challenge the United States."

This tactic of undermining any extension of European unity capable of challenging the establishment of US hegemony over Eurasia reached its highest point with the "old Europe" versus "new Europe" split prior to the beginning of the 2003 Iraq war. Lined up behind Washington were the most avowedly pro-NATO members of the EU, especially Britain, with the gaggle of pro-US Central-Eastern European NATO and EU candidate countries squawking their support. Washington was able to utilise its sway over the continent in order to scupper any Franco-German led effort to ensure that European capital was not too disadvantaged in the scramble for control of the Middle East.

Thus NATO has emerged more than had ever been the case during the Cold War as a means by which America aggressively imposes its power over Europe. How have the continental European powers responded to this?

France and Germany have made limited efforts to add a military capability to Europe's existing structures of economic integration, through which they hope to more aggressively assert the interests of European-based capital in their horse-trading with the US. It was envisaged that this would be done independently of US-dominated structures of NATO, but this has proved extremely

difficult to achieve.

Former French President Mitterrand and German Chancellor Kohl cautiously sought to develop a European defence organisation, with the 1991 EU Maastricht Treaty preparing the ground for a common European defence system. Since then has followed a struggle within the EU to agree on a European military project, with Britain repeatedly acting to prevent any drift away from NATO.

In 2000, following the NATO war on Serbia, many European commentators bemoaned the EU's continuing reliance on America's armed forces to sort out problems in its own "backyard", and European defence ministers proposed the creation of a 60,000-strong European Rapid Reaction Force. However, the EU powers have not been able to agree on the role that this body should play in relation to NATO.

This struggle is currently being played out over the draft European Union constitution, which sets out to strengthen the EU's existing economic structures while establishing a new military command structure and security apparatus. The document seeks to create new EU institutions capable of deciding on foreign policy, with a new European foreign minister, while framing a "common defence policy, which might lead to common defence."

Once again Washington is using its regional allies, primarily Britain, to try to abort the European military project. Blair was forced to call for a referendum in Britain on the EU constitution by elements within the US and British ruling class who hope to sabotage moves that would deepen European independence from America. Even if the European constitution is ratified by all EU member states, then US-aligned countries such as Britain, at the head of the "new Europe" faction that includes the eastern accession countries, will act to weaken the stature of any European defence force that rivals NATO.

If an independent European military force is established then it is likely to consist of a "core" of EU members, minus the closest allies of Washington, drawing primarily on French and German forces. Either way America will seek to ensure that it retains its role as the pre-eminent power in Europe with NATO as the continent's largest military structure.

Consequently EU military policy is in something of a shambles. With the more ambitious French and German plans to establish military structures independent of NATO failing to get off the ground, they have opted to participate with Britain in a plan for the establishment by 2007 of half a dozen 1,500-man European "battle groups" to intervene in areas considered outside the theatres of US and NATO interest, such as Africa.

Aside from America's existing overwhelming military superiority, which it uses to threaten and cajole its rivals, there are two fundamental reasons for the European powers' inability to cut themselves free from NATO's apron strings.

Firstly, European-based capital continues to look to American imperialism to lead the way in cracking open every area of the world for ruthless exploitation. This was shown during the 1990s in the former Yugoslavia when the Europeans colluded with the US to break up the country and finally bombard Serbia into submission. When George W. Bush announced the beginning of the "war on terror", a euphemism for neo-colonial adventurism

across the globe, every country in Europe enthusiastically joined the bandwagon, recognising the potential that the 9/11 attacks had created to aggressively pursue their own interests in the shadow of the American onslaught.

While the bourgeoisie in Britain is most closely tied to US militarism in the pursuit of its predatory goals, their German and French counterparts are not averse to attempting to glean what they can from the spoils of American neo-colonialism. In October 2003, just months after Chirac and Schroeder had criticised the US invasion of Iraq, the two countries signed a UN resolution handing the US official control of the country as the occupying power. The French and German bourgeoisies remain divided between taking advantage of the short-term prospect of being able to scavenge some limited benefits from the occupation of Iraq and recognising that the US is acting to ensure its hegemony in direct opposition to European interests.

The second reason why the European bourgeoisie continues its subservient orbit around US imperialism is that it finds itself sitting atop a highly volatile social situation at home. The anti-social programmes of the EU and its member states aimed at attacking the position of the working class, combined with a massive popular antiwar sentiment across the continent, have created a situation in which the European elite feels dangerously exposed. Following the global antiwar movement that emerged early in 2003, Europe's governments are acutely aware that any confrontation with America could set into motion a further mass movement of the working class and threaten their own survival.

Additionally, the failure of the US occupation in Iraq at the hands of an insurgent population would also be a defeat for world imperialism and a major setback to Europe's own ambitions to subjugate weaker countries under its control. In September 2003 Chancellor Schroeder, addressing the UN General Assembly, held out the hand of cooperation to the US over Iraq, pointing out that German assistance in the occupation would be in Washington's interests. "New threats, over which no state in the world can become master, require international cooperation more than ever," he said, before offering humanitarian, technical and economic aid, and training for Iraqi police and military officers.

President Chirac, equally concerned that the US was facing a looming popular rebellion in Iraq, also offered aid to the occupation, saying that France "very much [wanted] the Americans to succeed."

This stand continues with the UN debate regarding the June 30 establishment of the interim Iraqi government, with Paris and Berlin offering advice to the US on how to give a veneer of credibility to the handover of "sovereignty" to its own hand-picked puppet regime. Nevertheless, the European powers will continue to look for opportunities to stake out their own spheres of influence where and whenever possible, inevitably leading to conflicts with each other and their larger transatlantic rival.



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