Did the Creation of NATO Prevent the Establishment of Europe as a 'third force' Between East and West During the Cold War?

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This essay will focus on the immediate post-war years and argue that the creation of NATO was not the decisive factor in the failure to establish Europe as a 'third force' between East and West. Instead, it will point to the geopolitical and economic situation in Europe as discrete obstacles that prevented an independent European security identity from emerging. Indeed, the suggestion will be made that the Europeans consciously chose the creation of an Atlantic partnership over a European direction due to a lack of political will, economic instability and perceived security threats which could not be adequately met without US involvement. The paper will acknowledge that in the longer term there were subsequent occasions where Europe attempted to recast itself as a 'third force', and that in these instances, NATO was one of a number of instruments which constrained this direction. However, the crucial point will be made that these circumstances arose out of a stable security environment intrinsically based on the existence and operation of NATO. The failed opportunities to pursue an independent European security identity were thus inherently contingent on the creation of the Alliance.

Certain conditions would have to be present for Europe to develop as a 'third force' in world politics. Clearly the political will and desire would have to be present, particularly in Britain, France and Germany, who would have to provide leadership of the bloc. Similarly, these actors would need to have coherence on the form any European bloc would take. The entity would have to be economically viable as well, to stand independently from the United States. Similarly, it would require the political and military strength to be able to resist either superpower, in both a diplomatic and a security sense.

Political Will

Was there significant political will for the establishment of Europe as a 'third force', independent of the Soviet Union and the United States? On the face it, the answer is 'yes'. One can point to a significant groundswell of pan Europeanism in the immediate post-war years, with integration seen as a mechanism for curtailing destructive nationalism. Groups such as the United European Federalists saw an upsurge in membership numbers, whilst noted figures such as Winston Churchill came out in favour of closer European cooperation (Dinan 2005, pp.11-13). Yet, although sharing an overarching desire for a united and active Europe, there was little coherence between various groups surrounding the exact nature and direction of this movement. Federalist designs diverged sharply from unionist ones, whilst the Christian Democrat vision was obviously markedly different to the socialist Europe envisaged by Briand. There were even differences in what was thought of as constituting 'Europe' – note that Churchill's famous Zurich speech actually envisaged Great Britain and the Commonwealth as a separate power bloc outside of the continental security arrangements (Churchill 1945). Additionally, one should note that in these important early stages, none of these groups held considerable political power, certainly not enough to enact significant change. For the 'third force' direction to have any potential, it had to be pursued by key decision-makers.

Britain

British 'third force' policy has its roots in Foreign Office discussions in 1944 surrounding the likely post-war scenarios. Fears persisted in Whitehall that the any power vacuum in Western Europe would be filled by communism and by extension the Soviet Union (Greenwood 1993). Note that the concern was not necessarily centred on direct, aggressive Soviet hostility – the prevailing opinion was that the extension of their influence would be a natural process should a security architecture remain absent. A number of discussion papers were circulated that were sympathetic to the idea of a 'Western bloc', and prospects were furthered with the appointment of Ernest Bevin as Foreign Secretary in July 1945. There are many interpretations of Bevin's overarching desires for British foreign policy (for instance Shlaim (1978 pp.114-142) suggests that Bevin was strongly in favour of a British-led 'third force' with the Brussels Treaty at the core). The truth is perhaps closest to John Baylis' (1993) interpretation – Bevin was at heart a pragmatic political operator, adopting the best strategy to satisfy British security interests. In the first years of his reign, a 'Western Union' was considered an appropriate method to address Britain's needs. A Western bloc would act as a control upon defeated Germany – still a prime consideration in the mind of the British. Closer economic ties with Europe would help European economic recovery, as well as providing for some independence from the Americans. It would allow Britain to remain distinctly 'socialist' with increasing political stability in Western Europe diminishing the attractions of communism in the eyes of the population (Kirby 2000).

But Bevin never viewed the 'third force' plan as the *only* choice for British foreign policy. He had mentioned the possibility of enrolling the United States in European affairs as early as 1946, and by early 1948 was pressing strongly for American involvement, either in the soon-to-be-concluded Brussels Treaty or a wider alliance (Bullock 1983). Moreover, it should be noted that Bevin was by no means the only policymaker in terms of British foreign affairs. The Chancellor of the Exchequer Hugh Dalton was opposed to a Western European bloc on economic grounds, whilst other cabinet members stressed the importance of historical and cultural ties with the United States (Greenwood 1993).

Europe as a 'third force' was only therefore one of a number of options. Once circumstances changed which meant the long term viability of such an entity was in doubt, London switched support to a stronger involvement of the Americans – an idea which had never been 'off the table' – and pursued this path wholeheartedly.

France

Whilst British leadership was not forthcoming, there was arguably even less political will on the part of France for a European 'third force'. Although France frequently tried to assume the role of European leader during subsequent years, in the immediate post-war era the focus was much more insular, reflective of a precarious economic and political position. More so than London, Paris was acutely aware of the unsolved German question, which at first was tried to tackle independently. Indeed, the Dunkirk Treaty, which perhaps had the potential to form the core of a European 'third force', took the form of an explicitly anti-German defensive alignment as opposed to a precursor for common European security (Calvocaressi 1991 p.173). Similarly, the Monnet Plan to revitalise the French economy was intrinsically tied to weakening the industrial capacity of the Germans (Milward 1992 pp.126-141). Yet, as Hitchcock (1998 pp.99-133) notes, there was an increasing realisation throughout 1947 that France could not prevent German recovery, only manage it through cooperation with the United States. Thus Trizonia was pursued as the political and economic means of rehabilitating Germany, whilst the Atlantic Alliance was advocated as a stronger military guarantee against potential German aggression. In this early period little consideration was given to an independent European entity – again, because such an undertaking would not best serve the security interests of the nation. Without French or British leadership, and with the determination of these two powers to check significant German re-emergence, it is perhaps unsurprising that 'lesser' European states were relatively unmoved in pursuit of a European 'third force' either. They too viewed America as the best prospect for the satisfaction of their security interests, and were persistently vociferous in the pursuit of an American military guarantee for Western European nations (Lundestad 1998 p.197).

Why did policymakers in Europe so emphatically reject the prospect of a European 'third force'? The answer lies in the geopolitical and economic situation of the time, and serves to further demonstrate why, even if NATO had not been created, a European 'third force' was unlikely to have emerged or survived. Two issues rendered the prospect unworkable – firstly, the economic position of the European nations, and secondly, the increasing Soviet threat at a

direct, indirect and perceived level.

Economic Position

Simply put, the economies of Western European states in the late 1940's were extremely unstable. The War had devastated large parts of the continent, depleting working inventories, and leaving states with large debts. The cold winter of 1946/7 had also hit industry hard, as well as creating a significant food shortage (Milward 1992 pp.1-43). One can therefore cast significant doubt as to the economic viability of any European 'third force', both in terms of the short-term reconstruction of Europe and the long-term ability to resist increasing United States dominance. Moreover, as the British acknowledged, without swift and effective recovery, it would be impossible to prepare a defence program independently of North America (Adamthwaite 1985). Economic revival, and by extension a security architecture, simply could not be undertaken without significant American assistance (De Vergh 1949), which implicitly entailed a closer cooperation in other fields. In the two years prior to the Marshall Plan, the US contributed $8.3 billion in bilateral aid to European nations. The European Recovery Program itself saw $14.1 billion distributed between 17 countries from 1948-1952 (Lundestad 1998 p.196). The Americans were an integral part of the reconstruction of Europe.

Soviet Threat

From the start, the Soviet position at end of the war was an barrier to an effective European alliance emerging. By remaining in Eastern Europe militarily, the USSR ensured that any bloc which was created would be a solely Western one, and would contend with communist Europe from the outset. Specifically though, it was Soviet moves in the latter half of 1947 which generated real fear in Western Europe. Russian policy towards Germany, Moscow's fierce rejection of Marshall Aid, the communist intrusions into Greece and Turkey and the creation of Cominform all caused significant alarm (Offner 1999). Alongside this, the economic crisis and resulting decline in living standards saw communist influence rising in many Western European nations. Academic debate continues to surround the nature of these developments – Cold War revisionists (Kolko 1972; Cox 1990; LaFeber 2002) attribute Soviet moves to a defensive attitude borne out of fear of American imperialism, whilst post-revisionists stress the paranoia of Stalin (Gaddis 1997) or general Soviet expansionism (Leffler 1992). The actual motives of the Soviets are, in fact, largely irrelevant – what is important to stress is the way these moves were *perceived* by western governments. A high level of insecurity was prevalent at this time – in February 1948 for example, Lord Gladwyn suggested, somewhat hyperbolically, that the Soviet Union was looking at *'physical control of the Eurasian land-mass and eventual control over the whole world island'* (Gladwyn 1972 p.211). With the notion that the Soviet Union was an aggressive, expansionist power fixed in the minds of most governments, it is perhaps unsurprising that any plans for a European 'third force' were quickly superseded by an alternative security framework. The war and resulting economic slump had left Europe with little in the way of military forces, and even a collaboration of states could not realistically hope to oppose potential Soviet advances. The only nation that could resist her from a military point of view was the United States (Evangelista 1998). Further Soviet moves, such as the Berlin blockade and Czechoslovakian coup, ensured that communist expansion remained Europe's primary concern throughout 1948 and 1949. US military involvement was seen the only way to allay this fear, and in subsequent negotiations for an Atlantic Alliance it was typically the Europeans who pressed for a more substantial American commitment from a somewhat hesitant Washington. This viewpoint is clearly coherent with the post-revisionist 'Empire by invitation' model popularised by Geir Lundestad (1980; 1986), which contrasts the consensual hegemony of the US in Western Europe with the 'enforced' Soviet sphere of influence. Indeed, it is worth noting that many in the United States would have favoured a much stronger Europe that more closely resembled a 'third force', viewing the continent as an economic and military burden.

Thus in the early Cold War years an independent European security identity was correctly judged unfeasible, and the power vacuum in Western Europe was filled by an American presence at the behest of the Europeans themselves. NATO did not therefore prevent the emergence of Europe as a 'third force' – instead, the Alliance's creation was a direct response to the inability of Europe to stand independently, as either individual nations or a united entity, in the face of economic hardship and perceived Soviet expansion.

'Third force' Potential after NATO

The concept of 'Europe as a 'third force" was to resurface on a number of occasions throughout the Cold War, in various guises and with different circumstances. The extension of the Brussels Treaty to become the Western European Union (WEU) in 1955 was one such opportunity, and indeed both the French and Germans courted the idea of using this as a base for a more independent European security identity (Dedman 1996 pp.70-93). Similarly, the early-to-mid sixties saw collaboration between the two nations through the Elysee Treaty, with a view to bolstering the European pillar of the Alliance in what Dietl (2006) labelled 'the most serious attempt to create Europe as a 'third force". Under De Gaulle, France became disillusioned with American pre-eminence on security matters and actively pursued an independent defence policy which would leave the door open for rapprochement with the East, and theoretically a more independent, neutral role. In these cases, the obstacles that prevented a 'third force' emerging in the immediate post-war years were either not present or much less prevalent. European economies at this time were in a period of sustained and impressive growth. The death of Stalin and subsequent détente meant that the 'Soviet threat' was much less enunciated that in the late 1940s. Differences over the exact nature of European development still existed, but there was a much greater political will (certainly on the part of the French) to break from American influence. Yet in the first case, the WEU was superseded by NATO almost immediately, with Germany being incorporated into the Alliance and the German enlargement placed within an Atlantic framework. Similarly, the US strongly rejected Franco-German attempts at duplicating NATO in the 1960s, playing on deep-seated fears surrounding German acquisition of nuclear capability to secure the support of other European countries. One could therefore say that in these instances, NATO *did* play a part in checking the development of Europe as a 'third force'.

There is, however, an inherent danger in dealing in what is essentially counterfactual analysis. The crucial point is that all these subsequent calls for a European 'third force' were made in a security environment that NATO had underpinned for several years – the permissive conditions were contingent on the stability that the Alliance had brought to the continent. Had the organisation never been created, it is highly unlikely – given the mindset of Stalin and the existing evidence of Soviet encroachment in the East – that Europe could have arrived at such a point. Perhaps one could claim that the *persistence* or the *predominance* of NATO prevented a European 'third force' from emerging in later years. But the *creation* of the organisation was a necessary measure to ensure the survival and recovery of Western Europe, and thus allow states to develop to a point where other options could be considered.

Conclusion

The foundation of the Atlantic Alliance did not check the establishment of Europe as a 'third force'. Simply put, in the immediate post-war years where there was theoretically the greatest policy freedom to pursue such a direction, there were too many obstacles to such a way. These included differences between the main actors as to what form a 'third force' would take, the extreme instability of European economies and the inability to adequately resist the perceived Soviet and communist threat. The combination of these factors meant there was never sufficient political will for an independent European security identity to be pursued. Indeed as a product of this unfeasibility, states actively put their trust in the United States to act as guarantor for the continent – in this manner, NATO was in fact born out of the failure to establish Europe as a 'third force', as opposed to being a causal factor. Whilst it is possible to note future instances where the Alliance constrained European desires for such a direction, it must be stressed that all these opportunities arose within a stable security structure that NATO was an intrinsic part of. Survival of Western Europe both economically and politically was contingent on the creation of an Atlantic Alliance.

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Date written: April 2008