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Wilson, Brendan

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NATO: Prologue or Requiem?

Brendan Wilson, PhD¹

It is often said that NATO is an organisation in search of a mission; that since the end of the Cold War, NATO is simply casting about for some reason to stay in existence.

One recent example of this type of analysis was an article by Justin Logan, director of foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, titled, “NATO is a Farce”.² Among the points Mr. Logan made is that NATO’s European Allies do not pull their weight (offering the operations in Libya and Afghanistan as examples), US expenditures on behalf of NATO are excessive and unwarranted, and in particular that the US would have been better off if it had disbanded the Alliance at the end of the Cold War.³

Underlying all such criticisms of NATO is the claim, stated or unstated, that NATO was somehow unprepared for the collapse of the Soviet Union and the resulting altered political and military landscape. Detractors admit, although reluctantly, that NATO’s deterrent value did play a role in winning the Cold War. Beyond that they see it as an anachronism, unsuited for the modern environment, largely irrelevant and mired in delusions of past glory—a hammer looking for a nail.

These claims should be evaluated against the larger picture of NATO’s recent history, its goals, and the steps it has taken—and continues to take—to achieve those goals.

This article will present the case that the benefits of collective defence, deterrence, and efficiencies resulting from the pooling of resources and the sharing of the burdens of operations outweigh the relatively modest costs of NATO membership. Rather than a cumbersome Cold-War relic, NATO has been and remains on the forefront of both diplomatic and military transformation of the Euro-Atlantic security environment. The US is a major beneficiary of this arrangement.

Late Cold War Thinking

In the late 1980s a debate had emerged in policy circles about how best to posture the United States and its allies to meet the demands of a changing security environment. At the risk of oversimplification, let me set out, in general terms, the two major sides of that discussion. Paul Kennedy in his 1987 book, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict From 1500 to 2000*,⁴ articulated a view that the US was in the position of an over-extended empire. With troops stationed on foreign soil, entangling alliances, and burgeoning defence expenditures, the US risked catastrophe if it did not pull back, consolidate itself and concentrate on domestic priorities.

¹ The views expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of NPS, the Dept. of Defense, the U.S. Government, or NATO.

² Justin Logan, “NATO is a Farce,” *The CATO Institute*. Accessed 1 November 2011.
http://www.cato.org/pub_display.php?pub_id=13614

³ For an excellent review of NATO critics see Loree Filizer “Skeptics at NATO’s 60th Anniversary: a Critique of the Criticism,” *Strategic Insights*, Volume VIII, Issue 3 (August 2009).

⁴ Paul Kenedy, *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers*, New York: Vintage Books, 1987

An alternate view, posited in 1990 by Joseph Nye in his book, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*,⁵ countered that the US was not an empire in that it did not occupy foreign lands nor extract wealth or tribute; rather it provided stability, promoted free trade and encouraged self-governing democracies in the areas where it extended its influence. He pointed out that US defence expenditures were only around some 6% of GDP, nothing like the enormous sustained defence expenditures of the empires, such as Rome and Spain, which Kennedy had used as his examples.

But most important, at that time, Nye pointed to what he considered to be the impending collapse of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact. The end of a bipolar balance of power in historical experience would mean instability and conflict as the newly sovereign states of a fragmented empire cast about for security, armed themselves, and joined in alliances against perceived threats. It is hard for us now to look back and not recognise the importance of his insight. The collapse of the Soviet Union could have led to regional fighting—including possibly even the use of nuclear weapons—with the inevitable consequences of death, dislocation, and economic and environmental catastrophe. Nye's recommendation was that the US and its Allies should move rapidly to fill this prospective security void with cooperative arrangements, together with political and economic assistance, in an effort to foster a peaceful transition to a new stability.

Proactive Steps

Whether or not NATO leaders subsequently followed Dr. Nye's advice, NATO was already moving quickly to meet the new challenges. The 1989 NATO Summit Declaration recognised the changes that were underway in the Soviet Union as well as in other Eastern European countries and outlined the Alliance's approach to overcoming the division of Europe and achieving its long-standing objective of shaping a just and peaceful European order. The following developments illustrate this point.

At the Summit Meeting in London in July 1990, NATO leaders extended offers to the governments of the Soviet Union as well as Central and Eastern European countries to establish regular diplomatic liaison with NATO and to work towards a new relationship based on cooperation.

Following a visit by NATO Secretary General Manfred Woerner to Moscow, President Gorbachev in July 1990 accepted the future participation of the soon to be united Germany in the North Atlantic Alliance. His position was explicitly linked to the positive nature of the commitments made by Alliance governments in London.⁶ *The Los Angeles Times* reported:

“Soviet President Mikhail S. Gorbachev, accepting an invitation to a future NATO meeting, called Saturday for a joint East-West declaration that would proclaim the end of the Cold War and move beyond it to establish a partnership ensuring European security.

“Gorbachev told NATO Secretary General Manfred Woerner that decisions at the recent summit meetings of NATO in London and the Warsaw Pact in Moscow to reduce their armaments and reorient their defense strategies had confirmed that the long period of East-

⁵ Joseph S. Nye. *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*, Basic Books, New York, 1990

⁶ For a comprehensive view of the role played by the US in the German unification process, see Condoleezza Rice and Philip D Zelikow, “Germany Unified and Europe Transformed: A Study in Statecraft,” *Harvard University Press*, 1997

West hostility was over and that moves should be made quickly to build this into a new relationship.”⁷

It is important to understand that this substantial reorientation of policy—away from Cold War deterrence based on a balance of military power and toward cooperation and transparency—began before the collapse of the Soviet Union.⁸

On December 20th, 1990, the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC)⁹ met for the first time. It included all NATO foreign ministers and those of Bulgaria, the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Romania. The Soviet Union sent its ambassador extraordinary and plenipotentiary, Nikolai Nikolaevich Afanasievsky. In the course of the meeting, Ambassador Afanasievsky was called from the room. He returned and read a statement requesting that the phrase Soviet Union be dropped from the final communiqué. The following day, as history records, the member states of the former Soviet Union signed the Alma-Ata Protocols, which formally dissolved the Union and established the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

In very rapid succession, the fruits of these early diplomatic efforts led to many well-known successes, including the establishment of the NATO/Russia Charter, the NATO Ukraine Commission, and the Partnership for Peace, all of which offered both diplomatic and practical levels of cooperation to help guide this process. Perhaps the most overlooked aspect is NATO enlargement itself, which has allowed former Warsaw Pact nations, former Soviet Republics, and former component states of Yugoslavia to join NATO, securing their own independence as members of a powerful defensive alliance.

Far from being taken by surprise, NATO, through a series of prescient diplomatic initiatives, was well-positioned to facilitate a peaceful transition to a post Cold War security environment.¹⁰

Transformed Capabilities and New Military Operations

Alongside NATO’s efforts to promote security by bringing neighbouring countries to the table is its ability to use military forces to prevent conflict, conduct peacekeeping, and protect civilian populations through selective interventions. The scorecard on this count reflects a string of hard-won successes.

Four years after that first meeting of the NACC, NATO’s reorientation for the post-Cold War environment was put to the test. Following the unsuccessful efforts of the UN to keep peace in

⁷ Los Angeles Times, 15 July 1990, recovered on 25 August 2011. http://articles.latimes.com/1990-07-15/news/mn-266_1_soviet-leader

⁸ The effort toward political détente began as early as 1967 with the issuing of the Harmel Report, which urged a lessening of tensions, a peaceful solution to the issues of the division of Germany, and the participation of the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries in a diplomatic process in order to achieve “a just and lasting peaceful order in Europe accompanied by appropriate security guarantees.” Accessed on 5 September 2011 from http://www.nato.int/cps/en/SID-14E9AA0A-A3E624ED/natolive/official_texts_26701.htm?selectedLocale=en

⁹ The NACC has since evolved into the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC).

¹⁰ The US played a significant role in the momentum to establish the Partnership for Peace (PfP), and used its influence as a NATO member to help foster this programme. In 1994 and 1995, Dr. Nye served as Assistant Secretary of Defence for International Security Affairs, where he was instrumental in the development of the Partnership for Peace (PfP).

Bosnia—a failure that was highlighted by the killing of up to 8,000 men and boys in Srebrenica and the deaths of up to 10,000 civilians during the siege of Sarajevo—NATO undertook robust military actions when asked to do so by the UN. Following a naval blockade and the imposition of a no-fly zone, NATO conducted an air campaign that compelled the warring parties to agree to negotiations which resulted in the Dayton Peace Accord. Next was the establishment of an international peacekeeping force, IFOR. Within hours of being given the political green light on 20 December, 1995, NATO began the deployment of the required forces in what was a well-planned and successful operation. Almost 60,000 troops from 30 nations deployed and took up peacekeeping duties in the first month.¹¹

It is worth noting that Russia played a substantial role in the peacekeeping effort, providing an entire brigade under a shared command arrangement between Supreme Allied Commander, Europe (SACEUR) General George Joulwan and Russian Colonel-General Leontiy Shevtsov who served as Deputy to SACEUR for Russian participation in IFOR.

The NATO bombing of Serbia from March to June 1999, code-named Operation Allied Force, curtailed the ethnic cleansing in Kosovo, led to the withdrawal of Serbian forces from Kosovo, and the establishment of UNMIK, a UN mission in Kosovo. NATO forces provided the military component (KFOR) of some 50,000 troops. As the security environment improved, that number has been progressively reduced and now stands at approximately 5,000.¹²

NATO Invokes Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty

On 12 September 2001, the day following the terrorist attacks on the United States, the North Atlantic Council (NAC), NATO's highest governing body, invoked Article Five of the Washington Treaty, which states,

“The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all.”¹³

However, from reading the views of NATO critics, one would never know that Alliance military operations in Afghanistan were the result of Europe's offer to assist the US. For example, Mr. Logan writes:

“[T]he overall European contribution to the war [in Afghanistan] has been trivial compared to America's. Despite Europe's size and wealth, it is a military dwarf compared to the United States.”

This view overstates the disparity of military effort between the US and its Allies and is not supported by the timeline for involvement in that theatre. Together with the UK, the US entered

¹¹ All NATO nations, then numbering 16, participated in IFOR. They were eventually joined by 16 Non-NATO nations including; Austria, Bangladesh, the Czech Republic, Egypt, Estonia, Finland, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malaysia, New Zealand, Pakistan, Poland, Slovak Republic, Sweden, the Russian Federation and Ukraine.

¹² Although Russia objected to the use of force in Serbia, it played a major role in mediating the withdrawal of Serbian forces from Kosovo and the entry of NATO forces under a UN mandate.

¹³ North Atlantic Treaty, Washington D.C., 4 April 1949. Accessed on 31 August 2011. http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_17120.htm

into Afghanistan in October 2001, an intervention which resulted in the removal of the Taliban from power.¹⁴ This was not conducted under a NATO umbrella. Thereafter a new Afghan government was established in December 2001 with the support of an International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). This force, created under a number of UN security council resolutions, was initially led by the UK, then later Turkey, and subsequently jointly by Germany and the Netherlands. In 2003, NATO took over the ISAF mission and responsibility for Kabul and the surrounding area. It was not until 2006 that NATO took responsibility from the US for the embattled southern region. Since NATO's first involvement, non-US NATO Allies have deployed substantial forces to Afghanistan, suffering more than 900 fatalities, accounting for some 32% of all coalition casualties in that conflict.¹⁵ That NATO critics would paint this substantial, prolonged effort and sacrifice by Allies as trivial suggests a biased interpretation of the facts.¹⁶

Costs and Burden Sharing

Critics also argue that NATO is expensive (in particular to the US). As Mr. Logan writes:

“If the current Washington climate of austerity can serve any fruitful end, surely it should be to reconsider such foolish alliances.”

What this statement ignores is the relatively low cost and the considerable efficiency evident in NATO operations. First, one needs to understand that, because the 28 NATO Allies pool their resources, their individual defence expenditures are lower than they would otherwise be. The end of the Cold War saw US defence expenditures drop from a high under President Reagan of some 6.2% of GDP to a low of approximately 3% in the last years of the Clinton administration.¹⁷ While it is true that US defence expenditures have doubled in real terms since that time, this is due almost entirely to the expenditures related to operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.¹⁸ The idea that US expenditures for NATO have contributed to this increase is simply not the case.

Based on cost sharing arrangements, the US contributes approximately 22% of NATO common funding. One often hears quoted the collective budget for NATO is less than 1% of the collective defence expenditures for NATO nations. This actually overstates the cost. For 2012, the US President requested \$807 million for its share of the contribution to NATO common funding;¹⁹ this represents approximately one tenth of one percent of the US defence budget. Even these figures

¹⁴ The UK and US were quickly joined by other nations, both from NATO nations and those not members of the Alliance. By the spring of 2002, special forces from Australia, Canada, Germany, New Zealand and Norway were on the ground as coalition Partners.

¹⁵ Source: iCasualties.org, retrieved 22 November 2011, <http://icasualties.org/oef/>

¹⁶ Some Allies have made substantial sacrifices which, because of their relatively small size, are often overlooked. Estonia, with its population of 1.34 million, has suffered nine fatalities, a higher per capita rate of battle deaths than the United States.

¹⁷ “Historical tables, Budget of the US Government, Fiscal year 2011; Office of the management and Budget; accessed 8 December 2011. www.budget.gov.

¹⁸ According to an analysis by the Strategic Studies Institute in 2009, if the costs of Operation Iraqi Freedom are excluded, average US defence expenditures from 2003-2008 are only 3.25% of GDP, Joel R. Hillison, “New Nato Members: Security Consumers or Producers?” Strategic Studies Institute, pg. 7, April 2009

¹⁹ Carl Elk, “NATO Common Funds Burdensharing: Background and Current Issues,” *Congressional Research Service*, March 10, 2011.

overstate the relative burden to the US. As only one of 28 Allies, the 22% US share might appear to be an excessive contribution. However, US GDP is approximately equal to the combined GDP all other NATO members.²⁰ If the NATO common funding formula were to be rigidly applied, the US share would exceed 50%.²¹

One of the reasons for this relatively low overall cost is that NATO has been, and remains, a streamlined organisation. Despite the addition of twelve new members since 1999, and the added burden of operations in Afghanistan and the Balkans, maritime counter-terrorism and counter-piracy operations, and most recently operations in Libya, NATO maintains a relatively small cadre. NATO employs some 1,200 civilians in its HQ in Brussels.²² Planned reductions in its command structure will cut the number of military posts from 13,000 to 8,000. Reform of NATO agencies is also underway and will reduce the number of agencies from 13 to three, with a corresponding reduction in personnel.

The cost of belonging to NATO should be compared against the cost each nation would face if required to provide for its own security independently or through alternative cooperative mechanisms. If the Alliance ceased to exist, the US would need to seek alternate security arrangements with its strategic partners, increase its defence spending, or substantially alter its foreign policy objectives.²³

One also needs to remember that the US has critical interests in Asia, and thus maintains large land, air, and maritime forces in the Pacific that have nothing to do with NATO. An indication of how seriously the US takes its strategic commitments in the Pacific is the size of the military forces assigned to US Pacific Command (USPACOM). With a total of some 325,000 military and civilian personnel, six carrier battle groups, 180 ships and 1,800 aircraft,²⁴ USPACOM would rank as the third largest military in NATO, after the US and Turkey. It is arguable that these forces, including those on the west coast of the US, in Okinawa, Korea, and Hawaii, are affordable in part because the US's NATO Allies are, to a considerable extent, protecting US interests in the European theatre.

Operational Contributions in Context

A final point worth addressing in the common criticism of the Alliance is the jaundiced view of European operational efforts, considering these to be so lamentable that the US has to repeatedly come to the rescue. In reference to the operation in Libya, Mr. Logan states:

²⁰ For a very thorough analysis of burden sharing among NATO allies, including defence spending as a percentage of GDP, see Hillison, "New Nato Members: Security Consumers or Producers?", April 2009

²¹ Elk, "NATO Common Funds Burdensharing: Background and Current Issues," pg. 6. In 2003 US GDP was 53% of the combined GDP of the US and NATO's allies. However, the addition of new members since that time and the reintegration of France in 2009 to the integrated military structure have resulted in a slight *decrease* in the US burden for common funding.

²² In comparison, the European Commission has some 38,000 and the Pentagon houses a daily working population of some 24,000.

²³ Beyond the benefits of shared logistics, intelligence, basing and over-flight rights the US, as a member of NATO, is able to operate with both Allies and Partners entirely in English, thanks to 60-plus years of NATO standardization.

²⁴ Source: USPACOM fact sheet, retrieved on 22 November 2011, **accessed 11 November 2011.**

http://www.pacom.mil/web/Site_Pages/USPACOM/Facts.shtml

“Germany and other NATO members sat out the fight. The U.S. military provided most of the surveillance capabilities, largely via drones, that enabled NATO pilots to bomb Col. Moammar Gadhafi’s loyalists. European air forces ran out of precision-guided munitions and had to come begging for Uncle Sam to provide some. Thus, Washington essentially borrowed money from China to buy ordnance to give to Europe to drop on Libya. The post-Cold War NATO rationale is that we agree to spend and fight and the Europeans agree to support us - sometimes.”

This is a distorted view. Within the NATO framework, allies pool their resources to produce a mix of tailored capabilities that can accomplish military missions as directed by the North Atlantic Council. This means that individual allies provide capabilities in areas where they have existing capacity and expertise, each one complementing the efforts of the others. The result is that NATO seeks to provide a combined tailored capability to carry out the full spectrum of military missions.²⁵ NATO benefits from the division and specialization of labor, and there is little need for nations to duplicate each other’s capabilities.

Precision-guided munitions (PGMs) are a case in point. Although NATO members are, in general, responsible for arming their own aircraft, in NATO it is common procedure to cross-level or share the available PGMs when necessary to achieve an operational effect. No nation, including the US, stockpiles unlimited quantities of these very expensive resources. For the US to provide PGMs to those Allies who were doing the heavy lifting in Libya is normal and expected. This type of cross-leveling is a healthy and positive expression of cooperation, not a sign of inherent weakness. Allies routinely reimburse each other or provide in-kind support in accordance with existing agreements,²⁶ as will be the case with PGM expenditure in the Libya operation. NATO contributions are carefully negotiated with the capabilities and interests of the both the Alliance and its individual members in mind.

Libya in Perspective

Now that the operation in Libya has been completed, it is worth considering in some detail what took place. NATO took over the mission on 31 March 2011, in a smooth transition from national authorities that had already begun operations under the associated UN Security Council resolutions. Operation Unified Protector (OUP) had three components: an air component to enforce a no-fly zone; an arms embargo, enforced primarily by sea; and a mission to protect civilians and civilian population centres. In total, NATO Allies conducted a total of over 26,000 sorties, including almost 10,000 strike sorties.²⁷ Mr Logan complains that not all Allies have physically contributed to this effort. While this is true and there will always be room for improvement, it is also true that not all

²⁵ In February 2011, NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen called for further measures to “*pool and share capabilities, to set the right priorities, and to better coordinate our efforts.*” NATO web page, Accessed 11 November 2011. http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/news_70327.htm

²⁶ The basic framework for cooperation in military logistic matters is the establishment of Acquisition and Cross-Serving Agreements (ACSAs). This mechanism, established by US Law (USC 10, 138), allows for the exchange of logistic support, supplies and services on a reimbursable basis between the US, NATO Allies and Partner nations. Source: Global Security.Org, accessed 22 November 2011, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/facility/acsa.htm>

²⁷ Source: NATO and Libya, Operational Update, 23 Oct 2011, Accessed on 22 November 2011, http://www.nato.int/nato_static/assets/pdf/pdf_2011_10/20111024_111024-oup-update.pdf

Allies are needed or desired for every operation, and some Allies have increased their contributions elsewhere.

Relatively small nations like Belgium, Denmark, the Netherlands and Norway have each contributed six F-16s to the operations.²⁸ Proportionately, this is a large contribution for such small countries to make. The four nations together have a combined population of 38 million, i.e. approximately one eighth the size of the US population. If the US were to contribute combat aircraft in the same proportion, it would have to provide almost 200 F-16s. In the end, non-US NATO and Partner nations flew 75% of all sorties.²⁹ The significant contribution of the US, including critical enablers, a large maritime component, and dozens of aircraft, needs to be seen in the light of its much larger size. Commentators should recognise the substantial contribution and sacrifice European allies are making in this effort. It is important to remember that almost twice as many people live in New York City as in all of Norway.

All NATO nations contributed to OUP either directly or indirectly. Turkey, for example, operating under national, rather than NATO authority, conducted one of the largest and most successful non-combatant evacuations in modern history.³⁰ Beginning within 24 hours of the outbreak of hostilities in Libya, it used its civilian fleet of ferries and its national airline, in conjunction with military air and sealift, to evacuate 28,600 civilians, including 8,600 non-Turkish nationals from 57 countries. The entire operation was completed within 14 days.

Criticism Revisited

It is worth revisiting the arguments of NATO's critics once again in the light of the information provided above. Mr. Logan contends that NATO is an expensive farce which should have been disbanded at the end of the Cold War. While we cannot possibly know what would have happened without NATO's efforts in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, it is hard to imagine that events would have been better had it followed Mr. Logan's advice and disbanded. We should not forget that President Gorbachev publicly said that his acceptance of a reunified Germany was conditioned on Germany remaining embedded in the NATO Alliance.³¹ NATO could not have disbanded after German reunification without serious risks.

NATO has helped usher in a world that includes a peaceful, reunified Germany; a prosperous, stable and free Eastern Europe; and a united Alliance that delivered on the promise to protect and defend member states when attacked. It remains every bit as vital to security and peace in Europe as it was during the Cold War. This steadfast political commitment over time has meant that NATO nations can individually reduce defence spending to levels lower than they would be if they were not members of the Alliance. The US is a major beneficiary of these arrangements; its commitments in the Pacific would likely not be affordable were it not for the European Allies' strength and

²⁸ Source: *The Guardian*, accessed on 23 November 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog/2011/may/22/nato-libya-data-journalism-operations-country#data>

²⁹ Source: NATO Media Operation Centre, response to query, 23 November 2011.

³⁰ Turkey also contributed frigates and submarines to the maritime arms embargo and fighters to the enforcement of the no-fly zone.

³¹ Klaus Wiegrefe, "Germany's Unlikely Diplomatic Triumph," *Spiegel Online*, accessed on 22 November 2011, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/0,1518,druck-719848,00.html>

preparedness. Actual costs for NATO are very small in both real and relative terms. The permanent NATO staffs and command arrangements are lean and efficient. The pooling and subsequent cross-balancing of military capabilities is not a weakness or failure, but rather a strength acquired through NATO's careful defence planning and operational tailoring.