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1-1-1973

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Recommended Citation

Fedder, Edwin H., "Political Consultation In Nato" (1973). *UMSL Global*. 55.

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Occasional Papers
No. 737

POLITICAL CONSULTATION
IN NATO

Edwin H. Fedder

POLITICAL CONSULTATION IN NATO

I

Much has been written and said about the nature of political consultation in NATO. Most such references have tended to distort the elemental relationship among members of alliances generally and NATO particularly. The late Secretary of State, Dean Acheson, who knew NATO and the realities of world politics probably as well as any man once testified before a subcommittee of the U.S. Senate to the effect that an enhanced Atlantic Alliance "could be a central power house for a Free World made up of five hundred million skilled people producing a thousand billion dollars of goods and services annually. The potentialities of such a society are enormous."¹ In short order, Acheson jumped from an alliance to a projected new society--one which presumably would follow were the alliance resuscitated so that it could perform optimally once again.

Acheson did not speak of the formation of a federal union involving the United States and other NATO members; yet, there is no evidence that short of federation, such a new society might be born. Alliances, including NATO cannot accomplish such transformation. However productive an alliance may be in terms of national security, for example, the GNP of the United States or of any ally will not be expressive of the total value of goods and services produced in

both countries. Association in the context of an alliance does not automatically create a new political actor. Neither have military alliances created new political actors in the past.

An alliance is best defined as a set of states acting in concert at a given time for the mutual enhancement of the military security of the members vis-à-vis a specifiable adversary. An alliance is essentially a defensive arrangement--a compact to offer appropriate support to members in the event of an attack by the external enemy. An alliance is a loose coalition of nation-states; it does not incorporate the policy processes of its members. Each member's foreign policy process remains discretely independent even with respect to the designated enemy. To be sure, an alliance may be instrumental in coordinating the foreign policies of the members to some extent and it may help to foster cooperation and identification among the members. Treating NATO as if it incorporated the policy processes of its members, however, is a symbolic device of journalistic license. Confusing the symbol (NATO) with its referent (each member) promotes the tendency to talk of NATO as if it were an aggregate having an identity that is not primarily and directly a function of the several members.

NATO as a conceptualization tends to become confused with NATO as an operational entity--NATO thus is spoken of as an actor in a posited international system. As a result of such confusion, we encounter propositions about the existence of a state of equilibrium between NATO and the Warsaw Pact while the equilibrium should

more accurately be described as existing between the United States (and allies) and the Soviet Union (and allies). Similarly we see references to the Conference on Mutual and Balanced Force Reduction as a NATO-Warsaw Pact Conference. Yet, the Conference will not be bi-partite but multi-partite. This is true even were the Conference to include all of the NATO members and all of the Warsaw members as participants.

To be sure, a fairly extensive pattern of consultation has developed within the Councils of NATO; however, it is submitted that this consultation is by and large non-instrumental in the sense that such consultation is not influential in the foreign policy decision processes of the several members. In dealing with the most important area of decision making, nuclear strategic policy, it is clear that consultation does not contribute directly to American strategic planning. Jens Boyesen, who served as Norwegian Ambassador to NATO, confronted this point quite directly in arguing that on the elemental nuclear decisions--those that pertain to the application of the U.S. nuclear deterrent--the United States will not consult with her allies but that the decision will have to rest with the President. That responsibility cannot be shared; attempts at sharing would be dysfunctional and futile.

Boyesen's discussion related directly to the role of the small powers in the alliance; however, his comment applies to all members save for the United States as we will note by referring to his phrasing:

It is obvious that if ever a decision to use nuclear weapons has to be made, only a minimum of consultation will be feasible. The decision will have to be made by whom-ever has the requisite power and position --and this means ultimately, the President of the United States. This we all accept as a fact of life. It is something entirely different formally to delegate authority to a group of foreign governments to make decisions on one's own behalf which may involve the very existence of all the allied nations, even if a way could be devised constitutionally to do this.²

Boyesen's argument is not based on an assessment of current or recent U.S. or other allied behavior in the alliance. His is an eloquent statement of the fundamental inability to delegate responsibilities even when the spirit so moves.

II

As the title indicates, this paper is principally concerned with political consultation in the alliance with respect to the goals of the alliance--deterrence of possible Soviet moves against any of the allies. The deterrent relationship that has developed is based upon the nuclear power of the two principal adversaries, the United States' and the Soviet Union. NATO strategy was initially and has remained linked to American nuclear capabilities to deliver a crippling or fatal blow to the Soviet Union in the event of an attack upon any of the NATO allies by that power. In terms of relating to the over-arching goal of deterring a Soviet threat, the NATO allies have been compelled to yield in effect to the United States on major policy questions. General Vandevanter said it as

follows: "In a very literal sense, given America's role as leader of the Free World Coalition, what is good for the United States is good for the Alliance; the fate of the smaller nations of Europe depends both on the continued strength of the United States and on the policy by which this country undertakes to guarantee the bare security."³ Although that statement was made in 1963, Vandevanter's assertion continues to be valid with respect to the Soviet threat. Cleveland stated a similar concept more recently when he said that "the policy of the United States is, for better or worse, the key" to maintaining a credible defense.⁴

Generally speaking, policy making in an alliance requires the unanimous consent of the members. Alliance policy comprises the intersection of the several national decisions--that is, the point at which national decisions coincide is NATO policy. NATO cannot command, order or impose constraints upon members or upon their nationals. NATO can coordinate national commands and promote strategic consultation; but if it were given authority to issue commands and orders binding upon the members, it would be, as it obviously is not, supranational. Accordingly, studying NATO's policy making process requires emphasizing the discrete role of the member nations as actors in the Alliance. Each of the members is a sovereign state and each enjoys the capacity to veto any policy issue--refusal to concur in a proposed action suffices to stop the action whether that opposition stems from the United States, France, or Luxemburg. As William and Annette Fox have pointed out, "the North Atlantic Council

is primarily a 'decision ratifier.' Apart from that it is at the most a 'planning and consultative body' somewhat remote from the centers of power. The inability of the North Atlantic Council to 'take decisions' (except in the form of recommendations to governments) has suited the United State's government. The latter has, in any case, no fear of being bound by anything the Council might do, for the unanimity rule prevails."⁵

Unanimity is very difficult to achieve in any organization; it is yet more elusive when the members are sovereign states--especially when the principal issue area of concern is military security. This follows because national decision makers have tended to view military security as the principal mechanism for maintaining national independence. Attempts at giving international coalitions the capacity to make decisions affecting national military establishments generally meet virtually total resistance. Obviously, generalizations such as this have limited applicability in particular situations; however, NATO's experience has borne out the following observations: First, small states have favored policies which reinforce environmental continuity--they tend to favor maintaining the system to changing it. Second, midrange powers have sought to modify Alliance relationships in order that they might exert more influence upon environing factors; hence, sometime French attempts at establishing a three-nation directorate (United States, United Kingdom, France) to coordinate allied foreign and defense policies, and sometime British efforts at operationalizing a special relationship with the United States, etc.

United States' policy, finally, has sought to accommodate change so long as that change did not significantly alter the environment and diminish the relative weight of predispositional factors--that is, limit the options available to the United States. The abortive Multilateral Nuclear Force (MLF), advanced by the United States, would have created a façade of change in enviroing conditions while not affecting, in any way, American discretion in planning and implementing United States' nuclear strategy and tactics.

The MLF failed to excite allied interests for varying reasons; two of which are most important: First, the small powers were highly suspicious of any moves that appeared to alter the basic juxtaposition of forces within the Alliance. Most notably, they opposed any attempt to place a German finger on the nuclear trigger. Second, the midrange powers were not attracted by the proposal since it would not have provided access to the really important locus of strategic planning: the United States' decision process. According to Harlan Cleveland:

The real trouble with MLF, however, was that it did not scratch the real itch, merely diverting attention from the wider issue of nuclear sharing for a time. At least three fatal flaws would have killed it even if its public relations had been ideal: the defense of the West did not require yet another strategic missile system; MLF did nothing to cut the Europeans in on the central decisions about nuclear strategy and possible use; and therefore no government was really behind the scheme.⁶

The policy making process of an alliance is very complex, providing so many opportunities for interruption and veto as to attenuate its decision-making capabilities. Indeed, one is tempted to say that it is virtually impossible for an alliance such as NATO to make policy. This should not seem too surprising since NATO has made very little policy in the truest meaning of the term.

NATO's principal policy functions are more consultative than creative, more communicative than innovative, and tend to be more peripheral than central to the diverse concerns of the members. To be sure, NATO has occasionally been charged with adopting important policy positions; however, such occasions have been exceptional.

III

Identifying and measuring the concrete benefits flowing to the members as a result of the NATO policy-making process is virtually an impossible task. Indeed, identifying and measuring significant levels of common interest beyond that which nurtured the Alliance in the first place--the threat of Soviet military aggression against Western Europe--is so difficult as to frustrate any attempts at precision. And that threat is perceived as diminishing or having been diminished to the point of latency. The one issue-area where clear policy decisions have been made by NATO is that which deals directly with questions relating to modes of meeting the threat were it to become active. Such policies have been arrived at by means of following the American lead--United States' strategy has been Alliance strategy.

Had NATO been charged with planning and implementing strategic policies, it would have been an abject failure. It would have failed for want of an executive power to order compliance with new approaches and procedures. It would have failed for want of the taxing authority necessary for generating funds and enforcing priorities. And it would have failed for want of strategic and tactical forces that could be deployed without national consent.

NATO does, however, provide a continuing forum for consultation among the allies on questions relating to strategic policies. Cleveland's insightful study presents numerous illustrations of specific instances of consultation. He asserts that consultation leads to substantial levels of cooperation and identification among the allies, particularly regarding issue-areas most directly affected by rapid scientific and technological change.

The real test of the consultative process is the extent to which governments are willing to communicate fully about present and prospective plans. The Skybolt case illustrates very well that, at various stages, Secretary of Defense McNamara was reluctant to communicate with the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Secretary of State Rusk, or President Kennedy--much less the United Kingdom. By the time the United States was ready to communicate with the British government, the decision was a fait accompli. As Cleveland has said: "Even close allies do not consult each other any more than they have to. For each government, there are clear and present inhibitions to sharing with other its analyses of a delicate situation,

its information about diplomatic contacts, and especially the opportunity to influence its own national policy."⁷

The consultation process is seriously weakened by the removal of situational analyses, diplomatic contacts, and national policy questions from allied consideration. What remains for the Alliance is post facto deliberation of diverse national policies which may be more or less complementary and parallel. Such deliberations do, however, provide useful information about allied reactions to national policies and may affect the development of subsequent national policies.

The Nuclear Planning Group (NPG) illustrates the ambiguity inherent in the Alliance's consultative process. The NPG was designed to avoid some of the pitfalls that blocked the MLF by focusing upon nuclear policy rather than hardware, and upon small-group consultation rather than multinational operations. As first proposed by Secretary McNamara in May, 1965, there would have been a five-nation "select committee" who would "learn enough about atomic realities to participate with us in judgments on how to use this unprecedented weaponry for deterrence and defense."⁸

By the time the proposal was implemented, the five-member select committee became the ten-member Special Committee encompassing three working groups on crisis management, communications, and nuclear planning. This arrangement was supplanted in December, 1966, by the Nuclear Defense Affairs Committee (including all members save for France, Iceland, and Luxembourg) and the now seven-nation Nuclear Planning Group.

NPG's consultative ambiguity results from its role in sharing information while not sharing in the making of nuclear decisions. Consultation in such instances is communicative, not decisive--the outcomes of such activities may be reflected in decisions or they may be ignored; despite Cleveland's contention that such consultation becomes inextricably part of the United States' decision process: ". . . we are now giving our European allies so much information and creating so many occasions for them to come forward with their ideas, their papers, and their proposals that it is hard for them to feel, let alone complain out loud, that they are not 'participating in nuclear planning.'"⁹

During NATO's first decade, the United States rarely consulted her allies about strategic actions directed at regions beyond NATO's territorial jurisdiction, even when such actions affected NATO strategy or American Alliance policy. Once consultations were undertaken, European reactions were rarely, if ever, internalized into the American decision-making process.¹⁰ Attempts at obtaining NATO support for American policy in such foreign areas were equally unavailing. Thus, the United States failed to get support for embargoes upon trading with Cuba and Mainland China or for American policy in Vietnam. Cleveland implies that had the United States consulted before escalating in Vietnam, decisions to escalate might not have been made: "It is tempting to speculate whether decisions on other matters which were not subjected to serious international consultation --the successive escalations in Vietnam are again the obvious example

--would have been better decisions if we had had to discuss them with foreigners. Even with a complex and many-sided decision-making process, it is comparatively easy for any government to kid itself; it is always much harder to kid foreigners."¹¹ Tempting as it may be, such speculation is idle, if not specious, unless one can identify points of entry into the U.S. decision process for the consequences of such consultations.

Alliances are not particularly viable instruments for generating common interests or for effectively coordinating the foreign policies of the members. The NATO experience is not unique: the League of Arab States, for example, has been singularly unsuccessful in going beyond designating the common enemy. The Arab League has not succeeded in coordinating policies or planning strategies or even in preventing overt intra-alliance hostilities. The SEATO policy process has not been instrumental in coordinating allied policies in Southeast Asia despite American attempts at invoking the SEATO treaty as a legal justification for United States' involvement. And bilateral alliances may not be appreciably more successful in generating common interests or in coordinating policies beyond those for which the alliance was first formed. The Japanese-American Alliance, for example, was ignored when President Nixon made his dramatic overture to China in 1971.

A related question arises as to the efficacy of alliances in terms of policy implementation. Normally the question is moot since alliances tend not to make policy. NATO's experience indicates that

by and large policies have been implemented by the allies. The critical test, however, would be the behavior of the members in the event of a Soviet attack. Would they respond promptly and effectively? If so, would the alliance have sufficient capability to resist an attack successfully? If the alliance really represents the interest, held in common by the allies, or responding promptly and effectively, one might be reasonably confident that appropriate action would be taken. If, on the other hand, one or more of the members participates in the alliance because of side-payments and not because of shared interest, the answer is far less clear--indeed, it may be unpredictable, hence undependable. Confidence in such an alliance might well be undermined.

In a sense, all alliances are somewhat unpredictable, but some are more unpredictable than others. The North Atlantic Treaty requires its members to take appropriate action but does not specify what that action might be. Short of giving NATO authority to order troops into combat at a time and place and against an enemy to be specified by the organization, such decisions will remain the responsibilities of the several members. The credibility of the alliance therefore depends upon the willingness of the several members to live up to their responsibilities. Parenthetically, it has not been unknown in history for nations to fail to live up to their alliance commitments.

Growing restiveness towards American unilateralism combined with concern about the shift to flexible response generated a crisis of confidence in United States' credibility in the early 1960's.

The problem was not so much the credibility of the American commitment as of the American response. Would the United States consult with the European allies in defining the situation in the event of a Soviet challenge? Would the United States choose to try to limit a response to conventional forces in West Germany? If so, the price of defending Western Europe might be the laying waste of Germany --hardly palatable to the Germans. Would unilateral American challenges to the Russians, such as in the Cuban missile crisis, involve NATO in conflicts beyond the scope of the North Atlantic Treaty?

More recently, the war in Vietnam has raised questions not alone concerning United States' unilateralism but of the judgment of American officials who may be charged with defining commitments and exercising leadership. Specifically the question arises as to the effects of overcommitment and to modes of determining priorities among possibly competing commitments. One of the possible side-effects of the Vietnam war may yet be a reduction of options resulting in limiting the flexibility of an American response to a Soviet challenge.

IV

One is tempted to conclude that the NATO consultation process is effective since there is so much consultative activity. Yet we know that all activity is not equally purposeful or instrumental. The critical question is to what end is all this activity leading? Activity for the sake of activity may help keep some people gainfully

employed; but it may have little more socially redeeming value. Cleveland's notion that the NATO policy process shapes national policy does not appear grounded in NATO history or practice.

Despite much recent rhetoric, the principal actors in international relations are nation states who value their national independence higher than cooperation and higher than interdependence. If it makes sense at time X to enter into an alliance with state B against adversary D, such an alliance may be entered in to. As soon as that alliance does not make sense, it is ended, whether or not the treaty or various ancillary structures remain. Attempts at resuscitation will be unavailing unless the basic logic survived.

As was noted above, governments do not share information well intranationally much less internationally. Membership in alliances does not change this fact regardless of levels of institutionalization and structure. This holds for NATO as well as for other alliances despite the fact that NATO has generated more cooperation and sharing than have other alliances.

But it is important to bear in mind that that level of sharing is within a context of much more limited cooperation. On the basic question of NATO's strategic policy, little if any significant cooperation is evidenced before the fact. NATO strategy remains U.S. strategy and NATO continues to adapt to the vagaries of U.S. policy; the reverse does not occur.

As things stand now and for the foreseeable future, the USSR and the Peoples' Republic of China may be far more influential in shaping US strategic policy than America's European allies. The Nixon-Kissinger approach to world politics is rooted in the notion that they who hold the power bear the responsibility for maintaining international order. The foci of power rest upon Moscow, Peking and Washington, not upon London, Bonn, Paris and Brussels. Or Tokyo, for that matter.

The administration's litany includes Western Europe and Japan but actions belie the words; else "Nixon Shock" would have been "Nixon Tact." For Western Europe to become a primary actor in this new global coalition, it will have to demonstrate greater power than may likely accompany diverse national policies, especially as they are tied to U.S. strategy. Were a united Europe to arise from the present community (whether expanded further or not), the new entity would have sufficient power to share the burdens of responsibility. Until then, Europe is consigned a secondary role while enjoying the benefits of vicarious responsibility-sharing.

Even then, consultation would be after the fact. Only the creation of a supranational politico-military organ with jurisdiction over the U.S. strategic policy process would suffice to generate consultation in planning. And there is no basis for speculation much less for planning for such an eventuality.

Footnotes

¹United States Senate, Committee on Government Operations; Subcommittee on National Security and International Operations, The Atlantic Alliance: Hearings, Part 1 (Washington, D.C.: 89th Congress, 2nd Session, 1966), p. 2.

²Jens Boyesen, "Contributions of Small Powers to The Alliance" in The Western Alliance, Edgar S. Furniss, Jr., editor (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1965), p. 117.

³E. Vandevanter, Jr., Some Fundamentals of NATO Organization (Santa Monica, California: The RAND Corporation, 1963), p. 13.

⁴Harlan Cleveland, NATO: The Transatlantic Bargain (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), p. 184.

⁵William T. R. Fox and Annette Baker Fox, NATO and the Range of American Choice (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), p. 252.

⁶Cleveland, p. 50.

⁷Cleveland, p. 21.

⁸Cleveland, p. 53.

⁹Cleveland, p. 64.

¹⁰Fox and Fox, pp. 188 ff.

¹¹Cleveland, p. 28.