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The New Atlanticism

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With the end of the Cold War, it seemed that the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) had successfully achieved its purpose, above all containing the USSR, and could enter the trash can of history. Instead, the organisation spent the next quarter century looking for a role for itself. It faced an existential crisis of purpose. In the mid-1990s Christopher Coker warned of the 'twilight of the west', having in mind not western civilisation as such, whose decline had long ago been anticipated by Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee, but the Atlantic community as the political and cultural foundation of NATO. Coker meticulously describes how the idea of an 'Atlantic community' had to be constructed in the post-war years, and did not enjoy the automatic allegiance of its members, in particular in Europe. It was ultimately the Soviet threat that kept the alliance together, although it was challenged by alternative projects, above all the Gaullist vision of an independent Europe responsible for its own security that at its most expansive included the Soviet Union and at its most exclusive was able to manage its affairs without the United States. By the end of the Cold War, moreover, the countries making up the alliance were undergoing major demographic changes that turned them into multicultural societies, with diverse orientations that weakened the traditional focus on Atlantic security. On this basis, Coker was pessimistic about the future of the community.¹ Instead, the Atlantic community not only survived, but it prospered, and today is assuming increasingly ramified features in the form of what I call the new Atlanticism.

The road to Atlantis

Although the institutions of the Cold War in the East were dismantled, above all the Warsaw Treaty Organisation (the Warsaw Pact), on the other side the institutions of the Cold War were extended. NATO found a new role by going 'out of area' (notably in Kosovo and Afghanistan) and enlarging to encompass a swath of former Soviet bloc countries. Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic joined in March 1999, and then in a 'big bang' enlargement in March 2004 the Baltic republics (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania), Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia joined, followed by Albania and Croatia in April 2009. The process did not stop there, and despite repeated warnings by Russia that bringing NATO to its borders would be perceived as a strategic threat of the first order, the momentum of NATO enlargement continued. At the Bucharest NATO summit of 2-4 April 2008 Georgia and Ukraine were promised eventual membership.² Membership Action Plans (MAPs) were deferred because of German and French concerns that encircling Russia would be unnecessarily provocative, yet the strategic direction had been set for an enlargement of NATO to Russia's borders. Although the Declaration talked of 'indivisibility', it had in mind the security of the Atlantic community itself. The result of enlargement was precisely to enshrine the divisibility of European security, and thus the new division of Europe.

The question of what the Soviet leadership had been promised about NATO enlargement is bitterly contested. At the time of German unification commitments were given by Western leaders that the Eastern part of the united Germany would not become militarised. At a meeting in Moscow on 9 February 1990 Secretary of State James Baker promised Gorbachev that if Germany joined NATO and Russia pulled out its 24 divisions 'there would be no extension of NATO's jurisdiction one inch to the East', but this referred only to the former GDR. The question of NATO enlargement to the other

¹ Christopher Coker, *Twilight of the West* (Boulder CO, Westview Press, 1997).

² 'Bucharest Summit Declaration' 3 April 2008, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_8443.htm.

Soviet bloc countries simply did not enter anyone's head and was not discussed.³ On that day the German foreign minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher told the Soviet foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze that 'one thing is certain: NATO will not expand to the East'.⁴ Although once again it was East Germany that was in question, the commitment reflected an understanding that NATO enlargement was a neuralgic issue for the Soviet Union. Thus, although there was no written commitment, it was clearly understood by all the participants that NATO enlargement into former Soviet bloc territory was simply inconceivable. The moral intent was clear, and thus the West reneged on the spirit if not the letter of the terms on which the Cold War was deemed to have ended. As Sarotte notes, 'By design, Russia was left on the periphery of a post-Cold War Europe'.⁵ A negative dynamic was established that in the end precipitated the breakdown of the post-Cold War order established at that time.

In December 1991 Russia, as the 'continuer' state, assumed all the treaty obligations and privileges, such as the UN Security Council seat, from the USSR. Russia soon entered its new 'time of troubles', and its concerns could be safely ignored. From 1994, President Bill Clinton began NATO's path of enlargement, gradually threatening to encircle Russia to the East and South. Given Russian weakness in the 1990s, Boris Yeltsin could do nothing but acquiesce. On coming to power in 2000, Vladimir Putin toyed with the idea of Russia joining not only the EU but also NATO. On a visit to Britain in 2000 Putin he was asked by David Frost about the possibility of Russia joining NATO, to which Putin responded: 'Why not'? The answer was not so much a serious bid for membership as a signal (as Putin put it in the same interview) that 'Russia is part of European culture and I can't imagine my country cut off from Europe or from what we often refer to as the "civilized world"... seeing NATO as an enemy is destructive for Russia'.⁶ In the early 2000s Putin seriously engaged with NATO concerning membership. It appears that informal talks were even held in Brussels, until vetoed by the US.

The risks associated with NATO enlargement were apparent from the start, not least by George Kennan, the doyen of international diplomacy and the architect of the original policy of 'containment' of the Soviet Union in the post-war years.⁷ The Western powers did seek to sweeten the pill. Russia was included in NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme in 1994, while the NATO-Russia Founding Act on Mutual Relations of May 1997 spoke in ringing tones of the onset of a new era, stressing that 'NATO and Russia do not consider each other as adversaries. ... The present Act reaffirms the determination of NATO and Russia to give concrete substance to their shared commitment to build a stable, peaceful and undivided Europe, whole and free, to the benefit of all its peoples'.⁸ On 28 May 2002 the NATO-Russia Council (NRC) was established at the NATO-Russia summit in Rome as 'a mechanism for consultation, consensus-building, cooperation, joint decision and joint action in which the individual NATO member states and Russia work as equal partners on a wide spectrum of security issues of common interest'.⁹ Russia's status was enhanced from one

³ Mark Kramer, 'The Myth of a No-NATO-Enlargement Pledge to Russia', *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 2, 2009, pp. 41, 47-48.

⁴ The issue is reviewed by Josh Cohen, 'Don't let Ukraine into NATO', *Moscow Times*, 19 September 2014.

⁵ Mary Elise Sarotte, 'A Broken Promise? What the West Really Told Moscow about NATO Expansion', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 93, No. 5, September-October 2014, pp. 90-97, at p. 97. For the broader picture, see Mary Elise Sarotte, *1989: The Struggle to Create Post-Cold War Europe* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2009).

⁶ 'Intervyu V. Putina Devidu Frostu', *Kommersant*, No. 39, 7 March 2000, p. 2; Alexander Golts, 'Putin could aim for Europe alliance', *Russia Journal*, 20-26 March 2000, p. 8.

⁷ Thomas Friedman, 'Foreign affairs; now a word from X', *New York Times*, 2 May 1998.

⁸ 'Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security Between NATO and the Russian Federation', 27 May 1997, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_25468.htm.

⁹ This is the description on NATO's website describing the NRC, <http://www.nato.int/nrc-website/en/about/index.html>.

against the others to what was intended to be a higher degree of partnership as part of an expanded security community, although the text studiously avoided allowing Russia a 'veto' in any shape or form on NATO-centred security issues.¹⁰

However, at moments of crisis the NRC turned out to be useless as a forum of conflict resolution, isolating rather than engaging with Russia. American vetoed convoking the NRC to discuss the Georgia crisis in 2008, a move which it later admitted was a mistake, but once again as the Ukraine crisis unfolded in 2014, on 1 April NATO suspended 'all practical civilian and military cooperation between NATO and Russia', although contacts at ambassadorial level were allowed.¹¹ It was clear that the institutional architecture of cooperation, despite the genuine aspirations of both sides, was hopelessly inadequate to meet the real challenges of European security in the twenty-first century.

The liberal universalism of the Clinton presidency dominated the discourse and swept aside realist objections. The idea was that by bringing in the former communist states into the 'civilising institutions and prosperity of the West', they would be transformed, just as Germany had been after the war, and that eventually the same would apply to Russia. This was self-contradictory, since NATO's unilateral enlargement precisely pushed Russia away from the transformative experience that could have been offered by a reformed Atlantic community. The fundamental problem was that Russia had not been defeated and considered itself a great power in its own right, very unlike post-war Germany. If brought into NATO it would seek to exercise leadership, something that the other states would not readily contemplate. Certainly, the US was not prepared to share its hegemonic leadership. The idea that NATO enlargement would put an end to the division of Europe appeared oblivious to the fact that Europe's largest country remained a growling and increasingly dissatisfied presence outside. By creating new dividing lines in Europe, the security of all was thereby diminished. When Russia did finally respond in the manner anticipated by Kennan and other critics, it was taken as justification for the need for NATO consolidation. This is the essence of the new Atlanticism.

Old and new Atlanticism

The new Atlanticism challenges alternative models of European security. The increasingly hermetic and comprehensive character of the Atlantic community is at odds with visions of a more plural and inclusive Europe and is set against those who appeal to some sort of European pan-continentalism. For its critics, Russia is charged with determining the strategic choices of its neighbours, notably Georgia and Ukraine, to join a political-military alliance of their choosing, and ultimately using coercion to impose these constraints in a revival of the old Brezhnevian doctrine of limited sovereignty. Those of a more realist inclination would argue that any power would be concerned about the strategic choices of its neighbours if these were perceived to undermine its security. More profoundly, the Russian argument ultimately sought to transcend the emergence of such security dilemmas on the continent by creating genuine pan-European structures that would transcend the traditional divisions.

¹⁰ 'Nato-Russia Council, Rome Declaration, 28 May 2002', http://www.nato.int/nrc-website/media/59487/2002.05.28_nrc_rome_declaration.pdf.

¹¹ 'Statement by NATO Foreign Ministers', 1 April 2014, <http://www.nato.int/nrc-website/en/articles/20140327-announcement/index.html>.

Unfortunately, the very attempt to start a discussion about the form that such transcendent structures could take was perceived as the continuation of traditional attempts to split the Atlantic security system. Thus a vicious circle was introduced, which in the end only reinforced the consolidation of Western alliance system. The new Atlanticism is the ideological manifestation of this consolidation, becoming the armed wing of the Euro-Atlantic community and becoming increasingly synonymous with that community. This is not to suggest that problems of internal coherence, diverging ambitions, contesting representations of NATO's ultimate purpose and mission, reluctance to meet defence spending commitments, and many other problems of institutional development have been resolved. My argument is that the new Atlanticism is the framework within which these challenges are now being discussed.

From the very beginning Russia chafed at its exclusion, but its weakness in the 1990s allowed only impotent growls over Kosovo, NATO enlargement and other issues. In the 2000s Russia was in a position to reinforce its complaints with action. At the same time, the Atlanticism of the Cold War era was turning into something else. The new Atlanticism entailed not only the continued existence of the NATO-centred security system in novel conditions and its expansion deep into the former territory of its erstwhile enemy, and indeed right up to its borders, but above all a qualitative change in the security system itself. It not only widened, the subject of endless commentary, but it also reinforced the democratic normativity that was the hallmark of the Atlantic Charter when it was originally devised by Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt in August 1941.

This meant that the Atlantic system was increasingly unable to reflect critically on the geopolitical and power implications of its own actions, a type of geopolitical nihilism that in the end provoked the Ukraine crisis. From a defensive alliance established to resist the Soviet Union, the new Atlanticism is both more militant in advancing its interests and more culturally aggressive, setting itself up as a model of civilisational achievement. It is unable to accept geopolitical pluralism in Europe, and thus has become an increasingly monistic body. Although it is an 'empire' by invitation (although the invitation was not extended to Russia) and retains considerable internal divergence, the exclusion of the greatest power in Europe meant that it is unable to escape the constraints of its Second World War and Cold War origins, and instead perpetuates the monist logic of earlier years.

The new Atlanticism: hermetic and comprehensive

The new Atlanticism is a continuation of the traditional sort, but with the break-down of what passed for the post-Cold War system of European security, the Atlantic community is evolving into something very different. Having lost its original rationale, the Atlantic community cast around for a new purpose, which in the end it found by returning to a reformulated version of its original goals – the containment of Russia. The 25 years after the end of the Cold War were a period of transition, in which NATO fought wars in southeast Europe and Afghanistan, but above all sought to achieve the impossible: to retain its original Atlantic character by ensuring the predominance of the US in the expanding security alliance; and to bring Russia in as a security partner. The efforts devoted to the latter goal were both genuine and intense, but in the end were vitiated by various enlargements that brought the alliance to Russia's borders and by the continued pre-eminence of Washington in the alliance system. Without the institutional transformation of NATO, the proclaimed partnership with

Russia was unable to transcend the growing security dilemma whose baleful consequences became apparent in the struggle over Ukraine.

The new Atlanticism's changing functionality is shaping its internal evolution. The two fundamental characteristics suggested above are that the new Atlanticism is both hermetic and all-encompassing. By hermetic I mean that the security system created in the wake of World War II and which fought the Cold War after 1989 enlarged considerably, above all, as we have seen, to encompass a great swath of former Communist Soviet bloc states and even a part of the former Soviet Union (the Baltic states), but its internal rationale and structures remained remarkably impervious to change despite the collapse of the Iron Curtain and Russia's uncertain path towards capitalist democracy and international integration. No way ultimately could be found to make Russia a fully-fledged member of a new security community, and thus its effective exclusion from the most important security structure generated tensions and potential contestations that exploded over Ukraine. Above all, the Atlantic alliance has become an ideological project, and thus by definition loses flexibility and pragmatism and becomes far more rigid in its policy, and selective in its understanding of complex information flows.

Invocations of the American commitment to the defence of Europe take on mantric qualities, obscuring the dynamic whereby that very commitment undermines pan-European security. Any concession, or even understanding, of the Russian position is considered weakness, if not appeasement of the worst order, thus ratcheting up confrontation.¹² The idea of a multipolar world order, advocated loudly by Russia and by China more quietly, is considered anathema to the new atlanticists. This is as much to do with normative issues as it is with power considerations. The ease with which the NATO alliance slipped back into a posture of Cold War confrontation with Russia illustrates the hermetic character of the organisation. The ambient conditions had changed immeasurably, yet the ideational and corporate mentalities of the Cold War endured, now revived to take the lead in the neo-containment strategy.

As for the *comprehensive* character, this is something that has been gaining in intensity in recent years as the foreign and security dimension of the EU has effectively merged with the Atlantic security community. The EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) since the Treaty of Lisbon (the 'Reform Treaty') of 13 December 2007, which came into effect in 2009, is now in substance part of an Atlantic system.¹³ Accession countries are now required to align their defence and security policy with that of NATO, resulting in the effective 'militarisation' of the EU. A number of clauses in the Association Agreement between the EU and Ukraine, which was due to have been signed in Vilnius on 28-29 November 2013 but which in the end were signed only in May 2014 after the overthrow of the Viktor Yanukovich administration, testified to the growing 'transdemocratic' linkage between security and political matters.

¹² For an egregious example of this escalatory thinking, see Stephen Blank, 'Russia's Vladimir Putin clearly wants to dominate all of Europe', Washington Post, 28 December 2014.

¹³ The Lisbon Treaty was careful to stress the development of a common European security and defence policy (Section 2, 'Provisions on the Common Security and Defence Policy', Articles 42 to 46), but stressed that this would be compatible with the existing obligations of member states to NATO (Article 42.2): *Consolidated Versions of the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union* (Luxembourg, European Union, 2010); http://europa.eu/lisbon_treaty/full_text/.

EU enlargement has become part of a broader process of the expansion of the Euro-Atlantic community, in which security, good governance and economic reform go hand in hand. In other words, EU enlargement is complemented by NATO membership, a sequencing that would have surprised most commentators in 1991. For historical reasons a number of EU countries are not members of NATO – Austria, Cyprus, Ireland, Finland, Malta and Sweden – but since 1989 most new members of the EU have also become members of NATO. Even this neutrality is being questioned, with Atlanticists in both Sweden and Finland exploiting the Ukraine crisis to shift their countries closer to NATO. The new Atlanticism reflects the evolution of the Atlantic security system into a total community, encompassing far more than security but a specific representation of a hybrid Euro-Atlantic civilisation. By definition, this means the repudiation of what in the post-war era were came to be seen as core European values, such as social justice and equality, in favour of the new hybrid forms.

The new Atlanticism in perspective

The new Atlanticism has been long in the making and represents the internal transformation of the traditional security system into a new type of community. Although there was endless talk about the imminent demise of NATO in the two decades after the end of the Cold War, as well as recognition of the strategic failure of the ISAF mission in Afghanistan, the Ukraine crisis has once again revived the fortunes of an organisation whose end had long been predicted. NATO, however, is only one element of a broader Atlantic system, with American power at its heart, which has gathered strength on a global scale. Today's revival of NATO remains only one facet of the broader reinvigoration of Atlanticism.

In the wake of the Ukraine crisis there is increased emphasis on 'burden-sharing' within the alliance. After 1991 most of the European partner cashed in the 'peace dividend' and cut defence spending, whereas the US maintained and indeed after 9/11 greatly increased the proportion of GDP devoted to defence. Currently, only three EU NATO countries spend the recommended two per cent of GDP on defence: the UK, Greece and Estonia. The Newport (Wales) summit of NATO on 4-5 September 2014 represented an attempt to kick-start NATO and was accompanied by commitments to increase defence spending. The final Declaration absolved NATO of all responsibility for the Ukraine crisis, and instead asserted that 'Russia's aggressive actions against Ukraine have fundamentally challenged our vision of a Europe whole, free and at peace' (Article 1). The summit adopted the NATO Readiness Action Plan that envisaged the rotation of forces in Central and Eastern Europe, but in keeping with the 1997 NATO-Russia partnership agreement, did not envisage the stationing of NATO forces permanently in the region.¹⁴ Ukraine was not granted the special partnership with NATO that it sought, yet the transdemocratic language of the Declaration only intensified the processes that had provoked the crisis in the first place. The summit signalled the end of post-Cold War aspirations for a united Europe.

The new Atlantic community is reinforced by attempts to give greater institutional form to economic links. The idea of a Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) has recently been given a new impetus, above all by the British, as part of the continuing stratagem to dilute the integrative

¹⁴ 'Wales Summit Declaration', 5 September 2014, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm.

impulse of the EU and to undermine lingering continentalist (Euro-Gaullist) aspirations. TTIP is the successor to the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI), which was defeated after massive public mobilisation in 1998. On the face of it, consumers will only gain from the establishment of a free trade area and the removal of complex regulatory and other restrictions on the movement of goods and services. It would allow European companies to enter the notoriously complex and restrictive US market. However, TTIP plans to go far further to entrench the power of markets against states. The US and 14 EU members plan to establish a separate judicial system exclusively for the use of corporations, thus granting them a privileged legal status. Corporations will be able to sue governments in these special tribunal made up of corporate lawyers. National laws can be challenged and compensation sought if the laws are considered to threaten their 'future anticipated profits'. The 'investor-state dispute settlement' (ISDS) system could undermine the ability of governments to protect health systems from the depredations of the market, the environment, labour rights, and social welfare programmes.¹⁵

In keeping with its hermetic and comprehensive character, the new Atlanticism has effectively made security an exclusive public good. If in the past security emerged out of a balance of power or some sort of arrangement where different states engage in diplomacy to manage difference, the new power system guarantees security for its own members and allies (although of course to a different degree for the latter), but increasingly lacks a mechanism to engage in genuine equilateral security relations with others. This is a stance of one-sided geopolitical nihilism, where the very principle of other states having geopolitical interests that do not coincide with those of the Atlantic community is considered an aberration that not only delegitimizes those who assert different interests, but easily leads to the demonization of the leaders and elites who oppose the atlanticist hegemony. Sanctions, media campaigns, and covert operations are all part of the comprehensive attack on outsiders and antagonists.

All this comes together to create a formidable power constellation. The emergence of the new Atlanticism represents a shift in the meaning of 'the West', and even calls into question the continued use of the term. The traditional pluralism and capaciousness of the concept is now narrowed into a trans-democratic combination of security and normative concerns. Members of the new Atlanticism are subject to disciplinary and tutelary processes, while outsiders are faced by a recombination of the hegemonic power represented by the Atlantic alliance. However, as always in international affairs, the development of a putative hegemonic force stimulates resistance. This currently takes the form of intensified efforts to establish a counter-hegemonic alliance system, above all through the development of the BRICS association, as well as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation accompanied by the intensification of Eurasian integration efforts. A new pattern to global politics is beginning to emerge. The long-anticipated multipolarity is finally taking shape. The notion of the new Atlanticism provides a framework for analysis of the security and normative challenges facing Europe and the world.

¹⁵ George Monbiot, 'Equality Before the Law? Throw it on the Corporate Bonfire', *Guardian*, 14 January 2015, p. 30.

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