

140<sup>th</sup> Bergedorf Round Table

## The Future of NATO

Berlin, June 13–15, 2008

### INTRODUCTORY STATEMENT OF PAUL W. SCHROEDER<sup>1</sup>

I propose to set NATO and its accomplishments into a long history of the development of alliance capabilities and functionality within the international system that grew out of the Treaties of Westphalia in 1648 and has evolved into the current global system. Historians have always paid detailed attention to the complicated history of alliances of all kinds within this system, but less attention to alliance functionality and capability in general, i.e., what alliances in various eras could in general do and not do. That history, I argue, is clearly directional, shows progress over the centuries, and is central and important today. For once it became clear that international politics had to be conducted among governments considered as autonomous sovereign units (whether or not they actually were), the only way to achieve any order and basis for rational policy in international affairs would be through alliances of various kinds, voluntary associations among these units for common purposes—war, defense, collective security, territorial acquisitions, legitimacy, international laws, rules and norms, etc. Hence a central question of international politics in every era was what kind of alliances were possible, and what could they do and not do.

Here is my first sweeping generalization: in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, durable alliances could not be formed or sustained that were effective on a long-range basis for any purpose. All alliances were prone to breakdown and dissolution, and could not provide a basis for rational long term policy. Even Louis XIV, by far the most powerful and wealthy of princes, could gain allies through bribery, lure, and coercion, but not retain them or rely on them, and counter-alliances against France proved equally fragile. We cannot discuss here the various reasons for this; in any case, alliances could not be made durable and thus useful for rationalizing and regulating international politics. The inherent fragility and unreliability of alliances helped give the 17<sup>th</sup> century its particular bellicist character.

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1 The introductory statement was published in German in the Newspaper “Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung” on August 14, 2008.

Yet by the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century that problem had been largely surmounted. Many alliances in 18<sup>th</sup> century, including the most important, proved both durable and fairly effective—able to hang together surprisingly well in war and occasionally to enforce peace—for example, the Anglo-Austrian, Anglo-Dutch, Austro-Russian, Franco-Spanish, Russo-Prussian, and even Franco-Austrian ones. This ability to form and sustain durable alliances helped change the international system in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, making politics, though not more peaceful, at least more rational and calculable, and rendering war somewhat more humane.

One thing 18<sup>th</sup> century politics could not do, however, was to make alliances serve purposes other than those of power and gain. For alliances to endure, they needed to pay off in terms of concrete gains, especially territorial expansion and the defeat or elimination of enemies. They could not successfully be used in the long term as tools of general management and mutual restraint. This fact, that alliances worked and were successful only as weapons of power and not as instruments for management, not only helped cause wars throughout the century, but particularly helped bring on the wars of French Revolution and Napoleon and the breakdown of the 18<sup>th</sup> c. system.

Yet once again, early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, basically by 1815, that problem was essentially overcome, and remained so throughout the century until near its end. Not only did the most important 19<sup>th</sup> century formal and informal alliances, ententes and working partnerships prove even more durable than those of the 18<sup>th</sup> c.; more important, they functioned primarily as tools of management and mutual restraint, especially management of one's alliance partners, rather than as weapons of power, territorial gain, and victory in war. Again I have to forego giving examples, but they are many and convincing. This fact more than anything else accounts for the Long Peace of the 19c in Europe that survived the breakdown of the conservative Vienna Settlement, the wars and territorial changes of mid-century, and the revival of real-political competition thereafter. According to the historian Jost Duelffer and his colleagues, in 33 instances between 1865 and 1914 wars were avoided or limited, crises managed, and disputes contained or solved by collective action, primarily through using alliances as tools of management. Bismarck after 1871 in particular was a master of this technique.

But once again there were tasks, ultimately vital for international stability and survival of the system, that 19c. alliances could not fulfill, even while they generally served to manage crises and help avoid or postpone general war. They could not forge or sustain a broad consensus in Europe, even among the Great Powers, on a concrete, practical definition of peace; they could not promote political integration within Europe; and they could not ultimately resist and survive the twin challenges of imperialist and nationalist ambitions and rivalries. These failures or inability in alliances brought the European/world system down in 1914 and also blighted the attempts to rebuild it in the 1920's and 1930's.

Which brings us to NATO, widely acclaimed as the most successful alliance in history. I agree, for once finding myself in agreement with President Bush on this verdict—but not exactly on the reasons. The usual accounts of NATO’s success stress the obvious: that it helped the West win the military, economic, and political-ideological competition of the Cold War, drove the Soviet Union to collapse while preserving peace throughout Europe and much of the world, and since then has, unlike almost all successful coalitions, not split up after its victory over the common enemy and threat but endured and expanded far beyond its original Atlantic sphere.

These are undoubtedly remarkable achievements, though perhaps they should be stated with more nuance and less triumphalism. But they are not necessarily the deepest and most important explanations of NATO’s historically unique success. I would argue instead that NATO, working with other forces and institutions, has enabled the North Atlantic/ West European community of states to achieve things even the most successful earlier alliances could not:

- (1) to reach and sustain a general consensus within the alliance on a practical, concrete definition of peace, and to remain essentially united in defending and pursuing that definition of peace through innumerable difficulties, quarrels, problems, setbacks, and outright defeats;
- (2) to employ their overall security alliance with its concrete definition of peace to help promote genuine political integration in both the Atlantic and the European theaters covered by the alliance; and
- (3) to achieve its goals not by pressing for the destruction or decisive military defeat of the common enemy and threat, but by deliberately pursuing the path of living with that threat, defending themselves against it, and outliving it.

I cannot discuss these three achievements here, but wish to stress their path breaking character. The ideas and aspirations involved, those of reaching durable consensus among nations on a practical definition of peace, making this agreement serve the goal of greater integration, and thereby outliving and transcending the seemingly inevitable course of war and violence in international affairs, are not new to the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. They are parts of an age-old vision. History is full of proposals for alliances to promote these ends—proposals regularly proved in the past to be at best impractical and at worst dangerously Utopian. Take the Vienna Settlement, the most successful peace settlement ever achieved prior to 1989. There, by enormous effort, European statesmen reached considerable consensus on a concrete, practical definition of peace and wrote it into law. This was a remarkable achievement—but the consensus was not long sustained. The Vienna Settlement was also supposed to promote further political integration. The German Bund, essentially a defensive military alliance, was intended to lead to further confederation; it failed. So did Austria’s military alliances in Italy. The conservative monarchs and statesmen who perceived the great enemy and threat as being the forces of revolution did not want to destroy these by force. That would mean war, and war for them was revolution. Prince Metternich never tired of insisting that an ancient monarchy like Austria could not afford to try to destroy the forces of revolution, but must try to outlive the evil. He and his fellow conservatives found that they could not.

NATO's success in these three vital aspects of international politics is thus historically unprecedented. It is also important in practical politics today. Without a certain minimum of the elements embodied in NATO's success—consensus on a concrete practical definition of peace, the desire to promote political reconciliation and integration, and a willingness to live with some evils and threats too dangerous and destructive to destroy in the hope of outliving them—peace settlements and peace efforts break down. With them, they have a chance to succeed. As a general formula, that applies to almost any world hot spot and dispute one could name—the Israeli-Palestinian, Middle-Eastern, and Islamic-Western ones, for example.

Suppose ex hypothesi that everything I have said about NATO's unique significance in the evolving history of alliances is accepted as true: what does this suggest to us about NATO's future? In terms of indicating specific policies and actions to meet the concrete problems and challenges it now faces in Eastern Europe and Russia, the Balkans, the Middle East, Afghanistan, and elsewhere, little or nothing. It could, however, influence our general thinking about NATO, our priorities in its regard, and the strategy involved in using and developing it. Let me try to illustrate. Some months ago in April 2008 I attended a forum at my University of Illinois on the theme, "Can NATO Survive Afghanistan?" It was a good, instructive panel discussion by experts, informative, insightful, and sensible in the arguments made and conclusions drawn. Yet I came away feeling nonetheless that there was something wrong with framing the question as if the survival and future of NATO were or should be contingent on success or failure in military action and nation-building in Afghanistan. The fate of Afghanistan is an important question for the alliance in various respects, no doubt; so are those involving Iraq, Iran, Israel and Palestine, the Caucasus and Central Asia, and more many spots in Africa; so are a host of other out-of-area problems and challenges around the world. But the survival and future of NATO ought not be made to depend on whether it can solve or manage these problems, many of which are beyond its scope and are not inherently soluble by any alliance or institution. NATO has proved its value too clearly to be subjected to that kind of test of its current and future usefulness; it has too much still to do in its own sphere, in ways it has shown itself to be historically uniquely effective: preserving and expanding consensus on a practical, concrete definition of peace; promoting further political reconciliation and integration within Europe and the Atlantic community; and outliving threats.

Here is where attention needs to be focused, not only on account of these still unfulfilled tasks, but because the greatest danger to NATO and the Atlantic-European community it represents and defends today is internal rift and drift, an incipient undermining of the very elements responsible for its success—a decline of real consensus on what constitutes and makes for peace, a loss of interest and direction in further political integration, and above all, in certain quarters, especially in the United States (an admission I hate as an American to make), an insistence that certain current dangers such as terrorism or Islamic radicalism cannot be deterred, lived with, and outlived, but must be attacked, defeated and destroyed—even if concern for international law and international institutions, on which NATO was specifically founded, is swept aside in the process.

Permit me to use a Biblical phrase to express a secular point. Terrorists, rogue states, failed states, like the poor, you will always have with you. They have been around for hundreds of years. Even looming perils and problems such as globalization, economic dislocation, and environmental destruction are not really new—different and arguably more pressing now, but not really unprecedented. NATO you may not have always. Without it and similar institutions, and their values, capabilities, and functions they embody and enable, these challenges cannot be met, combated, and outlived. The original threat against which NATO was formed almost sixty years ago is gone; the original functions it served—in the words attributed to Lord Ismay, those of keeping the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down, are obsolete. But for the tasks it now faces—bringing new partners in (even Russia eventually in one form or another), keeping the United States in, and bringing Europe and the Atlantic community up to the daunting challenges they now face, NATO remains as important as ever.

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## Imprint

Editor	Bernhard Müller-Härlin
Design	Groothuis, Lohfert, Consorten   <a href="http://glcons.de">glcons.de</a>

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