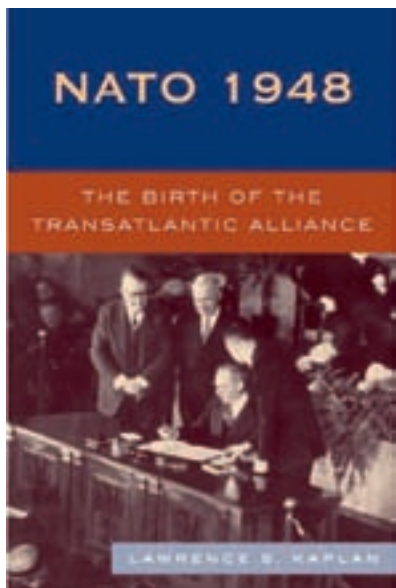


TALES OF THE PAST, LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE



Petr Lunak¹ reviews Lawrence Kaplan's latest book, which looks at how the fortunes of the Warsaw Pact and NATO differed – and why.

Why didn't NATO follow the Warsaw Pact onto the scrapheap of history after the end of the Cold War?

Any answer must start with debunking the old myth that NATO and its Eastern adversary were mirror images of each other.

In 1955 the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev imposed the Warsaw Pact on Eastern Europe as a supposed response to the West Germany's inclusion into NATO. But, as newly-released archival evidence shows, the real target in setting up the Warsaw Pact was NATO. Moscow assumed that it could trade NATO – which was by then a full-fledged security organization – for the Warsaw Pact, which remained a hollow shell until the late 1960s.

When the nations of Eastern Europe finally shed Lenin's system and Stalin's bloc, they also took the first opportunity to dispose of Khrushchev's alliance. Many a doomsayer predicted a similar fate for NATO, now bereft of its enemy. It would have been logical for NATO to die too, without a whimper, if it had been a US imposition on Western Europeans, obliged to accept it in the face of the Soviet military and political threat. But that is not what NATO was.

As Lawrence Kaplan explains in his latest book *'NATO 1948: The Birth of the Transatlantic Alliance'*² the idea of an entangling alliance with any European country was a sort of an anathema to the United States from the early 19th century. The American attitude to Western Europe, encapsulated in the logic of the Marshall Plan, was that Western Europe must first be able to demonstrate that it could speak with one voice and act in unison. America could assist – but not necessarily participate – in European arrangements aimed at getting Europe on its own two feet. Against this backdrop, the initiative to set up a trans-Atlantic security arrangement had to come first and foremost from Europe.

As Kaplan amply demonstrates, it is to the credit of the UK Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin that he fully understood US sensitivities and limits. In the wake of the failed Foreign Ministers meeting with the Soviets in Berlin in December 1947, Bevin used his skills to make it not only possible, but also inevitable, for the United States to get involved in European security arrangements. Ambiguous,

and maybe even unsure about its real direction, Bevin started alluding to how desirable "a Western spiritual union" created around the UK and France would be – a union that would have security ties with the United States and Canada.

The odds were not good: despite some exceptions, such as John Foster Dulles, the Republican-dominated Senate was prone to isolationist moods. The Secretary of State George C. Marshall was not thrilled. While a number of mid-level State Department officials were attracted to the idea of a trans-Atlantic alliance, the two intellectual gurus, Charles Bohlen and George Kennan, were opposed. They argued that meeting British wishes would unnecessarily militarize the Cold War, whereas the challenge facing the West was political rather than military. The French Foreign Minister and hero of 'la résistance', Georges Bidault, subscribed to Bevin's efforts. But he had to cope with accusations from the Communist left and Gaullist right that focussing on the Soviet challenge ran counter to France's primary interest: making sure that Germany never again posed a threat.

It took further developments in Eastern Europe and bold statesmanship by President Truman for the US to take the decisive step.

A collective will for collective defence

Western Europeans showed the will to jointly defend themselves by signing the collective defence

Brussels Treaty in March 1948, partly in reaction to the communist takeover in Czechoslovakia and suicide of Czechoslovak Foreign Minister Jan Masaryk. Truman responded by declaring support for these European efforts.

In reality, London had conceived the Brussels Pact solely as a vehicle to make US participation in European security arrangements possible. The Brits actually wondered about the implications for them if they got stuck in a Europe-only structure, without the United States.

Fortunately for them, and others, a Senate resolution sponsored by Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Arthur Vandenberg, and drafted by the State Department, contained a sentence supporting the United States' association with collective security arrangements. By now the whole US State Department subscribed to the idea of a trans-Atlantic Alliance.

This was all happening while the Soviets attempted to blackmail the West into new round of negotiations on the future of Germany, primarily by blockading West Berlin – except by air. We now know that Stalin's decision not to intercept air access went contrary to the Soviet military's recommendations. Stalin, expecting that the West would not be able to support West Berlin by air, chose not to provoke a military conflict.

NATO's creation changed the clarity of the US commitment to the defence of Europe

But he achieved the exact opposite of what he had hoped for: Berlin not

only survived, but by militarizing the Cold War, provided yet another argument for creating a transatlantic security alliance. The second NATO Secretary General, the Belgian Paul-Henri Spaak, once quipped that *NATO should erect a statue to Joseph Stalin*. Even today, one can ask: without Stalin overplaying his hand in Eastern Europe and Berlin, would NATO have emerged as we know it? Unfortunately, we do not find much analysis of Soviet behaviour and miscalculations that contributed to creating the entangling alliance in Kaplan's book.

Following the Vandenberg declaration, it took another year to arrive at the text of the **Washington Treaty**. Kaplan shows that, while the initial impetus to create a formal transatlantic alliance came from the Europeans, it is the Americans who deserve the credit for creating a workable structure. It was they who insisted that the future alliance would involve not only the five signatories of the Brussels Treaty (France, UK, Benelux) but also others (Norway, Iceland, Portugal, Denmark, Italy) as full fledged members. At the same time, the last minute watering down of the crucial Article V in order to make the text palatable to the Senate only illustrated the ongoing US difficulties in formulating a binding commitment vis-à-vis the Old World.

NATO's creation did not immediately affect the military balance between the West and the East, which still enjoyed a considerable military advantage on the ground. What it did change was the clarity of the US

commitment to the defence of Europe. The Soviet consent to the North Korean attack against the South stemmed from the conviction that the US would not get involved in a conflict on the Korean peninsula. But the idea of the US standing idly in Europe, with a formal alliance signed in April 1949, would have been unimaginable.

So back to the original question. Why, unlike the Warsaw Pact countries, did NATO allies preserve their alliance? Answer: because they did not see it as a tool of foreign domination, but rather as an alliance that for 40 years fitted their needs, and has continued to do so since.

But it would be facile to claim that **a proud past guarantees a glorious future**. To keep NATO relevant, the Allies had to put an end to Balkan conflicts, contribute to the fight against terrorism and take over ISAF in Afghanistan among other things. They must be ready to continue investing into military capabilities and demanding operations.

Not an easy task. But neither was the setting up the alliance in the late 1940s.

¹ **Lawrence S. Kaplan:** 'NATO 1948: The Birth of the Transatlantic Alliance', published by Rowman and Littlefield, New York, 2007.

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