



THE UNRAVELING OF THE

EU AND NATO

HOOVER INSTITUTION WORKING GROUP ON MILITARY HISTORY



A Future for NATO and the European Union

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Military alliances are apt to dissolve when the circumstances that gave rise to them cease to pertain. Such alliances come in three flavors. Some are involuntary. They are produced by conquest and intimidation. They are held together by fear of the hegemon, and they tend to fall apart when that fear wanes. Some are voluntary. They are rooted in fear of a common enemy or in a common sense of purpose. They are held together by that fear or by that purpose, and they tend to fall apart when the members no longer feel threatened or the mission is either accomplished or abandoned. Many, if not most, alliances occupy a murky middle ground. They are held together by both species of fear or by a sense of common purpose reinforced by a salutary awareness that the hegemon is not likely to tolerate betrayal, and they come apart when these circumstances no longer apply.

I am using ideal types here. There are alliances that are purely involuntary: in international affairs, conquest and intimidation are commonplace. But there are very few alliances that are purely voluntary. Where the rule of law pertains, human beings are sheltered at least to some degree from necessity, and they are free to make connections and break them more or less as they see fit. In the international arena—law professors to the contrary notwithstanding—there is no rule of law. Foreign affairs are in a sphere of necessity. Within that sphere, choices are nearly always constrained to one degree or another, and commitments made in circumstances where constraints play little or no role generally lack stability.

The Hellenic League, formed against Persia in 481 BC, is a case in point. Its membership included Athens, Plataea, Chalcis, Aegina, Sparta with her Peloponnesian League, and some smaller communities. Sparta's league fell into the murky middle ground. Lacedaemonian conquest and intimidation played a role in its formation, as did the fear—shared by the members of the oligarchical ruling orders installed in power in its member cities by the Spartans—of populist tyranny and democracy. If it endured, it was because Lacedaemon remained formidable and because populism was always a threat.

Membership in the Hellenic League was, by way of contrast, almost purely voluntary, and it was considerably less stable. This alliance was founded for one reason and one reason only—to fend off the Medes; and, though the Spartans and the Athenians had been at odds before its formation and would be so again after its collapse, it held together as long as it seemed plausible to suppose that the Persians might return. There were, to be sure, Spartans who resented Athens's seizure of the hegemony at sea in 478–7, but most of them were



willing to put up with Athenian assertiveness as long as it was clear that, in holding the Medes at bay, the Athenians were performing a genuine service. When, however, around 468, Athens and her allies in the Aegean annihilated the Persians on both land and sea at Eurymedon on the south coast of Anatolia and it looked as if the latter would not be able to restore their command over the sea, the Lacedaemonians began to regard their ally with suspicion as a threat. When Athens subsequently managed to forge a lasting peace with the Great King of Persia in 449, the suspicions formed almost twenty years before gradually became a conviction.

I mention the Hellenic League because it resembles the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in one crucial particular. Entrance into the latter was also almost purely voluntary, and its creation was similarly inspired by a common threat. It would never have come into existence had the Soviet Union not initiated the Cold War. Its purpose was, as its first secretary-general observed not long after assuming office, “to keep the Americans in, the Germans down, and the Russians out.” And it admirably fulfilled that purpose, pooling the resources of its members, stabilizing affairs in Western Europe, and containing the USSR. It contributed mightily, moreover, to what may constitute the greatest foreign-policy achievement in human history: one great coalition’s defeat of another, the dissolution of the latter, and the dismemberment of its imperial hegemon—all in the absence of a major war.

Dean Acheson observed after the Second World War that Britain had “lost an empire and not yet found a role.” Prior to the Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014, it could have been said of NATO that it had completed its mission and not yet found another role. For forty years, it had fended off the Soviet Union, surviving various crises—such as France’s withdrawal from its military structure, George McGovern’s presidential campaign with its slogan “Come Home America,” and the opposition in Germany and elsewhere to the deployment of Pershing II missiles. Then, suddenly there was no Soviet Union to fend off.

In the first few years after the end of the Cold War, inertia sustained the alliance, as it acted to consolidate victory by adding to its membership several nations once in the now-defunct Warsaw Pact as well as countries annexed by the Soviet Union such as the Baltic States, and by attempting to sort out the chaos produced by the dissolution of Yugoslavia. Its members played a prominent role in the First Gulf War; after 9/11, the alliance itself played a role in the war in Afghanistan. But it also began unraveling, as members resisted involvement in the Second Gulf War and as the United States began withdrawing troops from Europe.

At the time of the Second Gulf War, some European countries, such as Belgium, engaged in a great deal of venting of the resentments that had grown up during the Cold War. I doubt very much, however, that the gradual dissolution of the North Atlantic Alliance would have caused a deep antipathy between Europe and the United States. Though culturally similar, Athens and Sparta had been rivals of a sort before their alliance. Athens was anything but a satiated power and came to be perceived by Lacedaemon as a threat; the degree to

which their political regimes were opposed was bound to produce tension between the two. The states of Europe are similar in regime to the United States. None of the members of the alliance has territorial ambitions, and the difficulties that the Europeans have in coordinating the foreign policies of a multitude of once-antagonistic countries rule out Europe's emergence as a real rival to America.

It is conceivable that the old alliance would have limped along for a good long time as an empty shell. But it would not have amounted to much had it not been for the re-emergence of Russia as an aggressor, which has given NATO, at least for the time being, a new lease on life. There is no hegemonic power in Europe—not even Germany—capable of rallying the rest of the continent behind a common policy aimed at containing Russia and forcing it to withdraw from territories belonging to Ukraine. As the Yugoslav crisis demonstrated in the 1990s, only the Americans have the capacity to provide the requisite leadership.

Something similar can be said about the ongoing war between rival Muslim sects and sub-sects in Iraq and Syria. The refugee crisis produced by this war has engulfed Europe, which lacks the cohesion required for dealing with the problem at its source. In the absence of the United States, the chaos produced within Europe by this crisis would be much greater than it is.

In short, although there is no longer any reason to want to keep the Germans down or any possibility of doing so, the Europeans still have motives—less pressing though they may be than they once were—for wanting to keep the Americans in and the Russians out. The only question that remains open right now is whether the Americans still want to be involved.

I do not doubt that they should be involved. As we learned the hard way in 1941—wishful thinking to the contrary notwithstanding—the United States cannot withdraw from the larger world; and, if it tries to do so, there will be others unfriendly to America that will take advantage of the ensuing anarchy. If we leave Asia to its own devices, we are apt to find ourselves facing another Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere with all that this implies. And if we leave Europe entirely to its own devices, the Russians will make mischief on a considerable scale (as they have begun to do). Like it or not, we have to actively manage our larger security environment; and NATO, even in an attenuated form, is a very useful tool for this purpose.

Whether we still recognize this is, of course, an open question. Politics are generational, and there is next to no one left who remembers World War II. The manner in which things spun out of control in the 1920s and 1930s is no longer even a memory. It is all ancient history now. The new generation hardly even remembers the Cold War and does not appreciate how dangerous it once was. The crises that gave rise to NATO have faded into the past. Barack Obama treated our longtime allies with a measure of contempt. Donald Trump's off-the-cuff remarks suggest that he may think that he can do without them altogether.



The one thing that NATO could not survive is repudiation by its hegemon. We may live to regret our forgetfulness.

The European Union (EU) is arguably less fragile—though it, too, is facing difficulties. Like NATO, it grew out of World War II and the Cold War. It had its origins initially in the European Coal and Steel Community—founded under the aegis of NATO by France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg in 1951 with an eye, as its principal proponent, French Foreign Minister Robert Schumann, put it, “to make war not only unthinkable but materially impossible.” It grew directly out of the European Economic Community (the so-called Common Market), formed by the same six countries in 1957. In time, it subsumed the responsibilities of both organizations, and eventually drew in Britain, Ireland, Denmark, Greece, Portugal, Spain, Cyprus, Malta, Austria, Finland, Sweden, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Romania, Bulgaria, Poland, and Croatia. Thus far, the only country to chart a path to withdrawal is Great Britain.

The staying power of the EU stems from its status as a customs union. By making its members economically interdependent, it really has made war between them “unthinkable” and “materially impossible.” Nearly all of its members—with Britain as a notable exception—have more trade with countries within the union than with countries outside. Britain, which bought more from countries within the union than it sold to them, could afford to withdraw. For the other countries within the European Union, withdrawal would come at a very high price.

The weakness of the union stems from the federal ambition already made explicit in the founding documents of the European Coal and Steel Community. That ambition, still very much alive among the European elite, inspired the creation of a common currency. The existence of that currency has one great virtue: it reduces transaction costs. Its introduction was also intended to be the occasion for the establishment of fiscal discipline in countries such as Greece, Italy, Spain, Portugal, and France—which had in the past suffered from a lack of fiscal discipline remedied by high inflation and periodic currency devaluations. This end it did not achieve. The old fiscal indiscipline did not wane. Rather, it waxed in an environment of low interest rates. When a fiscal crisis finally presented itself, the old remedy was unavailable. The consequence has been years of high unemployment and economic stagnation, and to date there has been no acknowledgment that the currency union is a failure. How this will end no one knows. The imbalance between German efficiency and Mediterranean and Latin inefficiency is not going to disappear any time soon, and it is only by way of loans unlikely ever to be repaid that the countries in the south most severely affected will be able to continue buying the goods produced by their neighbors to the north.

There is another defect to the European Union that cannot be remedied. It is made up of democracies. That is a requirement for membership. But it is not itself democratically

governed, and it is difficult to see how it could be. The European elite may be able to bridge linguistic and cultural differences. The peoples of Europe whom they govern cannot. The European Parliament will never be a properly representative body.

In consequence, the EU is governed by a commission appointed by the governments of its members and dominated by its most economically efficient member, Germany. In practice, there is no provision for a redress of grievances and little room for a correction of course. The ordinary citizens of the countries within the union have next to no say about the regulations under which they live and work. In effect, they are subjects within an oligarchy; and, thanks to the crisis to which the common currency gave rise and to the refugee crisis produced by the war in Iraq and Syria, there is now seething discontent. There is no way to vent that frustration by throwing the rascals out.

In the long run, such discontent is inevitable. The citizens in the various countries in Europe are unlikely to be satisfied with a situation in which they are not masters in their own homes. The more intrusive and pervasive the EU becomes, the more it will be resented. And sooner or later, when a crisis presents itself, there will be an explosion.

If the EU is to survive, the European elite will have to acknowledge that the ambition to turn the old customs union into a proper federation was folly, the currency union will have to be dismantled or reduced in extent, and the welter of regulations will have to be cut back. Charles de Gaulle envisioned a *Europe des patries*. It is only in such a Europe that the distinct peoples of Europe can be self-governing. Sometimes, less is more.





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