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NATO, THE WARSAW PACT, AND THE NATURE
OF INTERNATIONAL ALLIANCES: THEORETICAL
EXPECTATIONS AND THE EMPIRICAL RECORD

The power vacuum in Europe after World War II induced the United States and the Soviet Union to seek European allies against one another (an action that neorealists would describe as "external balancing"). The disparate geopolitical circumstances facing the two superpowers were bound to have some effect on the types of alliances they sought. In the United States, many officials and legislators initially were reluctant to maintain a permanent military presence in Europe. They planned instead to help the West European states themselves acquire the wherewithal to sustain a viable balance against the Soviet Union. Not until after the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950 did U.S. perceptions of the Soviet threat change enough to generate widespread support for a huge increase in the U.S. military commitment to Western Europe. By that point, U.S. officials already sensed, from the Berlin crisis of 1948–1949, that the United States would need an extensive network of military bases in Western Europe if it wished to deter or rebuff Soviet probes on the continent. The increased deployment of U.S. troops and weapons in Europe from late 1950 on was geared toward that end, and was also intended to reassure the West Europeans of the strength of the U.S. commitment to their defense. That commitment had been nominally codified in April 1949 – primarily at the West Europeans' initiative – with the establishment of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), but it was not until the early 1950s, after the shock of Korea, that the United States began putting up the resources needed to fulfill its military obligations to NATO.

The Soviet Union, as the dominant European power, had less intrinsic need to deploy troops and weapons far outside its western borders, but until the early 1990s several hundred thousand Soviet soldiers were stationed at high alert in East Germany, Poland, Hungary, Romania (until 1958), and Czechoslovakia (after 1968). One of the main rationales for this was purely strategic: The Soviet-led alliance in Eastern Europe, which initially was based on an interlocking series of bilateral defense agreements and was then formally constituted in May 1955 as the Warsaw Treaty Organization (or Warsaw Pact, for short), started out primarily as a buffer zone for the Soviet Union against (West) Germany, rather than as a full-fledged military organization. For much the same reason, the Warsaw Pact consistently emphasized rapid offensive operations that would keep any fighting as far away as possible from Soviet territory. These features of the Pact can be explained by the geopolitical circumstances that the Soviet Union faced. Almost any government in Moscow would have been inclined to pursue similar arrangements.

Yet even when the Warsaw Pact gradually took on more of the trappings of a genuine alliance from the early 1960s on, the organization remained very different from NATO in its complexion and functions. At no point during the Cold War did NATO resort to the actual use of military force. By contrast, the Warsaw Pact was nearly used in 1956 – a year after it was created – to crush the Hungarian uprising; it was used in 1968 to subdue the Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia; and it was used repeatedly in conspicuous exercises in 1980–1981 to exert pressure on Polish leaders and the Polish public.[1] Detailed plans for Soviet/Warsaw Pact military intervention in Poland were drafted in 1980–1981 and forces were mobilized, but the introduction of martial law in Poland in December 1981 precluded any final decision by Moscow on whether to implement those plans.[2]

The fact that NATO was never called into action, whereas the Warsaw Pact was used numerous times against its own members, is indicative of the fundamental distinction between the two alliances. From their inception, both organizations ostensibly were designed for the exclusive purpose of warding off military threats

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[1] On the 1956 events see: M. K r a m e r, *The Soviet Union and the 1956 Crises in Hungary and Poland: Reassessments and New Findings*, "Journal of Contemporary History" 1998, Vol. 33, No. 2, p. 163–215; on the 1968 events: M. K r a m e r, *The Czechoslovak Crisis and the Brezhnev Doctrine*, [in:] *1968: The World Transformed*, eds. C. F i n k, P. G a s s e r t, D. J u n k e r, New York 1998, p. 110–174.

[2] M. K r a m e r, *The Soviet Union, the Warsaw Pact, and the Polish Crisis of 1980–1981: Coercion and Delay in Crisis Management*, "Journal of Contemporary History", forthcoming; M. K r a m e r, *The Kukliński Files and the Polish Crisis of 1980–1981: An Analysis of the Newly Released CIA Documents*, CWIHP Working Paper No. 59, Washington DC, Cold War International History Project, March 2009; M. K r a m e r, *Soviet Deliberations During the Polish Crisis, 1980–81*, Special Working Paper No. 1, Washington D.C., Cold War International History Project, May 1999; M. K r a m e r, *Poland, 1980–81: Soviet Policy During the Polish Crisis*, "Cold War International History Project Bulletin" 1995, No. 5, p. 1, 116–128; M. K r a m e r, *Jaruzelski, the Soviet Union, and the Polish Crisis: New Light on the Mystery of December 1981*, "Cold War International History Project Bulletin" 1999, No. 11, p. 5–31; M. K r a m e r, *Colonel Kukliński and the Polish Crisis, 1980–81*, "Cold War International History Project Bulletin" 1999, No. 11, p. 47–60; M. K r a m e r, *"In Case Military Assistance is Provided to Poland": Soviet Preparations for Military Contingencies, August 1980*, "Cold War International History Project Bulletin" 1999, No. 11, p. 86–94.

from outside. In reality, only NATO regarded external defense as its sole military objective. External defense was never the only – or even primary – military mission of the Warsaw Pact. The Pact made elaborate plans and combat preparations for a war against NATO, but the alliance's military role in upholding Communist regimes in Eastern Europe ultimately was more important. Although the Soviet intervention in Hungary in 1956 was unilateral, many of the Soviet troops entered Hungary from the territory of another Warsaw Pact state, Romania. Moreover, the Romanian, Bulgarian, and Czechoslovak authorities expressed willingness (even eagerness) to have their own troops take part in what would have been a Warsaw Pact operation.[3] Had the time pressure for a response not been so acute, troops from these other countries might well have ended up joining the Soviet forces. In 1968 the Warsaw Pact was a key vehicle for exerting pressure on Czechoslovakia, culminating in the invasion on 21 August. Supreme command of the operation was transferred at the last moment from the Warsaw Pact Joint Command to the Soviet High Command, but the Pact's role in the crisis was salient throughout.[4] Brezhnev was determined to give the invasion a multilateral appearance, and he obtained the cooperation of four other Pact countries – East Germany, Poland, Bulgaria, and Hungary – to intervene with the Soviet Union against their ally, Czechoslovakia. The function that the Warsaw Pact performed in 1968 as a defender of "socialist gains" in Czechoslovakia was the touchstone for all future crises in Eastern Europe. From the early 1970s on, Soviet officials themselves publicly acknowledged that intra-bloc policing was one of the chief military missions of the Warsaw Pact.[5] Nothing of the sort could ever have been said about NATO's responsibilities.

The contrast between NATO and the Warsaw Pact was also evident in the political functions they acquired and the nature of their decision-making. From an early stage, NATO served as both a symbol and an organ of the "pluralistic security community" of democratic industrialized states.[6] Although a few members of the alliance, especially Greece and Turkey, were not always able to uphold democratic principles, the organization helped stabilize democratic changes in Greece, Spain, and Portugal after those countries emerged from many years of dictatorship. A democratic polity became the norm for members of the alliance (or at least for those in good standing). By the same token, NATO's decision-making procedures reflected a commitment to democratic consensus-building. Although the United States

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[3] See: M. K r a m e r, *The Soviet Union and the 1956 Crises in Hungary and Poland...*, p. 205–206.

[4] For more on this see: M. K r a m e r, *The Czechoslovak Crisis and the Brezhnev Doctrine...*, p. 152–153.

[5] See, for example: Army-General S. M. S h t e m e n k o, *Bratstvo rozhdennoe v boyu*, "Za rubezhom" 1976 (Moscow), No. 19, p. 7.

[6] The concept of a "pluralistic security community" is explored at length in K. W. D e u t s c h et al., *Political Community and the North Atlantic Area: International Organization in the Light of Historical Experience*, Princeton 1957. See also: K. W. D e u t s c h, *Security Communities*, [in:] *International Politics and Foreign Policy*, ed. J. N. R o s e n a u, Cambridge MA 1960, p. 98–105. Essentially, it refers to a group of interacting sovereign states that no longer prepare for, or have any expectation of ever fighting, a war with one another. All their interactions are peaceful, and the prospect of violent conflict among them is all but inconceivable. (Greece and Turkey are obvious exceptions.)

was by far the strongest member of NATO and had a commensurately large role in allied decision-making (an arrangement that often sparked frictions with some of the West European governments, especially the French), differences between the United States and its allies were never violently squelched. Even at the height of intra-NATO tensions during the Suez crisis, the West European countries did not fear that the United States would use armed force against them. This was all the more true in subsequent years. France and Greece freely left NATO's integrated military command when they disagreed with allied policy. Decisions on important matters could not be approved without a genuine consensus among the member-states.

The Warsaw Pact, by contrast, served as little more than a bloc of Communist states under the hegemonic "leadership" of the Soviet Union. By its charter, the Pact was supposed to be "open to all states . . . irrespective of their social and political systems," but the events of 1956 and 1968 made clear that the members of the Pact would have to abide by the "common natural laws of socialist development, deviation from which could lead to a deviation from socialism as such." The Soviet Union reserved for itself the right to determine when "deviations" from the "common natural laws of socialist development" exceeded permissible bounds, and Soviet leaders proclaimed a "sacred duty" to intervene when necessary to "protect socialist gains." Not surprisingly, decision-making within the Pact featured much less of the give-and-take found in NATO. The political councils of the Pact were dormant for many years, and even when new bodies were set up in 1969, their main purpose was to facilitate political integration within the bloc and to foster "organic links" between Soviet and East European political and military elites. To the extent that political-military integration actually occurred, it was always Moscow-centered. Although the East European states signed bilateral defense treaties with one another (and with the USSR) in the late 1940s, the only bilateral security relationship that really mattered was the one each of them had with the Soviet Union. At no point did any of the East European states maintain bilateral military links with one another outside the Warsaw Pact framework, whereas all the East European countries (except Romania) had important bilateral military ties to the Soviet Union.

None of this is to suggest that Soviet control of the Pact was ever absolute. On a few occasions, serious problems arose with the East European allies, especially Albania and Romania. Albania ceased taking part in the alliance in 1961 (and formally left in 1968) after withstanding strong military and political pressure from the Soviet Union.[7] In the mid-1960s Soviet leaders feared that Romania, too, might seek to leave the Pact.[8] Those fears ebbed after the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 sparked a brief but serious standoff between the Soviet Union and Romania,

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[7] The split with Albania is well covered in recently declassified materials in former CPSU Central Committee archive; see: M. Kramer, *Declassified Materials from CPSU Central Committee Plenums: Sources, Context, Highlights*, "Cahiers du Monde Russe" 1999, Vol. 40, No. 1–2, p. 340–378.

[8] See, for example, the comments by Soviet foreign minister Andrei Gromyko in "Rabochaya zapis' zasedaniya Politbyuro TsK KPSS 6 maya 1968 goda," 6 May 1968 (Top Secret), Arkhiv Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii (APRF), Fond (F.) 3, Opis' (Op.) 45, Delo (D.) 99, List (L.) 211.

which induced the Romanian authorities to curb their defiance of Moscow's wishes.[9] Even then, however, Romania was unwilling to resume a meaningful role within the Pact or to forgo an independent military course. Romanian leaders continued to eschew joint military exercises and refused to subordinate their country to the unified wartime command structure that Soviet military officers secretly devised for the rest of the Pact in the late 1970s and early 1980s.[10]

Despite these scattered rifts and disruptions, the East European states overall were far more subservient to the Soviet Union than the West European countries were to the United States. Although East European leaders tried to influence Soviet policy in numerous ways and occasionally succeeded, the leeway for independent action was always sharply constrained. Unlike NATO, which was a genuine and voluntary alliance of democratic states and which could not act without a consensus among its members, the Warsaw Pact was little more than a byproduct of Soviet hegemony in Eastern Europe, whose main purpose was to keep pro-Soviet Communist regimes in power.

Two explanations of the discrepancy between NATO and the Warsaw Pact have been proposed: one based on ideology, the other on power.

The importance of ideology in alliance management has been emphasized by John Gaddis, among others. In his 1997 reassessment of the Cold War, John Lewis Gaddis claims that NATO was far more flexible and open than the Warsaw Pact because Americans "were, by habit and history, democratic in their politics." This engrained democratic ethos, he writes, prompted "the United States [to] permit [the West Europeans] a surprising amount of influence over [NATO's] structure and strategies." U.S. officials, Gaddis adds, "were used to the bargaining and deal-making, the coercion and conciliation, that routinely takes place within [a democratic] system. They did not automatically regard resistance as treason." Gaddis contrasts this with the tyrannical nature of Soviet Communism, which, in his view, guaranteed that Soviet leaders would use an equally heavy-handed and ideologically driven approach within the Warsaw Pact: "The Russians, coming out of an authoritarian tradition, knew of no way to deal with independent thinking other than to smother it. The slightest signs of autonomy . . . were heresy, to be rooted out with all the thoroughness of the Spanish Inquisition. The result was surely subservience, but it was never self-organization." The implication of Gaddis's argument, as he himself notes, is that "democracy proved superior to autocracy in maintaining coalitions."[11]

The competing explanation of why NATO and the Warsaw Pact were so different is one that would find favor with neorealists. This explanation not only de-

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[9] M. K r a m e r, *The Czechoslovak Crisis and the Brezhnev Doctrine...*, p. 162–163.

[10] Romania's defiance on this score was first revealed by Colonel Ryszard K u k l i ń s k i, see: *Wojna z narodem widziana od środka*, "Kultura" (Paris) 1987, No. 4/475, p. 52–55, esp. 53. Kukliński was a senior officer on the Polish General Staff until late 1981.

[11] J. L. G a d d i s, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History*, New York 1997, p. 181–182.

emphasizes ideology, but leaves it out altogether. Proponents argue that the disparity can be attributed to the simple fact that Soviet preponderance in the Warsaw Pact was far greater than U.S. preponderance in NATO. The difference in relative power guaranteed that the United States had to negotiate with its allies on more equal terms than the Soviet Union did with its allies. Differences in ideology, the argument goes, were irrelevant.

The importance of relative power in alliances has been emphasized not only by neorealists, but also by one of the most outspoken critics of neorealism, Ned Lebow. In an illuminating comparison of the Spartan and Athenian alliance systems of ancient Greece (as chronicled by Thucydides), Lebow argues that Sparta, despite being a militarized, authoritarian city-state, headed "a democratic alliance system in which policy was made by consensus," whereas Athens, a city-state best known for its commitment to democracy, "dominated and exploited its allies in a manner not at all dissimilar" to the Soviet Union's treatment of the other Warsaw Pact countries.[12] Lebow maintains that Athens "exercised leadership [of its alliance] in an increasingly dictatorial manner" and "did not hesitate to use force against recalcitrant allies . . . to discourage any of them from harboring thoughts of independence," whereas Sparta "was not in a position to dictate policy" to its allies and was often "so cautious that [its] allies sometimes questioned [Spartan] resolve." Lebow adds that Athens's reliance on highly undemocratic means of alliance management was especially striking insofar as the Athenians had set up democratic regimes in most of their allies. Sparta's reliance on democratic consensus-building within its alliance was equally striking insofar as almost all the regimes that voluntarily allied themselves with Sparta were rigidly authoritarian and intensely fearful of democracy.

Even if Lebow overstates the contrast somewhat, his analogy is telling enough that it should make one wary of relying on ideology alone as an explanation.[13] Clearly, differences in relative power did matter. The U.S. approach to the Organization of American States, for example, was quite different from the U.S. approach to NATO. This disparity is most readily explained by the fact that the relative magnitude of U.S. power was much greater in Latin America than in Western Europe.

Nevertheless, important as the role of power may be, this hardly means that ideology was irrelevant. An explanation that focuses only on power may have the virtue of parsimony, but it leaves out a crucial aspect of European alliance dynamics during the Cold War. The U.S. and Soviet approaches to alliance management in Europe were alike in one respect: Both superpowers sought ideological

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[12] R. N. Lebow, *The Soviet Response to Poland and the Future of the Warsaw Pact*, [in:] *The Future of European Alliance Systems: NATO and the Warsaw Pact*, ed. A. I. Broadhurst, Boulder 1982, p. 185–236, esp. 185–190.

[13] The contrast is overstated because at the time NATO was founded in 1949, the power of the United States relative to its West European allies was nearly as disproportionate as Soviet power was within the Warsaw Pact in 1955. Hence, the question arises of why NATO was so different all through the Cold War. This question is addressed below.

compatibility with their allies. The United States encouraged the spread of liberal democratic systems in Western Europe, while the Soviet Union promoted orthodox Communist systems in Eastern Europe. Aside from this one similarity, however, the two sides' approaches to alliance-building and alliance management were fundamentally different. The U.S. presence in Western Europe, as noted above, was established with the avid support and at the urging of democratically-elected European governments. The West European states took the initiative in forging NATO to ensure that the United States would remain firmly committed to their security, rather than leaving Europe to its own devices, as in the interwar period.[14] This is not to imply that the United States was merely a passive observer, responding diffidently to West European overtures. Leading officials in the Truman administration had a firm conception of U.S. national security interests, which they pursued as best they could. Nevertheless, what is striking is the extent to which U.S. objectives overlapped with and reinforced the objectives of the West European states. Far from imposing NATO membership or democratic systems on the West European countries, U.S. leaders were merely doing what the West European governments and populations themselves wanted.[15] The broad popular support in Western Europe for close ties with the United States was consistently evident in free elections, which brought leaders and political parties into office who favored both NATO membership and liberal democracy. Extremist and anti-democratic parties and candidates, who might have opposed NATO membership and undermined democracy, were of negligible influence. Because the United States was acting in accord with the wishes of the West European countries, NATO was bound to rest on a consensus among its members. The United States had no reason – nor any inclination – to impose an Athenian-style alliance on Western Europe.

In Eastern Europe, by contrast, the Communist regimes were maintained not through public voting, but through the might of the Soviet Army. Free elections were never permitted once Communist rule had been consolidated throughout the region in the late 1940s. It is true that the Soviet Union initially had a favorable climate in which to set up a military bloc. All the leading Communist officials in Eastern Europe, including those who had lived for many years in the Soviet Union, were loyal Stalinists intent on forming a close alliance with Moscow. Moreover, the prospect of renewed German militarism may have been enough, for a while, to generate considerable popular support in Eastern Europe for military ties with the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, those popular sentiments quickly faded, particularly

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[14] R. A. B e s t Jr., *"Cooperation with Like-Minded Peoples": British Influence on American Security Policy, 1945–1949*, Westport 1986; N. P e t e r s e n, *Who Pulled Whom and How Much? Britain, the United States, and the Making of the North Atlantic Treaty*, "Millenium: Journal of International Studies" 1982, Vol. 11, No. 2, p. 93–114; G. L u n d e s t a d, *Empire by Invitation? The United States and Western Europe, 1945–1952*, "Journal of Peace Research" 1986, Vol. 23, No. 4, p. 263–277.

[15] A qualification should be mentioned here: The United States did "impose" democracy on West Germany, but this "imposition" was continually endorsed by the West German public in free elections and was also endorsed, indirectly, by the mass exodus of East Germans to the West, an exodus that continued until the Berlin Wall was built.

when the region was forcibly Stalinized in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Unlike the United States, the Soviet Union had to impose both its ideological system and a formidable military presence on its "allies." The periodic revolts in Eastern Europe against both Communist rule and Soviet hegemony – in 1953, 1956, 1968, 1970, 1976, 1980–1981, and 1989 – confirmed that popular resentment against Soviet-imposed institutions outweighed any lingering public concerns about Germany. It is not surprising, then, that until the mid-1980s the Soviet Union clamped down whenever East European leaders tried to pursue an independent course or when anti-Communist revolts erupted from below. In this respect, the Soviet Union bore a strong resemblance to ancient Athens.

The divergent origins and evolution of the two European alliances accounted for the different structures of decision-making. Unlike in ancient Greece, where a pronounced disjuncture existed between type of polity and type of alliance system, the two were mutually reinforcing in Europe during the Cold War. The democratic states in NATO interacted through consensus-building, whereas the Communist states in the Warsaw Pact had to abide by the code of "proletarian solidarity" and "socialist internationalism." This conjuncture enabled the superpowers' ideological preferences (liberal democracy for the United States, orthodox Communism for the Soviet Union) to be encoded into the military and political bodies of their respective alliances. Over time, as the basic orientation of the two alliances remained stable, their respective ideological imprints congealed and became an integral part of the institutions. The Warsaw Pact's institutional identity was increasingly linked with the "defense of socialism" in Eastern Europe, while membership in NATO carried with it, more and more, the expectation of a commitment to democratic principles both at home and within the alliance. The lapses in Greece and Turkey were seen as undesirable aberrations. NATO was by no means the only organization that bolstered democracy in Western Europe after World War II, but there is little doubt that the alliance helped to shape domestic political interactions and expectations in ways conducive to democratic outcomes. By contrast, the Warsaw Pact circumscribed the political options of the East European states and forestalled any public accountability, thus ensuring the maintenance of orthodox Communism.

Largely for this reason, the Warsaw Pact collapsed soon after Communism dissolved in Eastern Europe, whereas NATO survived, flourished, and even expanded long after the Cold War was over. If the two organizations had been nothing more than military alliances directed against one another (which is the way they were depicted during the Cold War in neorealist and realist theories of alliances), they both would have disintegrated once the Cold War ended. Many neorealists had explicitly predicted in the late 1980s and early 1990s that NATO would not survive for long in the absence of a common Soviet threat.[16] What those predictions

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[16] See, for example: J. J. M e a r s h e i m e r, *Back to the Future: Instability in Europe After the Cold War*, "International Security" 1990, Vol. 15, No. 1, p. 1–55; K. N. W a l t z, *The Emerging Structure of International Politics*, "International Security" 1993, Vol. 18, No. 2, p. 64–67; Ch. L a y n e, *The Unipolar Illusion: Why New Great Powers Will Rise*, "International Security" 1993, Vol. 17, No. 2, p. 5–51.

overlooked is that NATO and the Warsaw Pact were not just Cold War military alliances. Both had gradually taken on institutional identities that conformed with the ideological preferences of their respective superpowers. Because U.S. ideological preferences remained relatively constant both during and after the Cold War, NATO could thrive in the post-Cold War era. By contrast, Soviet ideological preferences changed drastically at the end of the 1980s. This shift proved too much to bear for the institutions of the Warsaw Pact, which for so long had symbolized and promoted Moscow's earlier set of preferences. The demise of the Warsaw Pact thus suggests that if ideological preferences determine the whole nature of an organization at an early stage, the task of reshaping that organization will be onerous if long-held preferences abruptly and fundamentally change later on. Rather than being adjusted or reconfigured to attain a new equilibrium, the existing institutions may simply have to be disbanded.