

NATO's Global Mission Creep

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NATO, the main overseas arm of the U.S. military-industrial complex, just keeps expanding. Its original *raison d'être*, the supposedly menacing Soviet bloc, has been dead for twenty years. But like the military-industrial complex itself, NATO is kept alive and growing by entrenched economic interests, institutional inertia and an official mindset resembling paranoia, with think tanks looking around desperately for "threats".

This behemoth is getting ready to celebrate its 60th birthday in the twin cities of Strasbourg (France) and Kehl (Germany) on the Rhine early in April. A special gift is being offered by France's increasingly unpopular president, Nicolas Sarkozy: the return of France to NATO's "integrated command". This bureaucratic event, whose practical significance remains unclear, provides the chorus of NATOlatrous officials and editorialists something to crow about. See, the silly French have seen the error of their ways and returned to the fold.

Sarkozy, of course, puts it in different terms. He asserts that joining the NATO command will enhance France's importance by giving it influence over the strategy and operations of an Alliance which it never left, and to which it has continued to contribute more than its share of armed forces.

The flaw in that argument is that it was the totally unshakable U.S. control of NATO's integrated command that persuaded General Charles de Gaulle to leave in the first place, back in March 1966. De Gaulle did not do so on a whim. He had tried to change the decision-making process and found it impossible. The Soviet threat had diminished, and de Gaulle did not want to be dragged into wars he thought unnecessary, such as the U.S. effort to win a war in Indochina that France had already lost and considered unwinnable. He wanted France to be able to pursue its own interests in the Middle East and Africa. Besides, the US military presence in France stimulated "Yankee go home" demonstrations. Transferring the NATO command to Belgium satisfied everyone.

Sarkozy's predecessor Jacques Chirac, wrongly labeled "anti-American" by US media, was already willing to rejoin the NATO command if he could get something substantial in return, such as NATO's Mediterranean command. The United States flatly refused.

Instead, Sarkozy is settling for crumbs: assignment of senior French officers to a command in Portugal and to some training base in the United States. "Nothing was negotiated. Two or three more French officers in position to take orders from the Americans changes nothing", observed former French foreign minister Hubert Védrine at a recent colloquium on France and NATO.

Sarkozy announced the return on March 11, six days before the issue is to be debated by the French National Assembly. The protests from both sides of the aisle will be in vain.

There appear to be two main causes of this unconditional surrender.

One is the psychology of Sarkozy himself, whose love for the most superficial aspects of the United States was expressed in his embarrassing speech to the U.S. Congress in November 2007. Sarkozy may be the first French president who seems not to like France. Or at least, to like the United States better (from watching television). He can give the impression of having wanted to be president of France not for love of country, but in social revenge against it. From the start, he has shown himself eager to “normalize” France, that is, to remake it according to the American model.

The other, less obvious but more objective cause is the recent expansion of the European Union. The rapid absorption of all the former Eastern European satellites, plus the former Soviet Republics of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, has drastically changed the balance of power within the EU itself. The core founding nations, France, Germany, Italy and the Benelux countries, are no longer able to steer the Union toward a unified foreign and security policy. After France and Germany refused to go along with the invasion of Iraq, Donald Rumsfeld dismissed them as “old Europe” and gloated over the willingness of “new Europe” to follow the United States lead. Britain to the west, and the “new” European satellites to the East are both more attached to the United States politically and emotionally than they are to the European Union that took them in and provided them with considerable economic development aid and a veto over major policy issues.

This expansion effectively buried the longstanding French project to build a European defense force that could act outside the NATO command. The rulers of Poland and the Baltic States want U.S. defense, by way of NATO, period. They would never accept the French project of an EU defense not tied to NATO and the United States.

France has its own military-industrial complex, totally dwarfed by the one in the United States, but the largest in Western Europe. Any such complex needs export markets for its arms industry. The best potential market would have been independent European armed forces. Without that prospect, some may hope that joining the integrated command can open NATO markets to French military products.

A slim hope, however. The United States jealously guards major NATO procurements for its own industry. France is unlikely to have much influence within NATO for the same reason it is giving up its attempt to build an independent European army. The Europeans themselves are deeply divided. With Europe divided, the United States rules. Moreover, with the economic crisis deepening, money is running short for weaponry.

From the viewpoint of French national interest, this feeble hope for marketing military hardware is vastly outweighed by the disastrous political consequences of Sarkozy’s act of allegiance.

It is true that even outside the NATO integrated command, France’s independence was only relative. France followed the United States into the first Gulf War – President François Mitterrand vainly hoped thereby to gain influence in Washington, the usual mirage that beckons allies into dubious U.S. operations. France joined the 1999 NATO war against Yugoslavia, despite misgivings at the highest levels. But in 2003, President Jacques Chirac and his foreign minister Dominique de Villepin actually made use of their independence by rejecting the invasion of Iraq. It is generally acknowledged that the French stand enabled

Germany to do the same. Belgium followed.

Villepin's February 14, 2003, speech to the UN Security Council giving priority to disarmament and peace over war won a rare standing ovation. The Villepin speech was hugely popular around the world, and greatly enhanced French prestige, especially in the Arab world. But back in Paris, the personal hatred between Sarkozy and Villepin has reached operatic heights of passion, and one can suspect that Sarkozy's return to NATO obedience is also an act of personal revenge.

The worst political effect is much broader. The impression is now created that "the West", Europe and North America, are barricading themselves by a military alliance against the rest of the world. In retrospect, the French dissent accomplished a service to the whole West by giving the impression, or the illusion, that independent thought and action were still possible, and that someone in Europe might listen to what other parts of the world thought and said. Now, this "closing of ranks", hailed by the NATO champions as "improving our security", will sound the alarms in the rest of the world. The empire seems to be closing its ranks in order to rule the world. The United States and its allies do not openly claim to rule the world, only to regulate it. The West controls the world's financial institutions, the IMF and the World Bank. It controls the judiciary, the International Criminal Court, which in six years of existence has put on trial only one obscure Congolese warlord and brought charges against 12 other persons, all of them Africans - while meanwhile the United States causes the deaths of hundreds of thousands, or even millions, of people in Iraq and Afghanistan and supports Israel's ongoing aggression against the Palestinian people. To the rest of the world, NATO is just the armed branch of this enterprise of domination. And this at a time when the Western-dominated system of financial capitalism is bringing the world economy to collapse.

This gesture of "showing Western unity" for "our security" can only make the rest of the world feel insecure. Meanwhile, NATO moves every day to surround Russia with military bases and hostile alliances, notably in Georgia. Despite the smiles over dinner with her Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, Hillary Clinton repeats the stunning mantra that "spheres of influence are not acceptable" - meaning, of course, that the historic Russian sphere of interest is unacceptable, while the United States is vigorously incorporating it into its own sphere of influence, called NATO.

Already China and Russia are increasing their defense cooperation. The economic interests and institutional inertia of NATO are pushing the world toward a pre-war lineup far more dangerous than the Cold War.

The lesson NATO refuses to learn is that its pursuit of enemies creates enemies. The war against terrorism fosters terrorism. Surrounding Russia with missiles proclaimed "defensive" - when any strategist knows that a shield accompanied by a sword is also an offensive weapon - will create a Russian enemy.

The Search for Threats

To prove to itself that it is really "defensive", NATO keeps looking for threats. Well, the world is a troubled place, thanks in large part to the sort of economic globalization imposed by the United States over the past decades. This might be the time to be undertaking diplomatic and political efforts to work out internationally agreed ways of dealing with such problems as global economic crisis, climate change, energy use, hackers ("cyberwar").

NATO think tanks are pouncing on these problems as new “threats” to be dealt with by NATO. This leads to a militarization of policy-making where it should be demilitarized.

For example, what can it mean to meet the supposed threat of climate change with military means? The answer seems obvious: military force may be used in some way against the populations forced from their homes by drought or flooding. Perhaps, as in Darfur, drought will lead to clashes between ethnic or social groups. Then NATO can decide which is the “good” side and bomb the others. That sort of thing.

The world indeed appears to be heading into a time of troubles. NATO appears getting read to deal with these troubles by using armed force against unruly populations.

This will be evident at NATO’s 60th anniversary celebration in Strasbourg/Kehl on April 3 and 4.

The cities will be turned into armed camps. Residents of the tranquil city of Strasbourg are obliged to apply for badges in order to leave or enter their own homes during the happy event. At crucial times, they will not be allowed to leave home at all, except under emergency circumstances. Urban transport will be brought to a standstill. The cities will be as dead as if they had been bombed, to allow the NATO dignitaries to put on a show of peace.

The high point is to be a ten-minute photo op when French and German leaders shake hands on the bridge over the Rhine connected Strasbourg and Kehl. As if Angela Merkel and Nicolas Sarkozy were making peace between France and Germany for the first time. The locals are to be locked up so as not to disturb the charade.

NATO will be behaving as though the biggest threat it faces is the people of Europe. And the biggest threat to the people of Europe may well be NATO.

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