Feature

BRITAIN AND THE FORMATION OF NATO

Carl Watts *outlines the shift in British security policy and examines the role played by the Foreign Office during the post-War period.*

April 1999 marks the 50th anniversary of the signature of the North Atlantic Treaty, which came into effect in August 1949. The Cold War is over, but NATO remains an enduring feature of international politics, as the recent intervention in Kosovo has demonstrated. It is therefore timely to reflect on the process by which NATO came into existence and, in particular, to consider the role that the British Foreign Office played in the formation of the Organisation. It will be noted in this article that Britain's commitment to post-War European security arrangements marked a significant departure from the pre-War strategy of 'limited liability'. As John Bayliss has demonstrated, this reorientation began to occur during the Second World War, but there was still a great deal of confusion among British policy-makers by the end of the War.[1] The emergence of NATO owed much to the initiatives pursued by the British Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin, but it is also true that this model of Western multilateral security was quite different from the arrangements that Bevin had initially envisaged.

The strategy of 'limited liability'

Before the Great War, Britain's traditional war strategy was that of 'limited liability'. This strategy was based on the principle of maritime supremacy, which guaranteed the security of the British Isles and allowed small professional military forces to be deployed abroad. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, British governments found it expedient to subsidise continental allies and therefore had no need for a large standing army. However, in the Great War a mass army was raised and mass casualties sustained. This was an aberration in Britain's national experience and had a profound psychological impact on both the ruling élite and public alike. Accordingly, during the interwar period, British policy-makers reverted to the strategy of 'limited liability'. From 1919 until 1932, the armed forces were directed by the Cabinet to assume that the British Empire would not be engaged in a major war during the next ten years, and that no Expeditionary Force would be required. Despite the simultaneous threats from Germany, Italy and Japan during the 1930s, the Cabinet was so sensitive to the implications of a continental commitment that it would not permit the use of the term 'Expeditionary Force', even in secret papers. Thus, as A. J. P. Taylor observed, 'not only the will, but the means, for British intervention on the continent were lacking.'[2] The German annexation of Czechoslovakia, in March 1939, prompted a major revision of British diplomatic and military policy. Guarantees were offered to the Netherlands, Poland, Greece and Romania. The Cabinet also authorised preparations to be made for the dispatch of a British Expeditionary Force within two weeks of the start of a war in Europe; the Chiefs of Staff were permitted to enter into talks with their French counterparts. The strategy of 'limited liability' was dead, but it was too late to make any significant difference to the balance of power on the Continent.

The wartime reorientation of British peacetime security policy

British policy-makers had assumed that the outbreak of hostilities in Europe would produce a scenario similar to that of the Great War, in which the French would conduct a holding operation while the British marshalled their resources to deliver a knock-out blow against Germany. Once the bankruptcy of this policy had been exposed, however, the desirability of some sort of post-War European security group became evident. Trygvie Lie, Acting Foreign Minister in the Norwegian government-in-exile, was the first to approach the British Foreign Office with a suggestion for post-War military co-operation. Although the Foreign Office was receptive to the idea, it did not get very far in the War Cabinet. After the German invasion of the Soviet Union, it was considered inappropriate to discuss post-War issues without the involvement of Britain's new ally. The various governments-in-exile of the smaller European states were, however, keen to obtain an indication of British attitudes towards Western European integration after the War. Paul-Henri Spaak, the Belgian Foreign Minister, told Anthony Eden in March 1944 that the smaller powers looked to Britain for leadership in European affairs. Although Eden and the Foreign Office were sympathetic to the desire for closer co-operation after the War, Churchill's preference for the 'Special Relationship' with the United States was an impediment to further movement in this direction. Similarly, his hostility towards De Gaulle was at odds with the ideas put forward by Duff Cooper, Ambassador to Paris (1944-47), about the need for an alliance with France as the cornerstone of any Western European group.

Sean Greenwood has commented that the discussions and planning which took place during the War were significant because they indicated a revolution in British policy concerning the requirement for a continental commitment

First session of the Council Deputies in London, 1950
Reproduced with the kind permission of NATO PHOTOS

during peacetime.[3] In August 1942 the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Richard Law, and the Assistant Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office, Nigel Ronald, visited the United States to discuss post-War matters. The Foreign Office subsequently set up an Economic and Reconstruction Department, which came under the direction of Gladwyn Jebb, to consider long-term policy. Until early 1943, officials assumed that a resurgence of German power would represent the biggest problem for post-War European security, but they also recognised the potential threat from the Soviet Union. In July 1943, the Post-Hostilities Planning Sub-Committee of the Chiefs of Staff was set up, with Jebb as its Chairman. It soon became clear that there were distinct differences of opinion between the Foreign Office and the Chiefs of Staff, as evidenced by their reaction to Jebb's memorandum on 'Western Europe', produced in May 1944 as a brief for the British delegation to the forthcoming Dumbarton Oaks conference. Although Jebb acknowledged American, Soviet and Dominion sensitivities about his revolutionary proposals for British involvement in post-War European security, he nevertheless argued that British interests would be served by a security group, not least by providing 'defence in depth' against potential Soviet aggression. This could be achieved either by a series of bilateral treaties, or a multilateral treaty. It was emphasised that the United States and Britain should seek co-operation with the Soviet Union through the proposed 'world organisation,' which would succeed the League of Nations. The Chiefs of Staff, however, took the view that in the long-term the United Nations, as it became, would be unable to prevent a deterioration in relations with the Soviet Union. They therefore argued that in order to prevent the possibility of a hostile alliance between the Soviet Union and Germany, it would be necessary to partition Germany and incorporate the British zone of control into plans for 'defence in depth'. The Foreign Office opposed this scheme by arguing that it would be likely to antagonise the Soviet Union; the Chiefs of Staff, although unrepentant in their thinking, backed down. The Post-Hostilities Planning Staff report of November 1944 therefore concluded that:

> unless and until a major clash with the USSR is clearly unavoidable, we must adhere to the policy of eradicating German ability to wage war. This would limit the assistance which the USSR could obtain from Germany.[4]

It was also acknowledged that close co-operation between a Western European security group and the United States was desirable, since only the latter possessed the resources to resist a Soviet invasion of Western Europe. This was the broad state of British strategic thought inherited by the new Labour Government, elected in July 1945. Ernest Bevin, who had served as Minister of Labour in Churchill's Coalition Government, became Foreign Secretary. As Greenwood has observed, it was Bevin who was to transform the Foreign Office proposals for a military alliance 'into a wider project for European co-operation.'[5]

Anglo-French relations and the Treaty of Dunkirk

Anglo-French relations had been marred during the War by the personal antagonism between Churchill and De Gaulle. This was exacerbated during 1945 by British opposition to French attempts to reassert control over Lebanon and Syria.

Despite these unpropitious circumstances, the Foreign Office view was that a treaty with France would lead to greater co-operation with other Western European states. This was not the first time that the Foreign Office had advocated a better understanding with France as a step towards improving relations with other states. For example, an underlying objective of the Entente Cordiale (1904) had been to prepare the ground for a political understanding with France's ally, Tsarist Russia. In this respect, therefore, it may be argued that the policy advocated by Ernest Bevin was rooted in an established Foreign Office orientation. Bevin, however, transcended the narrow emphasis on political understanding in Britain's relations with other states. In a meeting with officials of the Western Department on 13 August 1945, Bevin acknowledged the need to improve relations with France but also revealed that:

> his long term policy was to establish close relations between this country and the countries on the Mediterranean and Atlantic fringes of Europe - e.g. more especially Greece, Italy, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Scandinavia. He wanted to see close association between the United Kingdom and these countries - as much in commercial and economic matters as in political questions.[6]

Bevin's 'grand design' was deferred as a result of the hostility shown towards the idea of a Western European group in the Soviet press during the London Foreign Ministers' Conference in September. Bevin was not prepared to press ahead with his 'grand design' if it was likely to cause the severing of relations with the Soviet Union. On the other hand, he recognised that there was scope for an Anglo-French treaty. The Soviet Foreign Minister, Molotov, had expressed a cautious view that such a treaty would be desirable provided that it was directed against Germany. Bevin therefore initiated discussions with the French Foreign Minister, Georges Bidault, which culminated in the signature of the Treaty of Dunkirk on 4 March 1947. The Treaty—directed against a resurgence of German aggression—was limited in its aims. However, as John Bayliss has argued, it was significant because it had demonstrated co-operation between the two most important states in Europe and prepared the way for the signature of the Brussels Pact in March 1948, which was the precursor of NATO.[7] It would be a mistake, however, to suppose that this course had been mapped out by the Foreign Office. The future development of British security policy was not yet clear because the German problem remained outstanding, and neither the United States nor the Soviet Union had given a clear signal of their intentions towards Western Europe.

The emergence of Western multilateral security

During 1945-46, the relationship between the wartime Allied Powers began to deteriorate, mainly as a result of their conflicting political and economic interests in Germany. The Potsdam agreement had established the principles that reparations should not impede the ability of the German people to subsist, and that Germany should be treated as a single economic unit. It soon became apparent, however, that France and the Soviet Union were determined to exploit the German economy in order to assist their own recovery. Britain and the United States, on the other hand, found themselves subsidising their zones of occupation and therefore aimed to limit the drain from their economies. The situation was compared to a farmer feeding his cow while someone else milked it at the other end.

Churchill's Fulton speech in March 1946 publicly articulated the fear that the Soviet Union was trying to effect a division of Europe. Shortly thereafter, the British and American military acted on their concerns about the Soviet Union. The continuation of the wartime Combined Chiefs of Staff facilitated the preparation of secret Anglo-American plans for a strategic air offensive against the Soviet Union. The Clifford Report, submitted to President Truman in September 1946, advised that the United States had to prepare for total war, including the use of nuclear and biological weapons. The Report also recommended that American policy should be to provide economic aid to friendly states, which was endorsed by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who were anxious about the implications for American security if Europe fell under Soviet control:

> No one can show ... how the United States could live safely if France and/or Great Britain were under Soviet domination either by reason of military conquest or for the reason that communists had taken over control of their governments.[8]

On 21 February 1947, the British government informed the American administration that it could not supply aid to Greece and Turkey after the end of March. The result was the Truman Doctrine of 12 March, which offered the promise of aid to 'free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation.' Some in the British Foreign Office, like Gladwyn Jebb, thought that this sweeping statement might precipitate conflict with the Soviet Union, but it was generally welcomed as an indication that the United States was unequivocally committed to defend Western European interests.

In a speech at Harvard on 5 June the American Secretary of State, George Marshall, announced that it would be the policy of the United States to offer economic aid in order to assist the economic recovery of Europe. Bevin welcomed this, for it diminished the threat of gradual economic deterioration and political destabilisation in Europe. Bevin had been planning to initiate discussions with Belgium and the Netherlands for military treaties based on the Dunkirk model. Marshall Aid required a postponement of this approach; it was offered on the understanding that the states of Europe would co-operate in the implementation of a European Recovery Programme. Britain and France took the lead role in setting up the Organisation for European Economic Co-operation and were the principal beneficiaries of the U.S. Foreign Assistance Act of April 1948.

These developments in U.S. foreign policy were set against a backdrop of Soviet intransigence over Germany, which also produced a hardening of attitudes in the British Foreign Office. Bevin was reluctant to abandon the search for agreement with the Russians, but he recognised that it was increasingly unlikely. When the Council of Foreign Ministers met in Moscow on 10 March 1947, it soon became evident

that the states of Western Europe shared the British and American preference for a federal German constitution, whereas the East European states supported the Soviet view that there should be a unitary government. The conference, which lasted until 24 April, was little short of a diplomatic disaster. Bevin now accepted that the division of Europe into Eastern and Western camps was highly likely and he therefore returned to his plans to create a Western European group. On 22 September 1947, Bevin had an important conversation with Paul Ramadier, in which he told the French Prime Minister that:

> one of (his) principal objectives had been to strengthen good relations between the two countries. With their populations of 47 million and 40 million respectively and with their vast colonial possessions they could, if they acted together, be as powerful as either the Soviet Union or the United States. It was only owing to their divisions that the Western democracies did not occupy the position that they might in the world today. In addition to their populations they possessed between them supplies of raw materials greater than those of any other country.[9]

Mr Ernest Bevin signs the NATO treaty for the UK
Reproduced with the kind permission of NATO PHOTOS

This reveals that Bevin was determined to preserve Britain's political independence from the United States, through leading the process of European co-operation and promoting the maximisation of colonial resources, particularly in Africa, where American presence was minimal. Bevin's concept of a European 'third force' was not only shared by many of his colleagues on the left of the Labour Party, such as Richard Crossman, but also by Conservatives like R. A. Butler. However, ministers and officials in the Board of Trade and the Treasury blocked Bevin's suggestion that Britain should participate in a European customs union, whilst those in the Colonial Office criticised his proposals for African development as exploitative. This bureaucratic resistance, allied with Bevin's suspicions of federalist pressure from the Benelux countries, progressively undermined his initial vision of European unity.

Bevin's next initiative was prompted by the collapse of the Council of Foreign Ministers meeting in London in December 1947, which confirmed British and French perceptions that the Soviet Union would precipitate a partition of Europe. On 17 December Bevin had talks with Bidault and General Marshall, in which he suggested a loose federation of the Western European states, the United States and the Commonwealth. Christopher Bartlett has suggested that this proposal was not motivated by fear of Russian aggression. Bevin and the Foreign Office recognised that despite the promise of Marshall Aid, Western European morale was still low. It was thought that the European Recovery Programme would not succeed unless it were also accompanied by the promise of military security and political stability.[10] Although Bevin's ideas were generally accepted by Marshall, he indicated that more specific proposals would have to be formulated before the United States could commit itself. During the next few weeks Bevin wrote several memoranda on the subject of Western European union, for consideration by the Cabinet and Britain's ambassadors in Paris and Washington. Bevin identified the states which he thought should be included in such a union and suggested that Britain and France should begin by concluding bilateral treaties with the Low Countries, on the model of the Treaty

of Dunkirk. In a speech to the House of Commons on 22 January 1948, Bevin articulated the view that the failure of the Council of Foreign Ministers to reach agreement pointed to the conclusion that 'the free nations of Western Europe must draw closely together.'[11]

Bevin's speech was well-received in Britain and the United States, but there were domestic and diplomatic obstacles to overcome before his aim of a Western European group could be realised. When the Chiefs of Staff met at the end of January 1948 to consider the implications of Bevin's policy, the Chiefs of the Air and Naval Staffs, Lord Tedder and Sir John Cunningham, rejected General Montgomery's paper advocating a continental military commitment. This bureaucratic row—coloured by personal antipathy towards Montgomery—was not resolved in favour of the Chief of the Imperial General Staff and the Secretary of State for Defence, A. V. Alexander, until May 1948. The Foreign Office therefore found itself negotiating a Western European defence pact without any prior agreement to provide the military forces necessary to honour Britain's potential commitments!

As a result of discussions between the U.S. State Department and the British Ambassador in Washington, Lord Inverchapel, it had become clear to Bevin that the American administration required a demonstration of European unity, in the form of a multilateral pact, before the United States would consider underwriting its security. The governments of Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg also expressed their preference for a treaty based on the model of the Inter-American Treaty of Rio de Janeiro, since it was felt that this would address current realities better than a series of bilateral treaties aimed potentially at Germany. The British were more flexible on this point than the French government, which was still sensitive about the German problem and therefore committed to treaties based on the Dunkirk model. The impasse was broken by the Communist seizure of power in Czechoslovakia in February 1948 and the possibility of such a coup in Italy. Negotiations between Britain, France and the Benelux states began on 4 March and focused on two main issues: attitudes towards Germany, and the future enlargement of the pact. In response to French pressure a reference was inserted, in Article VII of the Treaty, to 'the steps to be taken in case of a renewal by Germany of an aggressive policy'. The Benelux states, which saw the Pact only as a means of securing co-operation between the signatories, did not consider enlargement to be a realistic possibility in the near future. Bevin, on the other hand, was keen to ensure that the Pact could be expanded if the contracting parties considered it desirable; a suitable mechanism was therefore included in Article IX of the Treaty. With these minor differences resolved, the Brussels Pact was signed on 17 March 1948.

The fact that the Brussels Pact was followed one year later by the conclusion of the North Atlantic Treaty should not lead to the conclusion that the Brussels Pact was intended only to encourage the United States to become involved in European security. As noted above, Bevin thought in terms of building a Western European grouping independent of the Superpowers. Bevin recognised that in the short-term, however, American economic and military assistance was necessary to give effect to his long-term scheme for Western Union, in which Britain would be the leading actor. Further movement in this direction was evident in European federalist pressure for institutional innovation and Bevin's counter-proposal, in September 1948, for a Council of Ministers of Western Europe. By this time, however, the stand-off with the Soviet Union had produced a greater military emphasis in British policy.

By the end of 1947 there was little, if any, hope of an agreement between the Soviet Union and the Western Powers over the future of Germany. In January 1948 the Soviet Union began to impose intermittent restrictions on western traffic to Berlin, which lay 100 miles within its zone of control. By June this had developed into a total blockade of all road, rail and canal routes into the city, which was clearly designed to prise the Western Powers out of Berlin. The American response was a proposal to the British that an armed convoy should be driven along the autobahn to Berlin. British officials, worried that this might provoke the Russians, suggested the alternative of an airlift to keep the Western zones of the city supplied. The airlift was a tremendous success; more than a million and a half tons of supplies were delivered in almost 200,000 flights by British and American planes. In January 1949 Stalin hinted that he was willing to lift the blockade if the West would abandon its counter-blockade, and on condition that there was a further meeting of the Council of Foreign Ministers. The blockades ended on 12 May 1949 and the Council met shortly thereafter, but no progress was made and the political division of Germany was formalised four months later.

The effect of the Berlin crisis was to expedite the movement towards the formation of an Atlantic alliance. Secret talks were held between Britain, the United States and Canada at the Pentagon in March 1948 in which there was no decisive outcome, partly as a result of continuing American prevarication, but also because of disagreement over the prospective membership of the proposed alliance. Bartlett has observed that 'Bevin's activities and flood of suggestions offered further encouragement' and the impasse in the U.S. Senate was broken by the Vandenberg Resolution of 11 June 1948, which permitted American association with European collective security arrangements.[12] Negotiations continued in Washington between July and September, this time involving representatives from the Brussels Pact powers. The head of the French delegation, Henri Bonnet, irritated the Americans and the British with his demand for an immediate American guarantee of French territory, the despatch of troops and military equipment to France, and the admission of French representatives to the Anglo-American Combined Chiefs of Staff. The British Foreign Office was, for the moment, successful in persuading the French to accept the long-term benefits of a more cautious approach. Although the American administration had demonstrated its commitment to an alliance in December 1948, when it drew up a draft treaty, it had to compromise on Congressional objections to the mutual guarantee clause which, it was argued, would automatically commit the United States to go to war. The French exacerbated these last-minute problems in early 1949 when they insisted that Algeria should be included in the treaty area, and argued that Italy should become a member of the alliance. The

NATO flag raising ceremony, Place des Invalides, Paris 1953
Reproduced with the kind permission of NATO PHOTOS

U.S. State Department was ambivalent; the British Foreign Office, although exasperated by the French attitude throughout the negotiations, took the view that it was better to concede on these points than to jeopardise the final stages of the negotiations. The original seven participants in the talks finally agreed to include Italy, Portugal, Norway, Denmark and Iceland in the scope of the alliance, and the North Atlantic Treaty was eventually signed in Washington on 4 April 1949. At its inception NATO was very much a cosmetic organisation. The strength of its forces in Western Europe was probably only a third of the number of Soviet divisions in Eastern Europe. It was not until the outbreak of the Korean War that NATO began to develop anything like a credible defence posture.

The significance of the North Atlantic Treaty

A common observation on the formation of NATO is that it marked a revolution in the attitude of the United States towards European peacetime security. Yet it also represented a profound transformation in British strategic thought. During the Second World War it was generally recognised in the Foreign Office that the strategy of 'limited liability', which had characterised British policy before and after the Great War, was no longer appropriate to British interests. From 1945 Bevin played a pivotal role in the developments in European and trans-Atlantic diplomacy and, as Kenneth Morgan has observed: 'The creation of NATO in April 1949, with its loose structure and distinctly functional character, bore very much the stamp of British origin.'[13] Perhaps the greatest significance of American involvement in European security was that it reduced British strategic overstretch and thereby made possible the continuance of Britain's great power role. By the end of the 1950s, however, Britain had to balance the cost of its commitments to NATO against considerable liabilities outside Europe. Hard choices lay ahead.

Carl Watts is a PhD student in the School of Historical Studies at the University of Birmingham, where he is also a part-time Lecturer in War Studies in the School of Continuing Studies.

References

[1] J. Bayliss, *The Diplomacy of Pragmatism. Britain and the Formation of NATO, 1942-1949* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1993), Chapters 1 & 2.
[2] A. J. P. Taylor, *English History, 1914-1945* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), p. 375.
[3] S. Greenwood, *Britain and European Co-operation Since 1945* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. 9.
[4] Quoted in V. Rothwell, *Britain and the Cold War, 1941-1947* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1982), p. 123.
[5] Greenwood, *op. cit.*, p. 9.
[6] PRO: FO 371/ 49069. Quoted in Greenwood, *op. cit.*, p. 9.
[7] Bayliss, *op. cit.*, p. 58.
[8] *Foreign Relations of the United States* (Washington D. C. Government Printing Office, 1947) Vol. 1 pp. 734 ff. Quoted in C. J. Bartlett, *The Global Conflict, 1880-1970: The International Rivalry of the Great Powers* (London: Longman, 1984), p. 265.
[9] Unsigned memorandum of conversation between Bevin and Ramadier. Quoted in G. Warner, 'The Labour Governments and the Unity of Western Europe, 1945-51' in R. Ovendale (ed.) *The Foreign Policy of the Labour Governments, 1945-1951* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1984), pp. 65-6.
[10] Bartlett, *op. cit.*, p. 273.
[11] Hansard, House of Commons, Vol. 446, pp. 395 ff. Quoted in A. G. Harryvan & J. van der Harst (eds.) *Documents on European Union* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), p. 46.
[12] Bartlett, *op. cit.*, p. 275.
[13] K. O. Morgan, *The People's Peace. British History, 1945-1989* (Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 85.

Further reading

For the strategy of 'limited liability' see M. Howard, *The British Way in Warfare* (London, 1975); the interwar context is examined by Brian Bond, *British Military Policy Between Two World Wars* (Oxford, 1980). The formulation of wartime and post-war British policy is discussed in detail by John Bayliss, *The Diplomacy of Pragmatism. Britain and the Formation of NATO, 1942-1949* (Ohio, 1993). Sir Nicholas Henderson, Bevin's Assistant Under-Secretary, wrote *The Birth of NATO* (London, 1982). On Bevin see Alan Bullock, *Ernest Bevin: Foreign Secretary, 1945-1951* (London, 1983). The wider context of British policy is explored by Victor Rothwell, *Britain and the Cold War, 1941-1947* (London, 1982).