

## THE IMAGE OF NATO AND THE AMERICAN PUBLIC OPINION (\*)

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### INTRODUCTION

“Isolation” and “Isolationism” are two words which had shaped American Foreign policy until the beginning of the 19. century. American isolation such as it was, had died about the turn of the century, where as American isolationism has been in decline ever since. It has been in decline promoted by the strategic realities of the shrinking world in which Americans live. The system of alliances began simply as a means of formalizing the concept of solidarity of American States. This concept was developed during the presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt (1932-1945). But the means used for restating the policy of Western Hemisphere solidarity provided the framework for the new policy. Early in the Cold War and very shortly after the United States actively entered the European arena, the basic strategic ingredient in the European situation was the danger of Soviet aggression. Washington soon reached a correspondingly basic decision that the defence of the West was to be based on a ‘forward strategy’. This meant the line NATO would defend against a Soviet assault would be in the zone of initial contact —along the Iron Curtain and the Elbe River— rather than along the Rhine after giving up almost all central Europe to Soviet forces. This decision carried important and far-reaching implications for future doctrine and policy. (\*\*\*)

The North Atlantic Treaty was the second alliance system in which the United States has taken a leading part. In the

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(\*) This article as a part of wider research on the NATO Image in the U.S.A. has been carried out in Washington in 1978.

(\*\*) A.Ü. Basın-Yayın Yüksek Okulu.

(\*\*\*) Charles O. LERCHE, “Last Chance in Europe”, Chicago quadrangle Books, 1967, U.S.A.

interest of preserving the 'democratic way of life' the North Atlantic Treaty goes further than the inter-American Treaty. It opens the way to prevent violent internal changes of governments. The patterns are to consult together "Whenever, in the opinion of any of them, the territorial integrity, political independence or security of any one of them is threatened." An effort to set up a government of communists friendly to the Soviet Union might be considered a threat political independence. (\*)

As the years passed, NATO became a basic element of American Foreign Policy. To counterbalance the NATO, the Warsaw Pact was established by the Communist States under the leadership of the Soviet Union. Soviet threat and Warsaw Pact then became the milestone of American Foreign Policy. Obviously, American Public opinion who influenced by these developments in American Foreign Policy.

#### I. PUBLIC ATTITUDES ABOUT NATO

The attitudes of Americans towards the NATO are of course closely linked with the American feelings towards Russia. Since World War II, Americans have been brought up and regularly informed by fear of Russia and her intentions to invade the Western Europe and to expand her ideology, communism, to all over the World. These kinds of feelings have also been fostered and supported by the policy-makers as well as the mass media, namely broadcasting and press in the States. Therefore the word NATO, in many cases goes together with the word 'Russia' or more formal with the phrase 'Soviet Union'.

For the average American, it can be easily said that he is not much aware of NATO; its functions and its role in American Foreign and Domestic policies and its place in World affairs. When we come to the elites and well educated Americans, they are of course well informed about NATO, but show greater interest when news about Russians military strength

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(\*) Blair BOLLES - Francis O. WILCOX, "The Armed Road to Peace",  
Headline Series of Foreign Policy Ass., N. 92, 1952.

makes headlines. This is also for the average American. Especially when American military power is compared with the Soviet Union and the money spent on armaments by the two super powers is discussed. Closely related point, to namely American military aids to foreign countries (generally under-developed countries) also draws the Americans attentions towards NATO.

As a result of these kinds of involvements of Americans in NATO affairs, American polls are notable for their lack of specific reference to NATO. The only fairly recent mentions of NATO are in more general questions the ROPER POLL asked in the Summer of 1975 and CHICAGO LOUIS HARRIS POLL asked in December 1974.

According to the result of Harris Poll: One half of the public shares the view that the United States should keep its commitments towards NATO just as it was a position which was held by 62 percent of the leaders. An additional four percent of the public (and five percent of the leaders) believe that the U.S. should increase that commitment. On the other hand, 13 percent of the public (and 29 percent of the leaders) think the U.S. should reduce its commitment to NATO; and only 7 percent of the public and 2 percent of the leaders think the U.S. should withdraw from the alliance. In Roper Poll in 1975, respondent asked this question:

"I'll name some major events in our history. I'd like to know for each whether you think what this country did was the right thing or the wrong thing or somewhere in between?"

	right	wrong	somewhere bet.
Fighting World War II	76 %	6 %	10 %
Deciding to help form and join the UN.	70	8	12
Deciding to help form and became a member of NATO	55	9	15
Deciding to help reconstruct Europe with the Marshall Plan	45	15	20

Although the question is posed in historical terms, the responses have to be considered as statements of contemporary attitudes, rather than as retrospective evaluations. NATO, therefore, did pretty well, considering it has not recently been a newsworthy issue for the general public. Most notably, there appears to be a minimum of public opposition to U.S. membership in NATO (9 percent). Although 55 percent of the general public said that involvement in NATO was the 'right thing', far higher approval came from college graduates (73 percent) and executives and professionals (71 percent).

Despite the lack of actual references to NATO in recent American Polls, there is no dearth of data that reveals American attitudes on issues that concern the alliance. Poll questions have produced findings on American views of comparative U.S. and Soviet military strength, attitudes toward defence spending, attitudes toward the defense of various allies, attitudes toward resisting Soviet military aggression, perceptions of Soviet strategic intentions, and attitudes toward negotiating with the Soviet Union.

#### **A. American Attitudes Toward European Issues:**

The various survey findings on American attitudes toward the NATO allies and related subjects have been also reflecting public opinion about NATO.

##### **1. Relations with allies:**

The public perception of U.S. relations with the major allies became more favorable after the Viet-Nam War. Between April 1974 and May 1976, the number describing them as 'poor' declined from 15 to 5 percent. The number describing the state of these relations as "good" rose from 28 to 43 percent. The proportion viewing relations as 'only fair' also declined, from 50 to 41 percent.

The European allies are viewed as somewhat burdensome but clearly essential for U.S. security. Only a plurality of the public (45 percent) felt in May 1976 that the close relationship with and commitments to the countries of Europe resulted in a benefit to the United States. 36 percent felt the relationship

was more than beneficial. But a 69-20 percent majority believed the U.S. could not 'do without its European allies and live in a security'.

The number of Americans who want to strengthen U.S. ties with the major European allies increased between early 1975 and early 1977. About a third of the public (32 percent) now want to strengthen the U.S. ties with WEST GERMANY, while 10 percent want lessen the commitments to that country up 25 vs. 12 percent in 1975. Nearly as many support closer ties with Great Britain (28 percent for stronger ties vs. 7 percent for reduced commitments-up from 24 vs. 10 percent in 1975); support for closer ties with FRANCE is lower than WEST GERMANY and GREAT BRITAIN but it also rose between 1975 and 1977. About half of the public continues to favor maintaining U.S. relations with these countries 'about as they are'.

## 2) Sending the U.S. troops abroad in Foreign Crises:

The number of Americans who favor defending Western Europe from attack has increased during the past several years. The public 'willingness' to defend the major allies declined during the early 1970's, but has turned upward since 1974-75. A 49-31 percent plurality of the public in April favored "U.S. military involvement, including the U.S. troops" if "Western Europe were invaded" up from a 39-41 percent split in late 1974. (An American leadership sample favored U.S. military intervention by a 77-14 percent majority on a comparable poll in late 1974).

The same questions were asked in a nationwide poll by ROPER in July, 1977. The result showed that willingness to use American troops in defence of West Berlin and Western Europe has declined a bit since 1977, though it remains higher than in 1974, when the public was showing an acute negative reaction to the Viet-Nam experience. According to result of Roper poll two-fifths of the public favored using troops to defend Western Europe from Soviet attack only one-fifth were willing to send troops to defend South Korea, Taiwan, Israel, Rhodesia or Yugoslavia, in general men, younger people, the more well to do, whites, the college educated, republicans and

especially the politically, socially active are the groups most favorable to sending troops.

Support for defending various countries depends on how people feel about U.S. defence commitments in general as well as how they feel about the particular countries involved. POTOMAC found, for example, that those who favored defending Western Europe from attack also tended to favor defending South Korea, while virtually all of those opposed defending Western Europe also opposed defending South Korea. All in all, about one quarter of the public favored U.S. defence commitments to both Western Europe and South Korea, and about one quarter opposed both of those commitments. Similarly, nearly half of the public favored defence commitments to both Western Europe and Japan, while about one quarter opposed both commitments.

Certain population groups were more supportive than others of every U.S. defence commitments. Men were much more willing than women to defend all other countries, the college educated were more willing than the grade-school educated, those earning more than \$25,000 annually were more willing than those having incomes less than \$7,000 and adults 30-50 years invariably were more willing than those over 50 to defend other countries.

### 3) Perception of the U.S. Military Strength

The public concern with U.S. primacy as a world power has returned to the level of the mid-1960's. Between 1972 and 1976 there was a steady increase in the number of Americans wanting the United States to "maintain its position as the World's most powerful Nation" (from 39 percent in 1972 to 52 in mid 1976) reversing the decline between 1964 (54 percent) and 1972 (39 percent).

Recent polls also show the same increasing in public opinion relating to the strength of U.S. military power. According to the one of the GALLUP polls recently conducted (Spring 1978), one American in three, 34 percent, rates the U.S. as the 'most powerful' nation in the world while another 50 percent say it is 'one of the most powerful' and 13 percent feel it's only

as 'powerful as other large countries'. In comparison, only eight percent of Americans rate Russia as the World's most powerful nation, and the comparable figure for Communist China's but two percent.

The proportion of Americans who perceive the U.S. as the most powerful on earth is remarkably similar among all demographic groups, with the percentage closely reflecting the national results. The only major exception to this pattern occurs among young people (under 30 years of age), who are somewhat less likely (28 percent) to say the U.S. is the prominent power in the World. Nationwide, those Americans who rate the U.S. as merely as powerful as other nations in the World do not necessarily see the Russians and Chinese as superior forces. Nearly half of those who feel the U.S. is only about as strong as other nations have the same perception of China. Similarly, 43 percent give Russia the same rating. However, in the case of the Soviets, a somewhat larger proportion is more likely to see the USSR as one of the most powerful countries in the World.

The HARRIS POLL also conducted similar survey in summer 1978 and asked cross section about the military system of the U.S. comparing the Russian military strength. Against a background of heightened tensions between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, a 61,3 percent majority of Americans continues to feel that this country's military defence system is as strong or stronger than that of the Russians. Back in 1976, a slightly higher 64-27 percent felt this way.

There is evidence however, that the number of people who think it is necessary for America to have a stronger military defense system than the Russians has declined in the past few years. Of course there are sharp differences among various groups as to how strong the U.S. defence should be: On a regional basis, both the South and East tend to feel that America must take its defence system stronger than that of the Russians. The Midwest and the West reject this notion, clearly preferring that the U.S. achieve a standoff. Older people feel quite strongly that America should have superiority over the Soviets, while youngsters feel that military parity between the world's super-

powers will suffice. Those with less education tend to want a stronger U.S. defence system, while the college educated clearly feel that parity will do. Conservatives firmly opt for U.S. military superiority over the Russians, while middle of the roaders and liberals prefer to see the U.S. on an equal footing.

These findings from a recent survey help explain why the public is overwhelmingly in favor of the SALT talks, hoping for an agreement on arms limitation. People seem to feel that military parity will foster stable relations between the U.S. and Russia whereas superiority on the part of one side or the other will lead to an environment in which peace will be more difficult to maintain.

## II. ACTIVITIES STRENGTHEN THE TIES BETWEEN U.S. AND NATO

As it may be known the U.S. was one of the chief founders of NATO and has been the major supporter of it since the very beginning. As the year passed, like in every military organization, NATO has also been facing with some problems, arising from the inside the Organization. Although not very often the U.S. policy in NATO is sometimes questioned in American political circles eg. Mansfield proposal for reducing the American troops in the Western Europe (in 1971) and the U.S. embargo on the military aid to Turkey. Two main activities are in circulation both to remove the negative effects of anti NATO activities and their reflections and influences on the public opinion and also to spread the NATO notion and concept among the young generation and some groups.

First of them is the U.S. Atlantic Council's activities. Council was founded 17 years ago for the purpose to contribute to the security and economic strength of U.S. and its fellow members of the Community by working for the strengthening of existing Atlantic institutions and, when the need becomes clear, for establishment of new ones, adequate to meet the political, military and social challenges and threats of this era. The Council many of whose members have long governmental experience, maintains continuing informal contact with senior officials



during as well as after formulation of its policy recommendations. (\*)

The second activity is not within America but from the European alliances namely from the Eurogroup of NATO. Since 5 years Eurogroup has been sending a small sub-group whose main task is to enlighten the American public understanding about NATO. Among its activities lectures to the overseas journalits, university students, interviews with the politicians and professors take a dominant place.

### CONCLUSION

Briefly it was found no overwhelming opposition to NATO in the public opinion of America, except minority groups in Universities and some leftist organizations. The impact of these groups is not great when the whole American society is considered. After pointing out this fact, I can also add that roughly one third average people knows or are aware what is NATO, and what is going on NATO. However, at least 90 percent of average Americans think that NATO is necessary for their security against the Russians. For this purpose it should be maintained and supported by the U.S. From time to time there has been some domestic pressure on NATO policy of American government. The most important of them took place between the years 1966-1972. Since that time such a pressure over American foreign policy toward NATO has not been observed.

In general, NATO issues arouse public interest when new Soviet threats appear in the media. As one of the senior officers in Washington said, "the Soviet phomenia continue to spur the interest of public media as well as the public opinion relating to the NATO subject."

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(\*) Atlantic Council of the United States, "Issues and options", Washington.