

**The Atlantic Alliance between Continuity and Transformation:  
from the “Spiritual Federation of the West” to the “Alianza por la Libertad”**

**Prof. Massimo de Leonardis**

The first expression in my title was used in December 1947 by British Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin, who outlined to U.S. Secretary of State George Marshall the idea of «some western democratic system comprising the Americans, ourselves, France, Italy etc. and of course the Dominions. This would not be a formal alliance, but an understanding backed by power, money and resolute action. It would be a sort of spiritual federation of the west». The second expression is part of the title of a study on NATO published by the foundation of former Spanish Prime Minister Manuel Aznar: *OTAN: Una Alianza por la libertad. Cómo transformar la Alianza para defender efectivamente nuestra libertad y nuestras democracias*.

Both Bevin's and Aznar's ideas are an appeal to the West to close the ranks, in order, «to safeguard the freedom, common heritage and civilization of their peoples, founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law», just to quote the preamble of the Atlantic Pact. The scope remains the same, in the late Forties and now, but there is at least one big difference: then there was unanimity of consensus on the enemy, the Soviet Union, and the means to face it, while such a consensus does not exist on the enemy identified today by Aznar, whose papers says: «The Alliance was able to protect our freedom and democracies from the Soviet threat. Now it is imperative to defend them against Islamic extremism ... Its mission right now must be clear: to combat Islamic jihadism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction mainly, but not exclusively, among Islamic groups and governments». Islamic fundamentalism was the new enemy publicly identified by NATO Secretary General Willy Claes in February 1995; but he was compelled to recant after a few days.

In about two years Bevin's project became something less grandiose but more concrete: the Atlantic Alliance. Will Aznar's paper remain only a provocative contribution to the debate on NATO's future? If it's very unlikely that NATO will consider «Islamic extremism» the enemy as much as the Soviet Union was, on the contrary the idea

of a «global NATO» is certainly on the agenda. Aznar proposed «that NATO should invite countries such as Israel, Japan and Australia to join the organization» and to «set up a strategic association with Colombia and India». Two authors wrote on *Foreign Affairs* in September 2006 that «NATO's next move must be to open its membership to any democratic state in the world that is willing and able to contribute to the fulfillment of NATO's new responsibilities. Only a truly global alliance can address the global challenges of the day».

The title of this conference talks of «continuity and transformation». Certainly the Atlantic Alliance has transformed also during the Cold War, but isn't today «transformation» an understatement? Actually in December 1998 at the Atlantic Council in Brussels, U. S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright referred to «those who try to suggest that by assuming these new missions, or by talking about common Euro-Atlantic interests beyond collective defense, we are somehow tinkering with the original intent of the North Atlantic Treaty». Her answer was drastic: «I've said it before; I will repeat it again today: this is hogwash». She justified this harsh comment saying that «the founders of the Alliance were wise to allow us the flexibility to come together to meet common threats that could originate from beyond our immediate borders ... We are neither altering the North Atlantic Treaty, nor attempting to create some kind of a new "global NATO". What we are doing is using the flexibility the Treaty always offered to adapt this Alliance to the realities of a new strategic environment and the challenges we must face together in the twenty-first century». These statements were made while the United States were shepherding NATO towards the military intervention in Kosovo, which, in the opinion of many commentators, stretched the letter and the spirit of the treaty beyond reasonable limits.

Actually the Treaty of Washington is very «flexible» and was interpreted flexibly about the commitment to democracy included in the preamble. It's significant that, on the eve of the Treaty's signature, the British Foreign Office considered the problem of an eventual request by the Soviet Union itself to join the Pact and Minister of State Hector Mc Neil remarked that mentioning freedom and democracy in the preamble would offer no valid reason to exclude Moscow, since they were concepts exploitable by everybody, «we just interpret it differently» he said, as it was demonstrated by the references to democracy in the «Declaration on Liberated Europe» signed at Jalta,

which had not prevented the instauration of totalitarianism in Eastern Europe.

Spain's admission to the Alliance, desirable from the military point of view, was in fact «unpalatable politically», but during the negotiations no reservations were made on the Portuguese regime, also authoritarian. Greece and Turkey suffered no serious consequences from NATO when they suspended democracy. Yugoslavia, ruled by a bloody dictator, in 1954 signed a military alliance with two NATO members, again Greece and Turkey. Tito received strong economic and military support by the United States and the United Kingdom. The Americans proclaimed to fight «Stalin, not communism» and described Tito as «a bastard ... we need to flatter», while British Foreign Secretary Bevin said: «Tito may be a scoundrel, but he's our scoundrel». During the Cold War, NATO was neither indifferent to ideology as traditional alliances, nor followed strict ideological guidelines, instead adopted an «ethical realism», able di «to distinguish clearly between different grades of evil and to choose firmly between them».

The Soviet threat was the worst evil and there is no doubt that among the commitments listed in the preamble of the Atlantic Pact the last one, «to unite their efforts for collective defence and for the preservation of peace and security», had absolute urgency and prominent importance. Speaking on 29<sup>th</sup> September 1948 to the United Nations General Assembly, Belgian socialist Prime Minister Spaak, a future NATO Secretary General, addressed these words to the Soviet delegation: «Do you know which the basis of our policy is? It's fear, fear of you, of your government, of your policy». In 1978 the Italian Manlio Brosio, a former NATO Secretary General, remarked that «to keep the Alliance working for a long time were enough the feeling of danger and the necessity of common defence».

Certainly is flexible art. 5, the core of the Alliance, which does not commit member states to react automatically with military means to an external attack. This provides today the ground for envisaging a NATO at «variable geometry». The *Military Concept for Defence against Terrorism*, approved at Prague summit in November 2002, makes a distinction between operations with «NATO in the lead» and «NATO in support». In the second instance «on a case-by-case basis, the Alliance might agree to provide its assets and capabilities to support operations in defence against terrorism, undertaken by or in co-operation with the European Union or other International Organisations or coalitions involving Allies». This paves the way to NATO as an arsenal for

«coalitions of the willing». This could also imply revising the «tradition of making decisions by consensus», since the North Atlantic Treaty does not specify how collective decisions are to be made, with one exception: the Article 10 provision that «unanimous agreement» is necessary to invite a state to join the Alliance. It's clear that military operations decided without the explicit consensus of everybody could not commit dissidents to participate, but they should not openly disagree. Certainly it would be advisable to replace the principle of «“those who go also pay” with a formula whereby “all pay for those who carry out the task”». The attitude of Greece on the intervention in Kosovo may be considered an example of «constructive abstention». Athens didn't vote against the attack to Serbia, but Greek airplanes didn't participate to the bombardments.

Ground for «flexibility» on the issue of «out of area» operations and «non art. 5 missions» is provided not only by art. 4 of the Atlantic Pact but also by the reference to art. 51 of the United Nations Charter, which is the last of chapter VII about «Action with respect to threats to the peace, breaches of the peace, and acts of aggression» and recognizes to the states «the inherent right of individual or collective self-defence if an armed attack occurs». Americans would have preferred to adopt the model of the Inter-American Treaty of Rio de Janeiro of September 1947, which refers also to art. 54, one of the three of Chapter VIII of the UN Charter, about «Regional arrangements for the maintenance of international peace and security». But to refer to Chapter VIII was very risky, since it includes art. 53, which provides that «no enforcement action shall be taken under regional arrangements or by regional agencies without the authorization of the Security Council». Therefore the organization would not escape from the Soviet veto, while the purpose was «in fact be aiming at a U.N.O. as it should have been had the Soviet cooperated», as Bevin's secretary wrote in March 1948. Therefore NATO cannot be considered a «regional arrangement or agency» as those described in Chapter VIII of the UN Charter.

The relation between NATO and UNO is ambiguous, or should I say «flexible»? since the origins. United States, and to a lesser extent United Kingdom and Canada, insisted that the Atlantic Pact should be, or at least appear, an application of the spirit, of the principles and even of the letter of the UN Charter. Two polls in 1947 and 1948 showed that respectively 82% and 72% of the Americans were opposed to security agreements outside the United Nations' framework. The British *Foreign Office* was the

first to discuss the «desirability of organizing collective security under Article 51, that is to say – we read in the minutes of a meeting on 18<sup>th</sup> December 1947 – outside the Charter of the United Nations». It should be noted how this statement was curiously contradictory: how something based on an article of a charter can be «outside» that charter itself? In subsequent documents *outside* was put between inverted commas, until in March 1949 the Foreign Office maintained that the Atlantic Pact was «compatible» with the UN Charter. These variations reflected the effort to conciliate the necessity to obtain an American military guarantee, a typical instrument of traditional diplomacy, with that of giving «an appearance of universality» to the Atlantic Alliance.

Presenting the text of the North-Atlantic Treaty, American Secretary of State Dean Acheson took care to describe it as «carefully and consciously designed to conform in every particular with the Charter of the United Nations». Europeans considered risky to embark in such juridical argument and British Foreign Secretary Bevin confined himself to say that «the Atlantic Pact should be regarded as the first practical step towards implementation of the objects of the United Nations Charter, and as such was completely in consonance with the ideals of the United Nations». To obtain the Senate's ratification, the Department of State presented a document with the significative title *Difference between the North Atlantic Treaty and Traditional Military Alliances*, while in July 1950 Acheson described the Atlantic Alliance as a novel approach to international affairs, which «has advanced international cooperation to maintain the peace, to advance human right, to raise standards of living, and to promote respect for the principle of equal right and self-determination of peoples». To sum up, already in the first years the Americans stressed the potential universalism of the Atlantic Alliance.

I shall not deal in detail with the issue of «out of area», on which there is a specific paper at this conference. I would only remind that it appeared periodically during the Cold War: in the *Report of the Committee of Three on Non-Military Cooperation in NATO* of December 1956, in the Harmel Report on *The Future Tasks of the Alliance* and in the *Strategic Concept* of December 1967, in the NATO summits in Bonn in 1982 and in Paris in 1983, just to mention the more relevant official documents. General de Gaulle in September 1958 wrote: «The world being as it is, one cannot consider as adapted to its purpose an organization such as NATO, which is limited to the security of the North Atlantic, as if what is happening, for example, in the Middle East or in Africa,

did not immediately and directly concern Europe». Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs Fanfani at the Atlantic Council of May 1965 warned that lack of preventive consultation inside NATO on the out-of-area issue could bring to «a gradual crumbling of our Alliance».

Nobody questions today that NATO is entitled to act out-of-area. But how much «global» NATO should be? On the eve of Riga summit in November 2006 Secretary General de Hoop Scheffer was prudent: «We don't need a global NATO. ... NATO doesn't need to become a "*gendarme du monde*". What we need is an increasingly global approach to security». But Americans seemed to nurture more ambitious plans. U. S. Ambassador to the Atlantic Victoria Nuland «argued that Nato should focus on deepening its co-operation with countries such as Australia and Japan and becoming a genuine globally deployable military force ... This is all part of a continuum of moving from a house where basically everyone had to hold their own territory . . to common collective deployment at strategic distances ... It's a totally different animal». Daniel Fried, Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs, expressed similar ideas: « In short, what NATO is becoming in practice – although not yet in theory – is an organization, an alliance which does not have geographic limits on its operations. It is potentially worldwide in its missions ... It's an organization which is doing things consistent with its original mission that were inconceivable 15 or 20 years ago». Again, like Mrs. Albright in 1999, he stressed that NATO's new tasks are consistent with the principles on which the Alliance is based: «the Washington Treaty is one of these remarkable documents that are short and deceptively simple. It allows for a great deal of flexibility in NATO's actions based on the consensus of its members, and it is very specific as to its values and very non-prescriptive in terms of action». Time runs quickly: Mrs. Albright said «we are not attempting to create some kind of a new "global NATO"», seven years later Mr. Fried talked about «an alliance which does not have geographic limits on its operations». About the membership, referring to enlargement of NATO to the countries indicated by Aznar, Fried said: «This is a legitimate debate, but right now we're looking at developing partnerships with nations far away. But that's not the same as membership. So we're not crossing that line yet». I stress that he said *yet*. From the legal point of view art. 10 of the North-Atlantic treaty, which opens the accession only to «any other *European State*», is certainly a very big obstacle to a global full

membership, which could be surpassed only if existed today a strong ideal background and political will similar to those shared by the Alliance's founders.

Leaving aside the issue of membership, remains the problem of NATO's identity and role. In the Spring 2005 issue of the *NATO Review* we could read these opinions: «NATO is a highly successful alliance immersed in an identity crisis from which it is unlikely to emerge soon» or «the Alliance seems today to be suffering from anaemia». On the eve of Riga summit Donald Asmus and Richard Holbrooke evoked the danger of «condemning the Alliance to a slow but certain descent into marginalization». We cannot dismiss these opinions as philosophical lucubration of scholars, following a top NATO official whom I remember saying «Alliance in crisis? We are too busy doing things to notice that».

Neorealism claims that alliances form in response to perceived threats, persist because of threats, and die in the absence of threats. But NATO has been better described by political scientists as an «authoritative alliance», which «endures under three conditions: a shared daily culture; no alternatives; satisfied challengers». Thousands of essays have been written on the crisis of transatlantic relations, which was already quite evident during the Clinton presidency. On the first condition certainly Europe and the United States have drifted apart, but on the world stage they remain the two closest civilizations.

The second condition, «satisfied challengers», is endangered both by American unilateralism, and by the ambitions of the EU. Unilateralism, or if you prefer hegemonic multilateralism, was not invented by President Bush Jr. but it's deeply rooted in the American diplomatic tradition. This is Barack Obama speaking: «I reject the notion that the American moment has passed. I dismiss the cynics who say that this new century cannot be another when ... we lead the world ... No President should ever hesitate to use force – unilaterally if necessary – to protect ourselves and our vital interests when we are attacked or imminently threatened». About EU ambitions, at least I will say that most Europeans wants to redress the balance of power between the two shores of the Atlantic which existed during the Cold War, at the beginning of which U. S. Undersecretary of State Lovett remarked «that nearly every country in the world had requested some sort of assurances from us».

Probably the second condition, «no alternative», could be the most effective.

There is no alternative in sight to NATO as an effective military organization. This certainly assures the survival of NATO. But the possibility of NATO not only to survive but to play a central role depends from the solidity of the transatlantic relation. A militarily weak Europe still needs the United States, while these, imperially overstretched, need the support of the Old Continent. After the disillusionments suffered in the last few years, on the two sides of the Atlantic many seem to be convinced that no important problem in the world can be dealt effectively without the joint effort of the United States and Europe.