Why was the formation of NATO sought by Britain as the solution to its defense dilemma?

Vários
Vários conferencistas

This article will examine how the North Atlantic Treaty Organization allowed the UK, in the early stage of the Cold War, to maintain some global power. In many cases, it acted as a bridge between Western European and American interests. Its role was sometimes misunderstood, mainly by the French, who in the 1960s called Britain the American Trojan horse. Perceiving the decline of the Empire and its lack of resources in the early stage of the Cold War, British politicians tried to preserve the UK´s world position as a Third Force within an Anglo-Saxon alliance that would protect Western Europe from the Soviet threat and would preserve strategic British positions in a world marked by the confrontation of the two superpowers.

1. Britain's position in the new post-war order

The first years of peace after the Second World War led gradually to the perception in British official circles that the United Kingdom could no longer project its global power as it used to be. The basic and undeniable fact was that it was to become a junior partner of the United States in a world dominated by two superpowers. Given the limitations on its resources the United Kingdom would have to adapt to the new coming reality and reformulate its foreign policy and defense strategy in a context where Germany was no longer a great threat, the United States an ally, the Soviet Union was aiming to interfere in "its" Mediterranean, and Europe was recovering from the millions of deaths, serious economic damages and a crisis of self-confidence. Still, the United Kingdom wanted to succeed as a third force on the world stage.

Britain had no longer large military capabilities and economic wealth, but its political capabilities defined, as Paul Viotti does, by "human resources, reputation, technology and the nature of its political system and political culture"[1], were still high prized in

international diplomatic and military circles.

In 1946 Nehru´s announcement of India´s intentions to become independent gave rise in the United Kingdom to heated debates over the future of the Commonwealth. The new British Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, accepted different approaches to this issue. Nonetheless, he was still hoping that India would recognize the British crown as the common link of the Commonwealth[2]. As if this was not enough, in October 1948 the Irish Prime Minister announced in Ottawa that the Republic of Ireland would leave the Commonwealth.

On the eve of a special Conference in April 1949 some meetings that took place at Downing Street showed that the Indians were not going to accept easily the British Crown as the Head of the Commonwealth. Times had changed and on 27 April India´s government informed the others governments of the Commonwealth that "India shall become a republic", although accepting the "King as the symbol" of the organization[3]. The conference had made it clear that the new decolonized nations were determined to choose their own political way. But, even more important, it had also emerged that these new countries might not follow the defense and security policy of the United Kingdom, specially, towards the Soviet Union. In fact, when the British have put the question whether the solidarity of war time would remain in peace time, Nehru´s response was that the real problems that were affecting Asia had their origins in poverty rather than in communism. So, why was it necessary for the Commonwealth a defense commitment against communism? By contrast, Pakistan expressed its worry about the Soviet threat[4]. The British conversations with India, once the "jewel in the imperial crown", and Pakistan during 1947, 1948 and 1949 had stressed the need for the United Kingdom to find new allies in order to guarantee a stable security to the country within and outside Europe[5].

Palestine, the mandate held by Britain since the break-up of the Ottoman Empire, considered to be vital by the British Chiefs of Staff for the UK´s position in the Middle East[6], was now the goal of thousands Jewish refugees that were not willing to return to their European countries after having
experienced the holocaust. The British military and some circles of the Foreign Office, including Ernest Bevin, the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, believed that the loss of Palestine would endanger the Suez Canal and the Cold War Strategy[7]. In Greece the ongoing civil war was been supported, on governmental forces side, by the United Kingdom against communist partisans. In late 1946 the British Prime Minister´s concerns about the extremely high level of overseas military expenditure, led him to argue that it was better to the UK to withdraw from Greece and Palestine[8]. All these events took place in a context in which Britain´s financial position was rapidly deteriorating.

Despite all this, the withdraw of strategic positions in the Middle East was seen in British official circles as a loss of prestige, whereas the military had serious concerns about the implications it might have to the strategy of deterrence regarding the Soviets. As a matter of fact, Attlee´s views on a retreat from the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean was seen by the Chiefs of Staff as another Munich[9]. The Middle East

should remain one of the main pillars in British defense strategy[10]. But how could the United Kingdom's domestic situation, dominated by enormous external debts, exacerbated by food and coal shortages, relying on US loans, exposed to a rebellion in Palestine and the demands of Egypt concerning the Suez Canal, and having to face the withdrawal from India, in a context of a shifting influence from Britain to the US, still allowed the UK to project power in the world?

2. The United Kingdom and the aim to build a Third Force

2.1 The European cooperation, 1946-1948

It is important to highlight, as Niall Ferguson does, that the alliance the UK had had with the US during the Second War World was "a suffocating embrace; but was born of necessity"[11]. Britain became very dependent on American credit and British perception was that the US was taking advantage of its financial weakness. The former World´s banker became, after 1945, a humble credit supplicant. According to economist John Keynes, who had been sent to Washington to negotiate with American creditors, the US was aiming to "pick out the eyes of the British Empire"[12].

Wanting the country to regain autonomy in world politics and despite Attlee´s objections concerning an involvement in continental affairs, British official circles led by Ernest Bevin, began to support the idea of having closer ties to Europe in order to refrain from being too dependent on the US. Bevin was advocating a stronger French-British cooperation which was aimed to build up a defensive-political Western bloc with complementary economic and commercial advantages. Already in September 1945 Bevin had already told the French politician Léon Blum that he was keen to work closer with France[13]. The foreign secretary saw such a cooperation as a way that would enable the United Kingdom to create a "third force" that would establish a strong UK position between the US and the Soviet Union[14]. On 4 March 1947 the treaty of Dunkirk was signed between France and the UK.

The British saw European integration as contributing to the solution of their weakness. On the other hand, the French had fears of a revival of a strong Germany. But like the United Kingdom, France was an impoverished ex-great power with extreme internal political divisions, even among Gaullists, and still marked by the stigma of Nazi collaboration. Additionally, as historians Young and Kent stress, the deep distrust of the Foreign office of communists in the French government was also an obstacle to a solid French-British cooperation[15].

In the meanwhile, the situation in the Middle East and in the Eastern Mediterranean was becoming more challenging and the United Kingdom had no other solution but to call for

American support. It is important to highlight that due to India´s independence the British began to focus more their efforts on the Middle East[16]. At the end of the day, European cooperation was still too weak to bring effective solutions to British strategic positions in the world. Therefore, Bevin had to look for American support in order to supply the economic and military aid the Greek government required to resist communist rebels. It is also important to highlight that the American involvement in Greece and Turkey in 1947 must be seen within the framework of the Truman doctrine which stated "The free peoples of the world look to us for support in maintaining their freedoms"[17].

At the annual conference of the Conservative Party, both Churchill and Eden highlighted three main objectives for British foreign policy. "First, unity within the British Commonwealth and Empire. Second, unity with Western Europe. Third, unity across the Atlantic"[18]. Although, at the time, Churchill was not in power, the concept of the three interrelated aims had some influence in British official circles. The above-mentioned aims were seen as complementary rather than antagonistic.

In 1948 the Czechoslovakia coup led some Western governments to draw the conclusion that the Soviets had aggressive intentions towards Eastern Europe. The Soviets were in fact infiltrating key governmental posts in order to create in Eastern Europe loyal governments to Moscow. According to John Thomas, the role of communist ideology may be exaggerated. In some cases, communists were successful because they knew how to exploit resentments against Nazis or Fascists[19]. The same year of the Czechoslovakia´s coup, Britain, France and the BENELUX (Belgium, Luxemburg and the Netherlands) formed a military alliance, the Brussels Treaty. The treaty provided for a response by all signatories, if one or more members were to be attacked.

2.2 The prospect of an Atlantic cooperation

In 1946 Attlee had realistically recognized that the British Empire and the Commonwealth could no longer be defended by itself as it has happened in old times: "The conditions which made it possible to defend a string of possessions scattered over five continents by means of a fleet based on island fortresses have gone"[20]. In fact, new military technologies as the long-range air power and the Soviet Union´s closer interest in strategic Mediterranean bases, which had emerged since at least 1944[21], made it gradually necessary for the British government to cooperate with the Americans. This cooperation was to become successful in Greece and Iran, among others. Moreover, the European Recovery Program, known as the Marshall Plan after secretary Marshall, announced aid to Europe in a Harvard speech, was certainly to be a successful effort to assist Europe economically and win the battle for the hearts and minds of Western Europeans.

By 1948 the United Kingdom was still hegemonic in the Persian Gulf and had to maintain an army in Europe, but had no reliable allies in Europe. To assure the UK´s security needs all over the world, to assist the defense of Western Europe and to allow the

decrease of the burden of military expenditure, Bevin began to promote the idea of a Western European joint defense bloc which would be backed by the US. In this task he was being informally encouraged by Marshall[22]. As Michael Howard has put it, by 1948 there was no "European security and defense identity"[23]. As a matter of fact, a Western European military cooperation independent of the Americans was unrealizable due to the deep mistrust between the Western European countries. Therefore, it was crucial for Washington and for the Europeans to consider an involvement of the US in a defensive European system in order to face the Soviet threat.

It is also important to highlight that Bevin´s anti-communism played a significant role on the accomplishment of the idea of the Atlantic alliance. Already in 1946 the foreign secretary had written to Attlee, stressing the danger for the UK of the Soviet threat, "The Russians have decided upon an aggressive policy based on military communism and Russian chauvinism (...)"[24]. Regarding this, Young and Kent claim the importance of Bevin´s notion of a united anti-communist force of Social-Democrats backed by the US. William Wallace argues that the emergence of the Soviet threat made the US alliance more essential for the British defense policy[25]. But probably the key factor that led the British to advocate with such fervor the North Atlantic Treaty was the desire of preserving the UK´s world position. There is also some evidence to suggest that having to leave the notion of a "Third force" by way of the leadership of a European cooperation, the UK sought to pursue the same concept with the "special relationship with the US". The UK would be a kind of bridge between Europe and Washington. As a matter of fact, from the very beginning Britain had played a pivotal role by convincing the French of the political and military advantages the creation of NATO would bring to Paris[26].

Martin Folly has brought up evidence by which Bevin´s role was also crucial convincing the Americans, since the Prague Coup, that it was absolutely necessary a security alliance between Western Europe and the US against the Soviets. Folly has demonstrated that it was the British that had pointed out that the Marshall Plan was not enough to contain the Soviet threat[27]. Finally, discussions on this issue began, led by Arthur Vandenberg. On June 1948 Vandenberg presented the general outlines of a military pact. It would include Europe, the US, the Algerian departments of France and the islands possessions of the European countries which were about to become members of the future North Atlantic Treaty organization (NATO)[28]. The treaty, signed on 4 April 1949, stated that "the parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all (...)"[29].

3. The United Kingdom and NATO in the early years of the cold war

The North Atlantic Treaty emphasized from its beginning, that the majority of Western European countries were determined to resist the Soviet threat in all its forms, ideological, economic and political. As Gann and Duignan had stressed it, the members of

NATO could leave it as they please, which was not to be the case of the Warsaw Pact´s members that had to be under the Diktat of the USSR[30]. Nevertheless, NATO´s members were unequal in practice, which would cause problems in the future. As a matter of fact, even at an early stage, when the NATO´s treaty was still being debated, it was only done between the British, the Canadians and the Americans. This fact was to have serious implications in the next years, mainly on French´s side. Nevertheless, the Treaty was a clear message to the Soviets that "the Western European powers were going to stand together and not allow themselves to fall prey to communist parties beholden to Moscow"[31]. Even countries that did not enter the Treaty understood the message. For instance, Spain was not a member of NATO, but agreed in 1953 to allow the Americans to have access to a base in Spanish territory[32].

The first serious clashes between NATO´s members began with the prospect of Western Germany´s rearmament. Whereas the US and the UK saw this rearmament as a necessity to defend Western Europe against the Soviets, the French had fears of a military resurgence of Western Germany. Since 1949 Germany was split into two states, i.e., the German Federal Republic, created in May 1949, which was followed in October of the same year by the German Democratic Republic.

For the British it was essential to protect the territory on the East of the Rhine. For this purpose they considered of being crucial the creation of a German military force. The French were shocked and obviously against it. In 1950 Paris proposed the Pleven plan, aiming to create a supranational European army as part of a European Defense Community (EDC). In 1952 talks over an EDC´s agreement were marked by heated debates. For the French the EDC would create a European army that would remove the prospect of a German army[33]. Nonetheless, as the EDC endangered the cohesion of NATO the British refused to be a part of it and the project was finally rejected when the French National Assembly refused to ratify it. In 1954 an agreement was reached on the acceptance of Western Germany as a full new member of NATO.

4. The United Kingdom: the Trojan horse of the US?

In the 1960s de Gaulle´s fears that the United Kingdom would turn to be the Trojan horse of the US, led France in 1963 to veto the country´s admission to the EEC. De Gaulle saw Europe and, above all, France, as been threatened by the US hegemony and the UK as an American subordinate. As Stanley Hoffman has put it, the Gaullists presented "Europe as a sleeping princess guarded by the American tutor, whom the Prince Charming tries to awaken"[34]. In fact, Gaullists argued again and again that Europe had to turn into a second force in the West, rather to become a mere Third Force. Therefore, it became gradually clear that de Gaulle wanted to challenge the US leadership in the Western world. Moreover, he saw in the UK´s decision to buy Polaris missiles from the US the proof that Britain "was committed to maintain a special relationship with the US in preference to Europe"[35].

In order to give France a better position within NATO and after the dissatisfaction provoked by the US intervention in the Suez crisis against the French and British interests, de Gaulle proposed in 1958 a tripartite NATO directorate which would include the US, the UK and France. De Gaulle´s proposal was not even answered by the US. The French viewed NATO as a "merely extension of the Anglo-American alliance"[36] and were determined to rank France as third in authority within it. Writing in 1961, Edgar Furniss claimed that de Gaulle was aiming "to raise France to the facto equality with the Anglo-Saxon powers". According to Furniss, that explained why he announced that the Mediterranean fleet would be under French orders alone[37]. Explaining its decision to take the Mediterranean fleet out of NATO command, de Gaulle said: "I observe (...) that the two other great powers of the Atlantic alliance (...) the United States and Great Britain have taken steps to prevent the greater part of their naval forces from being integrating into NATO"[38]. In order to mark his determination to led France to a dignified position according to what he considered to be suitable to the French rank's position in international relations, de Gaulle developed a nuclear "force de frappe" and withdrew France from NATO´s organization in 1966. But, as Robert Kleiman has stressed it in a book on NATO published in 1965 "With or without de Gaulle, the likelihood has always existed that a revived and united Europe, increasingly independent of the United States, one day might go its own way"[39].

The British too had been unhappy at the UK´s junior role in the Anglo-American partnership. Already in the 1950s Eden had realized that "Britain was a poor country which was grossly overstretched as a major colonial power and must face harsh realities, he could not accept that she had became a satellite of the United States"[40]. Nonetheless, in order to maintain British position in the world, although conscious of Britain´s decline and of the shift of global leadership from the UK to the US, it was necessary for London to accommodate to an Atlantic alliance that would allow the UK to play a significant role in the Cold War and in Western European security. Nonetheless, the price the UK had to pay for the "special relations with the US" was sometimes high. For instance, in 1963 Germany supported French veto of Britain´s entry into EEC because, as Nathalia Pinchuk has put it, "enlargement towards a state, which was very little inspired by the perspective to cooperate in the realm of foreign and defense policy, would weaken European dynamic of unification"[41].

William Wallace stresses that the guidelines of British foreign and defense policy during the early stage of Cold War were based in three circles. According to the author, the UK´s position as a world power in the first decade that followed the end of the Second World War was focused on three aspects. The first, emphasized the Commonwealth and the Empire. The second, concerned Western Europe. Finally, the third, stressed the Atlantic relations. Wallace argues that it was the shrinkage of imperial political and military ties that led the transatlantic circle to becoming gradually more important for London. Wallace highlights that, within the "transatlantic circle", the UK had acquired an important share of military power and was able to cooperate with the US in terms of "special relations" that allowed London to have significant advantages in the nuclear and the intelligence fields[42]. It cannot also be forgotten that for the US a reliable ally in Europe, as the UK, was not easy to replace, since neither France, nor the German

Federal Republic were trustful.

Conclusion

To conclude, it could be said, as William Wallace did it, that the gradual withdrawal from empire "only reinforced the conviction that Britain´s foreign policy was predicated on the maintenance of a position as America´s closest European ally". UK´s status as great power had substantially declined in a context of a major confrontation between two superpowers which had emerged after the Second War World. Therefore, the transatlantic alliance was the best option for the British. It would allow the UK to maintain a significant share of military power within the NATO, along with the protection of its interests in Europe and also, mainly in the early stage of the Cold War, to preserve its strategic interests in the Middle East. At the end of the day, the UK knew how to adapt to the new world order and played an important role in Western European security.

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2 McIntyre, W. David (1998), British Decolonization, Basingstoke, p. 112.

3 Id., p. 113.

4 Id., p. 116

5 Regarding this issue it is important to highlight also the manpower contribution of Indian soldiers to the First and the Second War at the British Army.

6 Kent, John (1993), British Strategy and the Origins of the Cold War 1944-1949, Leicester, p.54.

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