

WHAT IS NATO FOR?

Origins

NATO, much like the CIA, the American defence procurement budget, and the nuclear deterrent, is a relic of bygone times. The North Atlantic Treaty, signed in 1949, established the organisation, whose express purpose was “keeping the Russians out, the Germans down and the Americans in”. With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, NATO has struggled to define a new role, although its presence on the world stage has remained rather large. As of 2012, there are 28 member states, spanning North America and Europe. A full list can be found [here](#).

Certainly, there is reason to believe that the ‘Soviet threat’ was vastly exaggerated. As Herman writes, Western European elites, “...like U.S. officials, were more concerned about keeping down the power of the left in Europe than any Soviet military threat.”ⁱ In Italy, for example, the organization operated alongside the CIA to keep the left out of power - slaying three police officers by a car-bomb in 1972 and taking part in the Bologna massacre in 1980 - as well as taking an active role in a number of power grabs. These included the ‘Piano Solo’ silent coup in 1964, which forced various socialists to leave their Ministerial posts, and the ultimately aborted Tora Tora operation in 1970. Some evidence even links these efforts to the assassination of then Italian Prime Minister Aldo Moro, allegedly executed by the Red Brigades.

The campaign was known as ‘Operation Gladio’ and its traces can be found throughout Europe. In Belgium, a Parliamentary report published in 1990 found evidence of extreme right-wingers, enjoying a high level of protection, planning actions to destabilise the democratic regime. In France, violence was used to sabotage the negotiations for Algerian independence. In Greece, the military coup - which led to mass arrests, the use of torture on political opponents and a dictatorship lasting decades- and the 1980

coup in Turkey, all of which took place with the backing and material support of Gladioⁱⁱ.

Contemporary Role

Today, NATO has three main roles. These are, respectively, mopping up conflicts alongside the US, ‘humanitarian intervention’ in countries where it might prove useful and projecting power to back up western hegemony.

This first role is apparent in Afghanistan where the ISAF, or International Security Assistance Force, involves all 28 NATO countries in an effort to quell the Taliban and train Afghani security forces. As those who’ve been following this seemingly endless, bloody war will know, NATO has consistently killed civilians via aerial bombardment. They have also come under considerable criticism from President Karzai over their role in nighttime raids and control of Afghan prisons. NATO has also been keen adopters of the drone, or UAV, strikes which have bombarded the Afghan countryside and consistently crossed the border into Pakistanⁱⁱⁱ.

However, it’s in the ‘humanitarian’ capacity that NATO has received most attention. This can be observed during the war in Kosovo and, more recently, in Libya. While the narrative of philanthropic westerners using their eminently superior technology to quell ethnic conflicts sits well with our self-image, the reality differs rather starkly. In Serbian, the conduct of NATO was such that the civilian casualties actually increased after the NATO intervention, something Noam Chomsky has **tirelessly pointed out**. What’s more, the media portrayal of the war remained silent about the atrocities committed by our ‘allies’, which included the kidnap and organ harvesting of Serbians and the subsequent ethnic cleansing of ‘liberated Kosovo’ of 200,000 Serbs and Roma^{iv}.

The Libyan situation is not dissimilar. In addition to the **barbarism** of some NTC forces on the

ground, the escalation brought about by NATO was considerable. As Seamus Milne writes:

“Throwing its weight behind one side in a civil war to oust Gaddafi’s regime, it became the air force for the rebel militias on the ground. So while the death toll was perhaps between 1,000 and 2,000 when Nato intervened in March, by October it was estimated by the NTC to be 30,000 – including thousands of civilians.”^v

Another disturbing detail unites the two events. In both cases, the actions of Western powers guaranteed them considerable sway when the country’s next steps were decided. In the case of Libya, this has meant **lucrative opportunities** for American and European oil companies and the possibility of another country to (neo)liberate^{vi}. In Kosovo, we have the situation as described by John Pilger:

“Last February the “international community”, led by the US, recognised Kosovo, which has no formal economy and is run, in effect, by criminal gangs that traffic in drugs, contraband and women. But it has one valuable asset: the US military base Camp Bondsteel, described by the Council of Europe’s human rights commissioner as “a smaller version of Guantanamo”^{vii}.

Power projection is a key third aspect of NATO’s role. This has been clearest in the Clinton era expansion of the alliance eastwards, in **direct contradiction** of promises made to Russia. Certainly, as Georgia is considered for membership - a decision made at the 2008 Bucharest summit - the alliance finds itself encroaching further onto Russia’s doorstep.^{viii} One particularly worrying dimension of this is as follows: if attacks similar to those in 2008 had happened while Georgia was a member, the possibility of a 1914-style European conflagration, with ‘collective defense’ dragging the rest of the continent into the conflict, becomes all too real. Joint exercises with the ‘Dialogue countries’ in the middle east and states in the Gulf are, furthermore: “...expanding NATO’s military ambit from the Atlantic coast of Africa to and throughout the Persian Gulf.”^{ix}

In a similar vein, NATO countries are used to host nuclear weapons^x and, **as demonstrated** by the latest NATO summit in May, the much opposed

European Missile Defense Shield remains firmly on the agenda. Again, the projection of U.S. power casts a long shadow over all concerned. Close co-operation with Israel has become another salient feature^{xi}, throwing even further doubt over NATO’s alleged commitment to democracy and peace. Somewhat bizarrely, the Somalian pirates also became a target of NATO’s naval forces, following a series of high-profile incidents^{xii}. The Alliance has other incidental benefits, too, such as compelling member states to build up their armed forces with US-purchased weapons.

The lack of an obvious purpose has not prevented NATO from becoming a limb of western geopolitical interest. As this year’s summit in Chicago and next year’s summit surely attest, the ghosts of the cold war continue to haunt us long after their sell-by date. As Scotland’s role in the alliance is **considered** by the SNP, the need for civilian engagement with the issue is greater than ever.

References

i: Herman, Edward S. “NATO: The Imperial Pitbull” (2009) ColdType (available on www.coldtype.net)

ii: The evidence for this was first brought to my attention in the 2004 book, ‘NATO’s Secret Armies: Operation Gladio and Terrorism in Western Europe’ by Daniel Ganser. Further revelations have followed, and a full summary of the allegations and evidence can be found here: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation_Gladio

iii: Recent examples of botched NATO air-raids can be found [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#). Drone strikes, which have consistently been deployed over the border to assassinate alleged ‘militants’ have, unsurprisingly, caused problems for NATO in Pakistan, as protests continue to escalate. Veteran journalist Ahmed Rashid, whose excellent books *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism*, *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia* and *Descent into Chaos: The United States and the failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia* are invaluable in understanding the war, can be found discussing drones and geopolitics [here](#). Karzai’s opposition to ongoing NATO control of Afghan jails and night-time raids is detailed [here](#).

iv: <http://www.newstatesman.com/europe/2008/08/pilger-kosovo-war-nato-serbs>

v: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/may/15/global-justice-nato-libya> For further discussion, see: <http://www.counterpunch.org/2012/05/15/nato-in-the-dock-on-libya-bombing/>

vi: Interesting, albeit inconclusive analysis here: <http://www.counterpunch.org/2011/11/23/destroying-libyas-welfare-state/>

vii: Ibid. iv

viii: See [here](#) for some surprising liberal critiques of this plan.

ix: Ibid. I

x: See the CND briefing here: <http://www.cnduk.org/component/k2/item/576-cnd-submission-to-the-defence-select-committee-on-nato-briefing?qh=YToZOntpOjA7czo0OiJuYXRvbjtpOjE7czo2OiJuYXRvJ3MiO2k6MjtzOjU6Im5hdG8nJjt9>

xi: The relationship is discussed, for example, in Haaretz here: <http://www.haaretz.com/opinion/bring-israel-into-nato.premium-1.461868>

xii: For examples, see [here](#) and [here](#).