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THE WESTERN ALLIANCE : RECKONING WITH FLEXIBLE CRISES-PERCEPTION

Introduction :

The Atlantic Alliance today is confronted with controversy. Never before had the world experienced an alliance as powerful, rigorous, well-planned, and as long-lasting as the alliance between North America and West Europe. In a way, the Western Alliance epitomizes the structural frame of the entire post-War international system. Yet today, within this complex mechanism, in spite of the massive power that it continues to wield, trends have evolved which even if they, according to certain analytical interpretations, would reflect nothing more than sheer tactical flexibility, such a flexibility is also largely interpreted on the other hand, as a move towards weakening rather than a loosening-up of the alliance.

The purpose of this paper is not to offer any conclusive value-laden judgement either for or against the "weakening theme", but rather to weigh the facts objectively and to propose the possible contours of behaviour by the actors concerned, based on the current alliance-framework. The arguments offered, may generally rationalize the validity of the "diversity theme", suggesting that such a diversity may continue to exist and expand, thus offering a refined meaning to the alliance itself.

Certain areas exist within the Atlantic Alliance, that require us to examine the historical context of the Alliance in relation to the current state of the international system.

A comparative study would be a more likely tool to help us attain objectivity rather than a possible preference to emphasise entirely on the uniqueness of the current world events. The later preference could force the analyst to be carried away by the whims of the time and thus, be prone to a subjective bias.

I, therefore, propose to undertake a brief survey of the diverse nature of realities that have historically confronted the Western Alliance. I shall then attempt an analytical study of the current perceptions of change both within and outside the Alliance. A factual representation of the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the Alliance in addition to a supportive study of image-perceptions by the actors concerned will help us attain a comprehensive evaluation of the subject-matter.

Post-War Realities : War-torn Europe was at the verge of complete economic exhaustion. The pre-War status as colonial powers was shaky. Political leaderships were threatened by systemic instability. They were highly vulnerable to Soviet expansionism in the garb of Marxist ideology. West European states, however, had the strong potential and background to emerge as post-War industrial powers being the bastion of Western democratic values, provided they were pumped with massive economic aid. They were well-equipped with skilled-industrial manpower, viable and time-tested political systemic structure, and a pre-War colonial bureau-

cracy, military and a business base, gifted with experienced organizational capability. Being the pioneers of Industrial Revolution of the last two centuries, the USA, Canada, Australia and a few non-European states were basically the ethnic extensions of Europe, with great similarity of interests.

The USA realised that her economic and military superemacy could play a vital role to protect Western interests from the potential spread of the Soviet-sponsored Communist philosophy which could otherwise evolve as the most powerful systemic trend in the post-War world structure, specially in the under-developed and exploited ex-colonies that were newly-independent and in search of a political alternative. The Soviet military expansion in East Europe towards the end of World War Two alerted the USA regarding Soviet motivations in the post-War system. West Europe had to be "saved" from a possible onslaught. The spread of communism had to be contained, so that the US vision for a "world safe for democracy" could emerge.

Thus evolved the Truman Doctrine in response to George Kennan's celebrated 'Policy of Containment' along with his 'Dominoe Theory', that envisaged the need to check the 'organic growth' of Soviet expansionism. Since West Europe was at the receiving-end, the American conceptual framework of Soviet threat-perception prevailed unchallenged and West Europe received a fascinating pumping-in of American economic and military aid, sponsored through the Marshall Plan and the NATO, which evolved consequently. This was the

new start of a long-term Euro-American partnership. It was unique by itself in terms of the proximity of interests, the long-term identity of politico-economic goals and the avowed determination to safeguard common values through a continuous process of survey in order to maintain and strengthen the economic and military health of the alliance members.

In spite of the earlier American nuclear monopoly, the Soviets by dint of sheer military strength, were still the most powerful European power. The war-experience had enriched their military potential in favour of emergence as a super-power. Therefore, a rigorous programme of sustained military growth was immediately undertaken. Two reasons may help explain this :

First, the War experience of tremendous suffering and vulnerability to potential West European military adventure, a fact that was historically exemplified by Napoleon and Hitler.

Second, the goal of ideological destiny served well to enhance the search for security and to strengthen her potential to emerge as a counter-power to the American aims in a world unchallenged, when West European states, though the major powers of the pre-War world, were now devastated and were literally impotent.

The 1950s and the 1960s :

The US-sponsored Western Alliance continued to maintain a single object of primary concern : The Soviet threat on the Western perception of the world structure, including any possible spread of the leftist ideology that

could potentially strike at the roots of American "imperialism", if allowed to spread further. The American self-assertion as the "champion" of the "Free World" had thus led to the creation of a world-wide network of alliances, supported by the Western European states. The formation of CENTO and ANZUS indicated the very peak of West European support for American goals to secure a non-communist world, even at the cost of patronising non-democratic authoritarian but anti-communist regimes in power, including military dictatorships, monarchies and petty banana-republics, as in the Caribbean and in Central America. The world was clearly divided into two power-blocs based on sheer ideology and military power that came to be identified as the 'bi-polar world'.

The bi-polar world was marked by the Cold War psychosis and was characterized by intense East-West psychological warfare, mutual suspicion, intense propaganda, refusal to hold dialogue on political accommodation, efforts to sustain the bi-polar world structure, and a competition to win over the developing Third World states in either camps. The UNO became the stage for verbal duels and package deals.

At the same time, West Europe came within the binding folds of American economic domination, evolving as an extension of the American free-enterprise system. Massive investments by the US Trans National Corporations (TNCs) helped consolidate the American grip of European economic infrastructure to such an awesome extent that it is infact well-characterised by the saying :

“When the US sneezes, Europe catches cold”.

The Trilateral Commission evolved as a high-powered body of select politicians, military and business-leaders from the USA, West Europe and Japan to regularly monitor, prescribe and co-ordinate the economic and military health of the industrialized Western states through periodic meetings.

The Spectacle of the 1970s :

The 1970s were marked by significant changes in the international system. The ‘Detente’ evolved as a new mechanism so that the philosophy of peaceful-coexistence came closer to reality. West Europe reacted positively to the American initiative and consequently participated in meaningful, pragmatic dialogue with the Soviet and East European Bloc, which unlike the later overtures by the Americans, were not coloured by domestic compulsions or political expedience.

The Soviet military build-up continued with highly impressive and consistent strides, so that they successfully reversed their former status as the underdogs. Nuclear parity was roughly achieved. Conventional weaponry status was marked by a competitive edge varying on either side. This situation and the sheer geographic proximity of West Europe to the Soviet Bloc necessitated a more realistic reappraisal by West Europeans, esp, France and Germany, of their political options in favour of a more sustained and accommodating posture rather than any possible return to a Cold War-oriented confrontation posture, which could only

serve to make them the first targets of possible Soviet aggression. West Europe has opted in favor of dialogue, accommodation and co-existence, which in brief, typifies European consistency, compared to their American partners, whose behavior-pattern has been marked more by inconsistent, short-term reactions to Soviet moves world-wide, based on domestic, parochial considerations, as well as the presidential election compulsions, the accountability phenomena and the internal economic problems.

The EEC evolved as an exemplary unifying institution in West Europe, projecting to the world probably the first ever example of a success story in economic integration. The EEC does have a good potential to enhance consequently, a partial political integration of West Europe. The first-ever elections for the European Parliament in 1978 is a valid indicator of the mature growth of West Europe's political and economic institutions beyond the dictates of the Cold War years of dependence on the Americans by compulsion. West Europe proved to be a more confident entity in the 1970s, free from the stigma of self-pity, a phenomena that had sapped the instincts of her patron alliance-partner after the post-Vietnam and post-Watergate phase of retrenchment. Since West Europe did not suffer the backlash of war-defeat, the way USA did in Vietnam, Europe continued to maintain a steady and consistent pace as well as a more balanced and predictable behaviour-pattern *vis-a-vis* the Communist states and the Third World. The USA on the other hand, continued to be

a confused giant in the 1970s, leaving most of the initiatives in the world scene to evolve either from the Third World (whose major contribution has been the concept of the NIEO, or the North-South dialogue) or from the Communist Bloc (Ethiopia, Angola, etc.). The USA, in short, decided to react rather than initiate changes in the world's dynamic and highly sensitized regions, specially, the Third World.

West Europe, aware of its vulnerability to the American TNCs, clearly realised that only a unified response could help reduce the continuous domination and the syphoning away of profits by the American TNCs. The EEC evolved as the collective means to help offset the competition from the much larger, powerful, well-financed and technologically superior US TNCs. Thus the EEC serves as West Europe's response to the American economic challenge.

The West European states, notably West Germany and France have set up profitable economic ties with the Soviet Union and East Europe, following the evolution of detente in the early 1970s. Such economic links were meant for mutual profits and paralleled the USA's grain deals and limited technology transfers to the Soviets. The Soviet exports of uranium for German nuclear reactors and natural gas pipelines to provide power for German industries are significant examples of potentially enduring trade ties between the Soviets and the Germans, who also happen to be the most vulnerable Western power in terms of geographic proximity to the Soviet Union.

Realities of the 1980s :

West Europe appears to be clearly in a mood for peaceful economic growth. She is already befaced with such domestic issues like the gradual prominence of Euro-communism in France and Italy, the effects of the American recession and the declining value of the dollar, the continuous oil-price hikes, the world-wide energy shortage and changes within the EEC. It has become difficult for European states to appreciate America's sudden fluctuations in temperament towards the Soviets. Infact, it was Europe that had slowly but consistently picked up the threads of the US-initiated detente, with a motivation to help it develop and mature. Now, as the Americans suddenly seem ready to launch a renewed Cold War, the Europeans are probably taking time to react with a certain extent of consistency rather than an imitation of the speed with which America has retreated from detente.

In other words, Europe is probably less certain of America's external projections since so much of it is dependent on the latter's domestic compulsions, economic fluctuations and so on, which are areas, that have little to do with the defense of West Europe's evolving role as an independent factor in world politics. West Europe has detected that the USA deals with the Soviet Union only to uphold her own national interests, whereas West European interests *vis-a-vis* the USSR are given a secondary status in America's lists of priorities. In other words, West European interests are often compromised the way as they would suit the

American perceptions *vis-a-vis* the Soviets.

There is a possible perception in West Europe that the USA merely offers lip-service to the Alliance solidarity concept and that basically the USA has hardly changed its philosophy as regards dealing with the Soviets since the days of Henry Kissinger's detente initiative, when the Europeans had rightly complained that they were never consulted in advance. The Europeans have since then realised that there is a super-structure of super-power relations, an area, where they would be deprived of having an equal voice with the Americans in thrashing out crucial decisions. They realised that super-power dialogue in the shape of SALT talks would mean little to them in terms of making decisions as an equal to the Americans. Infact, their role has been formally limited to the status of trust-worthy consultants whose advise would be sought. Once the Americans arrive at a decision or have signed an agreement with the Soviets, as was done at the conclusion of the last SALT agreement, the West European allies would only be informed of the details. The European approval would normally be forthcoming. The finer shades of West Europe's limits would be projected when the Americans did not seem to dwell on the idea of including representatives of the West European allies as part of the negotiating team to participate directly in the actual SALT talks with a right to veto such areas as they would like to reject.

One may, therefore, suggest that if there are areas in Soviet-American relations that remain more bilateral in

nature, in spite of the fact that they also affect West Europe's destiny, the reverse may, therefore, be equally applicable in Soviet-West European relations.

Following the post-Vietnam and post-Watergate phase of American retrenchment, the American domestic scene in the 1980s is clearly marked by a return to conservatism. Such a situation is further augmented by catalysts such as the continuing recession, soaring unemployment, the prospect of chronic oil-price hikes, which have helped build up a domestic psychosis at times, similar to a war-fever. There is thus a strong temptation to shift blame on an external threat-perception—as if the Soviets are basically the roots of America's current miseries.

The nomination of Ronald Reagan as the Republican Presidential candidate for the 1980 Presidential Elections epitomizes the above-mentioned psychological frame of the typical American voter. Infact, the issues based on which Ronald Reagan wants his access to the Presidency are of a nature that have good potential to complicate American-West European relations even further than they are today.

The conservative upsurge currently underway in the USA tends to interpret West European disagreements mainly in terms of a perceived loss of faith in US military supremacy and as such, as a loss of confidence in US commitment to her allies. Clearly enough, such conservative estimates may have overshoot the actual European compulsions or interpretation of interests. It is probably true that the conservatives in the USA have

a totally different vision of the world structure, one that is strongly coloured by the images of past American supremacy, which in fact ignores the changes that have engulfed the world in the last two decades.

West Europe, as explained earlier, is in the process of a new emancipation. It has historically adjusted itself with the images of the past in a pragmatic manner in certain specific areas, such as the pursuit of the detente. The past memories of the Cold War have not been allowed to seep in a way so as to destroy the new reality. This is a situation of creative flexibility the Americans find difficult to adjust with.

The Afghanistan issue has raised a new set of questions regarding the vitality of the Western alliance structure. Clearly, the USA and the West European allies have reacted with differing extent of seriousness regarding the threat-perception. The best example is obviously the stands taken by the two groups of allies on the question of participation in the Moscow Olympics.

The West Europeans themselves have differed on their respective approaches on the Afghanistan crisis. There is, however, a strong element of commonality in their positions when looked at distinctly *vis-a-vis* the American position.

Henry Kissinger has been complaining recently that "Europe seems to be able to unite only against America".¹ Current European attitude of caution in dealing with the Soviets is thereby often interpreted as if it

1. Quoted from the Time Essay: The U. S. and Europe-Talking Back; *Time*, June 30, 1980; June 30, 1980; Page 24.

“verges on neutralism”, and is even castigated as “self-serving and self-defeating”. While Americans suggest that widespread European perceptions of America’s “early virtues and later vices” often depicted by its so-called “pre-Vietnam power and its present weakness”, is “feverishly overblown”, they counter such European allegations with a similar rebuttal, portraying Europe as a “seat of moral decay and corrupt sophistication”.²

Some American critics of Europe’s post-Afghanistan policies often argue that Europe has moved from “fanaticism to faint-heartedness”. Americans seem to be bitter about Europe “not finding the U.S. nuclear shield to be protective any more” and, therefore, seeking “accommodation and special deals with the Soviets”. They question the European wisdom as such and suggest that total isolation of the Soviets as a result of punitive measures against them would probably have meant much more for the health of the Alliance.

Perhaps such American frustration at European behaviour is understandable. The rationale behind Europe’s current policies, however, may not yet be based so much on gratitude as the U.S. wants it to be, but rather on certain more consistent and continuous patterns of behaviour in dealing with Soviets, as I have suggested earlier in this paper.

While Americans are highly sensitive when they detect any visible sign of a “neutralist Europe”, the Europeans, on the other hand, seem to be equally aware of the almost sentimental-sounding idea of an American

2. Henry Grunwald’s “*Time Essay*”; June 30, 1980; Page 24.

retreat to isolationism, as if it would be a return within the bounds of "Fortress America". Some American analysts even remind Europeans of the consequence of such a predicament: "Fortress America" as a much more comfortable means in order to materialise Henry Kissinger's super-power hierarchy through a condominium with the Soviets.³ While Americans seem to conclude that a joint Euro-American posture of confrontation is the best means to ultimately put the detente back into the track, the Europeans clearly have their obvious reservations. Though they had followed the U.S. initiative on detente with steadfast loyalty, they do not seem to exactly share the U.S. postures of exit from detente or at least, the U.S. pretensions to do so. Clearly, the Europeans seem to sustain a lingering devotion to the first act of U.S. entry and not to the second act of a possible U.S. exit.

Who should learn from whom is perhaps too controversial and complex a subject with value-laden implications. Clearly, however, today Europe depends much too greatly on the U.S. nuclear umbrella for anyone to suggest a European separation in favour of neutralism. The US currently demands greater European spending to strengthen the NATO. Surely, Europeans are in no mood or position to ask the U.S. to militarily vacate West Europe. Whether they would do so in the near future depends on a valid alternative for them to rely on, and at this time, there is none. European autonomy, not to speak of independence, is only restricted to areas which are so much talked about, debated and exposed by the

3. Henry Grunwald's: Time Essay; *Time*; June 30, 1980;

media and academia, as if they are a prelude to European departure from the American nuclear umbrella. The fact remains, however, that beyond limited areas, there are far too compelling reasons for Euro-American dependence.

Douglas Hurd, Britain's Minister of State for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office recently offered a number of observations regarding the state of the Alliance.⁴ In his official capacity, he offers optimism. He points out the inevitability of differences to exist but also indicates the progress attained recently in working out a strategy of defense and foreign policy. This includes modernization of tactical nuclear forces, involving increased defense spending. Considering the European stakes involving trade with Iran, the European response to the U.S. call for sanctions against Iran is looked upon by Mr. Hurd as "remarkable". He points out that the element of sacrifice made by Europe is often not "well-understood" in the U.S.. In spite of tactical differences, Mr. Hurd impresses upon the overall interest of the Alliance to maintain a working relationship with the Soviet Union for stability in the Middle-East and elsewhere.

Recent moves by Israel to annex the whole city of Jerusalem may have helped develop a few tactical differences in U.S.-European policies in the Middle-East. While the U.S. opposed the General Assembly's resolution of condemning Israel, the Europeans decided to

4. Based on an interview of Douglas Hurd with Newsweek's James Lemoine. Reference: *News Week*, June 9, 1980; page: 64.

abstain. It is possible, however, that the U.S. had no serious reservation regarding the European position. Britain's Douglas Hurd regards the Alliance's response to the Afghanistan crisis as much stronger than what the Soviets could have expected, specially the steps taken by NATO to modernise itself.⁵ A weak spot of the Alliance, in Hurd's perception, is its inability to remain prepared to respond to crisis rather than be taken by surprise. The crises in Iran and Afghanistan from Hurd's point of view thus, were test cases for the Alliance and have served to indicate fluctuations in the degree of response by the Alliance partners. Clearly, Hurd suggests that the U.S. acknowledge Europe's capacity to contribute to the Alliance the way it wants to, rather than expect Europe to respond to external threats exactly in accordance with American perceptions of self-righteousness.

The U.S. media currently complains that "never before have the West European leaders yearned openly for more independence from what they see as erratic American leadership".⁶ Value-laden statements like this are often misleading since they seem to portray a profound situation created out of a sudden vacuum. Such an evaluation would bear more on the side of an obsession exposed within a certain set of variables, working at a certain time-space in a specific environment. A more rational evaluation may probably evolve after the crisis-perception fades away so that a moderate, balan-

5. Douglas Hurd's Interview with Newsweek's James Lmoyné.

6. Time's Cover Story titled: The Great Nuclear Debate; *Time*; July 21, 1980. Page 6.

ced study may be possible once the other related variables, quite consciously neglected at this time, are ultimately projected with academic insight.

The idea of an independent, neutralist Europe is unrealistic if not impossible. A common political will, strong enough to defy the U.S. commitment is not visible as yet. The U.S. strategic nuclear force remains essential for European defense.

European dependence continues at a time when the Soviet military challenge on the U.S. has never been stronger. According to Colonel Guy Lewin, Associate Director of the French Defense Ministry's Center for Prospects and Evaluation, the mutual vulnerability of the super-powers means that "the probability of a limited conflict in Europe is greater".⁷ Recognizing such a threat, even Henry Kissinger, during a speech in Brussels at the end of 1979, suggested that the European allies look to their own defenses including nuclear deterrent forces as well as other possible alternatives.⁸ According to Colonel Jonathan Alford, Deputy Director of the International Institute of Strategic Studies in Britain, "The decision to maintain or discontinue an independent strategic nuclear deterrent will have a political significance out of all proportion to the relative military power involved. It may also be interpreted as not a British decision at all, but a European one, implying much about Europe's willingness to defend itself".⁹

7. Time Cover Story: "The Great Nuclear Debate"; *Time*; July 21, 1980, Page 7.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*

In response to the current large-scale Soviet deployment of SS-20 intermediate range missiles, the NATO decided to place as many as 572 Pershing-II land-based cruise missiles in West Europe by 1983.¹⁰ But what may bother Europe and notably France, is the fact that the trigger-finger remains American. In certain ways, the De Gaulle Doctrine has complicated the American perception of NATO's defense structure. The Gaullist orthodoxy perceives the narrow percept of defense only of the French soil as the doctrine suggests, which implies that while NATO could take action in case of an attack, France would wait until she can make up her mind on how to respond.

General Pierre Gallois, a leading nuclear strategist and a former military advisor to de Gaulle, maintains the opinion that adding the neutron bomb to France's nuclear arsenal would amount to abandoning the long-standing French policy of massive retaliation in favour of the more "flexible response" on which U.S. nuclear doctrine is based today.¹¹ The French military, however, reacted by saying that the bomb was only a tactical device meant for warning. The Gaullists foresee a possible use of the neutron bomb to defend West Germany and thus, they smell "Atlanticist" tendencies in it, meaning a pro-U.S. bias. This attitude counters the views of the French Defense Minister Yvon Bourges who said earlier this year : "In a dangerous world, we cannot lock France behind a new Maginot Line, even if it is nuclear".¹²

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Op cit.*

12. *Time Magazine*, July, 1980; Page 9.

Pierre Lellouche of France's Institute for International Relations seems to think that "the relative decline in U.S. deterrent power has made the "force de frappe" all the more important to France and its neighbours". He adds, "It is no longer a little umbrella under a big umbrella. It is more like a set of connected vessels. As the level of fluid in one declines, it rises in the other".¹³

Defense experts like veteran Gaullist Alexander Sanguinetti and retired General Georges Buis are among many who criticise the French military doctrine based on the credibility of the atomic force.¹⁴ Such experts point out that since France lacks the financial and technological means to keep up with the super-power arms race, a joint European nuclear defense could be the best answer. While an Anglo-French joint effort is often proposed, the Gaullists tend to dismiss away Britain as the "Trojan Horse" of the U.S.A.

An alternative proposition is a joint Franco-German defense force, suggested by Buis and Sanguinetti.¹⁵ However, the fact that West Germany is precluded the use of atomic weapons by the London Agreements of 1954 would indicate that nothing as such happens without the lifting of that restriction on Germany. The German leadership favors close consultations through NATO and bilaterally with Washington on nuclear strategy.

Another barrier to a possible Franco-German nuclear venture is Moscow's acute sensitivity to such an idea.

13. *Op. Cit.*

14. *Time Cover Story*; July 21, 1980; Page 10.

15. *Ibid.*

In 1974, Marshal Andrei Grechko, the then Soviet Defense Minister is on record to have told his French counterpart Robert Galley that "if ever there is one nuclear weapon in West German soil not controlled by the U.S., we will go and get it".¹⁶

However, in the final analysis, as Gregory Flynn, a U.S. strategic expert at the Atlantic Institute suggests: "Independent of whatever the French doctrine may be, the existence of the French nuclear force is an additional factor of uncertainty for the Soviets."¹⁷ Pierre Lellouche adds to this, saying: "It is not enough for the Soviets to figure out that the U.S. would not risk New York City in order to defend Germany. They would have to consider whether France would have the guts to retaliate".¹⁸

Conclusion :

The Atlantic Alliance is confronted with a diverse set of realities in the 1980s. Refinement in military weaponry is going on steadily, while gradual shifts in NATO strategy have also maintained a smooth pace with such sophistication in military technology.

The area where ample potential for fluctuations in perception may continue to exist, is the area of political behaviour. The response-pattern of each member of the Atlantic Alliance shall continue to be dominated, at least in tactical terms, by their own domestic, governmental, economic, socio-cultural and finally geo-political

16. Time Magazine; July 21, 1980; Page 11.

17. *Ibid.*, Page 12.

18. *Ibid.*

compulsions. Whether such flexibility in operational behaviour is the best means to enhance the solidarity of the Alliance is difficult to determine. But in the final analysis, one may conclude saying that tests of this nature that help depict diversity in approaches, do serve to enhance maturity and frank appraisals of each others positions.

Perhaps, the world is a safer place to live with such diversity rather than an illusion of any imaginary dream-unity.