

BRITAIN AND THE FORMATION OF THE NORTH ATLANTIC TREATY ORGANISATION (NATO) 1947-1949

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Abstract

This article examines the role played by Britain in the establishment of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) between 1947 and 1949. Britain felt a body such as NATO was desperately needed as it lacked confidence in the United Nations' (UN) role in preserving international peace and security in the post-war world. Indeed, under the aegis of the United Nations, the United States, France, China, the Soviet Union and Britain spent too much time and energy disputing issues such as the formation of an international force, an international atomic energy body and an international trusteeship. Apart from this, the perceived political and military threats from the Soviet Union strengthened Britain's resolve in initiating the new international organisation which would exclude the Soviet Union. This article examines in particular the primary role of the Labour Party Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin in the formation of NATO. Bevin, a nationalist and core supporter of British Empire, was nevertheless not alone in wanting to establish NATO. He had strong support from the senior officers who worked at the Foreign Office and the Chief of Staff. Considering Britain's economic situation after the end of Second World War, Britain would not be able to establish NATO herself. Therefore, Bevin planned a strategy to attract political and military support not only from countries in Western Europe, but also from the United States. When NATO was officially launched in 1949, Bevin was the key player who ensured that the United States participated as a member of NATO.

Keywords: NATO, Bevin, security, alliance, Britain

Introduction

The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) or the Atlantic Pact was established in April 1949 in Washington as a collective defence organisation for the North Atlantic area. The original members included the ten countries of Western Europe,¹ the United States and Canada. An extension of the Brussels Treaty of March 1948, its aim was to provide collective military assistance to its members if attacked by aggressors. The Atlantic Pact's main concern was the security of the North Atlantic area, and it was the major international security organisation for the Atlantic community at the onset of the Cold War.² This article deals with Britain and the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) in 1949. In particular, the discussion will examine the role played by the Foreign Secretary, Foreign Office and the Chiefs of Staff in directing the countries of Western Europe and the United States in forming NATO.

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The Foreign Secretary

As far as the historical documents are concerned, in terms of time, it is suggested that Labour Party Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin put into motion the setting up of some sort of international security organisation for the North Atlantic area in December 1947. This was due to the deadlock of the Council of Foreign Ministers' meeting in London.³ Bevin expressed his ideas on how to improve European security by forming a defensive organisation for the North Atlantic area and insisting on United States involvement to Bidault, French Foreign Minister, and General Marshall, the United States Secretary of State, and Norman Robertson, the Canadian High Commissioner.⁴

One of the crucial issues in the establishment of the Atlantic Pact is why NATO as a collective defence organisation for the North Atlantic area was important to Bevin from late 1947. In order to get a clearer picture, the issue is examined in the context of Bevin's ultimate aim. Bevin was less enthusiastic in promoting the collective security system and restoring the wartime alliance under the aegis of the UN. Instead, from the very first day as Foreign Secretary in Attlee's cabinet, he was consistent in upholding his ultimate aim of restoring Britain's credentials as a world power in peacetime. In other words, Bevin was committed to the Great Power thesis. His aim was that the United Kingdom should be independent politically, militarily and economically from both the UN on the one hand, and from the other world powers, particularly the United States and the Soviet Union, on the other. To Bevin, preserving Britain's power, status and prestige as a world power was essential if the United Kingdom was to be respected and if it was to play a decisive role in the international arena in the coming decades.

As this was the essence of Bevin's political thought, it is suggested that the formation of NATO in April 1949 was of paramount importance to him. He regarded NATO as nothing more than a means of achieving his ultimate aim. In fact, this was the key reason that NATO was so important to him from late 1947. Bevin's political motive in using an international organisation such as the Atlantic Pact to serve his ultimate goal was not new. He had done the same with the UN as discussed in the context of the Iranian crisis in 1946. In the Iranian crisis of 1946, Bevin was opportunistically successful in using the UN for the benefit of the United Kingdom. Bevin needed to commit himself to NATO if he wanted to achieve his ultimate aim. In short, the United Kingdom would gain political benefit through the establishment of the Atlantic Pact. Based on this political motive, Bevin felt that the United Kingdom should take the initiative in directing the Western European countries, the United States and the Dominions into the defensive pact scheme. In his memorandum of January 1948 to the Cabinet concerning 'the first aim of British foreign policy', Bevin explicitly expressed Britain's role as:

We [the United Kingdom] must also organise and consolidate the ethical and spiritual forces inherent in this Western civilisation of which we are the chief protagonist. This in my view can only be done by creating some form of union in Western Europe, whether of a formal or informal character, backed by the Americas and the Dominions.⁵

Bevin elaborated further in his memorandum that the Western European countries received material aid principally from the United States. The Western European countries, however, had no alternative but to accept the United Kingdom's political

assistance and moral guidance in combating what he considered as the Soviet Union's expansionist policy.⁶ In this memorandum, Bevin highlighted Britain's role in initiating the establishment of an international security organisation for the North Atlantic area, and clarified the reasons for doing so:

...backed by the power and resources of the Commonwealth and of the Americans, it should be possible to develop our own power and influence to equal that of the United States of America and the USSR... and by giving a spiritual lead now we should be able to carry out our task in a way which will show clearly that we are not subservient to the United States of America or to the Soviet Union.⁷

This was Bevin's ultimate aim. He repeated his political motivation in using the international security organisation for the United Kingdom's benefit during the Cabinet meeting the following week.⁸ In the discussion, Bevin received massive support for his political vision, including taking steps to consolidate the forces of the Western European countries to resist the increasing penetration of Soviet influence in Europe. Bevin's intention of using NATO to serve his ultimate aims was further evident in his memorandum of October 1949 concerning the 'creation of a third world power' five months after signing the Atlantic treaty. He explicitly stated in his memorandum that:

For the moment, the Brussels Treaty and the Atlantic pact provide a military alliance of those free democracies of the West which are threatened by the Soviet Government. But it has been suggested that this should be a temporary phase, and the real object should be to organise Western Europe into a 'Middle Power' co-equal with and independent of the United States and the Soviet Union alike.⁹

Based on these historical developments, it is not an exaggeration to suggest that Bevin intended to use the Atlantic Pact as a weapon in pursuing his goal. In fact, Trygve Lie, the first General Secretary of the UN highlighted a conversation with Bevin in his memoirs:

Britain, he began, would not, without further consideration, agree to periodic meetings of the Security Council. The main and the most important thing at present was the firm establishment of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation and a corresponding solidarity among the nations bordering the Atlantic. This meant power, which was the only thing the Russians seemed to respect.¹⁰

This shows clearly that from early 1948 onwards, Bevin was committed to creating a new international security organisation for the North Atlantic area in terms of membership, geography and purpose. In terms of membership, the new Atlantic Pact was to be smaller than the UN as it was only a regional collective defence and its membership was to exclude countries from Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Eastern Europe. The Soviet Union would undoubtedly be excluded from this regional defensive pact. Moreover, in terms of geography, the Atlantic Pact's main concern was the North Atlantic area rather than all continents worldwide. The main purpose of the Atlantic Pact was to assist its members in the event of war. Military assistance was essential, as there was no international force at the UN's disposal. The formation of NATO as a collective defence organisation would, Bevin believed, provide the best security system for North Atlantic

area as the organisation had the military capacity to deter aggression swiftly. Bevin clearly condemned the universal collective security system under the UN framework. As he described in the House of Commons in 1948: 'Regionalism of this kind might indeed be found to be the very solution for which we have been seeking for so long in the field of collective security...For the part of His Majesty's government, we must proceed to develop and unite with those with whom and where we can unite.'¹¹

The Foreign Office

In pursuing his ultimate aims, Bevin was not alone. Documentations show that the Foreign Office as the core supporter of the British Empire was in full agreement with him, continuing to support his nationalist and imperialist aims. The Foreign Office's prime role was to advise Bevin on the pros and cons of creating the Atlantic Pact, and on strategies to accelerate its completion for the sake of the British Empire. Senior officials at the Foreign Office such as Orme Sargent, the Permanent Under-Secretary and Ivone Kirkpatrick of Western Department played a vital role.

Before Bevin left for Washington in March 1948 to further discuss the proposal to set up the Atlantic Pact with the United States, Orme Sargent provided Bevin with the points on which he needed to insist at the meeting in order to attract the United States to participate in the Atlantic Pact.¹² In his letter to Bevin, Sargent recommended that he suggest to the United States that it should associate itself directly with the Atlantic Pact as a member. Second, Sargent recommended that Bevin insist that the proposed Atlantic Pact should be a military alliance based on Article 51 of the Charter of the UN. Third, Bevin needed to clarify that one of the reasons that the United Kingdom was in favour of a separate 'Atlantic system' was that the Benelux powers might be reluctant to assume an additional military burden and commitment by inviting new states such as Norway into the Brussels pact. Fourth, in its initial stage, the Atlantic Pact might be confined to the United States, the United Kingdom and Canada, leaving the way open for subsequent accession by other European states. Fifth, Sargent recommended that it seemed best to allow as many as Western European countries to join the Atlantic Pact. Bevin telephoned Sargent the day after he received his letter to confirm his agreement.¹³

Furthermore, Kirkpatrick of the Western Department of the Foreign Office provided Bevin with further practical grounds by which to clarify certain issues related to the formation of the North Atlantic Pact. This was because the Working Party in Washington, which was responsible for drafting the treaty, demanded direction and instruction from Bevin on particular issues. These issues included whether Italy and French North Africa should be invited to be original members of the Atlantic Pact; whether any provision should be made for Greece, Turkey and Iran; the use of UN the international courts for the settlement of disputes between signatory powers; and the duration of the Atlantic Pact.¹⁴ Concerning including Italy in the Atlantic Pact, it was recommended at the meeting presided by Kirkpatrick that Italy would be a military liability rather than an asset, and that Italian public opinion was against military commitment. In addition, the meeting argued that using the international court to settle disputes between signatory members would only cause delay in taking action, and it was very unlikely that there would be disputes between the signatory powers. On the issue of the duration of the Atlantic pact, the meeting suggested a period of between 20 and 50 years. Bevin generally

agreed with the outcome of the meeting as he felt that unsettled peripheral issues would cause difficulty and delay in setting up the North Atlantic Pact, and it would be a mistake for him to devote his time and energy to them. Eventually, Bevin used all these points as a basis to inform Attlee of the progress in drafting the treaty, and in case Attlee needed to answer any questions about them in the cabinet or the House of Commons.¹⁵

The Chiefs of Staff (COS)

The COS shared the view of the Foreign Office and Bevin that it was necessary to create a defensive organisation for the North Atlantic area. In his letter to Bevin, the COS emphasised that it was highly desirable that the United States and the United Kingdom should hold similar views in forming the Atlantic pact. In fact, the COS recommended to Bevin and the Foreign Office that headquarters for the international security organisation for the North Atlantic area should be in London. In addition, the COS firmly stated that the United Kingdom should have the greater say than any other powers and be in full control of the Atlantic Pact. As the COS wrote:

The governing principle of the United Kingdom COS concept is that the United States and we should be able to maintain control of strategic decision of the North Atlantic pact organisation, particularly in the event of war.¹⁶

In light of Bevin's opportunistic wish to secure the Atlantic Pact to serve his ultimate aim with encouragement from the Foreign Office and the COS, it is worth exploring in depth how Bevin endeavoured to gain the agreement of Attlee, the Western European countries, the United States and Canada to join the pact in 1949.

The Weaknesses of the United Nations

From late 1947 onwards, Bevin endeavoured continuously to undermine the UN's capability and credibility particularly in the area of international politics and security. He used issues such as red tape in the Security Council to settle international conflicts, the Soviet Union's uncooperative attitude at the UN, the misuse of veto and the forming of a Slav Bloc at the UN to justify his condemnation of the UN. Bevin's main contention concerning the lengthy procedure in settling international conflict was that negotiation and conciliation were time consuming. In his memorandum to Attlee of July 1947, he explicitly stated that:

...the procedure of the Security Council might involve substantial delay before action, or even a decision to take action were adopted...they can only come to the aid of a threatened state as the climax of a series of decisions by the Security Council all of which require the council's normal voting procedure... It would still involve the lengthy procedure of the Security Council before enforcement action could in fact be taken.¹⁷

One of the instances of how the Security Council delayed taking action, or even after a decision to take action was adopted, was the Corfu incident of October 1946. In this case, the British Royal Navy was fired on by the Albania resulting in 44 British officers' deaths and 22 wounded. Bevin was frustrated that the Security Council took such a long time to

settle the crisis.¹⁸ Only on 9 April 1947, did the Security Council adopt a resolution to refer the matter to the International Courts of Justice at The Hague.¹⁹

Another issue crucial to Bevin was that the Soviet Union extensively abused the use of veto in the Security Council. The veto is the cornerstone of the Charter. Initially, the five permanent members of the Security Council were granted veto in order to block any Security Council resolutions they perceived as contrary to their interests. For Bevin, the misuse of veto was a dilemma faced not only by the United Kingdom, but also by the other permanent members of the Security Council. In fact, the issue of veto was controversial from the very early days of the formations of the UN.²⁰

In October 1946 for instance, the Cabinet Steering Committee of the International Organisation of the Foreign Office reported to Bevin that the Soviet representatives had extensively misused the veto on issues such as the Levant States, Canada, and the admission of new countries to the United Nations.²¹ In the case of the Levant States, the Soviet Union representative vetoed the United States' proposal to express confidence that the British and the French troops would withdraw immediately. Further, the Soviet Union representative also used the veto to prevent Canada from taking part in the Security Council discussion on the general rules of procedure of the Atomic Energy Commission. A request by the Canadian delegation to be represented at the Security Council received nine votes in favour with the Soviet Union representatives opposing and Poland abstaining. On this issue, the Soviet Union representative claimed that the motion was lost since he had vetoed it. Finally, the Soviet Union representative used the veto to delay new admissions to the United Nations. For instance, none of the other permanent members of the Security Council objected to recommending the admission of Eire, Portugal and Trans Jordan as new members, but the Soviet Union refused to recommend them on the grounds that they had no diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union.

Thus, Bevin had the impression that the Soviet Union used the veto to defend or further their national interests at the UN. Bevin sent a personal letter to Attlee in November 1946 in order to impress upon Attlee the misuse of veto at the UN.²² He insisted that it was a delicate task for the permanent members of the Security Council including the United Kingdom to obtain concrete collective decision with the Soviet Union due to the abuse of veto. He again emphasised the veto dilemma to Attlee in January 1948. He warned Attlee that there was little chance of the Soviet Union changing its behaviour regarding the veto, as its prime political motive at the UN was to use it chiefly for propaganda purposes while maintaining its membership.²³ As the veto rendered the UN useless in defence against aggression, it was useful for the United Kingdom creating a new international security organisation which would exclude the Soviet Union.

Second, Bevin was concerned about the forming of bloc or political alliances in the United Nations. The bloc acts as a proxy for world powers seeking support in the Security Council or in the General Assembly. Support for the permanent members of the Security Council from satellite states was important either to condemn or to approve resolutions adopted in the Security Council or in the General Assembly if such resolutions clashed with the interests of the world powers. Bevin considered that the Soviet Union had its own political bloc at the United Nations. In his memorandum of January 1948 titled 'Review of Soviet policy' for instance, he called it the *Slav bloc*, which consisted of Soviet satellite

states in Eastern Europe.²⁴ Bevin had the feeling that these Eastern European countries were strong supporters of the Soviet Union at the United Nations for their own reasons. To make matter worse, Bevin was convinced that the Soviet Union intended to attract the other two permanent members of the Security Council, namely France and China to join the bloc. Bevin warned the cabinet that if France or China '*...both become satellites it is obvious that the whole present alignment of forces in the United Nations would be disrupted, and that the Soviet Union would have a good prospect of acquiring a normal majority favourable to its purpose in the General Assembly*'.²⁵

Third, Bevin publicly emphasised regularly that the formation of the new Atlantic Pact was, in fact, in compliance with the Charter of the United Nations. He wanted to give the impression to Attlee, the members of the cabinet, and the members of the UN that NATO was not separate from the UN. Instead, the establishment of NATO was consistent with the UN Charter. Bevin insisted on the right of individual states for self-defence under Article 51 of the Charter. As he passionately clarified in the House of Commons in March 1949:

I would emphasise that the Pact is in every way consistent with the purposes and principles of the Charter of the UN. Its primary purpose is to provide for the safety of our countries in accordance with the inherent right of individual or collective self-defence recognised in Article 51 of the Charter.²⁶

Last, Bevin managed to impress upon his Prime Minister that the Soviet Union was the United Kingdom's main opponent at the United Nations. Bevin recognised that a clash of interests between these two nations existed at the UN. As security was at stake, Bevin reassured Attlee that the universal collective security system as he advocated under the UN framework was very unlikely to come about due to the Soviet Union's destructive attitude. In his personal letter to Attlee of April 1948, he convinced Attlee that:

You will remember that we made great efforts in the League of Nations in Arthur Anderson's day to build up a real collective security system and we hoped to achieve this through the United Nations organisation. Up to now [April 1948], we have failed and there now seems little chance that we shall succeed in building up such a universal collective security system as long as the Soviet government continue to pursue their present policies.²⁷

Bevin was exhausted by the Soviet tactics and strategies in pursuing their national interests in every discussion at the Security Council. In fact, Trygve Lee, the first Secretary General of the UN mentioned in his memoirs that:

Mr Bevin said that as he remained Foreign Secretary he would not take part in any new discussions or negotiations with the Russians until their actions proved that they had changed their mind and heart. They could not be allowed to go on using pressure as they had until now, and continue their walkouts and boycotts of the United Nations.²⁸

In January 1948, in the House of Commons, Bevin publicly expressed his true feelings about the UN's progress as hub of world affairs and its role in security matters in the past two years. He said that:

I have to confess that the United Nations up to now has been disappointing, but it might have been so under any circumstances, and it may be better to have the disappointments at the beginning than to have the enthusiasm at the start and the disappointment later on.²⁹

Bevin's confession was remarkable in the sense that he condemned the UN publicly in the House of Commons in his capacity as Foreign Secretary in Attlee's government. To Bevin, it was time for the United Kingdom to stand firmly to combat any political attempts from the Soviet Union to penetrate its influence worldwide.

These issues concerning the weaknesses of the UN in the field of security and international politics indicate that Bevin committed himself to an offensive towards the UN from late 1947 onwards. In fact, his denunciation of the failure of the UN to deliver its prime task of achieving world peace became more pronounced in 1948. Bevin wanted to impress the international community that the UN had failed to fulfil its task of offering security sufficient to suit the United Kingdom's and European needs. Furthermore, in the light of what Bevin considered the real threat of the Soviet Union's ambition to expand its political grip on Europe, the UN was completely incapable of limiting its infiltration.

In his capacity as the British Prime Minister, Attlee gave his support and trust to Bevin by backing his justification of the necessity of establishing the Atlantic Pact in the House of Commons and in the cabinet meetings. This was because the acceptance of the Atlantic Pact in 1949 was not without internal controversy in the United Kingdom. One of the controversial issues was whether NATO would constitute a separate collective defence organisation from that of the UN. A group of MPs in Attlee's government was confused as to whether the Treaty of Dunkirk, the Treaty of Brussels and consequently the establishment of NATO were consistent with the Charter of the UN. They foresaw NATO as a collective defensive organisation exclusively for the North Atlantic area, depending entirely on the United States for military assistance which could lead to United States domination of the European continent; and an Anglo-American military alliance aimed directly at the Soviet Union. Thus, Attlee needed to end this confusion in the House of Commons. In signing the Brussels Treaty of March 1948,³⁰ Attlee clarified that:

This [the Brussels Treaty] is indeed no ordinary treaty. It is not an alliance based on self-interest and fear; it is rather an association of likeminded neighbours who are engaged jointly in shaping their way towards some closer social, and indeed spiritual integration bases themselves on the essential similarity of their civilisations.³¹

Later, Konni Zilliacus, one of the extreme critical left in the Labour Party at the time asked Attlee in the House of Commons about the meaning and aim of the Atlantic pact. Zilliacus' interpretation was that the future international security organisation for Western Europe was an Anglo-American military alliance in peacetime. This meant that the United Kingdom and Western European countries on the one hand, and the United States and Canada on the other, formed a collective defensive pact against the Soviet Union. In addition, Zilliacus insisted that the formation of such a defensive pact for the North Atlantic area was not consistent with the UN Charter. In addition, Zilliacus foresaw that the establishment of the Atlantic pact as a military alliance would weaken the Security Council in the sense that both the UN and NATO overlapped duty and responsibility in

the field of international peace and security. Atlee simply replied to this critical challenge that *'His Majesty's Government naturally reserve the right to conclude arrangement for regional defence based on Article 51 of the Charter. Regional arrangements for defence already exist, as my hon. Friend is aware, in Eastern Europe'*.³²

In addition, Atlee supported Bevin in pressing the idea and practical reasons to justify the necessity of forming the Atlantic Pact at international level. As the Dominion Government of Canada was one of the future members of the Atlantic Pact in April 1949, Atlee agreed with Bevin's suggestion of impressing the necessity of forming a regional defensive pact for the North Atlantic area on Mackenzie King, the Prime Minister of Canada.³³ In his letter of March 1948 to Mackenzie King via the British High Commissioner in Canada, Atlee explained that there were three alternatives on how to limit the Soviet Union's ambition to extend its influence in Europe. The first was the United Kingdom-France-Benelux system with United States backing. The second option was a system of Atlantic security which included the United States. The third was a Mediterranean security system, which would particularly affect Italy. Atlee stated that the United Kingdom was committed to the first alternative. Nevertheless, as Atlee expressed in his letter to Mackenzie King, *'the Atlantic security system is now even more important and urgent'*. Atlee warned Mackenzie King that failure to act urgently might mean *'a repetition of our experience with Hitler'*. He concluded his letter:

I am convinced that we should study the establishment of such an Atlantic security system so that we inspire the necessary confidence to consolidate the West against Soviet infiltration and at the same time inspire Soviet government with sufficient respect for the West to remove temptation from them and so ensure a long period of peace.³⁴

The Western Europe Countries

In relation to the participation of the Western European countries in the Atlantic Pact, it is worth examining how Bevin endeavoured to direct these countries into the Pact in 1949. To Bevin, the participation of Western Europe in the Pact was essential for two practical reasons. First, the United Kingdom undoubtedly needed partners to share the duty, responsibility, and military cost of defending Western Europe. Second, the Western European countries under United Kingdom leadership needed to act collectively in the field of defence in order to impress and attract the United States' to join. The United States would be uninterested in offering its military assistance to Europe if the Western European countries were both politically and militarily divided and disunited.³⁵

In light of these reasons, Bevin felt that the United Kingdom needed to collaborate with Western Europe not only to limit the Soviet Union expansionist policy in Europe, but also to achieve his ultimate aim. In fact, the latter was the key reason that the participation of the Western European countries in the coming Atlantic Pact was important to him. Bevin emphasised that the United Kingdom's key role was to provide spiritual and moral leadership for the Western European countries *'in building up a counter attraction to the baleful tenets of communism within their border'*.³⁶ Bevin clearly did not want any powers other than the United Kingdom to dominate Europe. In order to gain the support of the Western European countries for the necessity of forming a collective defensive pact, Bevin applied himself to persuading the Western European countries on at least, three practical grounds.

First, he insisted that the United Kingdom and Western European countries shared the same wartime experience in defeating the Axis powers. Second, both the United Kingdom and Western European countries shared a common way of life with values inherent in the western civilisation such as democracy, liberty, freedom, human rights, and the rule of law. These two issues were essential in directing the Western European countries into the Atlantic Pact in the sense that they were not interested in safeguarding British interests worldwide or in ensuring the survival of the British Empire. Consequently, the Western Europe countries need to be united under the aegis of the Atlantic Pact if they were to continue to enjoy western values in the coming decades. Bevin told the House of Commons in January 1948 that:

The free nations of Western Europe must now draw closely together. How much these countries have in common. Our sacrifices in war, our hatred of injustice and oppression, our Parliamentary democracy, our striving for economic rights and our conception and love of liberty are common among us all. I believe the time is ripe for a consolidation of Western Europe.³⁷

Third, Bevin impressed on the Western European countries that they would enjoy equal duties and responsibilities as partners in formulating policy or deciding action under the Atlantic pact framework. There would be no dominant single power with exclusive power such as veto in the scheme. In addition, the countries participating in the Pact would retain rather than surrender their sovereignty and independence. In this regard, the Atlantic Pact differed significantly from the UN in the sense that its members would not subordinate themselves to a larger international organisation as Attlee was hoping to happen at the UN in the past two years. In his memorandum on 'the threat to western civilisation' to Cabinet in March 1948, Bevin repeated his wish to collaborate with Western Europe closely for the sake of Western values. As he wrote in his memorandum:

It has really become a matter of the defence of western civilisation, or everyone will be swamped by this Soviet method of infiltration. I ask my colleagues, therefore, to give further consideration to the whole situation...so that we can proceed urgently with the active organisation of all those countries who believe in parliamentary government and free institution.³⁸

These strategies, namely defending western values inherent in Western civilisation and retaining states' sovereignty were Bevin's effective strategy in directing the countries of Western Europe into a collective defensive pact in 1949. he did not publicly make it clear that participation of Western European countries in pact was actually to serve his ultimate aim of preserving Britain's status and prestige as a world power.

The United States

One of the remarkable features of NATO was that the United States was included. The United Kingdom and Western European countries alone could not effectively resist the Soviet Union's political ambition to extend its influence into Europe. Bevin was determined to ensure that the United States should be permanently included in the Atlantic Pact. It is worth exploring the practical reasons for this. In relation to Bevin's ultimate aim as discussed earlier, the key reason was that he regarded the United States'

participation as nothing more than a means to attain his intended aim. If the United States was included in the coming Atlantic Pact, it would guarantee its military assistance and active American involvement in European defence.

Thus, it is suggested that as Bevin foresaw that the United States' role would serve his ultimate goal, he endeavoured from early 1948 onwards to encourage the United States to join the Atlantic Pact as soon as possible. The sooner it agreed to join, the better for the North Atlantic area including the United Kingdom in limiting the Soviet Union's political ambition in Europe. If the United States were uninterested in joining the Atlantic Pact, the effect would be disastrous not only for the United Kingdom, but also for Europe. If the United Kingdom and the United States pulled in different directions, it would reflect military and political disunity between these two world powers in resisting Soviet Union expansionism.

Bevin, however, realised that the United Kingdom was subject to the United States foreign policy. The United States would not lend its political and military support to the United Kingdom in forming the international security organisation for North Atlantic area unless it could receive at least, some benefit. There should be a reciprocal relationship between the United Kingdom and the United States in strengthening the defensive capacity of the North Atlantic area. Bevin saw a number of grounds for not taking for granted the United States' absolutely giving political and military support to the United Kingdom in setting up the Atlantic Pact. First, Bevin foresaw the United States' continuing heavy commitment to its isolationist policy in peacetime. Bevin based his impression on the United States' behaviour in the interwar years. The United States for instance, distanced itself from European affairs including in the field of defence during the early years of the Second World War. In addition, the United States was not a member of the League of Nations in the interwar years.

Second, the United States continued to pursue its anti-empire policy in peacetime. This meant that it was undoubtedly uninterested in lending its support to assist the United Kingdom in restoring its imperial power, status and prestige in peacetime. Third, to further complicate the matters, a group of influential figures in the field of security and military particularly at the States Department was divided in accepting the idea of the Atlantic pact.³⁹ Charles Bohlen, the Counsellor, and George Kennan, the Chief of Policy Planning Staff, for instance were reluctant to encourage the United States to directly involve itself as a member of the North Atlantic Pact actively participating in European defence. The main ground was that they felt that it was not timely for the United States to do so. Robert A. Taft and Albert Einstein argued that the formation of NATO would reinforce the division of Europe and consequently weaken UN responsibility in the field of international peace and security.⁴⁰ Other State Department officials such as Robert A. Lovett, John Hickerson and Theodore Achilles favoured a formal military treaty arrangement in the light of events such as the Berlin crisis.

Based on these practical grounds, from mid 1947 onwards, Bevin was determined to ensure that the United States should participate permanently as one of the original members of the Atlantic Pact. Thus, the United Kingdom should take the initiative in persuading and directing the United States to join. In the light of lukewarm support from the United States, Bevin in his letter to Attlee of April 1948, warned Attlee that the United

*Kingdom should be lucky if the President and the American Senatorial leaders pronounce in favour of a treaty binding the United States and her natural associates and friends in Europe.*⁴¹ Bevin was hoping the United States would accept its positive obligations and be prepared to cooperate under the aegis of the Atlantic Pact if the United Kingdom managed to persuade it with practical reasons.

In his attempt to secure the United States' agreement to join the Pact, Bevin continuously emphasised in public that the United Kingdom and the United States shared common western values particularly democracy. In the light of the Soviet Union's political threat, the United Kingdom and United States should collaborate militarily and politically to fortify and preserve their common heritage. To Bevin, the United States should waste no time in increasing the security of the North Atlantic area. In January 1948, Bevin told the House of Commons that:

The United States and countries of Latin America are clearly as much a part of our common Western civilisation...The power and resources of the United States - indeed, I would say the power and resources of all the countries on the continent of America - will be needed if we are to create a solid, stable and healthy world. It is true that the Americans are as realistic as we are.⁴²

This strategy, namely to ensure the survival of common western values in the coming decades was vital in directing the United States into the Pact scheme. Despite a divergence of opinions in the United States about accepting the North Atlantic Pact, tension eventually eased as Senator Arthur Vandenberg, the Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relation Committee, tried to find a compromise between these conflicting views.⁴³ The Vandenberg Resolution of June 1948 insisted that the creation of the North Atlantic Pact was consistent with Article 51 of the UN Charter. The setting up of this international security organisation in fact, strengthened the UN. In addition, the United States limited its engagement in the North Atlantic pact in the sense that they would only intervene immediately if any North Atlantic pact members were attacked by an aggressor.⁴⁴ The United States was convinced at the time that the Atlantic Pact was designed to strengthen the defensive capability of the non-communist states in order to assure their security in the face of aggression. When Bevin was in Washington to attend the signing of the Atlantic Pact, he informed the Foreign Office of the United States' agreement in April 1949.⁴⁵

Nevertheless, it must be emphasised that by signing the coming Atlantic treaty, the United States only committed itself to guaranteeing immediate military intervention to defend any of NATO's members attacked by an aggressor, but not to station American troops permanently in Europe. This was made clear under Article 6 of the treaty.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, this was a great deal for Bevin in the sense that the United States would no longer distance or isolate itself from European affairs particularly in the field of defence and security. In March 1949, three weeks before the signing of the Atlantic pact treaty, Bevin appreciated the United States' commitment in guarantee its military assistance to Europe for the sake of defending western civilisation in the coming decades. He said:

This is the first time that the United States has ever felt able to contemplate entering into commitments in peacetime for joint defence with Europe, and it is a most famous historical undertaking into which they are now entering, in common with the rest of us.⁴⁷

Later, in announcing that he had managed to get the United States, Canada and the Western European countries to accept the United Kingdom's proposal to form NATO, Bevin proudly told the House of Commons that *'I think I can say without exaggeration that this [NATO] is an historic occasion. It is certainly one of the greatest steps towards world peace and security which has been taken since the end of the First World War'*.⁴⁸

Bevin's expression indicated that he had clearly condemned both the League of Nations' role in the interwar years and the UN role in peacetime in the field of security. Both of these international organisations had failed to fulfil their task of providing security suited to the United Kingdom's particular needs. Thus, he regarded the Atlantic Pact as a defensive organisation separate from the League of Nations and the UN. Expressing his feelings about the strength of the Atlantic Pact, he said *'this new pact brings us under a wider roof of security, a roof which stretches over the Atlantic Ocean and gave us the assurance of great preponderance of power, which will be used on the side of peace, security and orderly progress'*.⁴⁹

In addition, in his concluding remarks on the day he represented Attlee's government in signing the Atlantic pact in Washington, Bevin stated that *'we had to get together and build with such material as was available to us, and this material was happily at hand in this great Atlantic community with a common outlook and desire for peace. Today will bring a great feeling of relief to millions of people'*.⁵⁰

Conclusion

Three main conclusions can be drawn from this discussion. First, events at the time from late 1947 onwards such as the growing political threat from the Soviet Union, the increasing disillusion at the UN's failure to fulfil its task of maintaining global peace, criticism from British Commonwealth political leaders and the Berlin blockade of 1948 encouraged Britain to accelerate the process of forming the Atlantic Pact. In fact, the provision in the Atlantic treaty of April 1949 particularly Article 5 makes it clear that the establishment of the Atlantic pact as a collective defence organisation for North Atlantic area was consistent with Article 51 of the UN Charter. Second, Bevin played a key role in establishing NATO by endeavouring to direct the cabinet, Western European countries, Canada and the United States into the North Atlantic Pact from early 1948 onwards. In persuading the Western European countries, the United States, Canada and his cabinet of the necessity of establishing the Atlantic Pact, Bevin emphasised two main issues. One was the urgent need of defending western values such as democracy, freedom, and human rights in the light of what he considered the growing threat from the Soviet Union to expand its political influence in Europe. The second was that he insisted on the right of individual states to self-defence under Article 51 of the Charter of the UN. Nevertheless, these were in fact only peripheral issues. What was at stake for Bevin at the time, was how to preserve Britain's power, status and prestige as a world power in the context of the growing political threat from Soviet Union's expansionism in Europe and worldwide. In fact, Bevin was opportunistic in the sense that he took advantage of forming the North Atlantic Pact in April 1949 to achieve his ultimate goal. While insisting on the urgent needs of the Western European countries to cooperate under the framework of NATO, he also emphasised Britain's role above that of any other country in providing ethical and spiritual leadership in Europe. This meant that Bevin was committed to collaborating with the Western European countries in resisting the Soviet Union political penetration. In pursuing his ultimate goal, Bevin was not alone as senior officials at the Foreign Office

and the COS were behind him. On the other hand, the formation of NATO in 1949 was a failure for Bevin in the sense that the United Kingdom continued to depend on the United States rather than to stand independently in the field of defence and security.

Third, to some extent, the very idea of the North Atlantic pact as an international security organisation for the North Atlantic area was contested internally and internationally. This was due to the fact that a number of controversial issues came up while drafting the treaty such as whether Italy, French North Africa, Persia, Greece and Turkey should become original members; the duration of the pact; and the use of the international court of the UN in settling disputes between Atlantic Pact members. In addition, despite the fact that the United States agreed to support the idea of creating a security organisation for the North Atlantic area, it was reluctant to participate directly as an original member. The division of opinion at the United States Department of State between March and June 1948 largely reflected its hesitation to join the Atlantic Pact. All these issues demanded collaboration and attention from the signatory powers if they wished the North Atlantic Pact was to become a major international organisation in preserving global peace and security in the coming decades.

Notes

- ¹ Belgium, France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Denmark, Iceland, Italy, Norway and Portugal. Greece and Turkey joined NATO in 1952, followed by Germany in 1955 and finally Spain in 1982. *NATO Handbook*, NATO Office of Information and Press, Brussels, 1992, p. 15.
- ² At the time, international organisation in Western Europe comprised the Brussels Treaty, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, the Organisation for European Economic Cooperation, the Council of Europe and the Economic Commission for Europe of the UN.
- ³ *BDEE*, Series A, Vol. 2, Part II, doc. no. 152, 'Cabinet memorandum by Bevin on 'Creation of a 'third world power' or consolidation of the West', 18 October 1949, p. 341.
- ⁴ Nicholas Henderson, *The Birth of NATO*, (Weidenfield and Nicolson: London), 1982, p. 1. Henderson was the secretary at the British Embassy in Washington and he was one of the Working Party's committee members in drafting the treaty of the North Atlantic Pact.
- ⁵ *BDEE*, Series A, Vol. 2, Part II, doc. no. 142, 'Cabinet memorandum by Mr Bevin on 'The first aim of British foreign policy', 4 January 1948, p. 317.
- ⁶ *Ibid*, p. 318.
- ⁷ *Ibid*.
- ⁸ *BDEE*, Series A, Vol. 2, Part II, doc. no. 144, 'Foreign Policy in Europe': Cabinet conclusions, 8 January 1948, p. 326
- ⁹ *BDEE*, Series A, Vol. 2, Part II, doc. no. 152, 'Cabinet memorandum by Bevin on 'Creation of a 'third world power' or consolidation of the West', 18 October 1949, p. 341.
- ¹⁰ Trygve Lie, *In the Cause of Peace*, p. 309.
- ¹¹ *Hansard*, Vol. 450, 4 May 1948, col. 1111.
- ¹² FO 371/68067/AN1196/1195/45G Orme Sargent to Bevin on 'Atlantic Security System: British representative for Washington Talks', 15 March 1948.

- ¹³ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴ FO 371/79218/277/1074/72G Foreign Office Minutes by Kirkpatrick on 'Report On Working Party in Washington' 3 January 1949. He presided over the meeting in the presence of Gladwyn Jebb and the Legal Adviser.
- ¹⁵ FO 371/79218/257/1074/72G Bevin to Attlee on 'On Proposed NATO: Comments on Report of Washington Working Party', 31 December 1948. Attlee then replied to Bevin on 1 January 1949 that 'I am in agreement with you'.
- ¹⁶ FO 371/79276/Z 2610/10727/72G To Secretary of State From the COS on 'Military Organisation of the North Atlantic Pact', 21 March 1949.
- ¹⁷ PREM 8/697 Bevin to Attlee, 16 July 1947.
- ¹⁸ *Hansard*, Vol. 449, 7 April 1948, col. 146.
- ¹⁹ On April 9, 1949, the International Courts found that Albania was fully responsible for the incident. The Albanian government were asked on December 15, 1949 to pay the United Kingdom compensation amounting to £843,947. Unfortunately, the House of Commons was told that as of March 1, 1951, not a penny of the damages awarded by the International Courts had been received from the Albanian government. *Hansard*, 5th Series, Vol. 484, 1 March 1951, col. 2504-2505.
- ²⁰ This was controversial in the sense that the world powers were divided as to whether they as permanent members of the Security Council who were parties to a dispute, should use the veto power on it or not. The United States and the United Kingdom agreed that the world powers should not vote. The Soviet Union, however, disagreed. Furthermore, the veto was also a controversial issue as it reflects inequality in formulating and deciding decision at the UN. The grounds were that a small state that is a member of the UN, but not a permanent member of the Security Council did not have the power of veto. Llewellyn Woodward, *British Foreign Policy in the Second World War*, Vol. V, (Her Majesty's Stationary Office: London), 1976, pp. 137-139,
- ²¹ PREM 8/377 Notes by the Foreign Office on the Right of Veto (Annex III), 13 October 1946.
- ²² *DBPO*, Series I, Vol. VII, doc. no. 94, Bevin to Attlee, 15 November 1946, p. 290.
- ²³ *BDEE*, Series A, Vol. 2, Part II, doc. no. 143, 'Review of Soviet policy': Cabinet memorandum by Mr Bevin, 5 January 1948, p. 322.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 323.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*
- ²⁶ *Hansard*, vol. 462, 18 March 1949, col. 2533
- ²⁷ PREM 8/788 Bevin to Attlee, 6 April 1948.
- ²⁸ Trygve Lie, *In The Cause of Peace*, p. 310.
- ²⁹ *Hansard*, Vol. 446, 22 January 1948, col. 401.
- ³⁰ This was a fifty year defence agreement against any aggressor between Britain, France and the Benelux countries (Belgium, Holland and Luxemburg) on 17 March 1948. Nicholas Henderson, *The Birth of NATO*, p. 13
- ³¹ *Hansard*, Vol. 448, 17 March 1948, col. 2137.
- ³² *Hansard*, Vol. 452, 29 June 1948, col. 1996.
- ³³ It must be emphasised that Mackenzie King himself had little interest in the UN as an international organisation of universal collective security. In November 1946, Mackenzie King mentioned to the United Kingdom High Commissioner in Canada that he was increasingly tempted to speculate whether it was politically wise to proceed with the concept of the UN in maintaining global peace and security in

- peacetime. In this regard, the Dominions Government of Canada needed little encouragement to give its full support to setting up the North Atlantic pact. PREM 8/469 Notes of Conversation between British High Commissioner in Canada and Mackenzie King, 14 November 1946.
- ³⁴ PREM 8/788 Prime Minister's Personal Telegram Serial No. T73/48 to the United Kingdom High Commissioner in Canada, 10 March 1948.
- ³⁵ Martin F. Holly, 'Breaking the vicious circle: Britain, the United States, and the Genesis of the North Atlantic Treaty', *Diplomatic History*, vol. 12, No. 1, Winter 1988, p. 62.
- ³⁶ *BDEE*, Series A, Vol. 2, Part II, doc. no. 142, 'The first aim of British foreign policy': Cabinet memorandum by Mr Bevin, 4 January 1948, p. 318.
- ³⁷ *Hansard*, Vol. 446, 22 January 1948, cols. 396-397.
- ³⁸ *BDEE*, Series A, Vol. 2, Part II, doc. no. 145, 'The threat to Western civilisation': Cabinet memorandum by Mr Bevin, 3 March 1948, p. 328.
- ³⁹ Nicholas Henderson, *The Birth of NATO*, p. 9.
- ⁴⁰ Hall Gardner 'NATO and the UN: The Contemporary Relevance of the 1949 North Atlantic Treaty' in Gustav Schmidt, (Ed.) *A History of NATO: The First Fifty Years*, Vol. 1, (Pelgrave, New York: 2001), p. 40.a
- ⁴¹ PREM 8/788 Bevin to Attlee 6 April 1948.
- ⁴² *Hansard*, vol. 446, 22 January 1948, col. 402.
- ⁴³ The text of the Vandenberg Resolution on 11 June 1948 is printed in *FRUS*, Vol. III, 'Western Europe', 1948, pp. 135-136.
- ⁴⁴ Hall Gardner, 'NATO and the UN: The contemporary relevance of the 1949 North Atlantic Treaty', p. 42.
- ⁴⁵ FO 800/483 'Military Assistance for Brussels Powers', Bevin to Foreign Office, 4 April 1949.
- ⁴⁶ The text of the treaty is printed in Nicholas Henderson, *The Birth of NATO*, Appendix B, pp. 119-122.
- ⁴⁷ *Hansard*, vol. 462, 18 March 1949, col. 2536.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid*, col. 2533
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid*, col. 2534.
- ⁵⁰ PREM 8/1379 (Part I), The Signing of the North Atlantic Treaty Proceeding, 4 April 1949.