

NATO and Collective Insecurity

Collective security, the official goal of NATO, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, seems plausible on its face. A group of nations ostensibly concerned about a common threat agree to defend one another in the event of an attack. “All for one and one for all,” as the Three Musketeers said.

But like many things, the principle, even if sincerely invoked, is more problematic than the first glance indicates. This is particularly true with governments, and in no area more so than foreign policy and armed forces. Schoolyard analogies involving bullies do not hold.

NATO was established soon after World War II ostensibly to keep the Soviet Union from overrunning Western Europe. The Red Army was present in Eastern and Central Europe, including eastern Germany, having driven back the Wehrmacht in the Allied defeat of Nazi Germany. It is by no means clear that Soviet dictator Josef Stalin aspired to have his armed forces conquer Western Europe, and his doctrine of “socialism in one country,” which suggests a conservative foreign policy, hardly supports a militarily aggressive posture toward the West. For one thing, the Soviet Union was exhausted from the savage war — it lost well over 20 million military personnel and civilians — and was hardly in a position to begin a new one against the Americans.

While many American politicians, fearing a return of the prewar public sentiment against foreign intervention, spoke of a Soviet threat, not all agreed. The influential Republican senator Robert A. Taft of Ohio, whom I will discuss below, questioned the consensus and thus the official premise of the Cold War.

On April 4, 1949, 12 countries — the United States, Canada, Great Britain, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Portugal, Italy, Norway, Denmark, and Iceland — signed the treaty that created NATO. (The Warsaw Pact, the Soviet Union’s counter-alliance with the Eastern European countries it occupied, would not be founded for another six years.) Since 1998, 18 more countries have joined NATO, for a total of 30, including former Warsaw Pact members and the former Soviet Baltic republics that border Russia — with the predicted disastrous consequences. (Austria is not a member, having agreed to neutrality in 1955, in return for the Soviet withdrawal. West Germany became a member in 1955, and then a reunified Germany became a member in 1990 as the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact were being dismantled.)

The heart of the treaty, the “all for one and one for all” provision, is Article 5:

The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all and consequently they

agree that, if such an armed attack occurs, each of them, in exercise of the right of individual or collective self-defence recognized by Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties, *such action as it deems necessary*, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area. [Emphasis added.]

Note the italic phrase: in the event of an attack on a member, each other member will assist by taking “such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force.” Strangely, this clearly provided wiggle room is never mentioned in the news commentaries about NATO and the Russia-Ukraine war. Why would that be? The reason for the hedge was that, in light of the constitutional delegation of the war power exclusively to Congress, the Senate would have had a problem ratifying a treaty that obligated the country to go to war automatically. (Ironically, President Truman went to war in Korea, which was not a NATO member, without a declaration of war. He called it a “police action.”)

The Senate ratified the NATO treaty 82-13 on July 21, 1949. Among those who voted nay was Sen. Taft. Who was he and what were the grounds for his vote?

Taft was the elder son of the late President and Chief Justice William Howard Taft. Sen. Taft had earlier voted to approve U.S. entry into the United Nations but doubted it would be effective, among other reasons, because, of the veto power held by the five permanent members of the Security Council: the United States, Soviet Union, Great Britain, France, and China.

Because of the influence and respect he had earned, Taft became known as Mr. Republican and was the Senate majority leader at the beginning of the Eisenhower administration, from January 3 to July 31, 1953, when he died. He had tried for the Republican presidential nomination three times, in 1940, 1948, and 1952, but failed because the Republican establishment had committed itself to bipartisan multilateral internationalism. As a principled noninterventionist, Taft had no chance.

Earlier, Taft had spoken against U.S. entry into World War II, having witnessed firsthand the unprecedented horrendous destruction and tyrannical aftermath of the first world war, propelled by U.S. intervention under President Wilson. Like other antiwar Republicans, Taft ended his opposition to entry into World War II after Japan attacked Pearl Harbor. (He objected to President Roosevelt’s shameful internment of Japanese-Americans beginning in 1942, which the Supreme Court later endorsed.)

Taft’s opponents smeared him as an isolationist, an unfair charge. His default position was against U.S. foreign military intervention because he feared it would lead to war, a loss of American liberty and economic stability, constitutionally compromising alliances, and

foreign resentment of America. On the other hand he supported an internationally administered rule of law, complete with a court and enforcement mechanism, to protect smaller, weaker nations from domination. That regime, however, would have had no power to meddle in the internal affairs of nations. Taft did favor giving Western Europe assurances regarding a Soviet military threat. (More below.) Taft also voted for, after initially opposing, both Truman's postwar military aid to Turkey and Greece and the Marshall Plan for Western Europe.)

He also opposed the U.S. government's encouragement of American investment in other countries because he foresaw that it would lead to imperialism, again, creating resentment against America. Taft thought the United States should set an example by protecting its own freedom, not by imposing values on others. Taft, who disliked the label conservative, which he associated with the plutocracy, was not a consistent libertarian, but it's clear that individual liberty and the imperative to limit centralized bureaucratic power topped his political values. For that reason he inspired several future libertarian stalwarts, including Murray Rothbard, Ralph Raico, and Leonard Liggio, to join Youth for Taft when the senator ran, unsuccessfully, against Dwight Eisenhower for the 1952 Republican nomination.

On April 12, 1949, Truman in a speech to the Senate urged ratification of the North Atlantic treaty, expressing the official line: "The security and welfare of each member of the community depend upon the security and welfare of all."

In opposing NATO, Taft gave a speech to the Senate on July 26, 1949. In it he criticized the alliance system for, among other things, subordinating U.S. foreign policy to the policies of the other member nations, which might unjustifiably provoke an attack. Note its current relevance:

[T]he Atlantic Pact goes much further. It obligates us to go to war if at any time during the next 20 years anyone makes an armed attack on any of the 12 nations. Under the Monroe Doctrine we could change our policy at any time. We could judge whether perhaps one of the countries had given cause for the attack. Only Congress could declare a war in pursuance of the doctrine. Under the new pact the President can take us into war without Congress. But, above all the treaty is a part of a much larger program by which we arm all these nations against Russia.... A joint military program has already been made.... *It thus becomes an offensive and defensive military alliance against Russia.* I believe our foreign policy should be aimed primarily at security and peace, and I believe such an alliance is more likely to produce war than peace. A third world war would be the greatest tragedy the world has ever suffered. Even if we won the war, we this time would probably suffer tremendous destruction, our economic system would be crippled, and we would lose our liberties and free system just as the Second World War destroyed the free systems of Europe. It might easily destroy civilization on this earth...[Emphasis added.]

Taft continued (again note the relevance):

If we undertake to arm all the nations around Russia from Norway on the north to Turkey on the south, and Russia sees itself ringed about gradually by so-called defensive arms from Norway and Denmark to Turkey and Greece, it may form a different opinion. It may decide that the arming of western Europe, regardless of its present purpose, looks to an attack upon Russia....

How would we feel if Russia undertook to arm a country on our border; Mexico, for instance?

He also said America could not afford the foreign policy of which NATO is a part.: "we can't let them [the Russian and Chinese communists] scare us into bankruptcy and the surrender of all liberty, or let them determine our foreign policies.... If the President is unwilling to recommend more taxes for fear of creating a depression, then we must have reached the limit of our taxpaying ability and we ought not to start a new and unnecessary building project...."

And more: NATO "is a step backward — a military alliance of the old type where we have to come to each others' assistance no matter who is to blame, and with ourselves the judges of the law."

From his prominent position, Taft made sure the public would hear a debate about postwar foreign policy. The bipartisan establishment surely would have preferred he had not done so.

As he prepared to run for the 1952 Republican presidential nomination, he published his book *A Foreign Policy for Americans*, in which he called for American "moral leadership" rather than imperial domination:

I do not think this moral leadership justifies engaging in any preventive war, or going to the defense of one country against another, or getting ourselves in a vulnerable fiscal and economic position at home which may invite war. I do not believe any policy which has behind it the threat of military force is justified as part of the basic foreign policy except to defend the liberty of our own people.

For some time now, American foreign policy has been sadly contrary to Taft's advice. The price measured in lives and treasure, for Americans and non-Americans, is beyond measure. Taft would be horrified but not surprised by what NATO has wrought and by what is happening today.

Further reading:

“The Republican Road Not Taken: The Foreign-Policy Vision of Robert A. Taft” by Michael T. Hayes, *Independent Review*, Spring 2004

“New Deal Nemesis: The ‘Old Right’ Jeffersonians by Sheldon Richman, *Independent Review*, Fall 1996