

“Transatlantic Security Issues from the Cold War to the 21st Century”
Geneva, 23-24 April 2009
PANEL 1: NATO DURING THE COLD WAR: SUCCESS AND PROBLEMS

**Three ministers and the world they made: Acheson, Bevin and Schuman, and the
North Atlantic Treaty, March-April 1949**

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The North Atlantic Treaty (NAT) was to define the institutional shape of the bipolar system and cement the geo-strategic and the ideological contours of the cold war world. Hegemonic but not democratic in structure, the alliance also shaped the politics of West European states, and became a key vehicle for East-West and West-West communication during and well beyond the cold war. Much of this would have surprised the three leading foreign ministers, Dean Acheson, Ernest Bevin and Robert Schuman, who signed the North Atlantic Treaty in April 1949, and who have all rightly been identified as playing significant personal roles in the creation of the Treaty. At the time, all three were primarily aware of the history of the previous fifty years. European and global wars; the consequences the US’ refusal to sign the Versailles Treaty; and the failure of appeasement in the 1930s to deal with nazism and fascism were etched in their memories. All three had to negotiate with a keen eye on national domestic opinion; none knew that the Soviets would detonate an atomic device within six months, that they would be at war in Korea a year later, or that the North Atlantic Treaty would generate strong institutions, enlargement, and elaborate military planning structures over the next sixty years.

This paper will fall into three parts. After the diplomatic narrative up to March 1949 is briefly reviewed, it will examine what Acheson, Bevin and Schuman thought and hoped they were creating in April 1949, and look at the sets of meetings held in Washington from 31 March to 7 April 1949. It will show that, as well as important grand strategic communalities, there were also substantive areas of disagreement, and compromises made, particularly by the British. The next section will rehearse the immediate consequences of the NAT, highlighting the strategic and psychological revolution that it brought. The NAT facilitated a more activist US policy over West Germany, which involved empowering France (and then West Germany), not Britain, and which left the UK as a European outlier.

The paper will conclude by briefly exploring two of the enduring footprints of the original treaty. It will argue that the idea of an existential external threat remains the driving and necessary force for the institutional success of NATO. That is to say, NATO remains at heart primarily a defence alliance. This helps to explain its policies in the 1990s, and contributes to understanding continuing perceptions of both Russia and now also terrorism as existential ‘others’. Finally, it will suggest that the dominance of the US over Europe from 1949 shaped the direction and depth of subsequent European

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integration efforts, and contributed to a European-wide cultural and political internalisation and dominance of Atlanticism.