

The Role of the Atlantic Council of the US in NATO Enlargement: The Initial Period

The following are some of my recollections of the contribution of the Council to the post-Cold War reinvention of NATO, and specifically of the position of the Council on NATO enlargement, as well as the significance of the latter for the Council during the 1990s.

I should begin with the caveat that as a member of the junior staff, I was not involved directly with work on NATO. These are the recollections of an observer one step removed and after more than two decades. I should note, however, that the Council then was a very small organization, staffed mainly by juniors, so my observations, while recalled at some distance then and even more now, are, I hope, reasonably well informed.

First, a brief note on the structure of the Council at that time: it was divided into semi-autonomous program offices. The offices occasionally collaborated but generally oversaw their own projects (indeed, one of the bitter dysfunctionalities of the time was the ‘float your own boat’ policy of the organization, which saw program offices sometimes competing against one another for grants from the same sources). There was no formal procedure for the selection or management of policy projects.

Like the Council, the program offices were tiny: most had a director, an assistant director, and one or two volunteer interns. The directors were nearly all retired bureaucrats; the assistant directors were nearly all younger than 25 and just out of university. It is important to know all this because it explains the role of the staff (and of the Council itself), which was mainly to facilitate other people’s collective efforts – normally resulting in consensus reports on matters of foreign policy with a mid-term time horizon of about five years. The aim of those reports was to shape public debate and policy choices within the government. Most of this work was done by groups of outsiders at a senior level. Many but not all were members of the Council’s board of directors. The staff coordinated, published, and disseminated this work in addition to raising the funds necessary to produce it.

The program offices were regional and functional. I worked in a functional office – “Collective Security” – that was unusual in that its director reported directly to the Chairman of the Board, General Andrew Goodpaster. It oversaw the work of projects on which he was the principal investigator and grantee.

There was a separate office for NATO policy, as well as another for post-Soviet policy. The NATO office reported in the normal way to the president of the Council, David Acheson; the post-Soviet office, however, was like the office where I worked and reported to Gen. Goodpaster because it also managed a couple of ‘his’ projects and foundation grants.

I joined the staff of the Council in the summer of 1994 but two years earlier I had worked there as an intern in the program office for energy and the environment. A few memories from the summer of 1992 stand out. The first was the ubiquity of talk about the future of NATO. I was in one of the few program offices that had little to do with it, but in the hallways, in the regular staff lunches, in the visits of board members and invited guests, it was nearly all we heard. The nucleus of work on Central and Eastern Europe was the office of a retired diplomat, John Baker, who also directed the Council’s education and civil-military relations programs. He and a recently retired US army colonel, Roy Alcalá, soon produced a study of post-Cold War security which became, by way of the Office of the Secretary of Defense (and Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, Amb. Chas. Freeman), the Partnership for Peace.

The president of the Council was then Ambassador Rozanne Ridgway and I remember the time I asked her at an intern lunch whether the existence of “superfluous” Euro-Atlantic security

institutions worried her (she had, as I recall, just given us a presentation on the NACC). She answered my question by saying that she was not worried about anything being “superfluous” (repeating the word with a mild sneer); the more overlapping institutions there were, the better.

Another memory from that summer was the Eurogroup conference. This was a big annual event for all the NATO defense ministers. The conference was held in a large hotel (the Marriott on Pennsylvania Avenue, I think) and all of us on the staff were roped in to help. What I most remember was the speech by Zbigniew Brzezinski about security guarantees in Central and Eastern Europe, and the minatory moment when he leaned forward and said, “so long as there is an independent Ukrainian state, Russian imperialism will never again rear its ugly head.” I remember thinking that was an odd historical argument to make and also noticing the discomfort of a number of people in the audience when he made it.

Two years later the tone was rather different. I do not remember the exactly month, but it had to have been in the summer or early fall of 1994 when the Council sponsored an event in the Loy Henderson room at the State Department. Most of the board were there, and on the stage were Gen. Goodpaster and Mr. Acheson. After some delay Richard Holbrooke strutted in from stage left. He had just become the Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs, and this may have been his first public event. He greeted both of the men sitting behind him, stating that he had known Gen. Goodpaster from the Paris Peace talks in 1968; then, nodding to Mr. Acheson, said that now was the time to be present at a new creation. He said that transatlantic relations were about to get a big boost because the CSCE was going to become an organization, and the North Atlantic alliance would expand to accept members of the former Warsaw Pact.

Holbrooke gave the impression that the matter was settled. General Ed Rowny asked, “why is NATO’s expansion now so necessary?” and I don’t remember Holbrooke’s answer because my attention was diverted by hearing a foreign service officer sitting behind me say to another, “because Dick is desperate to be SecState in a second term, and for that to happen Clinton needs to win all those Polish votes in the Midwestern swing states.” (n.b. Generals Rowny and Goodpaster were both proud Polish-Americans.)

I now remember feeling more surprised than bemused by the casual way Amb. Holbrooke had announced what seemed to be a major policy decision. After the event I asked Tom Hanson, a retired foreign service officer who directed the Council’s NATO information office, what the Council was going to do. Would it take the lead in sponsoring a public discussion? And I remember his non-answer, which was to give me an empty look and say, “Sure, Ken, why don’t you go and do something.”

One person who was not bemused (or amused) was General Goodpaster. Soon after this event, there was a board dinner at the Army-Navy Club. I remember him standing at the front door and greeting each guest with a smile and a handshake. But when the dinner began his mood changed. He stood up and delivered an angry monologue against NATO enlargement, saying it would destroy everything that had been accomplished since German reunification, “including Partnership for Peace, which is a silly-sounding name but a very good program.”

I shall let Gen. Goodpaster speak for himself with the attached copy of a letter he sent to President Clinton. His objections are clearly stated there and go beyond any offense to the pride of authorship regarding the Partnership for Peace. However, the Council, in addition to being rigorously non-partisan, was strict about never taking positions on policy matters. That was up to the individual working groups, which signed off on the recommendations in policy papers. The Council as an organization did not do that.

During the next several years, however, that practice changed with regard to NATO enlargement. It would be necessary to talk to several other people to find out why but on reflection I think it was because David Acheson had decided that he would remain as president of the Council until the 50th anniversary of the alliance in 1999. He was asked and agreed to serve as an interim president for only a short period when Amb. Ridgway stepped down (or moved up, rather, to Co-Chair) earlier than had been expected in 1993. What his actual intentions were, then or later, of course, cannot be known.

The 50th anniversary date was also the moment when NATO's first new members from the old Warsaw Pact entered the alliance, and I remember seeing Mr. Acheson that day at the members' table in the Metropolitan Club devouring a large steak. In the five years leading up to that point, the Council had taken a visible role in the promotion of enlargement. Jeremy Rosner, who was the Clinton administration's chief promoter, was a frequent visitor to our new office. Tom Hanson had left the Council and the office he directed was reconstituted under the direction of a retired army foreign area officer and "FOB" (friend-of-Bill) from Arkansas.

Gen. Goodpaster left the Council in 1997 for a number of reasons, one of them being his unease over the Council's having accepted so much government funding for the purpose of publicizing the virtues of NATO enlargement. He regarded that as a violation of the letter and the spirit of the Council's by-laws and its 501(c)(3) status, no matter what anyone's views were on the policy. A few other board members also resigned. But Mr. Acheson persevered and the Council remained in business during a tough decade for small policy organizations with no particular ideological or partisan base. (It's also worth noting that the Council, largely at Acheson's insistence, parlayed its role in NATO enlargement into a reinvigoration of the Atlantic Treaty Association, which had established branches in every PFP country. But there were limits to the "value added" of that effort. I remember asking him one day why he looked so glum, and he said "by God it's hard to get anyone to want to show up for a WEU conference!")

That story suggests where most hearts and minds were in the mid-1990s. Yet, it would be speculative for me to conclude that Acheson's acute political antennae with regard to NATO enlargement were directly responsible for the Council's financial survival. Or that whatever the Council did in hosting events, publishing reports, and generally serving as a cheerleader for enlargement during those years was integral to the acceptance by NATO of several new members. I'd be more tempted to say that Gen. Goodpaster's continued efforts up to 1997 to maintain dialogue with IMEMO and other Russian organizations and individuals which took place under Council auspices but separate from the work that was done on NATO, accomplished as much or even more to ease the way, at least to the NATO-Russian Founding Act, which in turn, arguably, made NATO enlargement truly possible.

I left the Council's staff in 2000 and have observed its work on NATO since from an even greater distance. Part of me is more impressed than I thought I would be at this time by what NATO has become and how much it has done. Nevertheless, I am struck by the number of recent critical assessments of enlargement – of both the policy and its implementation – and their echoing the concerns noted in Gen. Goodpaster's letter to President Clinton. And I often ask myself what-if questions, starting with the one a few of us on the junior staff asked at the time: What if Gen. Goodpaster had been ten years younger? My belief then was that he would have galvanized a much harder fight, both against the policy and against the role assigned to the Council – the organization he had led for more than a decade – in selling it. In retrospect, I'm not so sure. Twenty-five years from now, the answer may also be different.

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