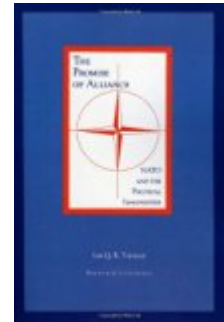


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Ian Q.R. Thomas. *The Promise of Alliance: NATO and the Political Imagination*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1997. xii + 189 pp. \$36.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8476-8581-3; \$114.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8476-8580-6.

Reviewed by Steven W. Hook (Kent State University)
Published on H-Pol (June, 1998)



The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has defied the historic fate of most military alliances. Not only has NATO continued to exist well beyond the demise of its proclaimed adversary, the alliance will expand in 1999, adding the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland from the ranks of the deceased Soviet bloc.

In this context it is worth reconsidering NATO's performance as a Cold War alliance and looking prospectively to its role in the new millennium. Both tasks are undertaken by Ian Q.R. Thomas in his informative and thought-provoking book, *The Promise of Alliance: NATO and the Political Imagination*.

The key point of Thomas's book becomes quickly apparent: NATO has always been an "elastic" alliance, assuming multiple meanings and perceived functions for its far-flung membership. Thus NATO's determined foray into the post-Cold War, based upon a host of largely improvised rationales, is an extension of historic practice.

Thomas guides the reader through NATO's first half-century; his book, in this sense, is more history than analysis. As he recounts, and as is already widely understood, pursuing the containment of Soviet communism was always less problematic than maintaining harmony within the alliance. Internal discord was inevitable given NATO's non-European (U.S.) core, the "special relationship" between the United States and Great Britain, the acute sensitivities of France and Germany, and the amorphous ties between East and West Europe.

All of this, to Thomas, produced a bewildering array of explicit "conceptions" of NATO: a vehicle for Atlantic Partnership, a linchpin of containment, an agent of U.S. leadership (or hegemony) in Europe, a force for human

rights, etc. Quite clearly, NATO's advocates devoted as much time deriving reasons for the alliance to exist as they did considering, not to mention executing, military strategy.

This is an important point to emphasize, particularly in the context of NATO enlargement. In looking to the past, Thomas seeks to make sense of the present.

His argument, though important and broadly credible, risks overstatement. Given the book's relative dearth of analysis, his critical assertions—that the functional "axioms" of NATO's mission somehow proved hazardous to the Cold War's peaceful outcome—are never fully developed. Thomas complains of "a political mindset that refused to re-examine its basic tenets and their origins" (p. 40). But he fails to elaborate on this charge or to identify its specific consequences.

This shortcoming is particularly glaring given the fact NATO fulfilled its stated task, and in a peaceful and victorious manner that exceeded the expectations of NATO commanders, political leaders and mass publics. Critiques of NATO's performance thus face a formidable standard of validity, and Thomas's critique falls short in this regard.

Among his laments, Thomas asserts that NATO advocates "simplified the infinite complexities of international political relations," a process which "often constrained the possibilities for examining alternative approaches" (p. 50). Thomas fails, however, to suggest what these "alternative approaches" may have been. More troubling, he does not persuasively argue against the "simplification" of complex reality as an essential element of statecraft.

Four primary and related problems stem from Thomas's critique.

First, it is not clear that NATO's mission was really as complex as Thomas contends. Europe was divided into eastern and western spheres of influence, both controlled by non-European powers. An alliance was established by the western zone to prevent the eastern zone from extending its range westward. The western alliance justified its mission on several, mutually reinforcing grounds, and it prevailed based on its possession of superior military, economic, and political resources. Is all this so complex?

Second, the objectives of any alliance strategy are likely to be numerous, extending beyond mere defense to the positive objectives to be realized by successful collective defense. In this regard, the therapeutic effects of any alliance on the internal relations of their members are obvious. Thus the promulgation of multiple "conceptions," particularly those that are complementary, is natural.

Third, one would expect political leaders in an alliance of democratic states to seek first principles, to strip down grand strategy to bare essentials, and to engage in some hyperbole as a means to garner public support. Any other behavior would be unwise and potentially self-defeating.

Finally, Thomas betrays his own thesis in suggesting, correctly, that NATO's internal cohesion was often inversely related to the perceived threat it faced at any given time. The detente of the 1970s "put a brake on relations within NATO and provoked a range of disputes" that dissipated only after the Soviet Union's renewed interventionism "gave a boost to the return of rhetoric by providing a focus for increased hostility" (pp. 108-109).

Thomas never seriously entertains the notion that, in the Soviet Union and Joseph Stalin and his successors, NATO faced a legitimate and dangerous threat. In his post-modern view, the Cold War was all about perceptions, political posturing, and the construction of "rhetoric" to justify policy. Little is made of Soviet provocations in Berlin or its ruthless tactics in the captive Visegrad states. Although the point is not developed,

Thomas derides the rhetoric of transnational interdependence as a ruse "both to mask and justify the extension of an American empire" (p. 65).

A counter-argument could just as easily be made that, for such a fractious alliance, NATO responded in a rational and highly effective way in constraining the Soviet Union, draining its resources, and hastening the collapse of its own "empire" in Eastern Europe. The fact that NATO achieved its stated goal while facilitating political integration in Western Europe, the reunification of Germany, and the subsequent assimilation of those same Visegrad states into NATO makes the feat even more impressive.

Of course, one could argue that the Soviet Union was destined for dissolution, with or without pressure from the West. This is the standard refrain of revisionists like Thomas. But the record of the Cold War, particularly during the SS-20 and Intermediate Nuclear Force (INF) controversies of the 1980s, points exactly the other way. Countervailing pressure, with or without political rhetoric, proved determinant. At the very least, one must appreciate the performance of NATO in maintaining a stable front along the Iron Curtain that deterred provocations across the dividing line and any prospect of hot war.

Nevertheless, Thomas rightly argues that the presence of "multiple conceptions" of NATO, and its service of several masters at once, has been an important characteristic of the alliance: "The sheer diversity of conceptions of NATO contributed to alliance unity by preventing any member from feeling too tightly constrained by any one of them."

On this point, which reflects NATO's success rather than its failure, Thomas is safe.

Copyright (c) 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu. [The book review editor for H-Pol is Lex Renda <renlex@uwm.edu>]

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-pol>

Citation: Steven W. Hook. Review of Thomas, Ian Q.R., *The Promise of Alliance: NATO and the Political Imagination*. H-Pol, H-Net Reviews. June, 1998.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2139>

Copyright © 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.