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The Western Alliance between Hegemony and Parity

Ever since the Maastricht Treaty of 1991 identified it as one of the key pillars of the European Union, debates over the nature, shape, and scope of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and over its relationship with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) have remained at the forefront of the political agenda in western Europe. It is easily forgotten, however, that these discussions did not simply emerge from the Maastricht Treaty. The search for what was originally termed the European Security and Defense Identity (ESDI) is in fact as old as the process of western European integration itself. Ralph Dietl’s latest study addresses this very issue. It comes as a welcome reminder of just how deep the roots of the ESDI and by extension the CFSP really are. Dietl’s ambitious two-volume project, published in 2006 and 2007, reexamines the development and nature of the western alliance system during the first two decades of the Cold War. This review treats the first volume only, which examines the role of Europe not only as an actor but also as a concept of order, in the manifold deliberations over the nature and shape of the western alliance system from the creation of the Brussels Treaty Organization (BTO) in 1948 until the return to power in France of General Charles de Gaulle in June 1958.

Volume 1 aims to illustrate just how complex and multilayered the western alliance was between 1948 and 1958. It was never a hegemonic security system dominated and controlled by the United States; instead, constant centrifugal and competing pressures worked within the alliance. Dietl’s research highlights the persistent push and pull between very different visions of Europe among members of the western alliance system. American policymakers under the Truman and Eisenhower administrations alike sought to use Europe as a means to secure American hegemony over the alliance. The progressive integration of western Europe along federal lines was intended not only to promote peace, stability, and cooperation among the European powers, or to contain the FRG and present a strong and united front against the Soviet Union, but also and primarily to reorganize the continent in such a way as to subordinate western Europe to the United States, particularly in the realm of security, defense, and nuclear armaments. For American policymakers, Europe therefore constituted an instrument of control, a means through which to stifle the re-emergence of the European nation-state as an independent actor in the international system. Hence, by sustaining the bipolar nature of the Cold War, American policy towards Europe aimed to maximize Washington’s power and freedom of action.

This vision of a docile and subordinated Europe within a bipolar world, however, was not uncontested by Washington’s larger European allies, notably Britain, France, and even at times the FRG. Dietl’s study demonstrates that throughout the period from 1948 to 1958, these states persistently sought to maximize not only their security but also their power and freedom to maneuver. Britain and France in particular strove to gain an
equal footing with the United States in NATO, especially over matters concerning security, defense, and nuclear armaments. In view of Washington’s clear preponderance of power, however, and taking into consideration the ongoing need to contain not only the Soviet threat but also the potential danger of a rearmed and resurgent Germany, Britain and France, too, sought to use Europe to achieve their goal of equality. Even so, policymakers in London and Paris had very different understandings of Europe than their American counterparts. For Britain and France, and even for West Germany, European integration became an instrument to advance national interests, a means through which to emancipate and reempower the European nation-state. This is not to say that British and French policymakers had an unwavering attachment to Europe, or that their visions of the nature of European integration were similar and static. After all, the ever-changing debates between the European powers over the nature and degree of integration have been well documented by historians. Yet the fact remains, as Dietl sees it, that the European powers sought to use Europe as leverage vis-à-vis their Atlantic ally in order to gain and increase their voice collectively and individually within the western alliance system. Thus, while the United States sought to create a two-tiered security alliance, one in which American hegemony was assured through NATO’s dominance over the various institutions of western Europe, the European powers overwhelmingly preferred a two-pillared security alliance, one in which European institutions would—or at least could—play an equal role with NATO in the defense of the West.

On the face of it, Dietl’s conclusions do not appear altogether novel. After all, the idea that the European powers sought to use Europe as a means to “rescue” the nation-state is not new, nor is the notion that the larger European powers often challenged the bipolar nature of the Cold War.[1] Likewise, historians have written volumes about the foundation and evolution of NATO, or about European efforts to institutionalize their cooperation in the realm of security, defense, and arms production, focusing particularly on the BTO, or Western Union, of 1948, on the European Defense Community of 1950-54, and on the Franco-German and Franco-Italian-German (F-I-G) armaments negotiations of 1956-58.[2] Yet Dietl’s study distinguishes itself from existing historiography on the western alliance system in two respects. For one thing, Dietl examines the inner workings of the alliance, focusing particularly on differences in policy-planning processes particularly in Washington, London, Paris, and Bonn. As a result, he draws a direct and constant connection between diverse European efforts to establish an institutionalized ESDI on the one hand, and between these efforts and wider debates concerning the reform of NATO strategy and decision-making on the other, particularly regarding the deployment and control of nuclear weapons. Secondly, Dietl focuses on an institution unduly marginalized in the historiography of the western alliance system, namely the Western European Union (WEU) which replaced the BTO in 1954.[3]

Indeed, perhaps the most innovative and significant sections of Dietl’s study are chapters 3 and 4, which examine the role played by the WEU in the context of the relance européenne of 1955-57. In these two chapters, Dietl demonstrates that the WEU had the potential to be much more than a technical sub-organization of NATO dedicated solely to the question of arms controls. In view of the changed strategic situation created by the launch of Sputnik and the development of intercontinental ballistic missiles, the European powers—including Britain—seriously envisaged transforming the WEU into a “third force” capable of deploying its own nuclear weapons. This potential development posed a significant challenge to Washington’s hegemony over the western alliance. To prevent its realization, Washington deliberately set out to separate Britain from continental Europe, offering London a special, exclusive relationship in the realm of nuclear armaments. As a result, efforts to create a European “third force” under the auspices of the WEU never came to fruition. Yet, as Dietl shows, they were not expended in vain, for they helped the European powers to press Washington on the crucial matter of NATO reforms. Likewise, Dietl reveals how the continental European powers used their own mechanisms of collaboration in the realm of defense and arms production, whether in the form of FINABEL (France, Italy, the FRG, and the Benelux countries) or of F-I-G, as means through which to pressure an increasingly reluctant Britain over the transformation of the WEU. Indeed, it is by highlighting the manner in which European policymakers institutionalized these diverse and competing expressions of an ESDI that Dietl has made an important contribution to our understanding of the western alliance system from 1948-58. Institutions such as the BTO, WEU, FINABEL, or even F-I-G were never simply instruments through which the United States could delegate responsibilities while maintaining dominance over the alliance. These institutions could just as easily help to extend the power and influence of the European powers, thus serving as means through which to challenge America’s hegemony in NATO. If need be, the WEU and
its various sub-organizations could even have replicated the functions of and rivaled that very alliance.

Volume I of *Emanzipation und Kontrolle* thus certainly adds to the historiography of the western alliance and of the role that Europe played within that system. The study reminds us that the quest for an independent and viable ESDI is as old as the western alliance itself. Dietl combines extensive archival research with a thorough analysis of international relations theory to shed new light on a much-covered topic. Impressively, he has consulted government archives and private papers in the United States, Britain, Germany, the Netherlands, and Belgium. He has even appraised documents from the archives of NATO and the WEU. Italy and France are left out of this documentary tour-de-force, though the reasons for that decision are not entirely clear. This omission is regrettable, for although France is one of the key actors examined throughout the monograph, Dietl relies on published sources to examine and explain the policymaking process in Paris. This criticism should not detract from Dietl’s achievements, however. Overall, this is a well-written, well-organized, well-documented monograph, an impressive attempt at producing a truly international diplomatic history. Given its scope, nature, and the fact that it is written in German, it is not suitable for an undergraduate audience (though students may want to consult some of Dietl’s publications in English).[4] Historians and political scientists specializing on the Cold War and European integration, however, will find *Emanzipation und Kontrolle* an interesting and useful read.

Notes


