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More often than not, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is described simply as a political and military alliance. But the institution was far more than that: it was also an intricate bureaucracy, composed of a secretariat, consultative bodies, advisory groups, and expert committees, to name but a few of the alliance’s constituent organs. Evanthis Hatzivassiliou illustrates that point clearly, as he explores the creation of the Committee on the Challenges of Modern Society (CCMS) and the body’s first few years of activity. *The NATO Committee on the Challenges of Modern Society, 1969-1975: Transatlantic Relations, the Cold War and the Environment* sheds light on how and why the United States—itself no great friend of international bureaucracy, in the main—pushed for the creation of this new NATO body.

The creation of the CCMS responded to a broader set of anxieties shaping the attitudes of policymakers within the Atlantic alliance. As the 1960s came to a close, allied officials increasingly worried about the health and vitality of NATO. The Vietnam War called into question the transatlantic partnership, raising concerns about the US commitment to Europe or the strategic thinking (or lack thereof) that shaped Washington’s foreign policy choices. Those who took to the streets to protest the war, as no shortage of policymakers noted, were young people. Perhaps they could no longer appreciate the need for NATO at all.

These problems showed no signs of slowing in the early 1970s, as economic problems plagued the Western allies. Such anxieties peak through in Hatzivassiliou’s work, particularly when he traces the rise of a new type of CCMS project: the so-called energy projects. These initiatives responded to obvious problems facing NATO’s member states, made all the worse after the oil shocks of October 1973. As Hatzivassiliou shows, however, the shared allied concerns about their energy supplies did not mean that they could agree on a role for the committee in discussing the issue. After Western European opposition to a proposed energy action group, recommended by Henry Kissinger, US policymakers “lowered their expectations” (p. 149). Instead, consistent with decades of compromise at NATO, the CCMS agreed to study the problem. A series of energy studies ensued.

Throughout, Hatzivassiliou emphasizes the United States and its impact on the CCMS. It was Richard Nixon who played a vital and personal role in the committee’s creation. Daniel Patrick Moynihan and Russell Train, Nixon’s chief advisers on environmental issues, shaped the parameters of debate and, in Moynihan’s case, occasionally browbeat Washington’s transatlantic partners. Time and again, while laying out the various studies undertaken under the auspices of the committee, Hatzivassiliou highlights the centrality of the United States as an advocate or a copilot of the various studies.

Few of the United States’ transatlantic allies were willing to stand in the way of Washington even as NATO’s other members expressed reservations about the CCMS. Chief among them were the United Kingdom,
whose opposition is the subject of a full chapter. Focusing on the British raises interesting questions. Were, as Hatzivassiliou argues, the British in fact “the closest ally” of the United States and, hence, worth the dedicated focus afforded to them in this study (p. 181)? Here, one wonders about the information not presented. The United Kingdom is the only ally to receive such treatment, but without a similarly detailed and sustained discussion of other allies’ overall approaches to the CCMS, it is hard to accept the claim at face value that British attitudes were unique.

The NATO Committee on the Challenges of Modern Society does give some indication of how complex and contested these projects were, as it lays out the wide range of studies that fell under the remit of the committee. These projects dealt with narcotics, road safety, pollution, energy, earthquakes, and countless other topics. Not only were these initiatives pursued and copiloted by members of the alliance, both large and small, but these initiatives also brought in non-NATO states. One conference on cities, to give one of many examples, included participants from Japan, Australia, and Mexico. In laying out these myriad projects, there could have been a greater distinction between the first round of projects, undertaken after the committee’s formation in 1969, and the second round, beginning in 1972. Part of this is the structure of the book itself: Hatzivassiliou takes great pains to emphasize the committee’s evolution, referring to 1975 as a “watershed” year. By that point, “the first ‘wave’ of projects had been completed, and the second wave was fully under way” (p. 157). The subsequent chapter, however, takes the reader back in time to discuss British intransigence.

As a sustained treatment of the CCMS, its origins, and its initial years, The NATO Committee on the Challenges of Modern Society sheds new light on the anxieties facing the Western allies. In particular, it illustrates how concerns about the strength of the West contributed to the emergence of a new institutional body, one that seemed a clear departure from NATO’s stated mandate. Hatzivassiliou shows instead that the CCMS was “part of the West’s crisis of adjustment” (p. 262). This overview of the CCMS’s early studies offers a reminder that NATO’s operations have long been far more complex and diverse than the phrase “political and military alliance” suggests.

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