In the post-Cold War world and especially in the post 9/11 era, NATO’s mission has changed beyond recognition. For its first forty years, it remained anchored by bipolarity and its sole task was the defence of the Atlantic and Western Europe from attack by the Soviet Union. It was set free by the end of the Cold War and was able not only to expand but also to globalise its activities. However, even during its Euro-centric period, ‘out-of-area’ issues were not ‘out-of-mind’ issues. After all it was Korea, an ‘out-of-area’ issue that transformed NATO into a powerful military organisation. The European NATO allies, although not consulted before the Truman Administration decided that the North Korean incursion into South Korea had to be reversed by war, had come to the conclusion that alone they would not be able defend their countries against a Soviet onslaught and that only the U.S. could protect them. Throughout the 1950s, the messy process of decolonisation complicated relations between the U.S. and its European NATO allies and ‘out of area’ issues became instrumental in fostering behaviour patterns that would beset relations between the NATO hegemon and its allies. These formative experiences left an indelible imprint on the attitudes of the European NATO allies towards ‘out-of-area’ matters. The European NATO allies became resolute in their belief that U.S. military might and resources should not be dispersed and weakened through U.S. military ‘out-of-area’ engagements as this could leave Europe defenceless. The

problem for them however, was that the end of World War II had ‘jarred the universe’ and the U.S. had to follow the logic of its commitment to containment into the Third World arena too. Concern over Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev’s ‘Third World offensive,’ Maoist posturing, and Soviet economic growth became intertwined with the surge of national-liberation movements. As U.S. foreign policy became more global, especially during the years of ‘flexible response,’ European feelings of insecurity increased. For the Europeans, the NATO area as defined by article 6 of the 1949 North Atlantic Treaty was sacrosanct and led them to resist doggedly any American push towards a more global approach.

Over the years, the history of intra-allied relations within NATO has been documented by too many historians to mention here, not least by the doyen of NATO studies, Larry Kaplan. Having said this, however, it may be admitted that ‘NATO culture’ has not been probed adequately since the ‘like-mindedness’ of alliance members is taken for granted or assumed to appear when needed as a deus ex-machina to save the day. And yet, NATO owes its endurance as an organisation to its ability to create a ‘culture’ or ‘a mindset’ of tension diffusion and conciliation even when its members are in open disagreement with each other and it is apparent that their thinking and approaches to ethical issues do not coincide. Thus far such issues has always been treated in a cursory fashion and used by authors merely to launch their views of the role of NATO after the end of bipolarity. The promising leads of the excellent edited collection Transforming NATO in the Cold War – Challenges Beyond Deterrence in the 1960’s were never really systematically followed up. It is this particular lacuna in literature and our understanding of NATO that Evanthis Hatzivassiliou has been working assiduously to plug with a series of articles and chapter contributions that will culminate in the publication of a book in May 2014 under the title NATO and Western Perceptions of the Soviet Bloc: Alliance Analysis and Reporting, 1951-69.

In his current article, Professor Hatzivassiliou has taken the bold step of exploring how NATO, from 1957-1967, regarded the periphery, or to be exact, those Third World areas in

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4 Andreas Wegner et al. (eds) Transforming NATO in the Cold War – Challenges Beyond Deterrence in the 1960’s (London: Routledge, 2007).


which its members had a geo-strategic interest, or where developments could affect the
alliance indirectly and its ability to undertake successfully the defence of Western Europe.
The period under scrutiny was one of the most formative decades of Cold-War NATO.
The alliance battled against a growing consultation deficit, increased insecurity, internal
tensions fomented by President Charles De Gaulle of France, the promotion of the
concept of Multi-Lateral Force, and the increasing U.S. focus in South East Asia. From the
mid-1950s, especially after the launch of Sputnik and the Suez Crisis, the differing
opinions on ‘out-of-area’ matters between the Western hegemon and the other member
states of the alliance made such issues recurring topics of disagreement.

As a safety valve from 1957 onwards, and with the prompting of suggestions emanating
from ‘the three wise men’ report, a series of working groups consisting of experts in the
fields of politics, economics, and Third World problems were set up to produce
background reports on ‘out-of-area’ issues. All the allies knew that despite bipolarity,
NATO existed in a rapidly changing and complex world environment. Changes in the
Third World could affect the alliance in achieving its primary goal of defending the
Central Front. NATO’s interest in ‘out-of-area’ issues was determined primarily by fears of
Soviet penetration of the periphery rather than concern over the problems of the Global
South. The organisation came to perceive Soviet infiltration of the periphery as a threat
because it could enable the USSR to influence local political or military decisions and
compromise the defence of the NATO area. The experts’ reports were for ministers
attending the biannual meetings of the North Atlantic Council (NAC).

At the same time the working groups had a peculiar position within NATO’s political
structure. Their deliberations led to no decisions since the NAC was not expected to make
decisions on these issues. These meticulously drafted documents were simply situation
reports relying on information provided by each of the national delegations. The
influence of the United States was strong whilst that of France, Italy and West Germany
was also significant. The major player, especially in matters concerning the Global South,
was Great Britain. This influence was based on Britain’s long experience in dealing with
the local affairs in many areas of the emergent Third World, its expertise in imperial and
colonial affairs, and its diplomatic prowess in international negotiations. Britain
manoeuvred to assume the role to educate NATO members “about the problems of the
Third World” (3). Also, by taking the lead on certain issues, Britain was able to ensure
that its NATO allies did not look too closely at its colonial and Commonwealth affairs and
interests. In many instances, in final reports a predominantly British view of the world
was tempered by the fact that these were still subject to the processes of negotiation and
compromise among all members.

The experts working groups looked at the political and socio-economic developments and
conditions of the volatile areas of the periphery and how they created opportunities for
the Communist Bloc to enhance its presence and influence in specific regions such as the
Middle East, Africa, Latin America, and the Far East. The reports were presented to
NATO member states in the form of agreed minutes – thus one significant task of the
working groups was to paper over disagreements amongst members. Overcoming differences of opinion among allies was facilitated by the fact that the working groups were drafting their reports under the clear guideline that the periphery ought to be examined in terms of its Cold-War characteristics. This strict adherence to the primacy of the Cold War as the only arbiter of international developments led NATO and its working groups to fail to disaggregate the growing North-South developmental divide from the East-West conflict. The primary concern, therefore, was the Cold-War implications of events at the periphery rather than the studying of the problems endemic and local to particular regions or countries. In part such views and actions can be accounted for by the rapid industrialisation of the USSR during the 1950s, which furnished the Soviets with the resources to provide countries in the Third World with both international and military aid and also an alternative economic model for development to the capitalism of the West. Greater Soviet economic strength threatened, in turn, an increasing penetration of the periphery and the threat of disruption to the West’s communications and its access to strategic resources.

The article provides much-needed analysis on critical ‘out-of-area’ regions such as Africa, the Far East – in particular China and Vietnam, Latin America and also the Middle East, a special case region, since a crisis there could directly affect a NATO member, Turkey. Hatzivassiliou goes on to consider how NATO’s working groups interpreted the post-Stalinist attempts by the Chinese and Soviets (or the Sino-Soviet bloc) to infiltrate NATO’s periphery. He looks at the communist economic offensive in general terms and moves on to discuss how NATO’s specialist study groups assessed the geo-strategic regions of the Middle East, Africa, the Far East, and Latin America. Thus, an ad-hoc Committee of experts from Belgium, France, West Germany, Italy, Portugal, Britain, and the U.S. studied Africa ‘South of the Sahara’. Problems with this Committee showed up straight away since each NATO member adopted a different position. France, Belgium, and Portugal – still with colonies in Africa – did not want to discuss growing African nationalism, whilst in contrast, the British considered that the West would lose Africa if it did not appreciate that ‘Africanism’ did not equate with Communism. For their part, the Americans were unhappy with an ad-hoc Committee which differentiated Africa from other regions – moreover, they considered the Committee itself to be an attempt by Paul-Henri Spaak (the NATO Secretary General appointed in 1957) to harmonise the policies of the member states. The Americans were reassured only when the British convinced them that ‘no common policy will emerge.’

The reports of NATO’s expert Committees during 1957-1967 appear to describe the world as seen by academics/specialists. To this skeleton of ideas and core world views appear to have been added a pot pourri of ideas arising from individual national interpretations of how the world operated and how to approach geo-political problems. The Harmel Report of 1967 on the workings of NATO lamented the lack of harmony on ‘out-of-area’ issues. It observed that the ‘future prestige of the Western World is less dependent on its power and wealth than upon its response to problems of human rights, race relations and
development’. Yet, despite such (prescient) comments, the Harmel Report still focused mainly on East-West relations, defence, and détente.

Professor Hatzivassiliou’s work in this article is hugely important for students of the alliance as it maps out NATO world view/s during a critical decade of its development. NATO always had a one-dimensional task consisting of just one bullet point – defence of the alliance area from Soviet attack – and this took precedence over everything else. Yet NATO, through its committees of experts, was still able to form a three-dimensional view of the world in which it existed, albeit one seen through Western eyes and always through the prism of the Cold War.

This article opens a major debate on an under-researched area, namely the inner workings of NATO, but even more presciently, on the ‘collective mind’ of the organisation. This is a timely article too, especially at a time when the situation in the Ukraine is once again testing the different opinions in approach among allies and is once again appearing to confirm the fact that America can never afford to take its eye away from Europe for too long even when the ‘pivot to Asia’ seems to be a more beguiling proposition.

**Effie G. H. Pedaliu** is a Fellow at LSE IDEAS, having previously held posts at LSE, KCL and UWE. She is the author of *Britain, Italy and the Origins of the Cold War*, (Palgrave/Macmillan, 2003) and the co-editor of *Britain in Global Affairs, Volume II, From Churchill to Blair*, Palgrave/Macmillan (2013). Her latest publication is ‘Transatlantic Relations at a Time When “More Flags” Meant “No European Flags”: The US, its European Allies and the War in Vietnam’, *International History Review*, 35 (3), 2013. Pedaliu is a member of the peer review college of the Arts and Humanities Research Council, and a co-editor with John W. Young of the Palgrave/Macmillan book series, *Security Conflict and Cooperation in the Contemporary World*.

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