

The Western Alliance, the Southern Atlantic and the Soviet challenge

Peter Nailor*

Let me begin by making clear that this paper is exploratory. It deals with possibilities rather than certainties, and is more concerned with what might happen in the future than with a simple extrapolation of existing circumstances. In that sense it is not only conjectural, but seeks to provoke discussion.

However, it is, I think, sensible to make the initial point that many of the perspectives that now function as orthodoxies in the NATO environment are, so far as the Southern Atlantic area in particular is concerned, historically fixed. The most obvious of these is the physical limits that were set as the area within which the commitments of the allies to consult and act collectively were defined. These limits made political sense in 1949, and represented a bargain between the core security interests of the allies in the European area, and the more diffuse interests of a few of the allies in what we now call «out of area» regions.

These limits also made some strategic sense, as power and influence were then spread and continued for the next twenty years or so. In the last twenty years, however, the position has changed markedly. For the United States, the implications of the policy of containment and a widening spread of interests have enormously extended her range of obligations and activities. It is not that Europe is no longer significant; it is clearly still very important. But other areas are important now too: and some of them areas where American allies might be able to support her, to some effect. For the Europeans, in the same period, the dissolution of their colonial empires has fundamentally altered the ways in which their 'out of area' concerns are viewed, and managed. They have not lost interest; but they have certainly lost interests, as well as power and influence – and, with varying degrees of success, have been reconciling themselves to the reduced circumstances of their post-Imperial situations. The formal transfer of power to newly-independent states that were once colonies has been accompanied by the loss of indirect control in 'spheres of influence'. It is not, everywhere, a total loss: political, cultural and, above all, economic ties persist in many individual instances. But the pervading sense of responsibility has either gone, or cannot easily be activated in an environment where paternalism in the old European mode has become both unfashionable and, largely, unwelcome.

* Professor of the Royal Naval College, Greenwich.

On the other side of the coin, the capacity of the Soviet Union to follow its interests has been greatly extended. Perhaps the most fundamental change has been in the way in which doctrinal considerations have been consolidated. The support of national liberation struggles, and the implications of a restated doctrine of 'peaceful coexistence' (that makes a significant distinction between the interests of governments and of peoples) have been an intellectual stimulus to a range of policy activities in which one might pick out, by way of illustration, three instruments of action that have been important.

The growth of the Soviet maritime forces is certainly very significant. Not only the military navy but the fishery and merchant fleets have grown very considerably. While the Soviet Navy is now a powerful instrument of state policy, giving the Soviet Union a reach that can, in some areas, be supplemented by air transport forces, it is not yet a classically balanced fleet, with components and operating bases that might help to ensure its ability to sustain protracted conflict. It cannot, however, be ignored, in either peace or war mode, as a manifestation of the Soviet Union as intent to act as a global power. It is a restraint at the very least, and a major military factor, if it is handled well. And the fishery fleet has a particular importance, even beyond its domestic usefulness to the Soviet Union, as an agency by which support to indigenous fishery industries in the «Third World» is offered.

The second instrument of action is local military support through arms sales and technical services. This is an activity which offers some measure of financial profit, as well as influence; but the record of success is patchy. Nevertheless the traffic is extensive and – as the West too has found – the demand persists. It sometimes offers the Soviet Union opportunities for extending its influence that cannot be balanced, as in the West, by economic aid, for the record of the Soviet Union is not comparable.

The third instrument is more diffusely manifested, and not very easily described. I am not sure whether to call it propaganda, or persuasion, or even state-controlled advertising. Its purpose is to mobilise and sustain support both for communist ideals and practices, and for Russian state policies; and, as such, a variety of techniques is employed, from radio and television broadcasting to covert intelligence and indirect support to dissidence and violence.

The upshot of all of these changes and developments is that, from the point of view of the Western allies, the challenges which they see facing them are now of a wider sort: geographically as well as instrumentally. From that point of view the physical limits defined by the NATO treaty do not make the sense that they once did – not least in

regard to the policies and the reach of the Soviet Union. However, we must take into account that the confrontation between East and West is still dominated by the carefully constructed, and carefully managed, position in Central Europe. It is in Europe that the military power and major interests of the two competing systems are most effectively deployed and defined. Europe is no longer the sum total of the matter: but it is partly because the potential conflict in Europe is so carefully managed that any clash of interests outside of Europe that may occur has a European implication.

However, we also have to take account of the fact that the Western allies have accepted – from the time of Korea onwards – that they have to pay a great deal of attention to what happens outside Europe in order to keep Europe free of war. And it is outside Europe where, historically, the wars have been occurring.

This is not, of itself, a reason why the NATO limits should be reconstructed; although it is a reason why NATO allies may need to take precautions, and even action, outside the treaty zones – and why perhaps the Alliance as a whole should understand that some national forces committed to NATO might have to be altered or withdrawn. There is an interesting political issue here, of course: any renegotiation of the NATO treaty, particularly one that looks to an extension of commitment, is likely to cause as much concern as it might bring benefit, especially since the artificial limitations in the South Atlantic can be surmounted, at least as far as contingency planning is concerned. But beyond that, it simply may not be feasible for post-colonial Europe to be brought so quickly back to an open-ended obligation to risk and commit themselves to a broader conception of involvement. However, that is to generalise: in truth, the phenomenon affects particular countries in different ways. But what might well be common is an attitude of caution, and a greater concern to be selective about areas and interests that may still, for various reasons, seem specially sensitive.

The significance of the South Atlantic

So far I have dealt with what one might well call a rather narrow and, I think, orthodox perspective, from inside NATO. The South Atlantic region itself has also altered in the recent past.

Strategically, the region – if we can impose an element of unity upon an area of many diverse characteristics can be divided between what it actually comprises, and the access which it offers. The sea routes to the Pacific and to the Indian Oceans have, of course, been historically significant to Europe and the United States: and remain so especially if the Suez and Panama Canals are unusable. This question of use is not

merely a matter of accessibility and local political control: in recent times a number of ship types – tankers and aircraft carriers, for example have developed beyond the capacity of the existing canals. The Cape of Good Hope route for tankers to and from the Gulf area is particularly a matter for contemporary concern, but the vulnerability of this traffic in war, or in periods of tension, is a matter that ranges much more widely than the South Atlantic. The Gulf itself, the Madagascar passages, and the northern approaches to the discharging ports are all areas where, in tactical terms, safe passage may be more crucially vulnerable. However, the Gulf/Cape route is so long, and the traffic so important that the problem – including the South Atlantic component – is complex and difficult. The access routes to the Pacific, by way of South America, pose different problems, of which length and difficult weather conditions over long periods are merely the natural difficulties.

The South Atlantic is, of course, a sea access route for Soviet forces and material as well. Within NATO we would tend to see their interest as primarily an opportunity to block or counter NATO activities, and to take into account the formidable problems they would have in maintaining any substantial concentrations at so great a distance from their main domestic base areas. Their dependence upon the short Suez route to the Indian Ocean area is, in many respects, more crucial than ours, their ability to offer any prolonged 'sea denial' activity is at least as dependent as our ability to contest it is upon access to local bases or operating points. There is too the question of the "Southern route», so far as the Soviet Union is concerned in supporting its South East Asian and Pacific interests, which gives their interest a more positive and rational perspective.

The significance of the South Atlantic as an avenue for supplies or military expeditions is closely related to the nature of the conflict that we suppose may happen. In NATO terms, this is the issue of 'long war, short war', about which it is probably enough to say here that any campaign plan that does not take some account of the necessity to obtain logistic resources from geographically remote locations will not be very flexible. If you are only geared to sustain a short war, a short war is all you will get. How long is long, and how short is short may be impossible to define. But, insofar as that sustainability is a very costly option, part of that choice – that of taking an economically cheaper option in peace in the belief that the structure of deterrence will prevail may already have been made by the time active defence might become a necessity and, by then of course, it would be too late to correct. To plan to deter without having a wide capacity to defend may be a delusively cheap option.

The significance of the South Atlantic also depends upon whether we think that – in an East/West conflict – the war will be global in its scope. Here, the orthodoxy is that the

need for oil supplies would require the resources of the Gulf to be available. It is of course a matter for conjecture whether this consideration will always apply. In ten or twenty years' time, would Mexican oil (or Antarctic oil?) enable this problem to be circumvented, or at least downgraded?

However, there is a more general point to make. It might well be in NATO's interest to emphasise that *any* conflict with the Warsaw Pact would be large and extensive; to limit the perspective to Europe alone might be to concede to the Soviet Union a «game-plan» that would suit them better than it would the West. NATO maritime forces have a global reach too, and it would certainly be consistent with recent United States thinking to make it clear that it is not only a Soviet privilege to be able to pick and choose where conflict might occur.

Perhaps one should also, at this point, raise another conjectural issue, what will the high seas regime look like in 20 years time? Will national jurisdictions have all crept out to 200 miles by then: will EEZ have become jurisdictional zones – and would this make any difference to the forces of warring states seeking transit?

The South Atlantic region has significance too because of its intrinsic assets; it is not merely an access route. The littorals, to East and West, are important in their own rights, and the South Atlantic seas have assets that will be developed, one day. The Antarctic too has to be taken into account; the existing treaty will soon be up for review.

In this regard, it seems sensible to begin any general survey like this with a Northern, NATO-type, perspective. So far as Africa is concerned, any strategic perspective would be too optimistic if it suggested a possibility that depended upon a general, comprehensive and single outcome. The countries of NATO have an individual as well as a collective interest in the peaceful and prosperous development of the African states; but their «bottom-line» interest, in any period of crisis or conflict, would be that the African states would be neutral or benevolent. It is already the case that some states, like Guinea, provide facilities for Soviet forces in peacetime; and that others have the geography that would make any assistance to the Soviet Union an additional problem for NATO. It may be true that it might be difficult for the Soviet Union to keep Conakry, for example, supplied or secure; but would it be true that NATO forces could take out Conakry without consequential political trouble with Guinea's neighbours?

However, the most crucial state in Africa in this regard is the Republic of South Africa. Would any NATO cooperation – even in the sense of refuelling in South African ports – preclude assistance, or even neutrality, from the other littoral states and the OAU? If the conflict that threatened seemed to be major, would such niceties be a major

hazard? It might be that the price for South African assistance could be pitched very high – but one is inclined to be cynical and to say that, if it seemed essential at the time, any post-war complications that were foreseeable would be discounted in the urgency of the moment. However, one could not perhaps be so cynical as to assume that South African involvement could be openly planned for in advance, without the political cost being counted. Nevertheless it remains a NATO interest that the African flank of the South Atlantic access routes should be, so far as possible, secure: and South Africa's attitude would be of some importance.

This perspective takes no regard, however, for what NATO's collective interest would be in ensuring the general stability of the African state system. If it were threatened, what would or could NATO do? To the extent that in the recent past parts of it have been put under pressure, it has often been left to individual external states to take a lead France in Tchad, for example. If there were another Congo, of course, NATO might be able to collectivise its concern through the United Nations; but, here again, the case of South Africa looks as if it may be *sui generis*.

The Latin American littoral presents a more complex picture. Here there is a range of states of power: with established foreign policy linkages and interests, and with roles and ambitions which, while they may be based largely on regional considerations, have historic links in the wider international scene.

It would be too easy here just to say that there is a NATO interest in securing the Western flanks of the South Atlantic. This is an area where assistance, or even a complaisant neutrality, would have to be worked for more positively: and in which assistance, if it could be had, might be very welcome. This interest extends, I think, beyond the conjectural possibility of what might be desired in a crisis; Latin America, abutting on to the Caribbean, Central America, and to the Antarctic, holds a central position in areas that may become of more, rather than less, concern to the international community.

If ever there were to be a 'South Atlantic Treaty Organisation' in any form, Latin American participation would, of course, be an essential component; on another level, if ever there were to be a South Atlantic «zone of peace», a wide participation by the major Latin American states would be the core. To the extent that both of these concepts have attracted some attention, the possibilities for either can be said to have been scouted; but they represent quite distinctively different approaches to regional security patterns, and the key to them both is how they reflect the security interests and perspectives of the states in the region. For NATO simply to think that a SATO of some

sort would be nice to have, and to assume that its interests (and its membership) would be both parallel *and* overlapping is *jejeune*: in much the same way as it would be simplistic to assume that a sanitized regional exclusion zone would, necessarily, be inimical.

It is not totally parochial for a British author to wonder where Anglo-Argentinian problems might fit into this sort of speculation; clearly a resolution of some sort between the two countries is generally, as well as specifically, desirable. Perhaps it might fit better into some economic pattern of progress rather than if it were viewed narrowly only as a territorial or security problem; but if that is the case then it would seem desirable to put any bi-lateral issues in a regional context. Fisheries, oil and the exploitation of whatever may link the Southern Seas with the Antarctic region cannot but be a general concern.

In this respect, about the general security development of the Latin American interests in the South Atlantic area, it is pertinent to make the point that any such development might be viewed as a drift away from the arrangements currently structured (insofar as they are specifically covered) by the OAS and the Rio Treaty.

Need for innovation and co-operation

The classical analysis of collective security patterns – or even of bi-lateral alliances – provides as a major precipitating element, for some common perception of threat. It is not the only reason for participating; but it is often an important element for requiring a beginning to be made. There is no doubt that the extension to Soviet reach, which has been developed in the last twenty or so years, and the Soviet determination to adopt a global perspective have intruded more into the South Atlantic areas than before. Does all of this present a need for innovation, action and co-operation between «North» and «South» Atlantic interests? And, if it does, what sorts of costs would it require – in political, as well as in defence, terms?

Here it seems to me, one can make two points that may help to focus discussion.

The first is, whether, if we think that there is a growing Soviet challenge in the Southern Atlantic, we also think that it is primarily of a maritime sort. The extended Soviet reach does not consist entirely of maritime assets; perhaps the ideological and subversive threats to state regimes are of more general significance here, in which case any North/South interaction might only have an incidental maritime character.

The second is that there is considerable difficulty in determining what might be done

without a very positive 'Southern' perception of need. It is all very well for the NATO states to feel that the Southern Atlantic flank has importance and significance; but it is the Southern perspective – and their calculation of costs and benefits – that will determine whether a general sense of concern requires to be specified, and turned into a definite programme of action.