

THE DISTINCTIVENESS OF NATO AND THE ALLIANCE'S PREHISTORY

This article delves into the prehistory and unique evolution of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), questioning its categorization within the realm of military alliances. While NATO can be seen as a conventional military alliance, its prehistory spanning 450 years of European balancing history sets it apart. In contrast to other regions, Western Europe resisted the emergence of regional hegemony despite numerous attempts. Major power warfare in Europe revolved around balancing coalitions organized to resist French, Spanish/Habsburg, and German advances. These coalitions exhibited commitment reluctance and slow organization tendencies, highlighting the exceptional nature of European balancing. The article emphasizes Ludwig Dehio's theory, which attributes Europe's balancing success to the flanking powers on its eastern and western flanks. The creation of NATO institutionalized the anti-regional hegemony coalition, broadening its scope to include North America. NATO's historical trajectory and its contemporary challenges are discussed, highlighting the organization's adaptability and continued relevance in an evolving geopolitical landscape.

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Historians search document archives for insights into why people did what they did. Anthropologists observe people interacting and interpret their behavior. Political scientists tend to generalize after first identifying of what a political phenomenon is an instance. To what category does the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) belong? The obvious answer is that it is one of many military alliances that have taken place in world politics. But that answer glosses over the unusual prehistory of NATO. That prehistory underscores the exceptional nature of NATO. It does not defy categorization, but it suggests that we be cautious in jumping to conclusions about NATO. Given its prehistory, it is something of a particular case.

NATO's prehistory extends across some 450 years of European balancing history. Western Europe was peculiar in this period (1494-1945), at least by world standards. The typical pattern in most regions during this time and earlier was the emergence of some powerful group that could take over and control a region for a finite period of time. Europe had been less peculiar when the Romans established their Mediterranean-centric empire. But since the end of the western manifestation of Rome in the fifth century CE, and with the partial exception of the Carolingians, western Europe managed to defy the tendency toward regional hegemony. But it was not for a lack of trying. The French moved into Italy in 1494 which expanded the scope of the western European system at the expense of the Italian city state subsystem and initiated what became the Habsburg-Valois rivalry for control of the more extensive system. France and Spain contested control of western Europe until the Thirty Years War and the Franco-Spanish War that continued the contest into the 1650s established the French ascendancy over Spain. The focus of European warfare then turned to a fixation on the further wars of Louis XIV which were renewed by the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Later in the nineteenth century, European attention fixed on the newly unified Germany and its potential aspirations. It would be hard to say that World War I started as a war to halt German hegemony in Europe, but it became one as the war slogged on. World War II, in many respects a continuation of the first world war, was more clearly oriented toward defeating German hegemony in Europe (and Japanese hegemony in East Asia).

Over almost half a millennium, major power warfare in western Europe revolved around balancing coalitions organized primarily to resist French, Spanish/Habsburg, and German advances. Ultimately, they triumphed in blocking regional hegemony even though Napoleon and Hitler were able to establish regional control for a few years. Yet these balancing coalitions were characterized by commitment reluctance and slow to late organization tendencies. If we ask what proportion of European

great powers were prepared to join a balancing coalition against a dire state that possessed more than one third of the region's military resources in the 1494-1945 period, the answer is about 50 percent. The answer would invariably be much lower if we asked what proportion of small states were prepared to join a balancing coalition.¹ In other words, balancing in these circumstances was never automatic and not all that common. At the same time, though, great power balancing coalitions were most likely when one great power possessed more than one third of the region's military resources and major power warfare aimed at thwarting the expansion of that powerful state was ongoing or imminent. So, one can say that great power balancing was common in certain circumstances.

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The slowness of balancing coalitions to organize is underscored by the fact that roughly half of these efforts to resist European regional hegemony only came into being after the war to block perceived hegemonic advances had begun. Whether balancing coalitions in the 1494-1945 period ever deterred French, Spanish, or German expansion is unclear. But it is clear that in several cases there simply was no prewar balancing coalition in existence to deter a subsequent war. Coalitions that took form only after a war had begun could coordinate and amalgamate the resources of the resistance bloc which had something to do with which side won. Still, their initial absence could hardly be expected to stop wars fought over regional hegemony from taking place.

1) The great power calculations have been made (see Jack S. Levy and William R. Thompson. “Hegemonic Threats and Great Power Balancing in Europe, 1495-1999,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (2005): 1-33, with Jack S. Levy “Balancing at Sea: Do States Ally Against the Leading Global Power?,” *International Security*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (2010): 7-43. As far as I know no one has actually computed small power propensities to join European balancing coalitions. But as Paul W. Schroeder noted, small states were legendary in the efforts they took to evade commitments of this type. See Paul W. Schroeder, “Historical Reality vs. Neo-Realist Theory,” *International Security*, Vol. 19 (1994): 108-148 and “Why Realism Does Not Work Well for International History (Whether or Not It Represents a Degenerate IR Research Strategy),” in John A. Vasquez and Colin Elman, eds., *Realism and the Balancing of Power* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003).

Nonetheless, the balancing coalitions did manage to prevent regional hegemony and the natural question is why that took place repetitively. Ludwig Dehio puts forward the best single answer. Shortly after the end of World War II, Ludwig Dehio put forward a rich and brief history of modern European international relations.² The book itself is written in an old-fashioned, almost poetic style. Yet, it develops a short theory of European balancing that is unrivalled for its insight and apparent degree of fit. It has been empirically tested elsewhere and found to be quite accurate once Dehio's assertions are translated into statements of social science.³ Despite its usefulness, though, it remains relatively unintegrated with much contemporary theorizing about the balance of power.

Dehio's argument was that Europe should have had a very high probability of being taken over by some regional hegemon in the last 500 years. That it never was conquered (for long) after the 1490s was attributed to the distinctive geopolitics of the region. Aspiring regional hegemons would rise somewhere on the European continent and ultimately fail because they encountered substantial resistance from states that flanked the region in the east and west. The eastern flank could mobilize large numbers of troops. The western flank, which also served as the principal intermediary for European- American/Asian trade, could rely on its sea power resources to contain the aspiring hegemon and cut it off from access to extra-regional resources. The simultaneous operation of the two flanking powers was not guaranteed but aspiring regional hegemons' behavior tended to make it more likely. Either they would attack to the east and the west simultaneously or sequentially after being rebuffed in one direction. The would-be hegemon then found itself fighting a two-front war that was difficult to win.

Thus, a coalition of flanking states, with help from others, intermittently restored the balance of power to Europe until the European system lost its autonomy in 1945, much as its predecessor prototype, the Italian city-state system had in 1494. Dehio went even further and described the balancing process as part of a complex dynamic that pitted two types of states against one another. The would-be regional hegemons were absolute monarchies, armed with large armies and bureaucracies, bent on territorial expansion within the region. The western sea powers, blessed with variable amounts of defensive insularity, possessed more restrained governmental leadership, sea power, and a primary interest in long distance trade. Both types of states waxed and waned in relative power vis-à-vis one another. When the sea

2) Ludwig Dehio, *The Precarious Balance: Four Centuries of the European Power Struggle* (New York: Vintage, 1962).

3) William R. Thompson, "Dehio, Long Cycles, and the Geohistorical Context of Structural Transitions," *World Politics*, Vol. 43 (1992): 127-152 and Karen Rasler and William R. Thompson, *The Great Powers and Global Struggle, 1490-1990* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1994).

powers were in decline, the continental powers were in ascent. The ascent of the continental powers alarmed the sea powers and encouraged their own rebuilding because they were susceptible to the threat of potential regional hegemon. The success of the hegemon would mean the absorption of the sea powers or, at the very least, the development of a competitive foundation for challenging the sea powers to control long-distance trade. But the sea powers could not hope to defeat an emerging regional hegemon on their own. Sea power could contain and block access to extra-regional resources. It could not defeat ascending land powers on land. For that, other large land powers were needed – preferably on the other flank, the better to divide the strategic focus of the rising continental power.

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Dehio’s interpretation is not without problems. But they seem fairly minor. One problem has to do with the emergence of the dynamic that he describes. He has the balancing system emerging in 1494 with the Spanish response to the French intervention into Italy. In the next century, a Franco-Ottoman coalition confronted the expansion of the United Hapsburgs. Later in the same century, an Anglo-Dutch alliance thwarted Spanish efforts in the Low Countries. The same group blocked France in the late seventeenth-early eighteenth century. A different coalition centered on Britain and Russia stopped France in the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. Britain, Russia/the Soviet Union, and the United States were critical in thwarting German plans in the twentieth century.

Nevertheless, it really was not a full-fledged system in 1494. Unless one insists on Venice as an eastern sea power flanker and Spain as the western flank state in 1494, the east-west flanking process was slow to emerge. There also was no Franco-Ottoman coalition in the sixteenth century. Both France and the Ottoman Empire fought the Hapsburgs and, occasionally, the two “balancing” states cooperated but they were neither allied nor did they coordinate their efforts very often. Moreover, France was definitely not a western sea power in the sixteenth century. The process described by Dehio only begins to take solid shape around the time of the Dutch Revolt later in the sixteenth century. The western sea powers are present and active. The eastern flank, however, is not really evident in Spain’s involvement in France

at a time when it was still coping with the Dutch revolt. A Franco-Swedish alliance reinforced Dutch opposition to Spain in the early seventeenth century. Only after 1688 does something resembling the full east-west press emerge in the alliance among Austria, England, and the Netherlands. Briefly in the mid-eighteenth century, Prussia played the eastern flank with Russia taking over the role after 1792.

It is not really a criticism of Dehio to say that the balancing system did not spring full-blown in 1494. He does not argue that it came fully into being with the failed French movement into Italy. The fact that it emerged slowly with the key actors fumbling their way into assuming their roles underlines that there is certainly no geographical determinism at work. Europe was not a region with natural flanks or flanking powers. Different states gradually came to assume these roles. States perceived as would-be regional conquerors cooperated by encouraging excessive opposition to their territorial moves. Yet none of this detracts from describing the structured process as evolving towards an east-west vice on states rising in relative power between the Atlantic and the Urals.

A second weak criticism of Dehio is that it is debatable whether the Italian city-states system really served as a prototype for the European balancing mechanism – one of his arguments about the emergence of European balancing. Balancing rhetoric and behavior were present in the fifteenth century Italian subsystem. It may have been natural to borrow the rhetoric in 1494 Italy. The point here is that the 1494 coalition was not a western sea power-eastern cannon fodder combination. Nor was there a similar west-east flanking motion in most of the Italian balancing behavior. Venice was in the east and was initially reluctant to balance because it preferred to focus on commercial affairs outside the Italian subsystem. When it got around to balancing, it was usually a southern coalition opposing expansion from the north. In both cases, it took a while for the structures to emerge, but the European structure did not resemble the Italian structure closely. Presumably, the balancing behavior on which Dehio's interpretation is based might well have emerged with or without the Italian precedent.

A possible criticism to which we do not subscribe is that European decision-makers began abandoning balancing rhetoric in the nineteenth century. Thus, some have argued that the heart of the balance of power system ended with the Napoleonic Wars. What matters more, however, is less the rhetoric used by statesmen and more whether the flanking mechanism continued to operate. Since the mechanism is clearly evident in World War I and II, extending the system's operation through 1945 seems fair, even if the last western sea power flanker was considerably far away from the European region.

These caveats aside, Dehio's model works very nicely in summarizing the structural dynamics underlying the European balance of power system. Given the attractiveness of the argument, one has to wonder if the success of the balancing is due not so much to the balance of power per se but more to the geopolitical structure that lay behind it. But the available variance is limited. On the one hand, balancing operated in Europe prior to the full emergence of the east-west structural pattern. One, therefore, cannot dismiss the balancing process as important to explaining the failure of any state to become the European regional hegemon. Yet the regional expansion efforts grew stronger over time. The French intervention in 1494 or the Franco-Spanish dueling in the first half of the sixteenth century cannot be compared to the energies and ambitions driving Louis XIV, Napoleon, or Hitler. Balancing alone might not have sufficed. The east-west flanking pattern must be given increasing explanatory credit as it solidified and contributed to thwarting the increasingly powerful attempts to take over the European region.

Of course, there is no need to distinguish between balancing and the east-west flanking structure. The balancing increasingly took place within the context of an east-west flanking structure. The failure of European regional hegemony after 1494 can then be attributed to an interaction effect between the two. Still, suppose we are contrasting the outcome in Europe with ones that occurred in other regions. In that case, one is still left with the puzzle of whether the geopolitical structure contributed most to the balancing working in Europe when balancing seems to have ultimately failed in other parts of the world.⁴ But that is a question for another venue and need not concern us here.

The creation of NATO in 1949 effectively addressed the problem of states that ducked joining anti-regional hegemony coalitions by institutionalizing it and making it a permanent feature of contemporary European international relations. Beginning with two members, the military alliance has grown to encompass twenty-nine European and two North American states. This approach also gives deterrence a chance because the organization has preceded any outbreak of war in the region involving NATO members.

It does not replicate Dehio's formula for balancing success exactly. Dehio underlined the utility of possessing two flanks, one based on land power and another on sea power. The western sea power flank is maintained by the United States even if it is a transatlantic flank. Sea powers have been critical for organizing and coordinating counter-hegemony coalitions. Moreover, hegemonic aspirants were cut off from non-regional resources by sea power blockades, they also had to divide their

4) See Stuart J. Kaufman, Richard Little, and William C. Wohlforth, eds. *The Balance of Power in World History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

forces to fight on multiple fronts. Consequently, Philip II was defeated by England, the Netherlands, and France. Louis XIV was defeated by England/Britain, the Netherlands, and Austria. Britain, Austria, and Russia defeated Napoleon. World War I was won by Britain, France, and the United States, with earlier participation by Russia. Hitler was defeated by the United States, the Soviet Union, and Britain.

Survival for sea powers in Europe meant creating and maintaining balance of power coalitions time and again if they were to avoid the traditional fate of older sea power - that is, being absorbed by adjacent land empires (as in the case of the Phoenician ports by Assyria). Eventually, most of the western European sea powers of the last 500 years were conquered but only after well past their eras of sea power eminence. The Portuguese were absorbed temporarily by Spain towards the end of the sixteenth century due to an unexpected succession struggle emerging in the aftermath of a major Portuguese defeat in Morocco that left the throne vacant and the Portuguese aristocracy greatly weakened. Philip II of Spain had a legitimate claim to the royal succession and more military power than the other candidates. The Dutch resisted the French until 1795 long after their “power and prosperity” peak in the seventeenth century. The English/British managed to escape successive Spanish, French, and German plans to cross the English Channel. Only the Dutch succeeded in capturing the English throne in 1688 thanks in part to their stadholder’s claim to the throne backed up by Dutch military power.

No European sea power could play the Dehio western flanking role in the late 1940s. So, according to its first Secretary General, Lord Ismay, NATO emerged “to keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down.” Keeping the Americans in Europe preserved Dehio’s western flank. Offshore balancing would not serve the same purpose. Keeping the Russians out reflected appropriately the anti-regional hegemony underpinning of the NATO alliance, but it also eliminated the possibility of an eastern flank. The compensating difference, however, is that the current western sea power is so much more potent than earlier European sea powers, in terms of wealth and military technology, that the traditional second flank may prove to be less critical should it become necessary to resist a renewed effort to assert regional hegemony in Europe. Perhaps nuclear weapons could be said to have trumped geography.

To date, changing the formula seems to have worked although one has to be careful in assuming that NATO has deterred a Soviet/Russian attack on NATO members. We lack a “smoking gun” in the form of knowing that NATO’s existence led to calling off a planned attack from the east. At the same time, the expansion of NATO since the end of the Cold War appears to reflect a number of decision-makers who feel that betting that NATO membership will deter an attack is better than staying outside

of NATO's protective embrace. This approach is a contemporary form of Pascal's wager that has been operative for seventy-five years and, no doubt, a gamble that will need to be bolstered in the coming decade.

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As noted, balancing is not universal, certainly not automatic, and perhaps not even all those common outside European international relations. In the history of the European region, balancing occurred regularly and intermittently and certainly figured prominently in the international relations of the region. In western Europe, the success of balancing was reinforced historically by a distinctive geopolitical configuration. But balancing in the past, successful, or not, often had to be played out in great power warfare. It was rarely a diplomatic device that precluded the need to demonstrate the relative capabilities of the opposing sides violently. NATO altered this historical trajectory. It institutionalized the idea of a counter-hegemonic coalition and, in a sense, broadened the geographical scope of the original region to include a second region (North America) for security purposes and to keep at least one Dehioan flank operative. Obtaining commitments and organizing quickly enough was supplanted by needing to consult with a standing membership body. What had been a single region's approach to thwarting regional hegemony was now a two-region approach. European members had to hope that the western sea power would be willing to go to war to preserve a non-hegemonic Europe despite demonstrating some hesitation twice before in the twentieth century to do so. But now the western sea power was formally committed to do just that. With any luck, the innovations will help to avoid the fate of previous European anti-hegemony coalitions – having to fight intermittently to suppress hegemonic aspirations on an ad hoc basis.

Thus, the prehistory of NATO is long and checkered by problems of coalition formation and maintenance even if it did ultimately succeed in thwarting aspiring European hegemony on multiple occasions. Institutionalization, commitments from an expanding set of small and large powers, and half of the Dehioan explanation (western sea power on one flank) has supplanted the more ad hoc nature of anti-hegemonic coalition processes of the previous 450 years. The new approach appears to have worked for 75 years but then it is also fair to say that an aspiring hegemon has not characterized NATO's threat environment for that entire period. In its absence, NATO has experimented with out-of-area campaigns (the Balkans, Afghanistan, Libya) with various outcomes and now confronts the expansion of one large state into the territory of a small non-member that is adjacent to the borders of some NATO members. That is the sort of thing organizations do when their initial *raison d'être* seems outdated. New activities are taken on to preserve the organization's continued functioning. But in the NATO case, the problem is complicated by intermittent, continuing external threats resembling the old days' hegemonic expansion. So, unexpectedly, some of the most recent novel NATO behavior may prove to be a continuation of its traditional function. William Faulkner's observation about the American South: the past is never dead. It's not even past may also prove to be accurate for ongoing and future NATO activity.