

NATO 1988–1991: Historical Leadership as Viewed through Three Lenses

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This article provides valuable historical insight from a senior officer's perspective on three different functional levels of Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE). Such observations are particularly useful because (1) momentous changes were occurring during this period (June 1988 through July 1991); and (2) SHAPE itself represents the most highly advanced collective security alliance to have evolved in contemporary times. The author's penetrating analysis offers readers a clear view into each of the working staff levels—action officers; deputy chief of staff (DCS), Operations; and the chief of staff—to illustrate how they individually and collectively contribute to the security of a complex international alliance. With the subsequent demise of the Soviet Union and the further uncertainty this introduces, it is all the more important for senior leaders to understand the Atlantic alliance and the United States's role as a key member.

Any comprehensive attempt to analyze the events of the last few years at SHAPE would be challenging. Even a basic summary of the years from 1988 through 1991 and an analysis of their significance will probably keep scholars and historians occupied for decades. It might even be argued that it is too early to begin to understand the amazing series of events that together marked the end of the cold war. Nevertheless, by virtue of my becoming SHAPE's chief of staff in June 1988, I arrived at Mons [Belgium] in a position to observe what surely must have been the most historic three-year period in the North Atlantic Alliance's history. If it were possible to capture the essence of what went on in Europe during that period with one word, then that word would be *change*. We have seen dramatic change—almost unbelievable change—over the last three years.

Despite the difficulties in dealing with this atmosphere of change, it is worthwhile to try to understand it within the framework from which military staff professionals must operate. This article is therefore organized from the points of

view of three working levels at SHAPE headquarters. It begins with the perspective of the action officer, who might be from any one of the several divisions or scores of branches at SHAPE. Afterwards, it moves on to examine events from the viewpoint of DCS/Operations. That position, then occupied by German Lt Gen Helge Hansen, had been one of the focal points for dealing with the security changes occasioned by outside events. General Hansen was responsible for the orchestration of the policy, intelligence, and operations divisions—and, in particular, for reconciling the differences between present reality and the vision of an uncertain future. Finally, the article summarizes my own views as chief of staff. My job was to bring order out of chaos. In speeches, I sometimes compared SHAPE to a 2,000-pound ball bearing rolling toward an objective. Over the years, scores of generals have put their shoulders to the ball bearing and thought that they were steering. Clearly, Gen John R. Galvin, the supreme allied commander, Europe (SACEUR)—assisted by a dedicated and professional staff—was steering and had succeeded in adapting his command to meet the challenge of significant change. The outline of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) new strategy emerged during this time period. NATO defined it in terms of peace, crisis, and conflict.

A strategy for peace allowed us to cement NATO's role and relevance. A strategy for crisis permitted the alliance to deal with the kinds of events we later witnessed in the Gulf. And a strategy for conflict, based in part on the experiences and lessons of the past, will be helpful in deterring or ending warfare quickly in an uncertain future.

The Action Officer's Perspective

Experience has revealed that the typical action officer at SHAPE is an experienced and hard-working professional. Consumed with daily tasks, he or she labors intently with the energy and capability that keeps SHAPE going. But it is also true to say that the typical action officer, whom I will call "Snuffy," is not terribly impressed by the large bureaucracy for which he or she works. It is fair to say that this attitude is shared by large numbers of staff officers, whether they work at the Pentagon, in the Ministry of Defense at Bonn, or in Whitehall. Despite this lack of regard for bureaucracy, the typical action officer *is* impressed by events. Four events, in particular, riveted Snuffy's attention. The first took place in

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1988, the second in 1989, the third in 1990, and the fourth was the recent Persian Gulf War.

The first memorable event occurred on 7 December 1988 at the United Nations (UN). On that day, Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev made an address before the General Assembly and promised several things. Among these were unilateral military reductions, troop withdrawals from Eastern Europe, promises on human rights, pledges of openness, and a call for economic reform. In one startling moment, Gorbachev seemed to be declaring that the Soviet Union would henceforth adopt a truly defensive doctrine and seek to rejoin the community of Europe.

Not surprisingly, this public pronouncement captured the world's attention. It also captured the attention of Snuffy, who was in a unique position to help participate in any official response to the details of the speech. Predictably, the response from SHAPE action officers was cautious. While they certainly welcomed Gorbachev's remarks, they adopted a wait-and-see attitude, with the prevailing wisdom being, "We wish him well, but let's keep our powder dry!" This caution was occasioned in part by the knowledge that Soviet numerical superiority was so pronounced that any reductions even on the scale offered would still not produce anything like real parity. Talking was always easier than real action, and NATO needed to remain watchful.

The second most memorable event was every bit as exciting to the action officer as the first had been. Actually, it was a series of events that led to the dramatic moment when the Berlin Wall came down on 9 November 1989. What began as a trickle of immigrants in the summer swelled to a flood in the fall as East Germans scrambled into Hungary. Vacillation and then a crackdown by the East German authorities accelerated the situation. After initially seeking safety in the West German embassy in Budapest, the East Germans then began crossing the open border to Austria and finally made their way in larger numbers to West Germany. The German Democratic Republic, which was democratic in name only, was hemorrhaging its best and brightest hopes for the future. The Berlin Wall's coming down was a logical result of more than 40 years of political illogic—the unnatural division of the German people. And it was the masses of people, not soldiers or politicians, who brought the wall down.

Snuffy was an eyewitness to these emotional events, as were many millions of television viewers around the world. SHAPE was involved in a command post exercise at the time—working together in the bunker with a closeness that only the focus of an exercise brings—and the emotion was tangible. By the way, this particular exercise may be recorded some day as the last of the cold war. Action officers at SHAPE knew they were witnessing an event that would fundamentally change the geopolitical and international security architecture of Europe. They knew also that the world they and their predecessors had dealt with for more than 40 years was likely gone forever. And from the moment the Berlin Wall was breached, the countdown to the unification of Germany and the liberation of Eastern Europe began.

These first two dramatic events took place on the world's stage. The third most memorable event for Snuffy took place at SHAPE itself. Despite its not making the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) or Cable News Network (CNN), it was every bit as significant as the first two events on the lives of scores of staff officers. In many ways it culminated the events of 1988, 1989, and even 1990 in a very personal way.

The chairman of the Soviet Defense Staff, Gen Mikhail Moiseyev, visited SHAPE on Friday, 26 October 1990. Moiseyev's official visit was conducted in a professional atmosphere. In other words, it was cordial without being marked by hearty fellowship. After a face-to-face meeting with the SACEUR, he had lunch with the senior staff and attended a series of briefings. After about five hours, SHAPE action officers came away with several impressions. First, Moiseyev was very much his own man and did not just mouth the words provided him by his staff. Moreover, he was not afraid to reveal problems in the Soviet Union, and these tracked with what the SHAPE staff already knew about problems with ethnocentrism and economics. Yet Moiseyev was able to underscore that, for all its troubles, the Soviet Union maintained a formidable military capability. All of this made a huge impression on the SHAPE action officer, who was now seeing the "enemy" invited to speak in NATO's own military headquarters.

The fourth event during this dramatic period that so impressed Snuffy transfixed the world. The Gulf War made some indelible impressions on all of us, but four things stood out in particular from the action officer's viewpoint. First, the Gulf War demonstrated conclusively that the world remains a dangerous place. The optimism that came as a result of the Berlin Wall's coming down—and all the subsequent events—was thoroughly tempered by reality. Second, the SHAPE action officer noted the pervasiveness of real-time reporting in war. CNN and network news programs had a profound impact on the development of the crisis and the war. Events took place and were reported with virtually no delay. Public perceptions and policy became a true military "center of gravity" as a result of the electronic revolution witnessed on a day-by-day basis. Decision making at all levels was affected. Third, the action officer learned firsthand about the hard realities of rapid reaction forces—and especially about the logistical complexities of moving and sustaining them. Finally, but certainly not least of all, the SHAPE staff was impressed by the coalition's military response. It was impressed by the combat capability and integration of the high-quality and high-tech military forces. Perhaps some of the hard work on "Rules of Engagement" during NATO exercises paid off in combat. And, of course, Snuffy was most impressed with the results!

The View from the Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations

During this period, General Hansen's job was to balance policy and operations. The Policy Division dealt with a future that is uncertain and changing and that reflects the

complexity of events. The Operations Division, on the other hand, focused on the reality of military capability.

In terms of policy, one of General Hansen's principal concerns was the arms control environment. SHAPE formed an arms control branch from manpower supplied with unprecedented enthusiasm by several nations. The Conventional Forces Europe (CFE-I) Treaty, successfully negotiated, awaited ratification. NATO followed Ambassador Pierre Harmel's 1967 advice, which had called for the alliance to stay strong and negotiate, and it paid off. The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Force (INF) Treaty was a significant milestone along the way because it established the precedent of asymmetrical reductions and on-site inspections. These were fundamental elements of the CFE Treaty.

NATO was thus able to speak of conventional parity. But that parity is really contingent on two things—neither of which was absolutely certain. First, of course, the Soviets must actually take out of commission all the equipment that was limited by the treaty. That means sizable numbers of tanks, armored fighting vehicles, artillery, helicopters, and aircraft. This is a very expensive proposition. NATO and SHAPE believed this would eventually be done—otherwise the alliance would not have supported the agreement. The other thing that must happen for the treaty to succeed is that the allies will have to stick to the agreed levels of equipment and not be in a rush to disarm unilaterally below the levels stipulated. The supreme allied commander and, through him, General Hansen devoted much of their time trying to make sure the latter did not happen.

While the Policy Division worked to ensure parity, or at least to make sense of it, General Hansen's Operations Division dealt with the real world and the threats to stability. With security challenges stretching from the Arctic Circle to the warm climates of the Southern Region, this was no mean feat. The Southern Region obviously remains very active in the wake of the Gulf War. It provides NATO and SHAPE with the prime example of instability and continued military risk. And further, there will likely be challenges to Turkey's security for years to come. The Soviet Union was beset with difficulties in Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia, and faced an unpredictable future. All this heightened NATO's sense of awareness regarding security challenges in the Southern Region.

At the other end of Allied Command Europe, the Kola Peninsula was still the site of formidable military capability. The Soviets resubordinated air force assets to their navy and moved aircraft from the Western Group of Forces. Many of these units ended up in the north. We were not exactly sure why the Soviets took these actions; but it was in the north that the strategic threat to the United States, NATO, and, in particular, to our reinforcement and resupply capability, remained very strong.

In addition to those in the north and south, challenges remained in NATO's Central Region. Despite all the publicity associated with Soviet withdrawals, more than 300,000 troops and several thousand tanks remained in German terri-

tory. These occupiers were not doing well. Some were reportedly deserting, selling their weapons and uniforms, not eating regularly, and generally not feeling welcome. Worse, they were uncertain about returning to the Soviet Union. Even though they are still in the process of leaving German soil, they bear close watching until they are gone.

So General Hansen had to deal with several very trying problems that can be easily summarized. His Policy Division was working the premise of military parity that is yet uncertain. Meanwhile, his Operations Division faced strikingly different military challenges in each region.

My Perspective as Chief of Staff

My principal challenge was to create order out of what is not an orderly process. Everything was changing at once—policy, strategy, operational concepts, operational requirements, and resources. Fortunately, there was sufficient guidance to work the issues, firmly grounded in collective security and political consultation.

The London Declaration of 5–6 July 1990 was an enormously important event. It made a clear statement regarding our goals and vision for the future. In this visionary declaration, member nations asserted that both NATO strategy and its integrated force structure would be modified as Soviet forces departed Eastern Europe and a CFE treaty is effectively implemented. In London NATO leaders avowed a strengthening of the trans-Atlantic partnership consistent with the new realities of a post-cold-war world. From these concepts it is possible to discern the most important parts of NATO's future strategy. Thus, whatever problems SHAPE faces, they are not a top-down problem; the guidance is clear. The challenge is to enable NATO to function effectively in a new Europe. Key elements of this transformation are to make NATO's military forces more adaptable through enhanced flexibility and mobility and more multinational in their composition.

NATO's view of the future rests on its strategy for peace, crisis, and conflict. No longer thinking in terms of a one-dimensional Soviet threat, the alliance considers a multifaceted strategy designed to meet the challenges of an uncertain future. In brief, the policy for the next several decades will still be based on deterrence, with the fundamental bedrock continuing to rest on the viability of NATO. NATO must adapt to survive, however. Its capability to do so has been well established and repeatedly demonstrated in the past.

NATO's strategy for peace will be founded on arms control—a matrix of legally binding and actionable treaties. Reductions in arms levels to parity along with stringent verification procedures and openness will increase confidence and stability. As long as we devote sufficient attention to the mechanism of response, our warning time before any conflict should increase. The goal will be to increase dialogue, exchange, and understanding while enhancing present functioning structures. Increasing military-to-military contacts and treaty verification are part and parcel of this strategy for peace.

The strategy for crisis is similarly multidimensional. Prior to the Gulf War, it was mainly conceptual. But events brought it to life with graphic reality. A strategy for crisis is necessary and the Gulf War confirmed what we already knew: NATO is necessary for crisis management. This fact was demonstrated in several ways. First, NATO was a superb forum for discussions concerning the appropriate response to a military or political crisis where significant interests of the West are involved. It is worth recalling that it was to the councils of NATO that Secretary of State James A. Baker first talked when the crisis broke. This began to form the consensus that was completed in the United Nations. Second, NATO's usefulness as an organized approach to security cannot be discounted. It was significant that every one of NATO's 16 nations with military forces responded in some way to the call for support of the allied coalition in the Gulf. And of the military forces actually employed, a vast majority were earmarked for NATO. Moreover, they were trained by NATO and used NATO doctrine, procedures, and rules of engagement. Finally, of course, NATO reaffirmed its intention to defend the territory of its members—and that meant Turkey during the Gulf War. A number of steps were taken by the alliance for the first time ever to deploy defensive assets to ensure security and territorial integrity. In sum, as an institution NATO was involved in a direct way. More important, it is clear that much of the political will that sustained the allied force came as a result of the collective security "ethos" that has been built up in the alliance over the last 45 years.

In retrospect, it is appropriate to comment on the main lessons from the Gulf War. In general terms, as the Gulf War unfolded, we saw confirmation of the broad outline of NATO's future strategy, operational concepts, and force structure. Events in the Gulf demonstrated daily that NATO had been on the right track as it formulated the conceptual framework for a new European security architecture. As indicated, NATO did much and learned much during the entire episode.

NATO received confirmation, for example, that proper crisis management will require highly trained and capable active forces. These forces must be available for immediate deployment. That means that a sizable lift capability, both air and sea, is essential. Reinforcements need a carefully orchestrated plan that is coordinated with a theater strategy. It is necessary to avoid the "ready or not, here we come" syndrome.

Should crisis management fail, NATO will have to be prepared to employ its strategy for conflict. In the event of warfare, we would still aim to defend all of NATO territory, but with a smaller active force. This smaller active force will actually have more conventional options because it will be more mobile.

In the end, deterrence remains the primary objective of NATO. Therefore, an alliance nuclear structure with credible links from the conventional battlefield to the strategic nuclear arsenals remains an important part of the equation, and mandates a cohesive conventional defense. Also, the

risks and burdens of nuclear weapons must be shared equitably across the alliance. The nuclear weapon cannot be dis-invented, but both sides will have fewer of them. While the nuclear threshold will be raised by virtue of these weapons being used only as a last resort, the former Soviet Union's nuclear forces retain the capacity to do unacceptable damage to Western societies. This would still give Moscow the potential to coerce European affairs unless NATO has the ability to offset either of these two eventualities.

Regarding deterrence, the turbulent times NATO faces are very similar to the early years of the alliance. The mission then was much the same—deterrence and defense; however, the first SACEUR, Gen Dwight D. "Ike" Eisenhower, also faced the monumental task of organizing the alliance. His legacy is still with us. His vision can continue to help guide us as the future road map is plotted. Ike anticipated, for example, the utility of multinational forces. When negotiations limit the total number of troops forward, the idea looks even better. The latest ideas on multinationality envision having forward-deployed corps being primarily from one nation. That means a nation would provide at least one of the divisions plus the corps headquarters and the major corps support troops. These support components would include artillery, signal, cavalry, engineer, and logistical elements. But the corps would also include divisions from one or two other nations. This means it would be possible to have a US corps augmented by a German division. Similarly, there might be a German corps with Dutch augmentation or a Belgian corps with Americans and Germans in it. Other allied units, sometimes even at the brigade level, could be integrated with the multinational corps.

In terms of the overall force structure, NATO is considering a design that envisions three principle categories: reaction forces, main defense forces, and augmentation forces. Reaction forces, further subdivided by the speed of their availability, can be allocated to NATO commanders for an early military response to a crisis. They contain combat-capable maritime, ground, and air components. Main defense forces will form the major portion of the structure and carry the major burden of day-to-day defense requirements. A portion of the main defense forces, called ready maneuver forces, will be maintained in a higher degree of readiness and availability. These, too, may be employed early in support of crisis management. The third category, augmentation forces, are from Europe and North America and are available to reinforce a particular region or maritime command. As such, they, too, contribute to deterrence, crisis management, and defense.

It is clear that the notion of collective defense is a good one. History, and my SHAPE experience, demonstrate that collective security helps establish a proper balance of power and eliminates asymmetries that have often caused conflict. With collective security and the international stability it brings, interaction between nations is far more likely to stay in peaceful arenas.

NATO's collective defense therefore lessens the negative aspects of large national forces. This, too, was much on General Eisenhower's mind. If nations attempted to "renationalize" their defense efforts, the costs would be enormous. Some would find it necessary to build their own defense structures to replace NATO's proven integrated organization. Aside from the great cost, it would also be terribly inefficient. Certainly, too, no one would want a return to the Europe of the early part of the twentieth century.

Summing Up

At SHAPE headquarters, I found a common ingredient that connected the SHAPE action officer, the SHAPE deputy chief of staff, and the SHAPE chief of staff. This component was the quality and resolve of the people who served the NATO alliance. This unity of purpose went hand-in-hand with the deep concern of the collective security of their respective national populations in order to sustain their political, economic, and cultural way of life.

Sir Bryan Cartledge made this starkly clear when he spoke at the annual SHAPE conference, SHAPEX 1989. During his speech, Sir Bryan spoke about the contrasts between the West and the Soviet Union in very memorable terms. He described Soviet difficulties as falling into three main areas. These were political, economic, and psychological.

During this period, Soviet leaders could read about their political problems in the Soviet press almost daily. These problems ranged from difficulties inside their own party, rumors of coups and takeovers, to regional outbursts that were pulling the Soviet Union apart. Soviet problems in the Baltics and Armenia were part of the daily fare. Some "visionary" experts even predicted the eventual disintegration of the Soviet Union.

As if that wasn't bad enough, key Soviet leaders had also to contend with the horrible economic situation facing their country. The distribution system was broken and the huge defense industry had to be turned to producing consumer goods. By most estimates, any real fix to the situation was close to a generation away.

The third problem is perhaps the most daunting of all and has not changed. The psychology of the former Soviet Union is the result of its history and almost certainly is difficult to change. For decades the psychology of the industrial work force has been summarized by the phrase, "We pretend to work and they pretend to pay us." It will take a long time to overcome this kind of attitude and produce the entrepreneurial spirit necessary to a market economy.

The years 1988 to 1991 clearly demonstrated to this writer that the principles of democracy, which include individual rights, rule of law, and a market economy, have served NATO well. The idea of a social contract between governments and their peoples is fundamental. The rule of law is the bedrock of society. Individual needs must be balanced with collective need. In retrospect, the ideas of private enterprise and marketplace competition have now proven to be key elements of the human dynamic.

All of these concepts make the nations of the Western alliance inseparable. NATO's strength and utility arise not just as a result of any external threat but also come intrinsically from the nature of the alliance itself. It is the interrelationship between the West's mutual political, economic, and cultural values that constitutes the binding threads that together weave the priceless fabric of collective security and NATO. The view through all three lenses is solidly focused on peace and collective security.

Postscript

A postscript to all of this is yet another event that got Snuffy's attention—the coup attempt in Moscow in August 1991. Within a few days, 18–21 August to be exact, the entire SHAPE staff swung from widely held suspicion mixed with anxiety that the cutbacks in NATO were going too far to affirmation that the cold war was indeed over. Snuffy is now concerned about the prospects for a military career. However, faced with current realities, he continues to realize that if a challenge to security occurs, the military will be instantly held responsible *and* accountable for a suitable defense.