Olav Riste

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Postwar security:
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In the history of international relations in the 20th century, two major attempts have been made to shape a new international order to supercede the traditional power game between nation states - a game usually referred to as the balance of power. Both the League of Nations, after the First World War, and the United Nations, following the Second World War, were conceived in a - mainly US-inspired - desire to replace the essentially anarchic world of balance of power and of alliances by a higher and more centralised international order. Yet, while both attempts may have brought certain benefits, both failed in their central purpose.

What follows is an attempt to show that in the diplomacy of the Second World War there existed a real - and in retrospect more realistic - alternative to the universalist experiment of the United Nations Organisation. It will also be my contention that the failure of the UN to contain and mitigate the burgeoning Cold War, and the resurgence of a balance of power in a hostile climate, may have served to prolong and aggravate the East-West conflict. Counter-factual history is a dangerous game. However, since one of the purposes of international history is to identify and shed light on elements of stability and instability in international systems in the 20th century, it may be worth while to ponder the pitfalls of zealous internationalist reformism.

Disregarding all the nuances and refinements close to the hearts of most historians, the 1941-1945 debate within the Grand Alliance on the postwar international order can be reduced to a fairly clear-cut contest between what we may here for brevity's sake call universalism, on the one hand, and on the other the more regionalist system based on the balance of power and great power spheres of influence. The United States Secretary

of State Cordell Hull put it in a nutshell as he welcomed the 1943 Four-Power Moscow Declaration proposing the idea of a "general international organisation, based on the principle of the sovereign equality of all peace-loving states". This means, he said, "that there will no longer be need for spheres of influence, for alliances, for balance of power, or any other of the special arrangements through which, in the unhappy past, the nations strove to safeguard their security or to promote their interest."[2] Hull thus came near to portraying the contest between the two systems as one between good and evil, in which the good had now finally got the upper hand.

However, the debate did not start in 1943, but two years earlier, during the formative months of the Grand Alliance. The initial call for such a debate came in Stalin's letter to Churchill in the autumn of 1941 wherein he blamed the disagreements between the two allies on the lack of a "definite understanding ... concerning war aims and plans for the postwar organisation of peace."[3] And Stalin was also the first to introduce into the great power debate some sort of blueprint for the ordering of postwar international affairs. He did this during his December 1941 conversations with British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden, when he put forward his proposals for what was essentially an agreed division of Europe into a Soviet and a British sphere of influence, for postwar security purposes.[4]

The point of departure for Stalin's proposals, put forward at their first meeting on 16 December 1941, was his proposed text for an Anglo-Soviet treaty on postwar European security, binding the parties "to act in accordance with a mutual understanding in the settlement of postwar questions connected with the organisation of peace and security in

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[2] United States Congress, *Congressional Record*, 18 November 1943, pp. 9678-79.

[3] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the USSR, *Stalin's Correspondence with Churchill and Attlee 1941-1945* (Capricorn Books Edition, New York 1965) p.33: Personal message from Premier Stalin to Prime Minister Churchill 8 November 1941.

[4] Public Record Office, London: PREM 4/30/8, Annex D. Record of an interview between the Foreign Secretary and M.Stalin, December 16, 1941. This is the only full account available of this particular meeting. The Soviet documentary publication *Sovietsko-anglijskie otnosjenija vo vremie velikoj otetsjestvennoj vojny 1941-1945*, (Moscow 1983), Vol.1 p.184, has only one brief paragraph on the meeting. See also D.Dilks (ed.), *The Diaries of Sir Alexander Cadogan 1938-1945* (London 1971) p.421.

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Europe", and to take "all necessary measures to render impossible a repetition of aggression and violation of the peace by Germany."[5]

Behind these innocuous formulae, to be included in a public treaty, lay a whole series of specific Soviet proposals which Stalin - as was his custom - wished to be embodied in a secret protocol. Several of the proposals required British acceptance of Soviet territorial expansion at the expense of Finland, the Baltic states, Poland, and Roumania. One suggested the dismemberment of Germany. Others concerned a series of frontier changes in South-Eastern Europe. But the most interesting one from our point of view was Stalin's scheme whereby each of the two powers would create its own regional network of alliances and military and naval bases in neighbouring countries, for mutual security against Germany.

In particular, Stalin for his part wanted such protective alliances with Roumania and Finland. Poland was not mentioned, presumably either because Poland was an ally with a special significance for the British, or because Soviet security interests were for the time being taken care of by moving the whole of Poland westward. Britain, Stalin thought, might establish similar alliance arrangements with France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark, and Norway. A military alliance between the Soviet Union and Great Britain would form the superstructure of such a system for the future containment of Germany.

Eden's immediate reaction to Stalin's proposals was cautious but generally favourable as regards arrangements for the containment of Germany. His main reservation concerned the attitude of the United States, which he thought ought to be part of the "superstructure". However, the negotiations soon centred on, and in the end became deadlocked over, Stalin's demands for the westward expansion of the borders of the Soviet Union. Eden would go no further than to promise to take up these questions with his own government as well as those of the Commonwealth and the United States after his return to London.

The subsequent British consideration of the postwar European order makes it clear that the concept of regional alliances for the containment of Germany and the maintenance of peace and order in postwar Europe was neither alien nor distasteful to the British. In fact the Western European tier of such a system was already under discussion in the British Foreign Office, based on a scheme put forward by Norway's Foreign Minister

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[5] *Sovjetsko-anglijskie otnosjenia...* Vol.I p.186.

Trygve Lie. Lie's idea, elaborated during 1941, was for a mutual regional postwar security system for the countries bordering on the North Atlantic including the United States, directed against Germany, and with naval bases as an important component.[6] About a month after Eden's return from his meeting with Stalin this scheme was discussed at a meeting of senior officials of the British Foreign Office. A memorandum from this meeting concluded that the "conception of a security system founded upon such bases is one of the few ideas in regard to the post-war structure which seem to have practical value and to have some chance of general acceptance."[7] And the argument about the scheme's acceptability was clearly linked to Eden's report about Stalin's benevolence in regard to British bases in Denmark and Norway, although it was recognised that this benevolence was tied to a *quid pro quo* concerning Stalin's proposed arrangements along the western border of the Soviet Union.

Further discussions in the British Foreign Office and Cabinet during the winter and spring of 1942 showed a considerable willingness on the part of the British to meet some of Stalin's demands, in order to obtain a meaningful treaty on war and peace aims.[8] The difficulty was how to reconcile a secret agreement on border revisions and territorial expansion with previous solemn pledges not to make any such deals. And here the main stumbling-block was the attitude of the United States, as expressed primarily by President Roosevelt. The end result, in the shape of the Anglo-Soviet treaty of 26 May, 1942, was as we know little more than a general statement of common war aims. The objections of the United States had thus been met. But the outcome hardly removed Stalin's suspicions about western attitudes to Soviet security requirements.

As so often both before and after, Roosevelt's motives in blocking Britain's desire to meet some of Stalin's demands were of a mixed nature. While there is ample evidence that he favoured the right of the great powers to shape the world order without too much concern for the self-interests of the smaller powers, he expressed his opposition to a British-

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[6] See e.g. O.Riste, "Norway's 'Atlantic Policy': The Genesis of North Atlantic Defence Cooperation", in A.de Staercke and others, *NATO's Anxious Birth* (London 1985), esp. pp. 20-23.

[7] Public Record Office, London. FO 371/32832, N 518/463/30: "Norwegian Proposals for Post-War Anglo-American-Norwegian Co-Operation in Regard to Atlantic."

[8] See Sir Ll. Woodward, *British Foreign Policy in the Second World War*, Vol.II, p.236-244. (HMSO, London 1971.)

Soviet "deal" in terms of the lofty principles of the Atlantic Charter and the United Nations Declaration, professing aversion against secret treaties and territorial arrangements over the heads of the inhabitants concerned. Moreover, his consciousness of the rising power of the United States strengthened his personal determination to play a leading part in re-ordering the postwar world through direct dealings with Stalin.[9]

The outlines of Roosevelt's proposed international order evidently began to form during those early months of 1942. As explained to Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov in June 1942, it conformed to a universalist conception in its insistence on the great powers acting jointly as the world's "policemen". This idea of joint action and responsibility, when coupled with Roosevelt's schemes for internationalisation and "trusteeship", clearly implied a rejection of more or less exclusive spheres of interest for each great power. To that extent Roosevelt's approach pointed in the opposite direction from the order envisaged by Stalin and - to some extent - the British. This was also admitted in a magazine article, inspired by Roosevelt but written by one of his cronies, which appeared in the spring of 1943. Entitled "Roosevelt's World Blueprint", this article made it clear that unless Stalin was willing to cooperate in such a "political society of nations" the world would be "driven back on a balance-of-power system."[10]

On the other hand, Roosevelt's projected great power condominium was far removed from the principle of the "sovereign equality of all peace-loving states" later re-established as a necessary concomitant of collective security. This principle, which represented a further step in the universalist direction, seems to have made its first appearance in draft agreements prepared by the American State Department in the early summer of 1943.[11] And as we have seen, it then found its way into the Four-Power Moscow Declaration a few months later.

By the end of 1943, therefore, the Grand Alliance appeared to be on course away from a "spheres of influence" approach and towards a universalist order. Yet at the same time both Roosevelt and Churchill

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[9] J.L.Gaddis, *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War*, 1941-1947 (Columbia University Press, 1972) p.15.

[10] Forrest Davis, "Roosevelt's World Blueprint", in *Saturday Evening Post*, 10 April 1943. Cf. R.Russell, *A History of the United Nations Charter* (Brookings, Washington D C 1958) p.101.

[11] Russell, *op.cit.*, p.111.

managed to give Stalin the impression that there was no necessary conflict between this new international order and his expectation of a Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe. Sooner or later this dualism would have to come into the open, unless a way could be found to create a workable compromise between the underlying concepts of universalism and regionalism.

It fell to the British Foreign Office to attempt to reconcile the two approaches. Foreshadowed in their "Four Power Plan" at the end of 1942, the compromise suggested in the "United Nations Plan for Organising Peace" in the summer of 1943 was embodied in the following sentence: "Generally speaking, tendencies towards regional groupings should be encouraged, subject always to the principle that no one World Power by itself should be given the task of maintaining order in any particular region."[12] On that basis, the British foresaw regional defence systems for security against Germany and Japan in which all the great powers would participate. A "Council of Europe" was also envisaged on which all European states should be represented, "including the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union", but also "with the addition, it is to be hoped, of the United States."[13]

Britain's views on European security were most succinctly set forth in the earlier "Four Power Plan", in the following paragraph:

> *In Europe, which is so closely knit together that it must for our purposes always be viewed and treated as one unit or region, the primary responsibility should fall generally on Great Britain and the Soviet Union, and this not only for geographical reasons but by virtue of the Anglo-Soviet Treaty, which binds these two Powers "to take all the measures in their power to render impossible a repetition of aggression and violation of peace by Germany or any of the States associated with her in acts of aggression in Europe." This, however, need not preclude arrangements being made by Great Britain in Western Europe and by the Soviet Government in Eastern Europe in order to control as far as possible the policies of the local powers ...* [14]

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[12] Woodward, *op.cit.*, Vol. V (London 1976) p.59.

[13] *Ibid.*, p.57.

[14] Public Record Office, London: PREM 4/100/7, "The 'Four Power' Plan", p.24.

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The striking similarity between these ideas and those that lay at the base of Stalin's proposals to Eden in December 1941 suggests that a postwar order on those lines might have stood a chance of preempting the subsequent *antagonistic* division of Europe. The British Foreign Office in fact sought to resurrect the regional approach in their preparatory work for the United Nations Organisation, and succeeded in the autumn of 1944 in securing an opening for regional security associations in the Dumbarton Oaks proposals. In a subsequent memorandum to Churchill, Foreign Secretary Eden referred to his December 1941 conversations with Stalin, and stated his conviction that Stalin would not oppose "the creation of a special regional association in Western Europe provided this were an integral part of the general system of world security, under the control of the World Organisation, and that it were made perfectly clear that it was directed against a resurgence of Germany."[15] And in an attached document, the Foreign Office asserted their belief in the compatibility of a regional approach to European security with the Anglo-Soviet Treaty:

> *The Anglo-Soviet Treaty lies at the base of our whole European policy, and we should try to reinforce it by all means in our power. The formation of some western European security system would, however, reinforce rather than detract from the Anglo-Soviet Treaty, more especially if the Russians, with our approval, constructed some similar security system in Eastern Europe - and they will almost certainly do so whether we approve it or not.[16]*

As regards the policy of the Soviet Union, it has been suggested that Stalin's statement on 21 April 1945, on the occasion of the signing of the Soviet-Polish Treaty, should be interpreted as signalling his continued faith in a dual but linked European alliance system directed against a resumption of German aggression.[17] But by then time was running out for a regional approach based on mutual understanding. Soviet suspicion of the motives behind Western interest in political developments in Eastern Europe led to measures which pointed in the direction of a sphere of influence where Soviet interests would be not only predominant but exclusive.

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[15] Public Record Office, London: PREM 4/30/8, Eden to Churchill 29 November 1944.

[16] *Ibid.*, Annex A: "Western Europe".

[17] See A.Resis, "Spheres of Influence in Soviet Wartime Diplomacy", in *Journal of Modern History*, September 1981, p.438.

In the United States, in the meantime, there seemed no turning back from the position that "postwar security could be achieved only through a fundamental restructuring of the international order", with "a new international organisation to keep the peace" as its mainstay.[18] The few who advocated a spheres of influence approach, like George Kennan and Walter Lippmann, were lone voices crying in the wilderness. At the end of January 1945, Kennan wrote to his friend and fellow Russian expert Charles Bohlen: "Why could we not make a decent and definite compromise ... - divide Europe frankly into spheres of influence - keep ourselves out of the Russian sphere and keep the Russians out of ours?" But Bohlen, no doubt reflecting the consensus of the State Department, dismissed the idea as "utterly impossible" - "Foreign policy like that cannot be made in a democracy."[19] It is ironic to note, as John Gaddis has done, that by 1949 the positions of the two diplomats had been reversed.

As it turned out, the world in 1945 embarked on the experiment of operating a fundamentally restructured international order, only to find itself after a few years faced with a Europe divided into two spheres of influence. Moreover, having been constructed in mutual adversity instead of on a basis of mutual understanding or at least acceptance, the two spheres were adamantly exclusive in character. It seems worth posing the question of whether the Cold War in Europe might not have been avoided if the sequence of the two approaches to a postwar order had been reversed - if gradual reform of the international order had preceded the attempt at a fundamental restructuring of the same. While the universalist principle which inspired the UN concept was a laudable one, it overlooked the fact that in a world dominated by the facts of power, security was a *sine qua non*. As George Kennan among others saw it, a basic measure of security had to come first: "No set of ideals could survive anarchy, or even chronic insecurity; certain minimal standards of stability had to be established before principles could be put into effect."[20]

The reasons commonly given as to why such a "spheres of influence" approach, by common consent and on a "non-exclusive" basis, was beyond

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[18] J.L.Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment* (Oxford University Press 1982) p.56.

[19] J.L.Gaddis, "The United States and the Question of a Sphere of Influence in Europe, 1945-1949", in O.Riste (ed.) *Western Security: The Formative Years* (Norwegian University Press, 1985) p.60.

[20] J.L.Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, p.32.

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the realms of possibility as the Second World War drew to an end, are hardly conclusive. As regards its being unacceptable to American opinion, this is an assumption which was never tested. The problem was rather, as John Gaddis has noted, that "by failing to prepare the American people for Stalin's demands in Eastern Europe, Roosevelt inadvertently undermined the domestic consensus necessary for his postwar policy of cooperation with the Soviet Union." [21]

The other assumption - that the smaller powers would never have accepted the great power preponderance which even a modified spheres of influence approach implied - is equally unproven. The Norwegian Government, for one, clearly stated its belief in a regional security order for Europe combined with an overriding "entente" between the Western powers and the Soviet Union.[22]

Historians know better than most that the "lessons of history" are an elusive commodity. But in reviewing the transition from the Second World War to the Cold War, it is hard to escape the conclusion that a gradual reform of the international order - a reform in which the safeguarding of basic security concerns by traditional balance-of-power means could be combined with attempts at building a superstructure of mutual great power understanding - would have stood a better chance of averting East-West antagonism than the grandiose universalist experiment which came into being at San Francisco in 1945.

The frailty of that experiment soon became apparent. What followed was the rapid construction of a new European balance of power, created and nurtured by antagonism. The consequence was a rigid division of Europe. Not until the late 1960s did we see the beginnings of a process of détente, marked by such initiatives as Willy Brandt's "Ostpolitik", followed by the 1972 "Statement of Basic Principles of US-Soviet Relations" in which the two super-powers indicated their mutual disavowal of the concept of *exclusive* spheres of influence. Then, from 1975 onwards, the so-called

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[21] J.L.Gaddis, *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War*, p.134.

[22] See e.g. my article "Norway's Atlantic Policy" in A. de Staercke and Others, *NATO's Anxious Birth* (C.Hurst, London 1985) pp.19-29.

Helsinki or CSCE process took the lead, by both acknowledging the *status quo* and pointing to ways in which the rigidity of the division might be reduced: through confidence and security building measures; through the erosion of political and economic barriers between Eastern and Western Europe; and through the promotion of human rights and easier contact and intercourse across boundaries.

While disarmament and arms control, both globally and in Europe, has tended to grab the attention of the mass media, our historical perspective should serve to demonstrate that a détente process such as that started in Helsinki has to be an integrated process. Just as the arms build-up of the 1950s reflected certain political facts, so disarmament and arms control depends for its progress on a measure of political détente. And postwar experiences suggest that political détente will prove ephemeral unless consolidated through real cooperation in the political, economic, cultural, and humanitarian fields. The revolutionary developments in the countries of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union have already laid the foundations of a political East-West détente. The challenge now confronting us is to develop an institutional superstructure for regional security and economic cooperation. CSCE, NATO - through its North Atlantic Cooperation Council, and the EC could all have important functions to perform in that process.

Even more significant, however, is the postwar experience that international peace and security cannot be built on panaceas. While the idealism of universal collective security or "world government" may be admirable, a balance of power system backed by the cautious diplomacy of the CSCE process has shown itself more practicable. And there exists as yet no tested alternative to regional alliances as security guarantees in a basically anarchic world.