

2024

Review of "Enduring Alliance: A History of NATO and the Postwar Global Order" by Timothy Andrews Sayle

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Recommended Citation

Turcotte, Jean-Michel "Review of "Enduring Alliance: A History of NATO and the Postwar Global Order" by Timothy Andrews Sayle." *Canadian Military History* 33, 2 (2024)

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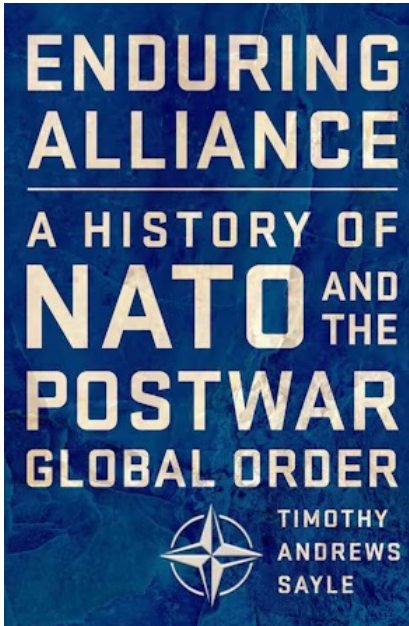
Timothy Andrews Sayle. *Enduring Alliance: A History of NATO and the Postwar Global Order*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2019. Pp. 346.

July 2024 marked the 75th anniversary of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Meeting in Washington, D.C. for the occasion, the same place where it has been signed in 1949, NATO member officials highlighted the numerous milestones and achievements “of the most successful and strongest, but also the longest-lasting alliance in history.”¹ Initially ratified by twelve countries, NATO now includes thirty-two members with a military budget of two billion euros. Most importantly, the alliance has secured peace in Western Europe, the longest so far since the nineteenth century. As several scholars, journalists and officials stress, members had worked together to keep people safe because the alliance is based on “a community of Allies bound together by common values of democracy, individual liberty and human rights and rule of law.”² Those accomplishments are celebrated in the context of the war in Ukraine where the organisation finds itself at the forefront of international debates on military affairs. NATO, however, has also met multiple challenges and moments of crisis over the years and its importance has often been questioned. Behind the public image of a forged defensive alliance against common enemies and the unity of its members, the history of NATO is one of tension, disagreements and crisis between allies but also of endurance. This complex process is the object of Tim Sayle book’s *Enduring Alliance*.

Created in the context of the post-Second World War and early Cold War, NATO was a response to the Soviet military threat in Europe. Fears of a Soviet attack echoed in Western military and political circles until the end of the Cold War. For Tim Sayle, however, NATO’s development lies in global politics. Following his argument, the greatest achievement of NATO was not to deter a Soviet aggression and keep peace in North Atlantic but rather to avoid allies’ disintegration. Considering the numerous divergent

¹ “NATO’s 75th Anniversary,” www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/224100.htm. Accessed on 16 July 2024.

² “NATO’s 75th Anniversary”; and Jason C. Moyer, “NATO’s 75th Anniversary Summit: Standing the Test of Time,” www.wilsoncenter.org/article/natos-75th-anniversary-summit-standing-test-time. Accessed on 16 July 2024.



and conflicting interests between major allied military powers (i.e., the US, the UK, France and Germany) over decades, the alliance could have collapsed at several junctures. The main threat for NATO was that allied countries would leave the alliance, favour national defence policy or agree unilaterally to Moscow's demands in order to avoid a potential destructive conflict. Sayle debunks the myth that NATO primarily survived because of the democratic values common to its members. He rather advances that NATO protected against the “dangers of democracy—a fickle electorate that, in seeking peace, might pave the way for war.” (p. 2).

Contributing to substantial scholarships, Sayle examines the evolution of NATO through the development of international military and political affairs, instead of solely by national policies, bilateral relations or internal mechanisms.³ According to the author, understanding NATO means exploring a “broader pattern of international affairs [that NATO councils, committees and military commands] lay and preserved” (p. 3). Moreover, Sayle advances the concept of “Pax Atlantica” to explain the role of NATO as an instrument of great-power politics. The term refers to the idea of a peace enforced by a military structure. He argues that allies viewed NATO as an important issue in both their transatlantic and global affairs because “the alliance provided the stability and peace that allowed for myriad other complicated non-security relationships between and among NATO allies and allowed for the allies to engage with the broader world” (p. 9). The evolution of the North Atlantic alliance is thus less a story of a military confrontation with Soviet Union, but rather one of how and why allies remained together through many crises and why it endured.

³ For instance, see Sten Rynning, *NATO: From Cold War to Ukraine, a History of the World's Most Powerful Alliance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2024).

Ten chapters address chronologically the various phases of NATO's development in terms of policy, geopolitics, warfare and military technology from the 1940s to the 1990s. The book opens with the 1948–1955 period which was marked by a diplomatic dynamism driving the building of NATO in the context of the postwar and the threat of the Soviet military power. Many allied high officials believed that Moscow might blackmail European governments pushing them to accept its demands to avoid a war. The first major disagreement within NATO appears in the 1950s but did not concern North Atlantic area. It rather involved Egypt and the Suez Canal where British and French colonial interests clashed with US policy. The Suez Crisis motivated Washington and London to resolve their disagreements within NATO. This rapprochement, however, caused tension with France and eventually led Charles de Gaulle government leaving NATO, and NATO headquarters moving from France to Belgium. The 1960s were an intense period in the Cold War. After facing a series of crises – the Berlin Wall, the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, the Americans pushed NATO into accepting a grand strategy for handling the Soviet Union. The latter was more or less successful in practice because of conflicting defence interests between members.

This period was followed by relaxed tensions in West-East relations. For NATO, however, the *détente* with the Soviet Union raised concerns about the German position in the collective defence. Since its creation, NATO gave importance to keeping West Germany in the alliance. In terms of power politics, the US influenced NATO against appeasement with the Soviet Union. By the 1970s, public funding and support for the alliance became a serious issue in many countries considering the absence of military threat. This situation amplified in the '80s with the global anti-nuclear movement and a stronger public opinion in favour of arm control, limitations and disarmament. Different positions of members regarding nuclear weapons and Cold War strategy almost made NATO collapse. With the end of the Cold War, the future of the military alliance was once again questioned. Nevertheless, with a strong support of the US, NATO survived, and aimed to constrain Russian influence in Central Europe. The book ends with the '90s, a decade animated by debates on public support and funding of NATO. While the organisation faced new challenges in the liberal global order and expanded, it

struggled to define a new defence and security strategy, especially in Eastern Europe. Once again, the alliance endured.

Sayle's work focuses mainly on high-level actors. This approach has great merits. It highlights interactions among various elected politicians, senior military officers and civilian officials on international affairs. All those actors experienced the Second World War which shaped their understanding of NATO. This approach, however, neglect structural elements such as global finance and political economy entanglement, national particularities, as well as the multiple actors involved in this process outside of high-ranked officers and officials. The analysis also remains US-centred following successive US administrations. Although there is no doubt that American governments were central in NATO, the role played by other states and non-state actors remained unexplored. Obviously, writing a comprehensive "total" history of NATO is a tremendous challenge and was not the purpose of the book. Such work would include multiple countries (including former Warsaw Pact members), which means hundreds of thousands of documents in different languages and numerous classified materials with limited access for researchers as the author has recently mentioned.⁴

Tim Sayle's book is of major importance to our understanding of NATO and its evolution during the Cold War. It is a highly recommended reading for graduate students and scholars in the field of post-1945 international history. Hopefully, practitioners and policymakers should also give attention to this work as many issues discussed are connected to current issues. For instance, "lessons" of the past help contextualising the current Russian-Ukrainian conflict and acknowledging the importance of power politics in global order. The role of NATO is still and will probably always be questioned, especially in a context where numerous political actors around the world are contesting international order and promoting isolationism. As *Enduring Alliance* shows, this major military alliance has evolved through and withstand multiple tensions and disagreements between members. It thus reflects a certain sense of coordination and

⁴ Robyn Doolittle and Tom Cardoso, "Redacted and out of reach: Canada's access laws keep the country's history locked away: Researchers are often denied decades-old documents because there's no process for declassifying them and poor records of what's piled up in government warehouses," *The Globe and Mail (Online)*, 10 November 2023.

cohesion of defence and military interests between members. Such “success” was primarily based on exchanges, dialogue, consultation and negotiations, all elements which are more than ever essential to the idea of global peace.

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