

'European defence' from the Corriere della Sera (5 April 1949)

Caption: On 5 April 1950, the Italian daily newspaper Corriere della Sera speculates on the military capacity of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and underlines the importance of the military and financial assistance provided by the United States for the defence of Western Europe.

Source: Corriere della Sera. 05.04.1949, n° 81; anno 75. Milano: Corriere della Sera. "Difesa dell' Europa", auteur:Luzzatti, Ivo , p. 1.

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European defence

The communiqué issued at the conclusion of the meetings of the various political and technical bodies of the Atlantic Pact held in The Hague in the last few days announced the agreements reached on the strategic principles to be applied in the event of war and on the duties of each individual associated Nation in the general framework of operations, as well as the approval of the plan for the defence of the North Atlantic area. It was clearly not possible to expect greater clarification: official communiqués from international conferences must, for obvious reasons, be non-specific and optimistic. However, it would be truly interesting to know how all the thorny problems inherent in personnel, arms, materiel, equipment etc., the keystones for any operational plan, have been overcome: unless all these factors are known, there will be too little evidence to judge the real importance of the plans themselves and the practical prospects for their application.

The solution to any strategic problem is strictly dependent on certain established factors, including essentially those relating to the size of the opposing forces; these very columns have already highlighted the great imbalance that exists between the ground capability of the Soviet bloc and that of the Atlantic group. This discrepancy is all the more vital since, whatever the war plan adopted in The Hague, the defence of our continent will, at least in the initial phase of a conflict, be entrusted mainly to the ground forces, which, on account of their present small size, would certainly not be capable of putting up even a semblance of resistance to the two hundred Russian divisions that stand prepared.

In the face of such a situation, the United States Government has acted by allocating a fund of thirteen hundred million dollars as a contribution to the military reinforcement of the associated Nations. To be able to make a judgement as to the results that may be achieved, however, it would be interesting to establish, first of all, what the European nations must do to ensure that their military potential is capable of offering a reasonable guarantee of defence against an enemy attack, at least until the weight of the ranks of American troops is felt directly on the battlefield.

Even without examining the detailed figures entailed in this calculation, however, the general requirements, limited to ground forces alone, may be assessed at a maximum of 40 to 50 divisions overall.

What is needed, then, is to double the existing number of large units; if, in addition to this essential requirement, one adds the no less urgent need for air forces, the budget required is indeed massive. It must be concluded, objectively and without fear of erring on the side of excessive pessimism, that the Mutual Assistance Programme funds are completely inadequate for creating the military capability that is essential for the defence of Western Europe in the initial period of a conflict. This is a *sine qua non* for the application of the war plan that has just been agreed, a plan that, according to public declarations made by General Bradley, rules out any idea of preventive retreat, but envisages resistance directed as far as possible towards the East.

To remedy this deficit, the only option would be to dedicate the entire amount of the Mutual Assistance Programme funds to ground forces, thus sacrificing the needs of aviation. It should be noted that, in apportioning the air war duties among the powers, the United States has taken over strategic operations, whilst Great Britain and France have been assigned essentially tactical objectives. These include, first and foremost, halting the westward advance of the Soviet columns by dense fire power and the disruption of communication lines. No one can doubt the effects of air bombardments in a future conflict. Their effectiveness, however, is more apparent when an operation continues over time and is against ground targets: built-up areas, industrial complexes and the enemy's other nerve centres. They are less effective, though, against moving targets, especially where the terrain is uneven and covered and concealment is easier.

In any case, even if such measures were adopted, this would not entirely eliminate the financial difficulties referred to, and these will have to be resolved in the political arena alone.

Certain authoritative voices have already been raised to express the need for a controlled rearmament of

Germany as a means of facilitating the rapid readiness of the Atlantic forces, whilst the press has reported that there are projects under way to use air bases located in Spanish territory. Both proposals highlight two essential factors: the first is political and is certainly of greater interest, but will not be considered here on account of the particular technical character of these comments; the second is military. It is pointless to waste words, since it seems obvious that, from this point of view, acceptance of the principle of the formation of a number of divisions with German manpower would offer a way of significantly alleviating any difficulties relating to manning needs, whereas the problems of their armaments and equipment would persist. The advantages of using bases on Spanish soil would be undeniable, but these do not help to solve the problem at issue: the rapid readiness of a ground force capable of resisting an enemy strike on its own for several months.

In addition, it should be noted that the implementation of both those proposals would take considerable time because of their political content, even though it is vital to arrive at a full solution to the entire matter as soon as possible.

From the other side of the Atlantic have come frequent calls to the friendly nations of Europe urging them to look first and foremost to their own resources for the wherewithal to rise up again, to create domestically an atmosphere of tranquillity and to conclude profitable agreements as part of reciprocal political and economic relations, since the unease in which they live there prevents them from making progress. However, the needs of military development, which have already been mentioned, are so great that they still exceed the potential offered jointly by such larger contributions and Mutual Assistance Programme funds. Since Europe does not have the means to take measures to satisfy the remaining needs on its own, further intervention by the United States will be necessary.

There are two possible fields of action for such intervention: financially, through a suitable increase in the amount already earmarked for assistance, or militarily, by increasing the current number of the US's own divisions and transferring some of them permanently to Europe. Such measures fall within the exclusive competence of the United States and there is no need to examine them. However, the problem calls for a rapid solution and it is the responsibility of the men in Government alone, who must provide the military leaders with the resources to conduct operations, without which any plan, however perfect, is doomed to failure.

Ivo Luzzatti