



Manlio Brosio: Cold War consensus-builder

Ryan C. Hendrickson examines the record of Manlio Brosio, NATO's fourth Secretary General, 25 years after his death.



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In the 25 years since the death on 14 March 1980 of Manlio Brosio, NATO's fourth Secretary General, the strategic environment in which NATO operates and the activities that the Alliance is engaged in have changed beyond recognition. One aspect of NATO's work that has not changed, however, is the consensus-building process. And it was here that Brosio, a quiet man rarely in the public or media spotlight, excelled during the seven years from 1964 to 1971 that he served as the Alliance's leader.

Born in 1897, Brosio studied law at the University of Turin. An early interest in politics was brought to a premature end by the fascist rise to power. An anti-fascist, Brosio returned to the political scene in 1943, briefly becoming Italy's Deputy Prime Minister and then, in 1945 and 1946, Defence Minister. Having

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served as Italy's Ambassador to the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, the United States, and France in that order between 1947 and 1964, Brosio came to NATO especially well equipped to deal with the Alliance issues of the day. According to the principal historians of NATO's Cold War Secretaries General, Robert S. Jordan and Michael Bloom, in *Political Leadership in NATO* (Westview Press, Boulder, CO, 1979), Brosio maintained at all times a deep commitment to transatlantic unity and was truly a leader and representative of all Allies – large and small.

A gentle, friendly man, Brosio shied away from direct confrontation within the Alliance, focusing instead on being an effective administrator and working to promote consensus via patient diplomacy and private negotiation. Extremely well read with a gift for detail, Brosio would arrive at NATO early in the morning and immediately immerse himself in all policy aspects of the Alliance's operations. Assistants recall his exceptional knowledge of current affairs that he acquired and maintained through voracious reading of the morning newspapers. His morning routine also included studies of the German language, a linguistic skill he believed he needed to develop to more effectively serve all members of the Alliance.

The Brosio era was an especially difficult period for inter-Allied unity during which NATO changed its strategic thinking from a doctrine of "massive retaliation" to one of "flexible response" and, in the wake of differences over the new doctrine, Alliance headquarters moved from Paris to Brussels.

In seeking to remain at all times leader of all 15 Allies, Jordan and Bloom note that Brosio chose temporarily to give up his chairmanship of the North Atlantic Council. In this way, the Belgian Ambassador to NATO, André de Staercke, served as the *de facto* chairman of the North Atlantic Council during negotiations over NATO's relocation to Brussels. Meanwhile, Brosio focused on maintaining close contact and open communication with all Allies and fostering NATO unity.

At the same time as NATO prepared to relocate to Brussels, inter-Allied differences emerged over arms-control proposals vis-à-vis the Soviet Union and many Allies believed that greater consultation was required within NATO. At the suggestion of Belgian Foreign Minister Pierre Harmel, the North Atlantic Council initiated a study re-examining NATO's Cold War mission and purpose.

The Harmel Report, which emerged from this study and took a year to prepare, set out a new and revolutionary way forward for NATO concluding that the Alliance had two missions of equal importance: defence *and* détente. In this way, the report recommended both that NATO maintain its traditional mission of defence and that it develop a new objective of "détente". This meant that, while recognising the ongoing security threat posed by the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact and the need for military deterrence, the Allies should also seek to promote a more stable relationship and to address the underlying political issues.

Today, most analysts view the Harmel Report as a seminal document that helped broaden NATO's mission, enabling the Alliance to move beyond being simply a military organisation to become a diplomatic union with political missions as well. In *NATO, The European Union and the Atlantic Community: The Transatlantic Bargain Reconsidered* (Rowan and Littlefield, Boulder, CO, 2002), Stanley R. Sloan credits it with helping restore a broad strategic consensus among the Allies, as NATO evolved to employ different diplomatic, political and military approaches to providing transatlantic security. Arguably, the Harmel Report also paved the way for NATO's wider mission changes that occurred at the Rome Summit in 1991, when Allies approved the first post-Cold War Strategic Concept.

Interestingly, Brosio himself had initial misgivings about détente. These are reflected in his as yet unpublished diaries, which are housed in the archives of the Foundation Luigi Einaudi in Turin and are currently being edited by Italian historian Bruna Bagnato of the University of Florence. Despite this, he eventually gave his full backing to the Harmel Report. Indeed, both before and after the Allies formally endorsed the Report, Brosio fostered transatlantic cooperation on arms control through his diplomatic efforts within the Alliance. Meanwhile, the US-led initiatives resulted in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks.

In addition to his leadership efforts on these specific events in NATO history, Brosio is remembered as a

champion of defence spending, for his disciplined oversight of Council meetings and his knowledge of and respect for diplomatic protocol among the Allies. Brosio also had the gift of remaining calm in tense sessions of the North Atlantic Council, rarely showing emotion even during the most heated discussions. Indeed, at the most contentious moments, he was especially skilful at drafting memorandums of decisions by capitalising on semantic and political nuances where Alliance consensus could be identified.

In his memoirs, *NATO: The Transatlantic Bargain* (Harper and Row, New York, 1970), former US Ambassador to NATO Harlan Cleveland, who served at the Alliance during the Brosio era, credits NATO's fourth Secretary General with providing the necessary "political ingredient" for finding consensus on the most difficult issues. He attributes this to Brosio's cautious and judicious diplomatic style, which often helped produce common understanding and communication among the Allies.

Brosio was a keen advocate of the NATO Ambassadors' Tuesday Luncheons, where Permanent Representatives could meet in an informal setting to find and develop shared policy objectives. In contrast to his predecessor, Dirk Stikker, Brosio made a point of attending the luncheons, which, in this way, evolved into an important and unique feature of NATO's institutional machinery.

Brosio also managed to develop effective working relationships with both Supreme Allied Commanders, Europe who served during his years as Secretary General – US Generals Lyman L. Lemnitzer and Andrew J. Goodpaster – in spite of their very different personalities and leadership styles.

Given that the Secretary General can influence NATO decisions only through his chairmanship of the North Atlantic Council and has no formal authority or decision-making power over Alliance policy, NATO's leader is always constrained in his ability to steer the Alliance in new directions. Like many Secretaries General, Brosio struggled at times to make his voice heard, with the result that his personal impact on Alliance policy should not be overstated. Nevertheless, given the complex strategic challenges that NATO faced in the mid-1960s, the historical record reveals an extremely favourable picture of his years at NATO's helm. Indeed, the deft touch and patient diplomacy that Brosio brought to the office are skills that all Secretaries General need to cultivate to help the Alliance through periods of change and inter-Allied differences. ■