

The End of NATO and the Danger of US Unilateralism

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As US Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates issued a warning that NATO was becoming a “two-tier alliance” with - as he put it - some allies willing to fight and die while others (predominately continental Europeans) remain combat-shy, questions have again surfaced about the viability of the almost 60-year old Alliance.

It is a long time since anyone earnestly questioned the continued existence of the Alliance. NATO's recent accomplishments are significant and have confounded those who predicted the organization's post-Cold War demise. It has expanded to include ten formerly Communist countries. Almost all countries not already in NATO have been offered a Partnership for Peace (PfP) or are undergoing reforms to qualify for PfP membership. This has extended the Alliance's reach and created a 'zone of peace', across the European continent.

NATO went on the offensive for the first time in Bosnia in 1994-5 to hasten the end of the war, and in 1999 conducted a large air operation to counter Serbian ethnic cleansing in Kosovo. These operations were followed by NATO's SFOR in Bosnia and KFOR in Kosovo, the first peacekeeping operations for the Alliance. NATO, together with the political leadership provided by the UN-mandated Office of the High Representative, facilitated the reintegration of ethnic entities in Bosnia into a new multiethnic state.

NATO also has an agenda for military transformation - agreed at the Prague Summit in 2002 - which seeks to overhaul its military capabilities. Relieved of its operational responsibilities, the NATO Atlantic Command in Norfolk, Virginia, has been turned into a motor for reform. And NATO's ability to deploy forces rapidly has theoretically increased after the Alliance's announcement that the NATO Response Force (NRF) (also established at the Prague Summit in 2002) had reached full operational capability in October 2006 with approximately 21,000 troops. Within the transatlantic area, the interoperability of NATO forces is taken for granted and the relatively seamless integration of different national militaries in combat missions stands in stark contrast to UN operations which are still plagued by language, culture and technological barriers.

With this list of accomplishments, asking what NATO's *raison d'être* is may seem inappropriate. But upon closer scrutiny, the Alliances' accomplishments look decidedly less impressive than its supporters would have us believe.

The basic identity and purpose of the Alliance remains confused. The founding idea of collective defence (codified in Article 5 of the Washington Treaty) clashes with the current and first large out-of-area stabilization operation in Afghanistan. The NATO Comprehensive Political Guidance issued during the November 2006 Riga summit states that “collective defence will remain the core purpose of the Alliance.” At the same time the Riga Declaration pushed NATO into exploring partnerships in decidedly un-transatlantic locations such as Australia, Japan and South Korea. European defence and expeditionary operations are not mutually exclusive, but there needs to be agreement within NATO about what the Alliance actually does.

Afghanistan illustrates these fundamental cleavages. While allies are slowly contributing more troops and equipment to Afghanistan, many of these contributions are less relevant from an operational perspective by “national caveats” placed on their use; Germany, France, Italy, and Spain prevent their troops from serving in the south of Afghanistan where most of the serious military activity is occurring. At the Riga Summit, these countries pledged that “the best they were prepared to do was to commit in principle to assist allies in an ‘emergency’” - hardly a ringing endorsement of multilateralism and of the Alliance.

But the ISAF mission is not the only chink in NATO’s armour. The Alliance’s attempts at reform, while laudable, have not seen shifts in European spending patterns, a prerequisite for meaningful reform: defence budgets are at best held level in real terms, and this is insufficient to fund either major new capabilities, or maintain force levels over a period of time.

As US Under-Secretary Nicholas Burns described it, there remains a considerable “usability gap” inside NATO - out of Europe’s 2.4 million soldiers, a paltry three percent are deployed in missions in the Balkans, Afghanistan, and Iraq. The rest are stationary and, beyond acting as deterrence, make no contribution to NATO’s missions. All of the allies may be engaged in Afghanistan, but many of the contributions are more symbolic than useful. NATO’s recently retired Supreme Allied Commander General James Jones told the US Congress in March 2004 that only 3.4% of European forces are deployable in ‘expeditionary’ missions. Little has changed since.

The much-lauded NATO Response Force has not proven its worth yet, beyond small-scale assignments such as supporting the Olympic Games in Athens, Hurricane Katrina support, and the assistance in the aid efforts after the 2005 Pakistan earthquake. Its numbers are mainly filled by countries, like the United Kingdom and France, which shoulder the bulk of continental efforts to support real capability within NATO. Other countries, like Germany, claim that the Response Force has led to a rethink of their armed forces over the next decade but, crucially there are no plans to increase defence spending as a share of GDP.

The German government has come a long way in its policy towards the military (who now remembers the hesitant, government-threatening deployment of German troops to the Balkans in the mid-1990s?) and consequently resents suggestions that it is not ‘doing enough’. German troops remain, however, ill-prepared for high-intensity combat, and have a dogmatic doctrinal approach to complex, civil-military

operations: neat theoretical differences between peacekeeping and war are unsustainable in practice. The constant calls for Germany to send troops to the volatile south of Afghanistan overlook an analysis of the efficacy that German forces would actually have on operations, given their current training and composition.

Perhaps most dangerously for NATO, the United States has come back to NATO with a much circumscribed concept for the organization. While calling NATO a “value-based alliance,” the Bush Administration’s actions demonstrate a considerably earthier, tactical view of NATO, encouraging it to focus on developing capabilities for stabilisation operations, urging it to give up the pretence of being a full spectrum war-fighting alliance, and dismissing it entirely as a political forum of liberal constitutional democracies.

European leaders are probably right to feel upset that they are now being accused of abandoning NATO. Most of the NATO offers of military assistance in Afghanistan were rejected by the United States, in part for political reasons stemming from the Bush Administration’s initial electoral rhetoric when it derided the ‘multilateralization’ of US foreign policy, and in part because the United States believed most NATO military capabilities were inadequate. This stance was made legendary by the response given by then Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld who, when asked about whether he planned to discuss possible NATO contributions after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, replied that the idea ‘never crossed’ his mind.

Now, as the Bush administration draws to a close, European allies do not want to be lectured about the dangers of abandoning NATO. They expect a new US president – whether from the Republican or Democratic Party – to re-launch Euro-Atlantic relations. However, this is a high-risk strategy. For, while a new U.S president will undoubtedly want to re-invest in NATO, most presidential candidates have talked about the need to deploy more troops to Afghanistan; expect the next occupant of the White House to come calling for more troops. The Americans see NATO as part of a tool box to effect operations around the world, not just for the territorial defence of Europe.

If Europe remains unwilling to make the necessary military contribution to ISAF – and the U.S becomes forced to “surge” unilaterally, as it did in Iraq – a new administration is likely to conclude, as the current one did in 2001 that NATO has little to offer as a war-fighting organisation and, by extension, is not relevant as an alliance of ideals. For, in the words of Sun Tzu, “virtue is not enough.” Ideas survive because they are supported by people who believe in them.

Way ahead

How, then, to get out of the current downward spiral and ensure that NATO’s Bucharest Summit does not become a venue for an alliance-destroying argument about ISAF?

First, the Alliance should be re-asserted as the centre of US-European relations. The United States needs to put aside talk of ‘coalitions of the willing’ and allegations of European weakness and reaffirm the

multilateral nature and collective defence orientation of the Alliance. In order to restore the Alliance to a central place in US-European relations, Washington must find a way to walk back from the depth of damage done to the Alliance through the unilateral invasion of Iraq and restore the political character of NATO. This means a real, consultative engagement with the Alliance as it existed during the Cold War years. But, for this to be sustained, Europe must accept a role for the Alliance 'out of area' and it must do much more than has been the case in Afghanistan.

Second, the members of the Alliance need to reaffirm their liberal values as the basis of NATO and redraft a strategic concept that addresses the current 'narrative confusion' in current counter terrorist and stabilization operations. A strategic concept based on the defence of political liberalism would reduce the current difficulties the Alliance has in resolving traditional notions of collective defence versus out of area operations involving stabilization operations—difficulties which currently threaten the very identity and future of the Alliance; the relationship of Article 5 to current operations in Afghanistan is far from clear. A new strategic consensus is vital in helping to shape US engagement in global affairs and for making liberal interventionism more effective. By making liberal interventionism less erratic, a new strategic consensus would greatly enhance the ability of NATO to condition behaviour and deter courses of action before they occur. With a new concept, hopefully, all the allies could contribute more equitably to future missions avoiding the 'tiering' of the Alliance that has occurred in Afghanistan.

Third, NATO needs to become truly operationally capable. It is not enough to be willing to act; allies must also be capable of acting. An inability to contribute effectively to missions further re-enforces the perception of a multi-tier alliance. The Alliance needs to redirect its military transformation agenda from the seamless conduct of low-intensity stabilization operations to high-intensity combat operations. While niche capabilities are a useful way to complement the war-fighting capabilities of other members, all new members in the Alliance must demonstrate an ability to directly contribute to full spectrum operations.

The Alliance must make itself directly useful to its most powerful member, the United States. The United States needs help in Afghanistan. Unless NATO can supply additional troops to their ISAF operations and lift national caveats on their use to allow for the eventual defeat the Taliban through more agile operations, the United States will come to view the Alliance as of no further utility. This is not about NATO being subservient to the US – it is about the transatlantic community making a serious, cooperative contribution to global peace and security. America thinks in global terms, not simply European ones. Without US support, the Alliance is moribund.

Doing so also means the Alliance needs to aggressively identify and fill capability and organisational gaps. A panel of former defence chiefs have tabled a number of thought-provoking recommendations in their report "Towards a Grand Strategy for an Uncertain World".¹ Chief among these is the idea that if some

¹ "Towards a Grand Strategy for an Uncertain World: Renewing Transatlantic Partnership", a report by Klaus Naumann, John Shalikashvili, Peter Inge, Jacques Lanxade, & Henk van den Breemen, (Noaber Foundation, 2007)

NATO members refuse to contribute to NATO's missions, they should be excluded from having a say in the conduct of those military operations. The report also suggests that NATO needs to change the way missions are financed. For decades, missions have been financed on the basis of "costs lie where they fall," which means that any country that sends troops or military hardware must pick up the costs. This means that the United States, Britain, France, Canada, the Netherlands, Poland and Germany bear most expenses because they regularly participate in large numbers in NATO missions. Instead, the authors call for a commonly financed NATO operations budget.

Other necessary reforms include the need to delegate greater authority to commanders' in-theatre and ensure that military action not only comes under political control at the strategic level - with the NAC in Brussels - but under day-to-day control in-theatre. That will probably mean finding ways to subordinate NATO commanders to a United Nations envoy or a similar post.

The US Defense Secretary's warning that NATO risks irrelevance should be treated as a call for action by both Europe and the United States. It would be wrong to think it only as a call for more ISAF troops. But it would be equally wrong to dismiss the criticism and wait for a new U.S. administration. The U.S and Europe has a lot in common, but without a common enterprise like NATO, centrifugal forces could - and indeed already have - pulled us in different directions. NATO is likely to survive even if the ISAF mission in Afghanistan fails. But it may not be in a state that benefits anyone. To ensure that this does not happen, bold moves are now required by the allies and NATO's Secretary General, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer.

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