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NATO's Strategic and Operational Challenges

A RUSI Transatlantic and European Security Programme Study

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The Long and Winding Road to 60

The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) was founded in 1949 to deter the Soviet Union from an invasion of Western Europe. Some sixty years later the Alliance now finds itself fighting a difficult counter insurgency in Afghanistan and confronting a myriad of risks that has made policy-makers on both sides of the Atlantic wax lyrical regarding a mythical state of certainty during the Cold War era. It is an interesting state of affairs. The world no longer confronts a nuclear holocaust, yet the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists has moved its doomsday clock forward to five minutes to midnight. The last time the world was this close to 'destruction' was decades ago. Rather than a monolithic state based threat, NATO must today confront a complex nexus of 'security risks and challenges' that range from the proliferation of nuclear weapons to weak and failing states, not to mention the possible impact of amorphous challenges, such as global climate change, on Euro-Atlantic security.

The Alliance as it now stands is poorly suited to deal with the new international environment. For the past two decades NATO has remained based on a Cold War structure, seeking to manage a post-Cold War world. The Strategic Concepts of 1991 and 1999, codified which new missions the Alliance was undertaking, but it did not update Alliance structures – physical or psychological. The most recent summit in Bucharest was the latest in a long litany of summits that have failed to push the Alliance into the twenty-first century. At the heart of this problem lie very different conceptions

amongst the allies as to what sort of organisation NATO should be, and what sort of missions it should undertake. This is not a US verses Europe, Kaganesque argument. Many European allies want a global NATO that proactively addresses global security issues, while many others want the Alliance to concentrate on Europe and its more traditional role as a defensive alliance. There can be no denying that NATO has been a crucial part of the process that has brought enduring peace and stability to the European continent since 1989. If the Alliance wants to remain relevant and engaged however, a re-conceptualisation of the Alliance must take place, based upon terms which all allies can adhere to.

A good place for this re-conceptualisation to start, should begin with the issues that were not addressed at the Bucharest Summit. The outcomes of the 2008 summit can thus be spun either positively or negatively. For example, the French offering to send an additional battalion of 700 troops to Eastern Afghanistan can be seen as a victory for those wanting greater solidarity and support amongst allies for operations in Afghanistan. At the same time, many commentators lament the fact that the largest influx of fresh troops will come once again from the United States with around 3,200 Marines. The success of the US in securing NATO endorsement for missile defence in Europe can nonetheless be seen as a positive outcome for the summit, as well as the decision to invite Croatia and Albania as new members. Macedonia's rebuff owing to Greek objections to the country's constitutional name, as well as the confusion

over a Membership Action Plan for Ukraine and Georgia does not demonstrate unity of minds however.

Despite Germany and France having previously warned Washington that it wasn't yet time to push for such a proposal, President Bush and his team decided to press on regardless and place MAP status for Ukraine and Georgia squarely on the Agenda. The opposing response to Bush's speech in Bucharest was undoubtedly strong, if not a little predictable, yet in the end the summit communiqué explicitly stated that Ukraine and Georgia would become members of NATO – an odd assertion indeed. These issues were discussed, but there were a great number of other pressing issues that were more or less left to the side.

While the future of NATO will require a discussion on the entire gamut of challenges NATO faces, this report will focus on a few of the most pressing. These include NATO's relations with other multilateral organisations, relations with global partners, Russia-NATO relations, and the future of the ISAF mission. Their relevance to both current policy and the future development of a new Strategic Concept – a task which must be the focus of the Alliance over the next few years – places them high on the Agenda.

NATO and Multilateral Organisations

NATO is currently engaged in Afghanistan leading the ISAF mission under a UN mandate¹. The Alliance's work in the Balkans

also fell under a UN remit. But for all of this cooperation with the UN, NATO and the UN do not have a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), meaning there is no 'official' relationship between the two organisations. In this respect, NATO is unique since the EU and AU both have an MOU with the UN. The lack of an official UN-NATO relationship is problematic for a number of reasons; first and foremost, because the situation in Afghanistan is far beyond the capability of NATO. NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer has repeatedly emphasised for the last few years that NATO is just one piece of the puzzle and that other organisations must make a significant contribution as well. The UN is in Afghanistan with the UN Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA), but their presence is too small and it has not been as prominent as many within NATO would like. A number of posts are unfilled, which represents a critical shortage given the need for more civilian effect. The UN mission has also suffered from a lack of international profile, which has seen UN efforts increasingly dedicated to Africa, rather than Afghanistan. This may change as Kai Eide settles into his role as UN Envoy to Kabul, but more broadly NATO and the UN cannot continue in such a weak relationship.

An MOU proposal was sent to Kofi Annan's office, but it died on his desk. Observers speculate that Annan was too discouraged by the Balkan and Iraq war experiences to engage in MOU talks with NATO, an organisation that is generally seen as US-led by the UN establishment. One glimmer of hope is that UN Secretary General Ban Ki

¹ Eight UN Security Council Resolutions – 1386, 1413, 1444, 1510, 1563, 1623, 1707 and 1776 – relate to ISAF.

Moon 'attended an international meeting on Afghanistan in Romania'² where he met with NATO and Afghan leaders. Mr Moon might have more of an appetite to establish a real institutional relationship with NATO and the Alliance should again push forward with talks. The Washington Treaty explicitly states that NATO exists to further UN principles and as such there should be no conflict of interest between the two organisations. NATO, however, will want to ensure enough freedom of movement in any NATO-UN MOU that would limit the Alliance's ability to act in the face of UN Security Council politics, a situation all too reminiscent of past disagreements over the Kosovo crisis. The next US administration will be key to making this sort of agreement possible and there may movement on the issue, particularly if a Democrat wins the White House this November, since the new Administration will most likely be seen as more fitting partner than the Bush White House has been.

The Alliance is also in desperate need of re-evaluating its relationship with the EU. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Afghanistan, where NATO and the EU are currently are engaged in an elaborate but absurd dance. Within the framework of a more comprehensive approach towards Afghanistan, the EU offered to take the lead on police training and reform, while NATO maintains its efforts towards the Afghan Army. An EU Police mission (EUPOL AFGHANISTAN) has been in Afghanistan

since June 2007, but NATO has been blocked by Turkey from providing security to the EU police training forces. As a result, the German-led EU mission has had to painstakingly negotiate bilateral security provisions with every Provisional Reconstruction Team (PRT) on the ground. Sharing intelligence is also more difficult because there is no across-the-board agreement as a result of the Turkish veto.

Turkey has so far been blocking the Alliance from providing assistance because Ankara believes that all NATO-EU cooperative endeavours should be governed by the NATO-EU Framework under Berlin Plus. The framework, however, excludes Cyprus as it is neither part of the Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme, nor has it signed a security agreement with NATO. This in practice blocks the entire process, with the EU refusing to engage in such a framework if all its Member States are not involved on an equal footing. Over the last few years, the EU has moved way beyond the original governing principles of the NATO/EU relationship, which led to Berlin Plus arrangement back in 2003. Indeed, those pushing for a reinforced European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) are determined to have a more autonomous defence capability, and would rather go through National Headquarters or develop a new facility in Brussels for planning its ESDP missions, rather than calling on such NATO assets within Shape at Mons.

Now redundant and unlikely to be used again in its current form, Berlin Plus is therefore an outdated agreement in need of review. While changing perspectives in France under the

² This is how the meeting was described on the UN website prior the Bucharest Summit.

leadership of President Nicolas Sarkozy have shown encouraging signs of a NATO/EU rapprochement, not enough is being done for the moment to address the Cyprus/Turkey issue. Now that there is a real prospect of a political solution in Nicosia between North and South, perhaps European diplomats are counting on the Cyprus issue simply deflating itself. This won't solve all the issues however and one has to engage with Turkey regarding NATO/ESDP relations more widely sooner rather than later.

The Berlin Plus agreements have been used successfully in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) where under the EUFOR Althea Mission EU peacekeeping forces took over from NATO's SFOR operation. At the time, Cyprus was not yet an EU member state and the EU's defence policy was considerably less ambitious. The EU and NATO need now address their relationship post haste, and the EU must also start taking into account the fact that the development of ESDP has left Turkey out in the cold. Turkey is worse off today than it was in the days of the Western European Union, where Turkey had achieved Associate Member status within the WEU and was practically a member in all but name. Furthermore, there has been no implementation of the Nice 2002 Council Provisions to increase cooperation with partners and the areas for further development have not moved forward either. The provisions would, among other things, include non-EU, NATO allies in consultation on planning and operations.

If these two organisations are going to make real contributions to global security, the relationship cannot be this dysfunctional.

While NATO has consistently made overtures to the EU, the same cannot be said of the EU. Talks with Turkey to address the Berlin Plus issue are urgently required, and a better framework for cooperation between EU and NATO civil-military assets during operations would be particularly useful. In order to do so, the EU and NATO must establish a workable framework agreement that enables non-EU NATO allies and non-NATO EU members to contribute to planning and operations. Once political barriers imposed by national governments have been dropped, a further challenge will be to transform the often antagonistically-laced working cultures of these two institutions.

With countries such as Denmark, France, Sweden and Finland all currently indicating that they might soon reappraise their positioning within either NATO or the European Union, the time is perhaps ripe for Europeans to explore a 'Dual Membership' agreement within European Security Architectures or consider 'Europeanising Shape' by bringing EU and NATO planning officers together. For the sake of improved ESDP/ NATO relations, better civil-military operational coordination, but also as a driving force for better European defence capabilities as a whole, European countries which are members of NATO and/or the EU should be given access to NAC and PSC meetings, but also be given the opportunity to contribute early on in the operational planning process of European missions.

Working with Global Partners

NATO's relations with the EU and UN are far from optimal, but the Alliance's relationships with a range of non-NATO states are quite good. Australia, Sweden, South Korea and Japan have all been involved with NATO operations in Afghanistan, both in support and combat operations. These states reached out to NATO for a more developed relationship, and the Alliance responded. But there is still much to be done and little agreement amongst the allies on how to proceed with 'global partnerships'. Australia has no desire to become an ally, but does want to be present for planning and consultations about the future of operations in which they take part. At the moment there is no mechanism for such a relationship. Indeed, the Alliance has a daunting array of partnership schemes that would confuse the most expert NATO watcher. Many of these are hangovers from the heady days of NATO expansion in the 1990s. Others are geared towards reaching out to neighbouring regions, such as the Middle East. The Alliance also has a partnership agreement with Russia, which is in many ways ironic given the role the Kremlin is playing in Europe these days.

The Alliance needs to revisit the plethora of partnership plans. They should be downsized, streamlined and a real partnership mechanism should be established to enable states that are willing to contribute to missions to really engage in NATO planning. This will require the Alliance to rethink the purpose of partnerships along a series of different lines. Essentially, three types of partnerships should be developed

with clearly differentiated responsibilities and names – they should not be called partnerships if the other side is not really a partner. To this effect, the Alliance should create programmes to address the following needs: preparation for membership (Ukraine & Georgia?), outreach and neighbourly relations (Mediterranean, Middle East, Russia) and finally, real operational partners (Australia, Sweden, Japan). Some in Washington want to push this last category towards membership, but aside from Sweden, none have expressed an interest in membership³. Indeed, Australia has explicitly said it does not want to be a NATO member. It makes no sense to push such a discussion if it will only split the Alliance and the partners are not interested in becoming allies.

Russia

Discussion of working with global partners and better relations with the UN and EU for expeditionary operations is necessary, but so too are discussions about problematic relationships. NATO must not forget that the Alliance has multiple functions. For many allies, NATO's primary function is still territorial defence. The US, UK and other globally-minded states might not think about this so often, but it is a paramount concern for most if not all NATO allies in the eastern half of Europe. The Alliance has yet to have a serious discussion on how to manage Russia, and it has failed to engage the new allies in a manner that reassures them of NATO's commitment to collective defence under Article Five.

³ Ivo Daalder & Jim Goldgeier, "Global NATO", Foreign Affairs: September-October 2006.

The inability to discuss Russia is not a problem limited to just NATO; the EU suffers under the same challenge. The crux of the problem is that some of the larger Western European countries, dependent on oil and gas imports from Russia, are willing to sell short their Eastern European neighbours. The concerns and interests of Estonia or Poland have thus not figured when measured against regular access to Russia's much needed natural resources. Berlin's decision to build a pipeline from Russia into Northern Germany for instance, is perhaps the most blatant example of "self-interest first" in years, with Berlin effectively opting-out on serious discussions on the needs of its Eastern allies. This makes a mockery of European values and solidarity and seems to go unnoticed by many Europeans. NATO should not make the same mistake.

NATO's easternmost allies are not in Afghanistan because they feel that the security of Afghanistan is directly linked to their national security. They are there because they feel that their national security is directly linked to the United States and NATO. In support of the Alliance, they are contributing in the spirit of solidarity and in the belief that this contribution will one day be paid back should Russia become problematic. Given the state of relations between Russia and the West today, their concerns are well founded⁴. NATO should

⁴ One of the few Western analysts to openly posit military conflict with Russia is Colin Gray. He may overstate the case, but history should caution NATO not to be neglectful of this possibility. Colin Gray, *Another Bloody Century: Future Warfare* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2005).

not just discuss NATO; the Alliance should also invest in defence structures in Eastern Europe, establishing bases to help reinforce the Alliance's commitment to the security of all allies. Some within the Alliance will naturally object, but they cut their nose to spite their own faces. While there are pragmatic areas of co-operation with the Kremlin, such as the Russian involvement in naval operations in the Mediterranean, Russia is not currently a friend of the West. Division in Europe suits Moscow well. Western Europe should not forget that the Kremlin needs the export commodities as much as Europe needs to import. Strength lies in unity and numbers and European states would be stronger vis-à-vis Russia if they could agree to a common policy towards the Kremlin. The Alliance will also need to review current expansion policies and plans. Some observers argue that NATO's democratising mission is key, while a credible argument can also be made that the Alliance needs to think about curtailing expansion⁵. NATO should not worry too much about Russian bluster, but it should explore the operational and procedural implications that expansion has on the organisation. Once again there should be more NATO-EU consultation on how to handle Russia.

The Future of ISAF

If strength lies in unity, then NATO's Afghan mission is an interesting one. All of the allies are involved in Afghanistan, but to say that

⁵ Ron Asmus, *Europe's Eastern Promise: Rethinking NATO and EU Enlargement*, Foreign Affairs, January/February 2008.

all of the allies are seriously invested in Afghanistan is another matter altogether. There is a clear distinction between those who are doing the fighting in the South and East and those that are doing reconstruction work in the North and West. On top of this distinction there are national caveats which hinder the ability of the ISAF commander (COMISAF) to manage operations. These caveats and too few troops nearly cost NATO a loss in Southern Afghanistan during the summer of 2006⁶, according to the UK COMISAF General David Richards who was responsible for NATO's push south in the spring and summer of 2006. Caveats, however, are not just about fighting. Recently an official at the Pentagon relayed the story of a young American captain fighting in Afghanistan. Wounded in battle the US Army called for a medivac for the young captain. The Spanish were responsible for the medivac and Madrid approved the request, but refused to pick the soldier up at his location because of security concerns. So, his leg bound in tourniquet and bleeding profusely, the Army trucked the captain several miles to a safer location. As a result of the delay the young man lost his leg. This sort of needless waste is unnecessary and it underlines the operational implications of the caveat dilemma. Troops in battle want the best possible back-up and to many in Washington, the attitude of a number of European allies illustrates time and time again that they are not a substitute for US forces. The standing US Army joke that ISAF stands for 'I Suck at Fighting', demonstrates a

certain level of disillusionment within the ranks, but more significantly marks a very real operational crossroads where the Alliance has to make real decisions.

There are only two ways forward in Afghanistan. The first is for the South to become the focus of a 'surge' similar to the one executed in Iraq. The troops would most likely be American, with possibly some Brits and some other select forces dotted about. This idea is being discussed within the Pentagon at the highest levels. The pressures on allies currently operating in the South, the need to regain the initiative and an inability to get major allies to commit to combat operations makes this an attractive option to the Americans. The US would flood the South with forces, the implication being that the South would fall entirely under US control as Canadian and Dutch forces withdraw in the next few years. The situation would then be similar to Bosnia in 1995 - NATO flags on American assets, with the rest of the NATO allies operating only in the North and West. This option is no doubt the more operationally effective and efficient route.

The second option is for NATO to continue to learn by doing. In this scenario the Alliance would continue to pull troop contributing nations from tier two to tier one status⁷. The Americans, British, Danes and

⁶ "RUSI Interview with General David Richards", RUSI Journal, Vol. 152, No. 2. April 2007.

⁷ Tier One allies are those engaged in combat operations. Tier Two allies are those engaged in providing valuable construction and development efforts, but are not engaged in combat operations. This division has been a concern for some time. For example see: Gideon Rachman, "Afghanistan and NATO's Two-Tier Alliance" Financial Times, Feb 23, 2007.

Dutch currently are the only tier one allies. The French decision to send 700 troops to Eastern Afghanistan brings them up to tier one, and the election of Silvio Berlusconi in Italy with an overwhelming majority offers the possibility that Rome may now respond to Alliance calls for assistance in the South and East of Afghanistan. This method is certainly not as effective or efficient militarily, but it would enable the allies to learn by doing, making force transformation a practical exercise or 'transformation on the front line' as ISAF IX Commander General David Richards called it⁸. This option is probably the better of the two for the future of NATO. If the Americans were to execute option one, the outcome would be that allies would just sit back and coast along on Washington's coat tails, leaving the solidarity problem to resurface again the next time around. This option will however prompt some in Washington to question the efficacy of conducting operations through NATO. If the Alliance chooses option two, the risk is that NATO will continue to muddle along, possibly losing Southern Afghanistan if allied political will does not firm up. It is not an easy choice to make, but a clear decision will be required in the coming months.

A New Strategic Concept

An Alliance of twenty-eight is always prone to slow and complicated decision making processes. The politics of such an

organisation at the national and international level are incredibly complex and as Bismarck once quipped of lawmaking, it is not a pretty sight. This is however no excuse for the Alliance to continue muddling through Afghanistan. Alliance politics could be more efficient and effective than they currently are and to achieve this goal the Alliance needs to have a very real discussion about the future of the organisation, including structural reforms and the need for a new Strategic Concept. The burning question is: Does a Strategic Concept codify where the Alliance is at this moment, or should it break the mould, establishing a new future? The method in 1991 and 1999 was the former. The Alliance looked at the world, examined what it was doing and codified the situation officially. But the deficiencies of this approach are illustrated in the problems mentioned above and most pressingly in operations in Afghanistan.

NATO 'at sixty' needs to have an open discussion about what the Alliance wants to do in the twenty-first century and how it is going to achieve this on mutually acceptable terms between Europeans and North Americans. Debate should occur ideally before operations commence, and not during the operations themselves. Each ally has a different view of what NATO should be doing and the three issues highlighted here are no exception. The task is to agree upon a concept that can move the Alliance forward, unified in purpose and vision. This would seem an ideal time to go beyond current boundaries and establish new precedents for future operations based on a bold vision,

<http://blogs.ft.com/rachmanblog/2007/02/afghanistan-andhtml/>

⁸ David Richards, "Transformation on the Front Line" *RUSI Journal*, Vol. 151, No. 4. August 2006.

informed by current and past experiences. It will not be an easy discussion.

Security is no longer linked exclusively to territorial defence, but it is not separate from it either. Euro-Atlantic security is not a regional issue, it is a global one. NATO is a military organisation, but security is no longer solely derived from military power. In the twenty-first century, the challenges are globalised risks that often lie far beyond the ability of the military to fix, but NATO is still structured as a regional defence organisation designed to counter a military threat.

NATO should remain primarily a military organisation and this should be clear in the new Strategic Concept. This does not mean that NATO cannot do disaster relief, nor does it mean the Alliance cannot participate in peace-keeping and state-building operations. However, it does mean that NATO should not be the lead on such missions, as is the case by accident in Afghanistan. The Concept must affirm NATO's role as part of the solution amongst modern day global security architectures, rather than as the solution itself. The Concept will be stronger if it recognises the shortfalls of the Alliance and admits to them. At the moment there is perhaps a sense of denial amongst some allies, who hold the belief that NATO can do everything and this is dangerous. The one unabiding lesson of Afghanistan is that NATO cannot and should not be a one-stop-security shop.

NATO should focus on three core tasks: territorial defence of Europe, expeditionary security management exercises abroad and co-operation on new security challenges. On

this latter point the Alliance must examine how it can address new security challenges, such as cyber attacks and energy security. The Alliance will also need to adapt itself to ensure that training, transformation and cross-Alliance procurement meets the requirements of modern operations, rather than Cold War scenarios.

The Euro-Atlantic community must move forward with an open discussion and it must do so quickly. With a new US President coming into office next year, there will be an excellent opportunity to make progress on a number of issues. The very real problem at the moment is that the European allies want to be judged on their potential contributions to global security, whereas the Americans judge the European allies on their actual contributions. The world may be seeing the tail end of an American dominated era, but this will last for some time and if NATO is to remain relevant, the US must believe in the fundamental tenants of the Alliance, which are: the delivery of effective military action and allied solidarity. The next President will, without a doubt, call on the allies to do more and it is a call Europe must heed.

Allies might not yet agree on how to take NATO forward, but the truth is there really are no easy answers as to what is best for the Alliance and what the future holds for NATO, bar one. If the Alliance fails to talk about its current problems in an open and honest way however, then it faces a bleak future. That sentiment went unsaid at Bucharest: it must be brought out into the open on the Rhine next April.

About the Authors

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