

IS NATO “TO BE, OR NOT TO BE?”

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This is a commentary on the challenges being faced by NATO as it strives to evolve a new strategic concept, prevail in Afghanistan, address competing resource demands from the European Union, replace its unfair policy of 'costs fall where they lie' with a more equitable financing instrument, and transforms itself to fight on in the interests of freedom loving peoples around the globe.

THE REAL WORLD OF ALLIANCES

Since the coming of the human race, people, tribes, nations, empires, and regimes of all kinds, have regularly applied economic, political, and martial power within their own territory, and beyond, to help preserve, protect, and, when necessary, defend and advance, their various interests. Over the past millennia the global reach, power, influence and longevity of all sovereign states and coalitions have waxed and waned. A passing survey of the historical record affirms that countries consistently rise and fall and international treaties and alliances come and go. There is nothing inviolate about the continued existence of any agreement among nations. In the 21st century this reality applies every bit as much to NATO - the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

AN INSTINCT FOR SURVIVAL

More than 58 years have elapsed since ratification of the Washington Treaty¹ and the birth of NATO by its founding members: Belgium, Canada, France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and the United States. For more than half a century the Atlantic Alliance has overcome existential crises that might otherwise have overwhelmed and brought down a less determined and flexible body.

This seemingly innate ability to survive may not continue, though, and the possibility exists that sometime in the early decades of this century we may be the witnesses to the expiry of the present 26-member politico-military coalition that saw the breakup of the Soviet

Union, the rebirth of democracy in the nations of eastern Europe, and victory in The Cold War.

CHANGE - OR GET OUT OF THE WAY

A harbinger of what the future may have in store for NATO lies in the particular set of circumstances it finds itself in today where, even as more European nations seek to gain membership in the Alliance under the provision of Treaty Article 10, serious questions are once again being raised internally about the continued relevance of its founding raison d'être, and the utility of its eight-year-old Strategic Concept.

At the same time as the Atlantic Alliance's leadership is endeavouring to come to grips with these fundamental questions NATO's future is also being challenged from without on the battlefields of Afghanistan.

STRATEGY FOR THE TIMES

The discussion surrounding NATO's Strategic Concept highlights the ongoing internal debate over how the organization must change if it is to successfully meet and overcome the many challenges it now faces and those it may feel obliged to deal with in the first decades of this new century. The current Strategic Concept came about in 1999 in the wake of the Alliance's involvement in the Balkans and its engagement for the first time in operations beyond its borders.²

These operations were initiated in defence of a third party, without any of its members having been attacked, and without invoking the "all for one" clause of Treaty Article 5. The 1999 Strategy enhanced NATO's ability to contribute to Euro-Atlantic peace and stability. Internal reforms put in place a new command structure, including the Combined Joint Task Force (CJTF) concept, the creation of arrangements to permit the rapid deployment of forces for the full range of the Alliance's missions, and the building of the European Security and Defence Identity (ESDI) within the Alliance.

In 2001 the tragic events of September 11 resulted in a dramatic and rapid change in the global security climate. NATO and other Western nations are now engaged in a de facto non state war brought about by Islamo-fascist zealots and spearheaded by members of al-Qaeda. To ensure its survival this situation demands that NATO must repeat what it did so successfully in 1999. It must again reshape itself to meet a new threat. Logically, its new Strategic Concept should define the means to provide for its members' continued security at home, and confronting and defeating its new foes as far away from their shores as possible.

In this respect, NATO should also acknowledge that future success will require other partners from outside the boundaries of Europe and North America. NATO is now working with 37 countries in Afghanistan; 26 are Allies, 11 are not; all are contributing to reconstruction and stabilization. Afghanistan demonstrates the great value in international partnership.

In fact, NATO has five leading partners spread through the world - two in Europe, Sweden and Finland; and three in Asia, Australia, Japan, and South Korea. The Asian partners will not be future members of NATO; Finland and Sweden would be undoubtedly be welcomed if they sought to join.

What is important is not membership itself, but the natural partnership, based on shared values and common interests, and being able to train effectively and discuss strategy and doctrine.³

With the addition of other allies such as, say, India and Israel, NATO might one day prove to be the catalyst for a larger club consisting of liberal democracies who are prepared to stand and fight together to overcome the threat posed by Islamist terrorism.

The debate within NATO circles today, however, centres not on whether the Alliance needs an updated Strategic Concept, but when it should be formulated. The German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, says that she would like to see a new Strategic Concept developed and endorsed at the 2009 NATO Summit. Lending her support is NATO's Secretary General, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer.⁴

But, having established the Year 2009 Summit as the deadline for this text may make it next to impossible to actually develop the new Strategic Concept since a new President will be in the White House by January of that year and the new American administration will require time to get its act together.

Once this is done, it will then need several more months to set out its security policy and its position on NATO. Meanwhile, analysts and experts are understood to be already hard at work on the matter, in spite of the fact that the North Atlantic Council has yet to give the go ahead to do so.

THE EU DOPPELGANGER

In the meantime, in NATO's own backyard, the European Union's (EU) stance on European defence is giving rise to serious questions involving overlapping goals, competing ambitions and jurisdictions, the apparent duplication of effort, the

counterproductive competition for military capabilities from the same resource pool, and the unfairness of an obsolete financing model that stipulates “cost lie where they fall.”

And there is little doubt that the EU decision announced on November 15 by the Chairman of its Military Committee, French General Henri Bentégeat, that it plans to add air and naval forces to its land force battle groups constitutes a major challenge for NATO planners who are responsible for force generation.

Yet, the defence chiefs of the EU member states approving these changes to address what they view as a growing requirement for a dedicated European sea and air response capability, are also members of NATO’s Military Committee.

General Bentégeat elaborated on the missing capability saying: “We know that crisis management operations also need air and maritime assets to take part not just as support but also in action. We can’t only rely on the army for these operations.”

The general also said that the altered battle group concept would not create a standing force for air and maritime assets, and it was “more effective to have a database and some preplanning without establishing standby forces.” Bentégeat also opined that there was no risk of overlap between NATO’s 25,000-strong rapid reaction force and the EU’s 1,500-strong battle groups. There are “no possible comparisons” and no duplication because each country knew what it could provide to one or the other body,” he said.

But NATO already has a severe problem generating the manpower and capability platform it needs to support its Afghanistan operation. This will become even more evident this December when the EU members’ governments are expected to approve a EU operational plan to send EU troops and humanitarian aid to Chad under U.N. Security Resolution 1778.

This EU force is still looking for countries to provide helicopters and other in-theatre transport and medical personnel, and General Bentégeat noted: “Helicopters are very costly and there are a limited number of them. We are looking at different solutions.”

Meanwhile, in North America and in Europe, four of NATO’s charter members - Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands - are voicing their increasing displeasure over the reluctance of some of the Alliance’s key European members to step up to the plate and more equitably share the burden being born by their contingents in NATO’s International Assistance Force (ISAF) mission in Afghanistan.

A more recent challenge to NATO’s future, however, is seen to come from France and the United Kingdom, two of the 27-member EU’s key members. The inevitable

misunderstandings that will occur within the Alliance as a result of the statements made by these country's leaders and senior ministers emanates from the seemingly divergent and sometimes contradictory opinions they have expressed, as much as by the unintended and unforeseen consequences that have already stemmed from prior agreements made at the Alliance's Summit in 1994, and again in Berlin in 1996, to support the advancement of the European Security and Defence Initiative (ESDI).

The work on the ESDI within NATO and the developments in the EU flowing from the Franco-British accord at St. Malo in December 1998⁵ have both demonstrated that Europe wishes in future to be a serious provider of international security for itself and for others.

However even these very limited moves have generated arguments over NATO/EU duplication in planning and capabilities; about the "right of first refusal"; about arrangements for the non-EU European members of NATO; and about the differing demands of Article 5 and the Petersburg tasks.⁶

On November 15 the United Kingdom's foreign minister, David Miliband, said: "It's frankly embarrassing that when European nations - with almost two million men and women under arms - are only able, at a stretch, to deploy around 100,000 at any one time . . . and European countries have around 1,200 transport helicopters, yet only 35 are deployed in Afghanistan," and in the same speech also observed that even though "economically and demographically Europe will be less important in the world of 2050 than it was in the world of 1950 . . . the EU's military capabilities should be strengthened."⁷

Yet, when answering questions following his speech, Miliband queried the need for more military instruments and said the priority was to make existing ones work better. "The mismatch is between ambition and reality. It's not an institution we lack. Let's not duplicate the work that's done by NATO or nation states in a new European institution," he said.⁸

A similar mixed message also came from French President Nicolas Sarkozy in his maiden speech to the European parliament on November 13, when he called for the EU to develop a strong joint defence policy and underlined that military integration would lead his agenda when France takes over the presidency. "How can Europe have any political influence in the world and be a factor for peace and (geopolitical) balance when it cannot take care of its own defence? . . . Debates must be held over a joint defence policy and over a renewal of the Atlantic Alliance in NATO," Sarkozy said.⁹

This is particularly significant since France is to assume the six-month rotating presidency of the EU in the second half of next year.¹⁰

The French position was obviously decided before President Sarkozy gave his speech. Earlier in the November, French Defence Minister, Herve Morin, told German newspapers that Paris would put defence high on its EU presidency agenda during the second half of 2008, and he wanted to establish a European military planning headquarters in Brussels, have officers traded between EU member states and see Europe develop a "military conscience".¹¹

London and Paris are said to disagree, however, on issues of central command - but some observers suggest that now that the difference is in the open, it's likely that any compromise will ensure that some form of central planning command will be created in their final proposals.

AFGHANISTAN TAR BABY

No matter what the long term future may hold for the Atlantic Alliance, though, it must somehow resolve its immediate twofold problem of generating enough forces to support continuance of the ISAF mission until the job is done, and reversing dwindling public support in key member states.¹² But this is simpler said than done.

Some Alliance members already say they are overburdened because their own forces were assigned to NATO missions in Afghanistan, Kosovo, the U.S. led coalition in Iraq, and the UN peacekeeping mission in Lebanon. In this context, NATO's problems are inextricably entwined with the EU which is simultaneously endeavouring to field enlarged EU battle groups that incorporate sea and air elements.

Early on both organizations should have realized that they would be competing with each other for the same resources and concluded that the cost to those NATO and EU states with memberships in both might prove to be financially unaffordable and politically unacceptable.

Without doubt, there are simply not enough troops and enough military hardware to satisfy demands of both NATO and the EU - let alone enable each sovereign European member state develop its own credible national defence capability. Not to mention, respond to calls for contributions to United Nations' (UN) missions.

At a time when the EU is seeking to add to its defence capability, and NATO is asking its members to ante up soldiers, sailors and airmen to serve on six month rotations in a struggling 25,000 man Response Force (RF)¹³, maintain 17,000 troops in Kosovo's KFOR, and add to the 41,000 now in Afghanistan, it becomes readily apparent that the Alliance has tapped out the existing capabilities of those states with membership in both the EU and NATO.

Coupled with the future impact of Europe's steadily declining population this situation only serves to further exacerbate NATO's existing, chronic military manpower shortage and gives evidence that the Alliance's reach exceeds its grasp.

To further complicate matters, all of these commitments, whether for NATO the EU, or the UN, require various combinations of amphibious shipping, attack and cargo/troop helicopters, UAVs, heavy/strategic air transport, logistics support, wheeled and tracked transport, and field hospitals. Not to forget that all three organizations really need at least threefold the number of troops they say they require because they all have to be regularly rotated - and, of course, all three organizations also need lots and lots more cash.

Financing too represents one the Atlantic Alliance's greatest weaknesses. As it now stands, any NATO country that commits troops to a mission is obliged to pay for them under the Alliance's seemingly unchangeable policy of "costs lie where they fall." Needless to say this imposes a very heavy burden for many NATO nations and is not without its accompanying domestic political implications.¹⁴

How could it be otherwise when NATO's European members and the EU are chasing after the same soldiers and euros to conduct and finance their respective missions and only seven of the 26 Alliance members meet the long standing NATO benchmark of 2 per cent of GDP on defence? ¹⁵

SHOW ME THE MONEY

Defence capability in Europe is steadily declining due, in part, to the ruthless pressure of defence inflation. In brief, governments are reluctant to do more than keep defence spending level in real terms while there is no threat to their national territory. Personnel and equipment costs rise at a faster rate than domestic retail prices. Militaries are rationalised to bridge the gap in resources. Capability cuts are inevitable

and will become progressively more serious, particularly at the expensive end of military force.

The all-important issue of affordability is neither new nor unfamiliar to political and defence decision makers. But a point is being reached where it can no longer be disguised or circumvented. For decades the annual cost of a given unit of defence capability in most NATO and EU countries has been growing considerably faster than the year on year inflation figure. A policy of level spending in real terms, means a constant decline in military capability.

If we manage to keep defence spending level in real terms, a nation's share of GDP will inevitably decline. Manpower costs are likely to rise, especially given the demographic trends in EU members' states. Unit equipment costs will also increase. New generation equipment may be more capable, but it will be very scarce. In any event, many of the new tasks will call for more trained manpower above all else.

National police forces have learned the lesson that numbers on the streets matter: many of the new military challenges will require a comparable boots-on-the-ground response by NATO. But, this also gives rise to the thorny political question of whether a decision to spend more on army manpower may also mean it will have to be at the expense of a nation's naval and air capability?

The only escape from this dilemma would appear to be for governments to begin to integrate a financially significant percentage of the effort they devote to defence. The political difficulties will be very great. But so will be the consequences of a failure to resolve the issue.

CAPABILITY-CAPABILITY-CAPABILITY

In the near term, however, Afghanistan will be the acid test for NATO. And if the NATO ISAF mission fails, then it is going to be very difficult for people to take NATO seriously in the future.

A NATO expert at the London-based Royal United Services Institute, Michael Williams, says the alliance is failing. "You have the situation where you have increasing collateral damage [civilian], which although very limited, still does a lot of damage when magnified

in the global media, both on the ground in Afghanistan but also back at the home countries - the pressure then accumulates and is applied to politicians to pull the troops out.

So I think really, when it comes down to it, the whole idea of collective security and solidarity and the ability of the alliance to provide security is going to be called into question if they cannot manage to extract themselves over the longer run from Afghanistan," said Williams.

NATO has been operating in Afghanistan since 2003, leading the 41,000-strong United Nations-mandated ISAF mission. It is the military alliance's first mission outside the Euro-Atlantic region. NATO has three basic missions in Afghanistan: Assisting President Hamid Karzai's government in its efforts to rebuild and stabilize the country; Training the Afghan army and assisting in facilitating police training - although that's not a primary NATO mission; and combat - the hunting down and capturing or killing insurgents in southern Afghanistan.

Therein lies one of the Alliance's root problems in that there are basically two conflicting missions in effect - one is the peace-building operation and the other is combat.

Taliban forces have shifted their tactics in their fight against NATO troops. Taliban fighters no longer attack NATO head on. They employ classic insurgency tactics - quick attacks against NATO positions, followed by withdrawal.

This means that NATO is constantly on the run, trying to put out these fires and that there aren't enough NATO troops to really secure and hold the ground. So what happens is they take an area, they win a battle and then they move on.

And unfortunately these areas often revert to Taliban control because there are no available Afghan army or police units to hold the ground after NATO takes it.

Meanwhile, perhaps one-quarter of NATO's troops present in Afghanistan, including those from Germany, Italy and Spain, are under strict operational restrictions. Some 50 national caveats are maintained, including some that prevent military assets in the relatively peaceful north of the country from being shifted south where they are most needed. According to one senior NATO officer, the restrictions have "an insidious impact on operations".

There are only about four or five countries that say we will go anywhere and do whatever fighting has to be done: the Americans, the British, the Canadians - who have suffered

more casualties than any time since the Korean War - the Dutch and the Estonians. The rest all have some limitations.

NATO, according to its own calculation, is a minimum four battalions (totalling some 4,000 soldiers) short of what it needs and the force lacks crucial equipment such as helicopters.

This shortage seems unlikely to be remedied. Canada, with 2,500 soldiers in the field, faces a parliamentary debate in the coming year about whether its mandate should be renewed. Poland (950 troops), Denmark (450) and NATO partner Australia (900) - all engaged in the difficult south or east - have also held or face elections that may lead their troops to being brought home.

Western officials say the solution to this shortfall lies in building the capacity of Afghanistan's own security forces. But progress has been slow. The Afghan National Army comprises fewer than 35,000 men, compared with a stated goal of 70,000 by 2010 - itself held to be insufficient by some analysts.

But NATO governments are still falling short of their commitment to provide teams to train army units on the job. There are fewer than 30 of them, compared with a target of 100. Officials expect more commitments in coming months - it is one possible future role for Canadian forces - but as the number of such teams increases, so does the number needed, as new Afghan units are deployed.¹⁶

STRESSES AND STRAINS

Those strains were evident in late October during a meeting of NATO Defence ministers in the Netherlands. At that gathering, U.S. Secretary of Defence Robert Gates sharply criticized some alliance members, saying the "caveats", or restrictions, have done real harm to the NATO effort in Afghanistan.

"Meeting commitments means assuming some level of risk and asserting the political will necessary to deploy armed forces beyond one's borders - fully manned and equipped, and without restrictions that undermine the mission. In Afghanistan, a handful of allies is paying the price and bearing the burdens of allies to create the secure environment necessary for economic development, building civic institutions and establishing the rule of law. The failure to meet commitments puts the Afghan mission - and with it, the credibility of NATO - at real risk," Gates said.¹⁷ And these same concerns have been voiced repeatedly at home and abroad by Canada's Prime Minister, Stephen Harper.¹⁸

“TO BE OR NOT TO BE?”

“To be or not to be” may be one of the best-known lines from all drama. It is, of course, from Shakespeare's play Hamlet. His speech is a profound examining of what is more crudely expressed in the phrase ‘out of the frying pan into the fire,’ - in essence 'life is bad, but death might be worse.' Is it better to live or to die? And like Shakespeare's Hamlet, the Atlantic Alliance today is rediscovering the historical reality that for an alliance suicide is a one-way ticket. If the Alliance gets its judgment call wrong, there's no way back.

Today, NATO is facing Hamlet's dilemma: Is it “to be, or not to be?” There is little doubt that NATO's Strategic Concept will continue to evolve, or that NATO will continue to exist into the foreseeable future. Indeed it is difficult to imagine under what conditions the Alliance would dissolve itself and how such conditions should be met.

In any case, the history of past defence alliances suggests that institutional suicide is very unlikely. Like old soldiers, old coalitions never die, they just slowly fade away - and are replaced.

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