

Smart Defense and the Future of NATO: Can the Alliance Meet the Challenges of the Twenty-First Century?

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Focused Engagement: NATO's Political Ambitions in a Changing Strategic Context

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***Abstract:** NATO is the strongest military alliance in the world, but it faces a strategic dilemma. Should it focus on a limited set of tasks, or should it broaden its mandate and expand its geographic focus? How can NATO renew the consensus about its purpose as it faces new challenges and smaller means? Existing strategic challenges remain such as Russia's drive for dominance, developments in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and transnational risks like terrorism. Other challenging developments are gaining in strategic importance. The Arab Spring might shift power structures along the southern brim of the Mediterranean. The growing importance of China and other emerging states as global players—active also in Europe's neighborhood—must be of concern for the alliance, together with the turn of U.S. foreign policy toward the Asia-Pacific region. A focused engagement on the regions closer to NATO territory, a clear strategic view of cross-border risks, innovative efforts for better partnerships, and limited missions if necessary might provide a pragmatic mix of solutions that serve the interests of all allies, even the most powerful.*

The strategic dilemma

NATO has shown the ability to adapt to new conditions quickly, reinventing itself more than once while retaining its traditional functions. Perhaps because of these shifts, there is a lack of unity among its members and therefore a lack of political will to equip NATO with the capabilities needed for an ambitious agenda. The feeble consensus about the purpose of the alliance would imply a focus on a limited set of tasks, yet the shifting global strategic landscape demands more openness and adaptability. This dilemma is all the more acute since the global financial and economic crises has led to an uncoordinated dwindling of defense budgets among most NATO members.

The conflict about competing visions for NATO's future is not over (Nötzel/Scheer 2009).

Anglo-American partners lobbying for a geographical and functional expansion of NATO quarrel with status quo countries like Germany who wish to focus on projecting stability (in situations perhaps not as difficult as Afghanistan). Members in Eastern Europe demand a more traditional defense alliance with a stronger stance against Russia.

For an alliance, such differences do not need to be fatal as long as mutual respect for each other's concerns is reflected both in strategic discussions and factual preparedness. Unfortunately, the allies do not meet these conditions sufficiently. Strategic rapprochement in NATO does not yet convey a sense of true solidarity. And the long-standing capability gap between the United States and the Europeans has been undermining NATO's cohesion and American support for the alliance decades.

The warning of the outgoing Secretary of Defense Robert Gates (Gates 2011) that the United States might find it difficult to pay for an alliance that the European allies don't want to invest in was an alarm to the Europeans. Cuts also affect U.S. defense spending. As Gates' successor Leon Panetta outlined in Brussels, "We are facing dramatic cuts with real implications for alliance capability" (Panetta 2011). Any ambitions for NATO's future must carry enough political momentum to raise the political will to allocate resources to the alliance. "Smart Defense," one of the mottos of the Chicago NATO summit, will be cheaper only in the long run. In that situation, defining a focus for alliance activities might be helpful to regain political momentum behind the build-up of capabilities.

Strategic decision making in NATO is a difficult issue, not just when facing new challenges and smaller means. The conflicts among members over the alliance's ambitions have foreseeable fault lines. Is a risky development dangerous enough to one or more allies to trigger NATO involvement? Does the situation have a military character, and is the alliance the right organization to handle it, or is there the risk of a militarization of a political issue? Is the problem close enough to allied territory to make NATO a legitimate actor? What follow-up responsibilities will NATO's strategic commitment entail, and who will pay for it? Because these questions are so difficult to answer, the most effective drivers for strategic innovation in NATO are external crises, which are, in most cases, unpredictable.

A larger agenda

In the run-up to Chicago, the alliance is facing a number of potentially challenging developments—some of them old, some of them new—which will occupy the delegations at the summit.

Russia's drive for dominance has emerged as a persistent challenge for NATO. Balancing its two objectives of collective defense and cooperative security, the alliance has to find ways to tie in Russia while making clear that Article 5 is valid for the members of Eastern Europe. The difficult partnership with Russia has not brought about proj-

ects of strategic relevance between the two sides (Monaghan 2011), maybe because of Russia's interest to maintain a harsher tone from time to time and to prevent the resolution of conflicts in Eastern Europe. Relations with Russia can always deteriorate and move up on the agenda.

Afghanistan will also remain a challenge. Even if the Afghanistan mission is drawing to a close, NATO will play a role in this weak state until 2014 and most likely in the transformation phase until 2024. Afghanistan has been labeled a test case for several new profiles of NATO. While starting from the protection of the political transformation in Kabul, the Afghanistan mission adopted challenging tasks of regional development and state building in a society not used to central government. The alliance, with hitherto limited experience in war fighting, decided to operate against terrorists and drug traffickers and ended in a full blown counterinsurgency operation with frequent high-level combat. After the withdrawal of combat forces by 2014, protecting NATO's achievements without combat troops and keeping the weak Afghan National Security Forces from dissolving into civil war parties will be a difficult task.

Transborder risks like the drug economy or refugees will also be on NATO's agenda. The situation inside Pakistan, its stability as a state, and the existing command structures of radical insurgents on Pakistan's soil will remain a security concern NATO.

The Afghanistan experience works as a deterrent for military engagement. Military engagement entails civilian responsibility. A legitimate operation and a set of rational decisions to expand it have driven NATO into an unwanted role as guardian of a difficult state-building process. Member states react differently, shy away from missions, or focus on deployments with a smaller footprint, relying more on unmanned warfare and special operations.

Cross-border risks such as terrorism, cyber war, or aggressive energy disruptions are in NATO's portfolio, although they do not tie down numerous forces. NATO's role as coordinator and political link is important, but its operational role should not be overestimated. As a military alliance, NATO has dif-

facilities cooperating institutionally with nonmilitary actors, although this ability would be crucial in playing an operational role in the fight against these threats (Keller 2012, 7).

The Arab Spring has brought about changes, but it is yet unclear what strategic consequences the reformist uprisings in the Arab world will have. It is good to see that autocracies can tumble, but the development is risky. Elections can result in diffuse outcomes. Networks between NATO members and their Mediterranean partners might break up—not least because the alliance has been partners with the old elites and is seen as a vehicle of U.S. foreign policy. In other words, the security and interests of NATO and its members might be affected by transitions that are generally desirable but that undermine the partnership with NATO since NATO is not the partner the new leaders might seek.

The great power competition in Asia is also a major challenge. The United States as a Pacific coastal state has been shifting its focus more and more toward the Asia-Pacific region because of the enormous economic dynamics, bilateral alliances, and, of course, the rise of China as a new global player. The growing importance of China and other emerging global actors is a development that needs to be placed on NATO's strategic map. China, especially, is investing globally and has economic and energy interests to defend in Northern Africa and the Middle East as well as in Central Asia. NATO is operating in China's neighborhood. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, when rolling out the most recent regional strategy of the United States, talked about cooperative initiatives, but also about "forging a broad-based military presence" (Clinton 2011, 57; U.S. Department of Defense 2012). Some have read this as evidence of the United States turning away from Europe. The situation might be even bleaker. In a post-American world, the United States might be "number one," but it has lost "centrality and command" (Jentleson 2009, 68) and cannot play a decisive role in international crises or sustain order. That would also imply that no other player can do that, so some disorderly times might lie ahead. U.S. diplomats have been traveling many miles to reassure their traditional allies, but the

shifting interests of the strongest ally need to raise attention in Europe.

Some argue that NATO should become an instrument to help the United States project power into the Asia Pacific. Certainly, there is reason to consider a stronger political presence in Asia. NATO has been active for a long time in Asia. It has Partnership for Peace partners in Central Asia, operates in the direct neighborhood of China and India in Afghanistan, and has International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) contributors from Asia. Closer partnerships are a natural demand (Weinrod 2008). And certainly, closer dialogue and confidence building with China and India are overdue. This would entail the addition of NATO troops to the military presence in the Asia Pacific. Yet, there are also arguments for NATO to refocus on European security (Coker 2008). Would that move NATO away from core U.S. interests?

Risks within reach

The answer, and not a bad compromise, might be that NATO's ambition should be simply to do well what it can do in its own neighborhood. NATO must find a balance between global availability and more regional involvement. The alliance has seen its outreach as global at least since 2002 when the fight against international terrorism was put on its agenda. When looking at threats to the security of its members in a globalized world, the sources of risk might demand long-distance power projection from time to time. Taking out terrorist networks, patrolling sea-lanes against pirates, or controlling cargo ships containing sensitive technology are conceivable tasks for NATO that might take allied forces far away from its territory. The question is no longer "home or away" (Hamilton 2009), but how far away from home should NATO operate?

When defining NATO's purpose and why paying for more capabilities is worth it, defining it in terms of global engagement might be less attractive than concentrating on challenges in the vicinity of Europe—especially for the thrifty European allies. Yet, a number of regions closer to NATO's territory are highly volatile. While most allies have strong

interests in stability in those areas, NATO has not yet found a clear framework for being a security provider in those areas and has not applied the resources needed to really work toward conflict prevention and stability.

In Eastern Europe NATO first and foremost has to protect its members' security, and not just against military intervention. Russia has the ability to make life difficult for NATO states and its partners in Eastern Europe. Cyber attacks, infiltration of Russian expatriate communities, or cuts in energy supplies are possible future tactics that might challenge the allies and partners there. NATO needs to collect knowledge and expertise to respond to such infringements, as it already does in the case of cyber war. In addition, there are a number of open conflicts, mislabeled as "frozen," resulting from Russia's interests in increasing its influence and keeping NATO from moving further east. These conflicts jeopardize security and economic development in Eastern Europe. Western states and Russia must do more to move the conflict negotiations toward pragmatic compromise and to implement agreed solutions. To work against escalation between Russia and the eastern NATO members and to address the open conflicts in Europe, the alliance has the NATO-Russia Council. The body can sustain dialogue but needs mutual trust to cooperate on projects of more substance.

Iran has already become the source of growing tension. The risks of military attacks to its nuclear installations, of proxy wars against Israel and U.S. troops in the region, and of further proliferation have never been as acute as today. The ensuing regional power struggles might keep NATO busy for some time to come. The alliance must prepare itself for crises that might emerge from aggressive meddling by Iran in Palestine, Iraq, or Afghanistan and that would involve deeper cooperation with Israel. NATO should consider its role in helping the United States guard the Strait of Hormuz. Two strategies need more resolve. First, NATO is already developing a missile defense program against Iranian intermediate range missiles, yet the Europeans are failing to pay their share for the system. Secondly, the ongoing Deterrence and Defense Posture

Review (Kamp 2012, 5f) should make clear the goal of extended NATO deterrence against Iranian nuclear threats.

NATO could find ways to be more helpful in stabilizing transition countries in the Arab world and the Maghreb. In NATO's 2010 Strategic Concept there was no special focus on the Mediterranean as a possible theater of operations. Yet, it was in Libya that NATO engaged in a complex operation only four months after the summit in Lisbon. Developments in Libya might turn into civil conflicts that would threaten the whole region. Even now, arms trafficking from Libya in the aftermath of the fall of Gaddafi has spurred civil strife in Mali and might have facilitated the arming of al Qaeda in the Maghreb. NATO did a good job of allowing for political change in the country, but seems to have lost interest in the aftermath. It would be hard to argue that NATO must play a central role in the creation of a new Libyan state and the disengagement of the opposing factions in the country. NATO cannot be seen as contemplating operations like in Libya for similar atrocities—Syria being a case in point. Every crisis, however, will generate options for limited crisis reaction, be it for creating a sanctuary for opponents, delivering humanitarian goods, assisting in security sector reform, or sending military experts for training and consulting. Afghanistan being a sobering experience, the allies will be careful not to be drawn into year-long responsibilities for state building. Yet NATO can make a difference in smaller ways, even in the form of fact finding and monitoring, to allow for early action in times of escalation.

The alliance must adopt regional strategies that address specific crisis situations, but tie in various bilateral relations to take on cross-border problems. Deeper regional cooperation of NATO with its neighbors based on an improved network of partnerships could address the following issues:

- Energy security, in terms of physical security of chokepoints, refineries, and pipelines;
- Terrorism, with an outlook at least as transnational as its al Qaeda opponents;

- Piracy, with a more active stance, together with partners along the African coast, toward fighting the home bases of pirates on shore;
- Small and light arms proliferation as well as arms control on the local level;
- Refugees and migration, also with a view to delivering humanitarian aid.

By improving its abilities to cope with these problems and to play a role in its wider neighborhood, NATO would serve some of the core interests of its strongest ally, the United States—next to regional stability.

Political entrepreneurs as partners

NATO's partnerships are an important topic of the Chicago summit. They are an underused tool, and many believe that NATO could multiply its capabilities through new and improved partnerships, even with smaller budgets. Zbigniew Brzezinski sketched out his vision of NATO as “the hub of a globe-spanning web of various regional cooperative security undertakings among states with the growing power to act” (Brzezinski 2009, 20). In 2010 NATO began a reform of its partnership programs, creating the Political and Partnership Committee as a unifying forum and streamlining the diverse programs (Reisinger 2012). In doing so, the alliance is looking at a multiplication of forces in times of scarcity. It should look, first of all, at what NATO can offer to the partners.

The partnership programs with aspiring members, with Eastern European and Central Asian countries, are important for networking between the militaries of these countries as well as between them and NATO, a critical function in times of crisis and transition. NATO needs to revise especially the programs with the Arab world and include more material assistance and advice, but the current transitions there might impede this.

Many non-NATO countries contribute to alliance missions—to strengthen those ties is an element of American policy (Panetta 2011). For some time, countries in the Asia-Pacific region have been

important for Washington's strategic outreach there. The United States has campaigned for special status of their allies Japan, Korea, Australia, and others. The idea was that NATO was limited by its geographical membership (Daalder/Goldgeier 2006). Many Europeans were anxious to prevent too deep an integration of these countries so as not to alter NATO's geographic focus. Labeled “Contact Countries” until recently, now “Partners around the Globe” (PAG), this class of partners now includes Pakistan and might be open to Mongolia or Afghanistan in the future (Reisinger 2012, 2). These countries strengthen NATO and have a role in operational planning when they contribute. There could be other criteria for individual partnerships such as regional political clout.

More attention needs to be given to the cooperation with regional organizations such as the African Union or others (Riecke/Koschut 2008). There are many reasons to be doubtful about the prospect of organizational partnerships, but the benefits of working support for their missions would be considerable. The Arab Spring experiences as well as the crisis in the Ivory Coast have shown how important regional organizations are for ownership and legitimacy of international engagement—and how hard it is to come to a consensus regarding a crisis. The Arab League in the cases of Libya and Syria is a welcome exception. Regional organizations that convene developing countries with authoritarian rule are usually ill-suited to take a stand for democratization. Regional organizations find it hard to equip complex missions beyond simple peacekeeping. NATO has had mixed experiences with the African Union (AU), which the alliance assisted with strategic airlifts for peacekeeping missions in Sudan and Somalia. The AU missions were underfunded and did not have the intended success. Nevertheless, the partnership has evolved; NATO now supports an African Standby Force.

NATO could reach out to other organizations, but the choice is small. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) might have a role in Afghanistan. This organization, in which Russia and China play dominant roles, seeks an intervention

capability. The SCO might play a role as arbiter in Afghanistan, but has an anti-American bias, being directed among many other things against the U.S. presence in Central Asia. Some countries are, by the way, members of the SCO and Partnership for Peace. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) has a small nucleus intervention unit that could be built upon. The GCC, unfortunately, has been a conservative, status quo force in the Arab Spring.

Even if the current outlook is not promising, NATO should pursue its partnerships with regional organizations. It could develop new patterns of individual partnerships or closer ties with countries that act as political entrepreneurs in these organizations. South Africa or Qatar might be helpful allies in the fight for stability.

Conclusion

NATO could do well with what it already has on the agenda. Eastern Europe, Central Asia, the Middle East (and the Indian Ocean), and the Maghreb could be the area of activity for NATO. A focused engagement in these regions based on regional strategies will improve NATO's cohesion and help to create stability in the neighborhood—with limited missions. With enough resources and networks to cope with cross-border risks, such an approach would also serve American interests directly and relieve the United States for operations elsewhere. To support this and to help NATO gain influence, innovative efforts for better partnerships based on the needs of the partners are a prudent strategy.

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