Perspectives on the North Atlantic Treaty Organization

Dr. Hans Binnendijk

“Three score and four years ago, our fathers brought forth across the Atlantic a new security alliance, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all allies are considered to be equal. Now we are engaged in a great debate, testing whether that alliance or any alliance so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure.”

—WHAT ABRAHAM LINCOLN MIGHT SAY IF HE WERE ALIVE TODAY

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is the transatlantic embodiment of the spirit of America’s founders. It has kept relative peace in Europe for more than sixty years and made possible a Europe that is nearly, as President George H.W. Bush envisioned, “whole and free.”1 Despite its problems, the European Union has united most of Europe and all twenty-eight NATO member states are democracies. And yet, NATO’s very success and the emerging challenges that it faces raise questions about its future viability.

This short essay is designed to highlight the strengths and weakness of the North Atlantic Alliance. It presents a balance sheet that can be used to judge the future of NATO. It also reviews two major challenges facing the Alliance in the next year. It concludes that, like the United States, NATO must and will survive despite conflicts and hardships. Its survival will require leadership and foresight, but the alternative is as unthinkable as American disunion was to Lincoln in 1863.

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NATO’S STRENGTHS

For more than six decades common heritage, common values, and a common sense of vulnerability have formed the core of NATO’s strength. Political consultations, integrated multinational command structures, interoperable equipment, habits of cooperation, and operational success have cemented these core strengths. As the strategic environment shifts, several factors provide confidence in a solid future for NATO.

A Viable Strategic Concept:

An organization consisting of twenty-eight sovereign states must have a unified vision to survive. That common vision enhances its ability to adapt to new strategic circumstances and has been one of NATO’s greatest strengths. Many felt that after Mikhail Gorbachev “removed NATO’s enemy,” the alliance would fail. That was the historic experience.

Yet, from the fall of the Berlin Wall, NATO adopted three different strategic concepts—each building on the former—to draw the broad consensus necessary to maintain cohesion in the Alliance. The last was adopted at the 2010 Lisbon Summit and was based on a report issued by a twelve-member Group of Experts chaired by former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright. It sets three tasks for the Alliance: common defense, crisis management, and cooperative security. Those tasks expand on NATO’s original mandate of common defense. Each NATO nation can satisfy its interests with this new set of broader tasks, and as such, the Alliance has adapted to new realities and used common values buttressed by military capabilities to refocus and take on new tasks. In the 1990s, NATO used enlargement of its membership and peace enforcement in the Balkans to create a degree of stability in Europe unprecedented in history. During the subsequent decade, NATO acted beyond Europe to tackle security issues like Afghanistan and Libya. It also survived profound differences over Iraq. Continued adjustments in practice are and will be necessary; however the 2010 Strategic Concept is flexible enough for the Alliance to adapt to new developments and provides a solid basis for NATO to move forward.
Commitment to Article 5:

The North Atlantic Treaty’s Article 5, which states that an attack on one member state is an attack on all, is the glue which holds NATO’s nations together and allows for its common command structure. It has been invoked only once in the Alliance’s history—after the September 11 attacks on the United States. The invocation of Article 5 then provided support for subsequent operations in Afghanistan. However, during the 2010 debate about NATO’s Strategic Concept, several Central European allies expressed concern that the Alliance was paying inadequate attention to the Article 5 concerns arising from increased Russian intimidation and threats. The Alliance has taken significant steps since then to reassure those allies. Military contingency plans have been developed within the Alliance to deal with possible challenges to the sovereignty of those Central European allies. Those contingency plans are being exercised by the Alliance, with Steadfast Jazz being the latest example of joint cooperation. Baltic Air Policing has been placed on a more permanent footing. The recent NATO deterrence and defense posture review underlined the Article 5 commitment. Missile defenses called the European Phased Adaptive Approach enjoy strong support throughout the Alliance and are being deployed to deal with a potential Article 5 threat from Iran. The approach, using the Standard Missile, taken by the Obama Administration is much more responsive to immediate European security needs than was the Bush Administration’s proposed Ground Based Interceptor missile defense plan.

Effective Operations:

In addition to a unified strategic concept and commitment common defense, an alliance must demonstrate a united will and capability to operate together effectively. NATO has a strong operational track record on the ground, at sea, and in the air. It ran stabilization operations in Bosnia and still has forces deployed in Kosovo. Its major undertaking in Afghanistan, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), has held together under widespread public concern about the cost in lives and resources. Furthermore, although the outcome in Afghanistan remains uncertain as NATO forces draw down, NATO and its partners did not leave the United States to complete the mission alone; America’s forty-nine ISAF allies and partners went “in together” and will leave “on schedule,” NATO further provided training for Iraqi security forces in support of U.S. efforts there. Naval counter-piracy operations such as Ocean Shield, off
the coast of the Horn of Africa, and counter-terrorism operations such as Active Endeavor, patrolling the Mediterranean, have demonstrated not just naval cooperation within the alliance, but NATO’s cooperation with the European Union and Russia as well. Moreover, air operations over Kosovo and Libya won two wars without a NATO fatality, and Baltic Air Policing provides coverage to NATO nations that lack sufficient indigenous capabilities.

**Institutional Reform:**

Likewise, to streamline both military and civilian operations, NATO has undertaken a series of important institutional reforms. Recent command restructuring shed unneeded levels of hierarchy and made Allied Command Operations’ subordinate headquarters more deployable. It also created important land, sea, and air component commands. Finally, it retains the military backbone and nerve center of the Alliance. Moreover, Allied Command Transformation has placed a French general officer on American soil, developed important new concepts of operation, and overseen the establishment and certification of eighteen NATO Centers of Excellence (technical and specialized institutions that are supported by individual nations). The NATO International Staff has also been transformed with the creation of a new Emerging Security Challenges Division and other mechanisms to share intelligence and assess strategic crises as they develop. NATO has also reformed its Defense Planning Process and granted greater authority to the Secretary General in order to manage the staff. Finally, a new NATO headquarters building is rising across the street from its existing antiquated buildings—a move that symbolizes the revitalization of the Alliance. These reforms should give NATO greater agility to deal with future challenges.

**Innovative Defense Initiatives:**

While NATO is facing a capabilities crisis that will be discussed below, the good news is that the Alliance recognizes this and has taken modest steps to ameliorate the situation. During last year’s NATO summit meeting in Chicago, heads of state agreed to a set of defense goals called NATO 2020 and to reconfirm a set of ten initiatives called the Lisbon Capability Commitment. In Chicago, NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen proposed what he calls “Smart Defense”—an effort to encourage nations to pool funds to purchase equipment and then share
the purchased military assets. So far, the effects are minimal, particularly because many nations fear they will not have access to the pooled equipment once they purchase it. Rasmussen has also proposed a “Connected Forces Initiative.” Designed to retain military interoperability after ISAF operations cease, this initiative would maximize transatlantic exercises by making better use of the NATO Response Force, the Alliance’s premier expeditionary force that has seldom been used. Additional initiatives have included efforts to maximize the deployability and sustainability of European forces.

The bad news is that these efforts so far have fallen far short given the massive defense budget cuts being implemented in Europe, and now the United States. More radical approaches are needed such as much greater regional cooperation, role specialization and division of labor among national forces. In the final analysis, however, the near freefall in defense spending needs to be halted and eventually reversed.

**Free Trade Agreement:**

NATO’s stability rests on political and security cooperation, but to further stabilize this structure, economic cooperation is necessary. President Barack Obama’s call in his 2013 State of the Union speech for a Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) should provide considerable stability. Support for the concept seems strong on both sides of the Atlantic, although negotiations over common standards and regulations will be particularly difficult. Statesmen will need to ensure that technocrats to not bury TTIP in excessive detail.

**NATO’S WEAKNESSES**

These six strengths of NATO are offset by an equal number of weaknesses. Global trends point to shifting power alignments from West to East, to multiple new empowered actors in a polycentric world, to the
risk of weapons proliferation and more deadly conflict—especially in the
greater Middle East, to continued strategic surprises including the risk of
massive cyber conflict, and to inadequate global governance. These trends
also reveal several weaknesses that the Alliance must address.

**European Defense Capability Shortfalls:**

The decline of European defense capabilities is perhaps the single
biggest weakness of the Alliance. Most Europeans feel secure from military
threat and see little reason to spend more resources on defense. Moreover,
they do not seek to share the global responsibility carried by the United
States. The Libya operation revealed the extent to which European Air
Forces were unable to sustain operations. Only two European nations now
meet NATO’s two percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) defense
spending goal. In contrast, the United States still spends over four percent
of GDP on defense and provides seventy-two percent of overall NATO
defense spending.

This weakness prompted former U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert
Gates to say that if not resolved, the Alliance’s future would be “dim if not
dismal.” Yet, the decline has not halted since Gates made those comments
in June 2011. European defense reductions have generally been made on
a national basis without much reference to the Alliance. And, while the
first set of cuts were horizontal or across the board, creating less sustain-
able or hollow forces, further reductions have become vertical, in which
entire national capabilities are being removed and defense gaps are created.
France and Britain—which both have had full spectrum forces with expedi-
tionary capabilities—are being hit hard. Few national plans exist to reverse
this European trend should economies improve or the security situation
deteriorate. NATO has to its credit has developed and accepted a set of
“minimum capability requirements” needed for the Alliance to deliver on
its so-called Level of Ambition. But European nations show little commit-
ment to fulfilling these requirements. To stimulate European resolve to
meet these capability requirements, the United States has proposed that
no one country (e.g. the United States) be responsible for providing the
Alliance with more than 50 percent of any significant NATO capability.

**European Introspection:**

The euro financial crisis threatens the cohesion of the European
Union as unemployment sours in Europe’s south and resentment builds
against austerity measures imposed by Germany. With this existential crisis at home, few in Europe concentrate on events abroad. This is just one element of new introspection in Europe. Add to that, massive defense cuts, the possible secession of Britain from the European Union, some democratic backsliding, the apparent unwillingness of the EU to employ its Battle Groups to deal with crisis management, and “stabilization exhaustion” as a result of ISAF operations. It is no wonder that some question Europe’s willingness to act in crisis. The 2011 decision by Germany to withhold its support for the Libya operation, including removing its crews from NATO Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) aircraft, and Poland’s unwillingness to contribute much to that operation still sends chills through the Alliance. Germany’s deployment, together with the Netherlands and the United States, of Patriot air defense systems along the Turkish-Syrian border and France’s willingness to deal firmly with Islamist radicals in northern Mali have given the Alliance some renewed confidence. Nonetheless, President Obama’s speech in Berlin referenced Europe’s complacency and highlighted the need for Europe to remain engaged beyond its borders. To NATO Secretary General Rasmussen this engagement is vital to Europe’s internal security and global credibility. As he told European Parliament members in May 2013, “we Europeans must understand that soft power alone is really no power at all,” emphasizing that a failure to recognize these existing threats to NATO’s capabilities and cohesion may portend even greater challenges than those Europe currently faces.\(^4\)

**The United States Pivot Strategy:**

The January 2012, U.S. Strategic Guidance called for a rebalancing, or “pivot,” of U.S. force structure from two Middle East wars to Asia. This guidance was accompanied by a modest reduction in U.S. force presence in Europe. The result was widespread concern in much of Europe that the
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United States was therefore also pivoting away from Europe. Although it was not intended by the United States, the move created doubt among several Allies. Instead, the United States intends to pivot with Europe, not away from it. A little observed silent corollary to the pivot strategy is that the United States will expect Europe to do more in its own neighborhood, mostly along the Mediterranean Sea. The European leading role in both Libya and Mali may serve as a possible model for the way the United States would like to arrange future operations. And yet this new expectation comes at a time when Europe is introverted and losing defense capabilities. A potential weakness in the Alliance is that this will create false expectations in the United States about the role Europe is willing to play in future operations. That in turn would damage U.S. willingness to rely on the Alliance.

Some of the distrust of the United States in Europe caused by this pivot strategy was amplified by the recent revelation that the U.S. National Security Agency may have been conducting eavesdropping operations against European countries and institutions. As one Polish observer quipped recently, “our concern is that Europe is down, the U.S. is out, and Russia is in.”

Disagreement over Nuclear Weapons:

The United States still retains a small number of nuclear gravity bombs stationed in five European countries that would be delivered if necessary by dual capable aircraft of several nations. This arrangement has been at the heart of NATO’s nuclear doctrine. However, several years ago, three nations hosting U.S. nuclear weapons questioned the usefulness of existing arrangements. Additionally, aircraft modernization plans may bring into question the capability of several European nations to deliver nuclear ordnance into the next decade, if required. The 2010 Strategic Concept and the subsequent NATO deterrence and defense posture review set the debate aside for the immediate future, but it will return when nations make procurement decisions on replacements for their fourth generation fighter aircraft. As President Obama made clear in his June 17 Berlin speech, the United States prefers to see nuclear reductions in Europe develop as part of arms control discussions with Russia, which holds perhaps ten times the number of non-strategic nuclear weapons as does the United States. Lack of a longer term NATO consensus on nuclear deterrence will probably rise again as a significant NATO weakness.
Weak Partnership Arrangements:

NATO relies increasingly on its partnerships with non-NATO nations. Key operational partners include not just European nations like Sweden and Finland, but Persian Gulf states like the UAE and Qatar and Asian allies like Australia, South Korea, and Japan. Although together these partnerships can compensate for some of the capability gaps appearing within the Alliance, NATO’s partnership arrangements were made in a different era. The Partnership for Peace achieved its original purpose of bringing many new members into the Alliance but is now outmoded. Newer arrangements like the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (primarily for the Persian Gulf) and the Mediterranean Dialogue (primarily for North Africa) are not particularly functional. NATO remains unable to coordinate closely with the European Union because of friction between Turkey and Cyprus, and the NATO-Russia Council showed promise, but has suffered as NATO-Russian relations have declined. The Atlantic Council of the United States has suggested ten functional ways to improve partnership cooperation, all of which are useful.5 But a more ambitious partnership reorganization plan is needed to turn this weakness into strength.

Lack of a Comprehensive Approach:

Finally, during the past decade NATO has—in a series of summit statements—sought to develop what it calls a “Comprehensive Approach.” This approach would bring together not just military elements of power, but political and economic elements as well. It is an operational concept designed to deal with the complex realities of stability and reconstruction requirements needed for nation building. Elements of the Comprehensive Approach were evident in ISAF, but the capability has not been institutionalized. The Alliance has been unable to fully develop this needed capability in large measure because of the institutional blockages to greater
NATO-EU cooperation. NATO should develop some capability to surge civilian reconstruction experts into troubled areas and remove blockages to further cooperation between the Alliance and the EU.

FUTURE CHALLENGES

As tests of these strengths and weaknesses, NATO faces at least two major political and operational challenges in the next year, which together could significantly impact the future of the Alliance: Syria and Iran. In Syria, the United States and its European allies have cooperated fully in sanctioning the Syrian regime and providing air defenses for Turkey. Europeans have worked with the United States to strengthen the Syrian National Council. There has been recent progress at the Doha Conference with regard to providing lethal weapons to the Syrian opposition, although Germany remains uncomfortable with the idea. There is strong support in Europe for the U.S.-Russian effort to hold a peace conference in Geneva. There remains a general reluctance to establish a no-fly zone or other sanctuaries within Syria. As the casualties of the Syrian war climb above 100,000, however, pressure will grow to do more, which could further divide NATO members. The real test may come if and when the current civil war either pits opposition forces against one other or spreads beyond Syria’s borders. A major unwanted Syrian stabilization operation may lie in NATO’s future. It is not clear that NATO is politically up to this task.

In Iran, the United States and its European allies have also cooperated diplomatically through the P5+1 process, which include the United States, France, Britain, and Germany along with Russia and China. The EU is also involved. Efforts to ratchet up sanctions to stimulate Iranian concessions on their nuclear program do not appear to be working, though the newly elected moderate President Hassan Rouhani may offer some hope to avoid a confrontation. At some point, Iran may cross red lines that trigger a military response. There is little support in Europe for military attacks on Iran’s nuclear facilities. It will be critical for NATO to avoid another 2003 moment, when the U.S. invasion of Iraq nearly tore the Alliance apart. Careful diplomatic consultations will be needed within the Alliance to avoid such a potentially devastating split.
CONCLUSION

Even facing these future challenges, the NATO glass remains more than half full. Despite NATO’s many problems, it is still the indispensible alliance; nothing comes close to being able to replace it. But NATO will require continual attention to its weaknesses so as not to diminish what has been built over more than six decades. The place to start is with military capabilities and sound diplomacy. If Europe loses the will and/or ability to contribute significantly to NATO operations, many Americans will lose interest and like the old soldier, NATO will just fade away. This disunion would be nearly as devastating as the one President Lincoln fought 150 years ago to prevent.

ENDNOTES


