

Problems facing NATO Strategy

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In the fiftieth year of its existence, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is undergoing a dramatic volte face. It is transforming its role and focus from that of deterrence of, and defence against, a massive Soviet invasion of Western Europe to something new. What the Alliance should look like in the absence of any clear threat is very much open for debate and discussion. What is clear is that the transformation is not painless or easy. The 1990s, far from being Fukiyama's "the end of history", have posed NATO policymakers with a plethora of new strategic dilemmas that cannot be ignored.

These external issues are coupled with issues internal to the Alliance, both at the intra-Alliance level and domestically within the member states. The combination of internal and external pressures has threatened the continued existence of NATO from its inception into the 21st century. NATO has not only survived, but dramatically acted in areas such as Kosovo. I contend that NATO has faced such strategic dilemmas for its entire history, and that it has learned to prosper in spite of the challenges which it faces. While the exact issues change, the fundamental difficulties of creating consensus within a democratic alliance remain the same. In another essay, "The Evolution of NATO Strategy", I demonstrate the challenges of developing a common nuclear strategy for the Alliance in the 1950s and 1960s. I find that many issues facing NATO have long precedents in those early years. Between the two papers, I nonetheless take away a sense of confidence in NATO's ability to muddle along despite the handicaps under which it often finds itself.

This confidence was not easily found. In my earlier paper, I identified several key challenges to the development of NATO strategy in the 1950s and 1960s. NATO enlargement (of Greece and Turkey in 1951, and West Germany in 1954) posed challenges to NATO unity and efficiency; questions over the American strategic commitment to Europe in the wake of increasing strategic parity with the USSR; and European (particularly French) concerns over American dominance of the Alliance. Each historical issue deserves a closer look to help put our contemporary concerns in context.

NATO enlargement is certainly not a new issue for policymakers in Brussels. The addition of Greece and Turkey gave NATO increased manpower, yet also increased the areas of responsibility to be defended. It also foisted the traditional Greco-Turkish antagonism upon an Alliance with enough on its hands with rearmament and reconstruction issues. NATO spent much of the 1960s and 1970s trying to secure its Southern flank as much from within as from without. The Cyprus crises seriously strained NATO internally, alleviated by the UN peacekeeping mission there. As well, the creation of the Federal Republic of Germany and its admission as an equal partner was crucial to NATO defence planning, yet was also accompanied by tremendous debate. The admission of West Germany was essential for its potential to raise numerous well-equipped, well-trained troops. It also pushed the border with the Soviet bloc eastwards, buying the Alliance more time in the event of war to defend in depth. Yet the FRG

had its own agenda, insisting upon a policy of "Vornerverteidigung", or "defence in proximity to the border". Thus enlargement brought both benefits and pitfalls, as in the south.

European concerns over the American strategic commitment grew as a result of the Soviets developing its own atomic arsenal and the means to devastate North America. As Mutually Assured Destruction became a reality, leaders in Western Europe questioned the American willingness to commit suicide in the defence against a Soviet conventional invasion. This was the premise of MC 14/2, the strategic doctrine more commonly referred to as "Massive Retaliation". This doctrine, formulated at a time of U.S. nuclear dominance, became obsolete. This set in motion an arduous debate ended only by the adoption of MC 14/3 ("Flexible Response") in 1967. The Americans were pressured to increase its conventional forces in Europe to reassure its allies that it would fight regardless of the threat to itself.

European notions of independence and autonomy also were significant for NATO. In the 1940s and early 1950s, the U.S. Marshall Plan helped rebuild Western European economies, while the Strategic Command guaranteed their security. Several Western European states, secure under the American nuclear umbrella, strove to regain past influence. The Anglo-French invasion of the Suez in 1956 was merely one example. Britain and France also developed independent nuclear arsenals, the ultimate insurance against American decoupling from Europe. French independence reached its zenith in 1966 with its withdrawal from the NATO unified command structure.

These three examples are a good sample of problems facing NATO policymakers in the past. However, these issues should not sound unfamiliar to contemporary students of NATO activity. Enlargement, concerns over American commitment, and the question of increased European independence are key issues of the 1990s. These issues are in an entirely different context, however. With the ending of the Cold War and the demise of the USSR and the Warsaw Pact, the original *raison d'être* for NATO vanished virtually overnight. Former adversaries now seemed potential friends – or even allies. Force structures and levels that seemed appropriate to counter the Soviet threat in the 1980s were now superfluous, prompting massive defence cutbacks in all member states. People began to question the ability of NATO to survive in victory. Historically, few alliances or coalitions have survived the transition from war to peace. In the heady days of the early 1990s there seemed little need for the collective defence of Western Europe.

NATO survived by drastically altering its fundamental nature. While maintaining its primary mission to defend Western Europe against any aggressor, it now undertook a major role in reaching out to the former Warsaw Pact states, through initiatives such as the Partnership for Peace. Secretary General Manfred Wörner remarked that "The first and most important area where change must come is in further developing our ability to project stability to the East". Such actions reintroduced the old issue of enlargement. The new democracies in Central and Eastern Europe pursued agendas of integration with the West, economically, politically, and militarily. They did so to raise their standards of living, and to create democracies. Western ideals towards enlargement were laid out by U.S. President Bill Clinton in May 1997.

"Enlargement would...strengthen the ability of the Alliance to meet future security challenges; secure democracy; encourage prospective members to resolve their differences by peaceful means; erase the artificial line in Europe that Stalin drew".

They also wanted closer ties with the West to safeguard against any new Russian imperialism. This became more of an issue as the decade progressed, and the pace of reform in Russia did not meet everybody's expectations. Western-Russian relations cooled from the euphoria of only a few years previously, prompting renewed efforts by the fledgling democracies to join NATO,

NATO was caught in the same dilemma as in the 1950s. To accept new member states would potentially in the long run strengthen the Alliance, adding both manpower and geostrategic depth. However, such enlargement might actually decrease NATO security, by antagonizing Russia and by increasing NATO responsibility for defence. Another issue, still worrisome, is the further dilution of decision-making capability due to the increased number of members. The original members found it difficult enough to formulate strategy when they were only twelve, let alone the later sixteen. The addition of new members would increase the number of voices and potentially dissenting opinions. NATO eventually decided that the benefits would outweigh the negatives, and elected to admit Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic as new members. Will enlargement stop there, however? Several countries considered for the first round are candidates for future expansion. Slovakia, Romania, and the Baltic countries are making concerted bids to join the Alliance. Will their presence help or hurt NATO?

The issue of the former Baltic SSRs (Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania) is an exceptionally sensitive one. Russia grudgingly accepted NATO enlargement into its previous zone of influence in Eastern Europe. Any move to expand into territory once part of the Soviet Union proper, and bordering directly upon Russian land, will be fiercely resisted. By 1994 Russia began to fear NATO influencing the Ukraine against Moscow, helping to chill relations. NATO must find a way to placate traditional Russian fears for its western border security to avoid provoking a confrontation. Such actions as the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act are helpful diplomatic ways to defuse tensions between the former adversaries. The frailty of this agreement was highlighted by the bitter dispute over the Kosovo crisis of this year, which seriously strained, and nearly broke, relations between Moscow and NATO.

Enlargement is a potentially worrisome development, yet the early theoretical concerns have largely not come to pass (at least as of yet). Popular support for NATO has grown in these new members, as has the professional capability of their armed forces. There is still much to be done before these countries become net contributors instead of net losses to the Alliance. All three states require massive modernization to their forces and infrastructure in order to create interoperability with the more technologically advanced members. Further, political and economic reforms in those countries must proceed apace in order to firmly cement them into the Western community.

For Western Europeans, far more important has been the continued cementing of the United States to the defence of Europe. The post-Cold War reductions have seen a dramatic decrease in the number of American troops stationed in Europe. There are always concerns over isolationist tendencies in both American society in general, and the U.S. Congress in particular. The American public is influenced by the same factors motivating other NATO members: with the Cold War "won", there were calls for a "peace dividend". Further, there initially seemed to be no clear-cut threats to the West, thereby obviating the need for substantial armed forces. The mid-1990s proved the opposite: that in fact, there is an even greater need for the maintenance of

highly trained troops capable of peacekeeping duty, whether through NATO or the United Nations. Of direct concern to NATO is the instability along the frontiers of Europe, particularly in the Balkans. NATO has had to repeatedly intervene in the area in order to promote its agenda for peace. In 1992 NATO created the Allied Command Europe Rapid Reaction Corps (ARRC) as a means to quickly deal with issues along its periphery. This showed a somewhat surprising speed in adapting to the new global geostrategic environment.

Such activity prompted many in both American and European circles to call for a greater devolution of responsibility to Western Europe to look to its own defence. This is not necessarily as drastic today than a decade ago. First, Europe is strong economically, no longer needing the financial support it once did from the U.S. Second, the European Union is slowly emerging as a significant political entity, potentially leading one day in the distant future to a unified Europe. There has been progress towards the establishment of a European Defence Identity (EDI) based upon Great Britain, France, and Germany. And lastly, the removal of the Soviet threat means that Europe likely faces no significant direct military threat in the near future that its forces cannot deal with themselves. Such optimism in European capability was dashed by the crisis in the former Yugoslavia, particularly in Bosnia. EU diplomats were unable to broker an agreement, while the inactivity of the West in the face of continual atrocities tarnished the European image.

The Bosnian Crisis highlighted the continued dependence of Western Europe upon the United States, at least in projecting NATO political and military power. While Europe is currently able to defend itself, it lacks sufficient clout to advance into areas such as the Balkans. It is likely that the European pillar of NATO is moving towards greater military autonomy from the North American pillar, but that this will take much more work. The Bosnian Crisis was too soon after the Cold War to expect Europe to act independently, after almost fifty years of U.S. leadership. Yet the desire for increased European autonomy is definitely there. Such actions as the Western European Union, the experiment with the Franco-German Corps, and the Eurofighter project all indicate a potential willingness to assume greater responsibility for their own affairs in the future. Yet for the foreseeable future, continued U.S. leadership is deemed critical in promoting NATO's agenda in the absence of any other obvious leader.

This agenda involves the maintenance of stability along the frontiers of NATO. The crises in the Balkans have potential ramifications beyond being a messy civil war. NATO is concerned at various levels. It is considered unacceptable in our supposedly enlightened societies to allow such bloodshed and atrocities to occur on the very doorstep of NATO. The much-quoted "CNN Effect" cannot be ignored in its effect in influencing public opinion. At the level of Realpolitik, Western governments are faced with the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people, many who will seek refugee status in Western Europe. These countries do not wish to support so many refugees, if any. Lastly, the conflict has the potential to induce its neighbours to intervene unilaterally; e.g. Albania, Turkey, and Russia. NATO preferred to settle the issue without introducing other armed forces into the conflict.

NATO reached a general consensus that events in the Balkans were unacceptable, and that something should be done. At this point the problems inherent in a democratic alliance asserted themselves. At first, it was not clear who supported whom. Some NATO members, such as Germany, initially favoured the Croats. Others wished to let the Serbs finish the job and

introduce some sort of stability. Yet in Bosnia there were no real "good guys" or "bad guys", as all parties were guilty of atrocities. Still, American sympathies for the Bosnians eventually prevailed in NATO circles after long debate. Once support was established, the problem emerged of what to do. Some favoured diplomatic pressure to seek a peaceful resolution, whereas others sought to use military power to induce Serbia to seek peace. Again, long debate brought forth the use first of air strikes, then the introduction of the Implementation Force in December 1995 to maintain the arduously wrought peace.

Bosnia showed that NATO, a community of states bound by general common principles, could disagree sharply when it came to particular issues. Being a transnational organization, it was hampered operationally by the essential sovereignty of the member states. The dilemma is this: politically and ideologically, NATO is committed to the political diversity and debate inherent to democracies; yet this same diversity can potentially hamper the application of military force. NATO eventually was able to field IFOR to effectively supervise the Dayton Accords, yet it was criticized for acting too slowly in reaching the consensus necessary to take such action.

The involvement of NATO countries in the initial UN mission UNPROFOR raised an ugly possibility. Would an attack upon these member nations in an out-of-area operation constitute an armed attack upon a member as defined by Article Five of the Washington Treaty, and if so, would the rest of the Alliance be obligated to respond accordingly? Fortunately for NATO policymakers, this dilemma was not put to the test.

The intervention in Kosovo also illustrates the difficulties in achieving unanimity in such an alliance. The process leading up to the commencement of Operation Allied Force was long and arduous. Again, achieving consensus that something had to be done was fairly easy. The execution of achieving the stated aims of returning the refugees to their homeland and expelling the Serbian army from Kosovo was another matter. Diplomacy failed to work, eventually forcing NATO to intervene in its first major operational action of its existence. The importance of Kosovo for NATO was greatly augmented by self-pressure. NATO staked its very credibility and future upon its ability to accomplish its mission. Many feel that Kosovo is not worth such an expenditure of effort, money, and materiel.

"NATO has already mistakenly staked its credibility on solving Eurasia's messiest and least relevant dilemmas rather than on defending its members."

However, once Kosovo was identified as a significant interest, NATO had no choice but to win. And win it did, accomplishing its goals. However, it was roundly criticized for taking seventy-eight days to succeed. Poor weather did hamper its aerial campaigns, especially early on. Yet many more problems were self-imposed.

Kosovo proved the difficulty in operating a democratic alliance in a combat situation. Initially, the approved list of bombing targets had to be approved unanimously by each member. This process would often take more than twenty-four hours; this gave mobile targets such as the Serbian army time to move on, and was a major impediment to expelling the Serbs from Kosovo early on. This was the primary consequence at the tactical level. At the strategic level, the bombing of Serbia itself, the political debate was even more confusing. In his testimony before a U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee on the Kosovo campaign, USAF LGEN Michael Short

stated that France was the reason why the aerial campaign was incremental and ineffectual in the beginning, akin to Vietnam's "Rolling Thunder" campaign. He stated the opinion of most Air Force leaders:

"I'd have gone for the head of the snake on the first night... I'd have turned the lights out the first night... I'd have dropped the bridges across the Danube. I'd have hit five or six political/military headquarters in downtown Belgrade."

Instead, pressure from European countries such as France limited the strikes due to concerns over potential civilian casualties. This concern led to a prohibition of daytime strikes upon bridges, creating very specific times at which certain civilian targets could be struck. This increased the risk to NATO pilots, as the Serb AA defences had a better idea when to be prepared for Allied air strikes. Further,

"the attempt to "fine tune" (in the words of McNamara aide John McNaughton) military pressure to send delicate signals leaves the initiative in the enemy's hands."

The Americans especially should have learned from their Vietnam experience, that a determined foe can endure sporadic, unfocused bombing for an indefinite period. Like the North Vietnamese after the "Linebacker" campaigns, the Serbs capitulated in part only after the Allies intensified their bombardment to include both military and civilian targets at a high rate.

Kosovo highlighted many glaring shortcomings of NATO planning (or lack thereof). NATO did not foresee the intensification of the ethnic cleansing upon initiation of hostilities, did not plan for the bad weather, relied heavily on precision-guided munitions (although these made up only some 35% of all munitions dropped), did not anticipate extended Serbian resistance, did not immediately escalate to strategic bombing of Serbia upon Serb intensification of ethnic cleansing in Kosovo, and did not allow for the introduction of land forces from the outset.

In essence, NATO entered Allied Force with no clear plan other than pounding the Serb forces in Kosovo and expecting them to crack after a few days. The hopes for a quick example of "Clinton cruise missile diplomacy" were not realized. The final analysis of Allied Force depends upon whether one is more concerned with ends or means. NATO did accomplish its stated goals, but took some 78 days to do so against an economically and militarily weak Serbia. Kosovo strained the credibility of NATO to perform to the limit. European analysis bemoaned the continued dependence upon the U.S., while the Americans continued to criticize the European financial commitment to their defence budgets. In the end, NATO did not cover itself in glory, but did get the job done.

NATO has an interesting few years coming up in the early 21st century. It will be informative to see if the Europeans (especially the Germans) increase their defence spending in the wake of the Kosovo campaign. The German defence budget has declined dramatically in the past few years, and is slated for further cuts. The overall budget will be reduced by DM 30 billion over each of the next two years, leaving little for defence. This downward trend is being repeated by most European governments (to say nothing of the Canadian example). The question of future capability emerges as a pressing concern.

Considering the significant obstacles facing NATO in this decade, encompassing enlargement issues, competing national interests, budget cuts, and a relatively unstable world, it is somewhat surprising that NATO muddles on fairly successfully. It is the contention of this paper that the democratic nature of the Alliance is both its strength and weakness. For the military leaders, the lack of clear strategy frustrates war planning and force structuring. Yet for the civilian leaders who are ultimately responsible for the decision-making, the very ambiguity of NATO gives them greater flexibility. This ambiguity has existed since at least 1967, with the adoption of the ambiguous strategic doctrine MC 14/3 (Flexible Response). Although superseded in 1991 by the end of the Cold War, the principle of allowing NATO's leaders the maximum latitude in formulating policies remains. This flexibility is largely the reason why

"For all its weaknesses, NATO worked. It was under the aegis of NATO that free institutions took root in Germany, Italy, Portugal, Greece, and Turkey. It was under NATO's auspices that old rivals – Britain, Germany, France, Italy, Turkey, Greece – cooperated in a military sense. NATO kept the peace".

When one appraises NATO's future prospects, one would be well advised to maintain this sense of perspective. For all of its flaws, NATO succeeded and continues to succeed today. It faces many challenges, yet manages to face them, all the while upholding democracy amongst its members. That is why I am optimistic for NATO's success into the next century. It is able to adapt, and to reflect the values of its members. NATO will survive these problems, yet probably continue to face them well into the 21st century.

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