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The Future of NATO

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Does NATO have any future at all? Even today, the state of NATO seems highly uncertain, if not precarious. For some, NATO already has been destroyed; its only chance is to be rebuilt (Ronald Asmus, in: IHT, Sept. 2, 2003; FA). For others, NATO has been shaken by the transatlantic crisis over Iraq, but has survived in fighting order: after all, in Afghanistan, where America had originally politely declined offers from NATO for assistance in the war against the Taliban regime, NATO has just take over command of ISAF from Germany and the Netherlands. Who is right? What should and could we expect of NATO over the coming years?

Part of the explanation for such widely differing assessments is that "NATO" means different things to different people. Any assessment of NATO´s condition at present and its future prospects will therefore have to start with clarifying what "NATO" we are talking about. NATO is

- an international organisation with a headquarter, a fairly large international bureaucracy, a whole set of institutions involving not only member countries (such as the North Atlantic Council, the Secretary General and his office, or the North Atlantic Assembly) but also a number of other states (such as in the NATO-Russia Council or the Partnership for Peace), and some military assets (such as NATO´s fleet of AWACs);
- an international treaty whose Art. V provides security guarantees to all member states, and thus establishes a system of collective defence,
- an integrated military command structure and a framework for military co-operation among members and with other states,
- a security community in the sense of Karl W. Deutsch, in which the use of force of member states against each other is no longer conceivable,
- a community of countries united by shared democratic values, and
- a political mechanism for transatlantic co-operation, with an emphasis on military security issues.

If we ask ourselves where NATO stands today with regard to those six different facets, there is evidence to support both sceptics and optimists. Thus, **NATO as an international organisation** is doing quite well: its membership has been enlarged, a further round of accessions has been decided on and will become effective in spring 2004, and other candidates are already queuing up. Admittedly, this enlargement causes complications in terms of decision-making procedures, of developing reasonably homogeneous standards and operating procedures, and of bridging the huge gaps between the different national military forces (Timothy Edmunds, NATO and its New Members, in: Survival, Vol. 45 No. 3,

Autumn 2003, pp.145-166), but none of this seems to threaten NATO´s future as an international organisation.

Nor is there anything formally to endanger the **NATO Treaty, including its Article V security guarantees**. True, there is the problem that after the demise of the Soviet threat, the meaning and value of Article V has become somewhat uncertain. For NATO´s strong mutual security guarantees in fact were only concerned with the Soviet threat; even in the past, the implications of Article V in the case of a military conflict between, for example, Greece and Turkey (both members of NATO) or even between Turkey and Iraq or Syria were rather indeterminate. Now, not only is there no threat to NATO members as a group in the traditional sense of the Soviet military threat anymore, but it is also very hard to see how any new threat could materialise in the foreseeable future: the military might of America, let alone of NATO as a collective, is simply too overwhelmingly superior. This does not preclude that individual NATO members (such as Turkey) might face rather traditional security threats, nor the possibility of unconventional, asymmetric threats to NATO as a group emanating from, say, international terrorism, but, as the invocation of Article V by NATO after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 against New York and Washington and its consequences showed, those threats do not provide NATO with a clear collective purpose, as the Soviet threat did. In that sense, NATO is simply suffering the consequences of its success in managing the Soviet threat. With that success, NATO´s strategic *raison d´ être* has disappeared, irrevocably. Still, the formal mutual security commitments will remain, although it will be up to the other members to decide how exactly to lend support to a member of NATO which finds itself attacked.

NATO´s integrated military command structure and its common assets (such as AWACs) also do not seem at risk. As Afghanistan shows yet again, this integrated military structure is very useful in enabling NATO member states (and others) to carry out joint military operations, both in peace-keeping and peace-enforcement. However, the rapidly opening technological gap between European armed forces and those of the United States, whose defence spending is being expanded very rapidly, already has begun to affect NATO´s military utility from the US point of view, and may do so even more in the future. Much will depend here on how successful NATO will be in implementing its new NATO Response Force project.

NATO will certainly remain a **security community**. There is no reason to assume that Kant´s theorem of democratic peace, which postulates that democracies do not go to war against each other, will not apply to NATO in the future, and the very rapid expansion of economies interdependence in the transatlantic community during the last few decades

suggests that NATO will remain a security community in the sense of Karl Deutsch, where members are integrated through a very high level of interaction and mutual benefit.

There are greater uncertainties even today with regard to NATO as a **community of shared values**. In a fundamental sense, all NATO members are, of course, democracies and market economies, and they undoubtedly form a security community: with some reservations about the Turkish-Greek relationship, it is inconceivable that one NATO member would seriously contemplate war against another. Beyond this very broad, general set of shared values, however, lie important differences in the foreign policy cultures of NATO members. Although it is misleading to simply take the Atlantic as the value divide, it does seem that America and Europe, irrespective of complex internal differences on each side, have been drifting apart for some time, largely as a result of domestic changes on each side and a new international environment, in which there is no longer a clearly perceived common threat. Sociologically and economically, the gap between America and Europe seems likely to widen further in the future. America seems headed for a (strongly multicultural) population of 400 - 500 mill. by the middle of the century, with a median age of 36 (that is, a reasonably young and balanced population distribution), while Europe´s population will be expanding only very slowly to the year 2020 or so, and then start shrinking to around 350 mill. People by 2050. Europe will thus be overtaken by America sometime between 20205 and 2040, and its population will be much older. The median age by 2050 will be about 57 years, and the population pyramid will be heavily skewed towards the share of people above 60 years of age, which by 2050 could represent as much as 40 per cent of the total population of Western Europe, against less than 25 per cent for the US (The Economist, Aug.24, 2002,pp.20-22).

The heart of the problem lies with the last dimension of NATO, its political role. What has been destroyed, at least for the time being, by the Iraq crisis is **NATO as a political mechanism**, a framework for hammering out compromises on transatlantic security policies which are then implemented jointly, such as, for example, NATO´s strategy of flexible response or the engagement of Eastern Europe and the successor states of the Soviet Union after 1989. Yet this dimension of NATO has often been absent in the past, as well; its relevance depends strictly on the willingness of member states to co-operate in that framework. In the end, this will generally be shaped by the overall state of relations in the transatlantic community (which probably can get only better) and NATO´s comparative advantage vis-à-vis other frameworks or ad-hoc co-operation. In the future, NATO may continue to enjoy some advantages because of its established institutions, its existing military organisation and military assets and its experience in the area of military co-operation. But it is unlikely to enjoy the kind of advantage which existed during the Cold War: to the extent the

new security agenda will require means other than joint military operations, NATO will not be the obvious framework for co-operation because it may not provide the right membership and may lack the appropriate experience. For example, after having pushed its European NATO partners for many years to take the WMD proliferation risks seriously, Washington has now decided to pursue a different institutional track through creating the International Proliferation Security initiative involving 11 countries, some of which are not in NATO. Thus, although NATO has long been involved with the problem of WMD proliferation, it is not obvious that it should be the key institution for developing and implementing non-proliferation or counter-proliferation policies.

The conclusion of this brief assessment of NATO´s future prospects thus provides both good and bad news. The goods news, for friends of NATO, is that NATO will be around: there is very little prospect that it will be formally dismantled, and it will thus be available for use, as a collective defence or collective security "fleet in being". The bad news is that NATO almost certainly has lost much of its previous cohesion, and – at least for the time being - its centrality to Western security policy. In the future, NATO will probably only rarely act as such as a collective; it will become a much more diversified organisation, bringing together variable coalitions of members and non-members as the case at hand requires. This may also come to be reflected in more flexible decision-making procedures (Jiří Šedivý, quoted in: Kai-Olaf Lang, Transatlantische Beziehungen und europäische Sicherheit vor neuen Herausforderungen, SWP-Zeitschriftenschau, Ferbuar 2003, p.4).

Let me now return to the original question. What may we expect of NATO in the years to come? The answer to this question, it seems to me, will depend on the evolution of three critical parameters: the type of contingencies the transatlantic community will confront in the future; the political will on both sides of the Atlantic to work together on coping with the contingencies at hand; and respective perceptions in America and Europe about the relative utility of military force in that context. By making different assumptions about the evolution of those three critical parameters, we can explore the future of NATO through five different scenarios of what could become of NATO over the coming decade or so. The five scenarios are:

- **NATO fading away:** In this scenario, NATO simply fades away as a result of lack of interest on both sides of the Atlantic, probably because there will be no serious challenges where NATO could provide possible answers – either because the world turns out to be rather less turbulent and dangerous than we presently tend to

assume, or because there is a shared sense within the transatlantic community that military force and other security services of the type NATO can provide are not much use under the prevailing circumstances. In that scenario, NATO continues to exist; its peacekeeping operations are gradually being wound down in response to improved circumstances on the ground in the Balkans, while Afghanistan and Iraq will be abandoned. NATO as an organisation continues to tick over, the military co-operation programmes are carried on without great enthusiasm, and politically NATO has been all but forgotten. Yet nobody will abolish it: you may still need it at some point in the future. From NATO´s organisational point of view, this may not be a very exciting scenario, but in broad terms it would represent a rather benign future, in which there are no major challenges which NATO could conceivably be involved in, and no political incentives on either side of the Atlantic to stir up the transatlantic relationship.

- **NATO revived** represents something like a mirror image of the previous scenario: in it, NATO would have lots of problems thrown at it, probably by the US, which would exert insistent leadership, but find the rest of NATO quite willing to follow. Such a scenario could arise if the "clash of civilizations" between the West and the Islamic world actually materialises as a result of concerted efforts by the likes of Osama bin Laden in the Islamic world, but also through the policies of Israel and the US government. Under this scenario, violent attacks on Western interests and Western allies would become so serious, pervasive and indiscriminate that the West closed ranks and followed US leadership into a comprehensive confrontation. In this scenario, the West would carry out military interventions to search and destroy the sources of terrorist attacks on Western interests wherever they were thought located, and would also mobilise domestically against the terrorist threat along the lines of a comprehensive security state concept in which security would replace liberty as the dominant political principle. While this would greatly revalue NATO politically, it would be a rather grim scenario in broader terms.
- The third scenario is a "**European NATO**", that is, a NATO in which European concerns would predominate. The US would accommodate the "Europeanisation" of NATO as a way to pre-empt the development of ESDP or for other reasons reflecting US national interests. America's security concerns would focus on other regions and other partners, such as the Middle East, Central Asia, or South East Asia. NATO would essentially be a provider of co-operative and collective security services and conflict prevention in Europe and its periphery, and a political mechanism to draw non-members closer to the West. Thus, NATO would remain a regionally focused security organisation, but its activities would shift towards political and co-operative

security functions. This would be a fairly benign scenario for NATO and for the transatlantic community, although the world beyond Europe could look quite unpleasant. Although America and Europe in this scenario might have different attitudes towards the utility of military force, those differences would be "compartmentalised", with a tacit agreement to disagree: in and around Europe, the European preference for comprehensive security policies would prevail, while America would pursue a more robust approach elsewhere.

- The fourth scenario is again a mirror image of the previous one. In this scenario, the "**American NATO"**, NATO would develop into an organisation specialising in global intervention and PKO activities. NATO would in fact be a posse, lead by the US sheriff, to confront international security issues (such as terrorism, WMD, organised crime etc.) which had not been successfully addressed preventively and which the use of force could plausibly hope to contain or even dissolve. In this scenario, NATO´s military transformation would have advanced rapidly – presumably again in response to international developments, and military power would play a large role. America would use NATO as a political mechanism to secure adherence to its strategies, military standards (and presumably also to US military equipment). This NATO, it should be pointed out, would largely correspond to the organisation's present ambitions and declared objectives, which reflect America's preponderance within the organisation. The scenario would imply European accommodation of this US predominance; European members would opt for (or resign themselves to) junior partner roles in NATO, or simply stand aside.
- The last scenario assumes that tensions within the transatlantic alliance will simmer on. Neither America nor Europe are willing to accept the predominance of the other, but try to impose their concepts about the utility of military force and the role of NATO. In that scenario (which I call **NATO as battleground)**, NATO primarily functions as an arena for playing out transatlantic security policy conflicts. This scenario would be a very mixed blessing for NATO (it would be taken seriously, but also buffeted by opposing forces), and an unmitigated disaster for the West, since it would mean that America and Europe were unable to co-operate effectively in the management of international security.

Scenarios are no forecasts; rather, they are meant to help identify policies which would make certain developments more likely or less likely. In this case, the political imperative is the will on both sides of the Atlantic to work together effectively on security issues. At present, effective co-operation is complicated, as Robert Kagan quite rightly points out, by a huge imbalance in

military power and quite fundamental differences in the foreign and security policy cultures of America and Europe (Robert Kagan, Macht und Ohnmacht, Amerika und Europa in der neuen Weltordnung, Berlin: Siedler 2003). But Kagan vastly overestimates the utility of American military power in securing international order. America cannot hope alone to master the enormous security challenges of the 21st century, and its awesome military power will, I suspect, in the end turn out to be not very relevant: this power is impressive only in its destructive potential, but in itself offers very little by way of helping to (re-) construct international order. But neither will Europe be able to cope on its own. The two halves of the transatlantic world still need each other, and the sooner they recognise that, the better for both.

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