

TRANSFORMING NATO: BEYOND A NEW STRATEGIC CONCEPT

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Abstract: *The process leading to a new NATO strategy is in its initial stage. NATO should not miss its goal of formulating concise, coherent and forward looking strategic guidance that can satisfy political leaders, military planners and public elites at the same time. NATO's Strategic Concept is currently more a potential source of dispute than a framework for action. What in 1999 seemed to be appropriate, to have elastic formulations whereby each member-state could adapt the framework to its own needs, is today a source of transatlantic disagreements. Some of the unresolved questions relating to the 1999 Strategic Concept as the geographical limitations of NATO's involvement are no longer applicable and have been answered through concrete actions in Afghanistan and in Iraq.*

Keywords: *Cold War, Dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, Non-article 5 Operations, Strasburg/Kehl Summit, Multipolarity, Decision Making Process, International Security, Alliance' Strategic Concept, NATO, Harmel Report.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The Allies have historically not prepared strategic concepts frequently. They have done so only when convinced of the political and practical necessity of such a complex, sensitive, and cumbersome undertaking. The 1991 Strategic Concept was prepared in light of the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact. Prior to 1991, the Allies had not prepared a strategic concept since 1967, when they approved MC 14/3, widely known as the military strategy of “flexible response.”¹ In 1967 they also endorsed the Harmel Report, which set forth the Alliance's broad political strategy for relations with the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies.² MC

14/3 and the Harmel Report together, covering political as well as military strategy, dealt with approximately the same areas encompassed by the 1991 Strategic Concept. The fact that the Allies saw no compelling need to prepare a new strategic concept during the 24 years from 1967 to 1991 may be attributed not only to factors such as the stability of the East-West stalemate and the intrinsic latitude of the 1967 policy statements, but also to acute awareness of the political difficulties and risks involved in preparing such documents. The functions of strategic concepts since 1991 present a further deterrent to undertaking a revision lightly.

Prior to 1991, the Alliance's strategic concepts were classified documents dealing with military strategy for deterrence and defense and corresponding force requirements. The Allies composed the 1991 and 1999 Strategic Concepts with this purpose in mind, but also with the objective of communicating the Alliance's political strategy to their own citizens and to non-Allied governments and publics. As a result, since 1991 the Alliance's

¹ MC 14/3, “Overall Strategic Concept for the Defense of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization Area,” approved by the Defence Planning Committee in Ministerial Session on 12 December 1967, is available in Gregory W. Pedlow, ed., *NATO Strategy Documents 1949-1969* (Brussels: NATO Information Service, 1997), pp. 345-370.

² The Harmel Report, named after Pierre Harmel, then the Belgian Foreign Minister, is available under its formal title, “The Future Tasks of the Alliance,” Report of the Council, Annex to the Final Communiqué of the

Ministerial Meeting, December 13-14, 1967, in *Texts of Final Communiqués, 1949-1974* (Brussels: NATO Information Service, 1975), pp. 198-202.

strategic concepts have been unclassified statements with many purposes, above all, offering a coherent framework for the Alliance's many activities; providing guidance for military policy, including operations and force development; promoting public understanding of the Alliance's policies; and communicating the Alliance's intentions to potential adversaries as well as current and prospective partners.³

2. STRATEGIC CONCEPT OUTDATED?

The Allies had undertaken major non-Article 5 operations and had dramatically increased the scope of their outreach and cooperation with former adversaries and other countries in the Euro-Atlantic region. In the 1991 Strategic Concept the Allies acknowledged the risks of ethnic and territorial conflict in central and Eastern Europe, but expressed little expectation of performing non-Article 5 missions such as crisis management and peacekeeping. In fact, rather than anticipating the major operations of the 1990s, the Deliberate Force Operation air strikes in August-September 1995, followed by NATO-led Implementation Force (IFOR) and Stabilization Force (SFOR) deployments in Bosnia, and the Operation Allied Force air campaign in March-June 1999 and the subsequent Kosovo Force (KFOR) mission, the authors of the 1991 Strategic Concept focused on the Alliance's Article 5 task: collective defence against aggression affecting Alliance territory, not intervention beyond that territory.

The language of the 1991 Strategic Concept suggests that NATO did not then envisage participating in any crisis management or peacekeeping operations as they came to be understood in subsequent years: "The Alliance is purely defensive in purpose: none of its weapons will ever be used except in self-defence. The role of the Alliance's military forces is to assure the

territorial integrity and political independence of its member states, and thus contribute to peace and stability in Europe."⁴ Similarly, while the 1991 Strategic Concept envisaged dialogue and cooperation with non-NATO countries, it did not refer to the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC), which was not founded until the following month. The NACC was designed to promote constructive interactions with former adversaries, initially defined as former members of the Warsaw Pact. When the Soviet Union disintegrated in December 1991, the NACC was expanded to include all former Soviet republics. In January 1994, moreover, NATO established the Partnership for Peace (PfP), a program of cooperation open to all countries in the Euro-Atlantic region, defined as the territory of the members of what was then called the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE).⁵ In other words, PfP was (and remains) open to countries in addition to those that were formerly part of the Warsaw Pact or the USSR.

NATO has offered its PfP Partners a security consultations pledge with wording similar to that in Article 4 of the North Atlantic Treaty.⁶ In the Mediterranean Dialogue, founded in 1994, the Allies have pursued bilateral exchanges of views with several North African and Middle Eastern nations. In May 1997 the Alliance founded the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, which replaced the NACC and brought together the Allies and all PfP members. During the 1990s the Alliance also substantially deepened its interactions with Russia and Ukraine. It was

⁴ North Atlantic Council, *Strategic Concept*, 7 November 1991, paragraph 36.

⁵ The CSCE became the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, or OSCE, in December 1994.

⁶ The North Atlantic Council declared in January 1994: "NATO will consult with any active participant in the Partnership if that Partner perceives a direct threat to its territorial integrity, political independence, or security." *Partnership for Peace Framework Document*, approved by the North Atlantic Council, 11 January 1994, par. 8. According to Article 4 of the North Atlantic Treaty, "The Parties will consult together whenever, in the opinion of any of them, the territorial integrity, political independence or security of any of the Parties is threatened."

³ While the 1991 and 1999 Strategic Concepts are unclassified, MC 400, the military implementation document prepared by the NATO Military Authorities, and other military guidance documents are classified.

accordingly appropriate that the Alliance first publicly announced its intention to examine the 1991 Strategic Concept with a view to updating it in the May 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act. The Allies deleted the references in the 1991 Strategic Concept to maintaining “the strategic balance within Europe,” which Moscow had found so offensively reminiscent of the Cold War.⁷

Three missions remained essentially unchanged in the 1991 and 1999 Strategic Concepts: serving as a forum for consultation, providing for collective defence, and supplying “one of the indispensable foundations for a stable Euro-Atlantic security environment, based on the growth of democratic institutions and commitment to the peaceful resolution of disputes, in which no country would be able to intimidate or coerce any other through the threat or use of force.” To reflect the Alliance’s principal new post-1991 activities, the 1999 Strategic Concept listed two additional fundamental security tasks: crisis management, including conflict prevention and crisis response operations; and partnership, including dialogue and cooperation, with other nations in the Euro-Atlantic region.⁸ The 1999 Strategic Concept also differed from its predecessor in devoting more attention to efforts to promote nonproliferation and to deter and counter the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), and this extended to defining the preferred characteristics of Allied conventional forces. “As NATO forces may be called upon to operate beyond NATO’s borders, capabilities for dealing with proliferation risks must be flexible, mobile, rapidly deployable and sustainable.”

The discussion of nuclear forces nonetheless remained almost unchanged in the 1991 and 1999 Strategic Concepts. The most noteworthy revisions included the judgment in 1999 by the “Allies concerned” that “The circumstances in which any use of nuclear weapons might have to be contemplated by

them are extremely remote” and their announcement that “NATO’s nuclear forces no longer target any country.”

3. TURBULENT PERIOD

The fact that NATO has evolved from a Eurocentric defence alliance to a global security provider has blurred the lines between the various requirements of security, deterrence, defence or stability. Over the last two decades NATO has adopted a number of tasks which were not foreseen in its initial design as a means for Western self determination and self defense against the Soviet threat. In consequence, there is an urgent need to define NATO’s role in the international security environment. Although NATO is currently more active than ever before in its history, the positive attention it receives remains comparably low. The engagement of most publics in member nations in security policy requirements is traditionally limited, and thus it is still difficult to gather political support for providing sufficient resources for military operations.

Many governments take the lack of interest of their electorates in defence issues for granted and refrain from any attempt to counter this trend. The consequences can be seen with regard to NATO’s engagement in Afghanistan: fewer national governments make an effort to explain to their electorate the need for NATO to act far beyond its territorial borders. The new strategy was supposed to be presented at NATO’s 60th anniversary summit in Strasbourg/ Kehl in April 2009, as the previous Strategic Concept was agreed upon when NATO celebrated its 50th birthday ten years ago. A number of factors baffled this intention. Despite the interest, particularly among the “new” NATO members (who joined the Alliance after the end of the cold war), in a new strategic foundation for NATO, many of the “old” members had their doubts. The “old” members pointed to the general and all encompassing character of the current strategy, asking whether NATO would find a consensus on developing something more specific. Moreover, there was concern that a publicly held strategic discussion could reveal

⁷ North Atlantic Council, *Strategic Concept*, 7 November 1991, paragraphs 14, 21.

⁸ North Atlantic Council, *Strategic Concept*, 24 April 1999, paragraph 10.

how disunited NATO was on key questions like the future role of the Alliance. There were also practical impediments, like the political calendar in the United States.

President Obama, who took office in January 2009, would not have been able to install the entire administration early enough to engage fully in a debate on the basics of the Alliance. As an intermediate solution, a Transatlantic Declaration had been proposed to provide NATO with some political guidance until the new strategy was finalized. This document called the Declaration on Alliance Security (DAS)⁹ and written under the auspices of the former Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, was adopted at NATO's Strasbourg/Kehl summit. Unfortunately, the document made only very general political statements, disappointing those who were expecting some strategic counselling for NATO's further evolution. Its evolution also set the tone for the upcoming debate on the new strategy, as even the general statements in the two-page paper were highly contested until the very last moment before the summit and required decisions at the highest political level. The most interesting part of the DAS is the last paragraph, as it contains carefully negotiated wording on how the new Strategic Concept will be drafted. While previous NATO core documents were drafted by the NATO Council, this time the NATO Secretary General will be in charge of the process.

4. PERSPECTIVE PROBLEMS OR SOLUTIONS?

Is a new strategic concept a panacea for all difficulties? Of course not, but even an agonizing strategic debate with dissenting views and "agreements to disagree" would have at least two crucial advantages; a/ all NATO members would be forced to clarify and precisely express their own positions. Such transparency would increase the general pressure to adapt the individual engagement to commonly agreed positions. Free riding would become much more difficult, b/ by definition,

NATO would become the centre of the transatlantic security dialogue again. Furthermore, popular misperceptions of Europeans humbly accepting US orders would be countered. Assuming that NATO agrees on such a strategic debate, what would its content be?

What are the points to be tackled in a new strategic concept? Two fundamental insights, often disguised by political rhetoric, need to be taken into account. First, the incontestable dominance of the United States not only in military but also in economic and political terms is going to persist for many years to come. This American "hyper power" is not per se "good" or "bad", but it has to be taken into account, whether one likes it or not. This has two vital implications, any future direction of NATO will be determined crucially by the national preferences of the United States and "multipolarity" in the sense of counterbalancing American supremacy is not going to happen any time soon, even if the call for a multipolar world is constantly repeated in Paris, Beijing or Moscow. Moreover, it is far from sure whether such a multipolar world with America, Europe, Russia, China, India and other potential "poles" would be a more stable one. Second, the build-up of a true European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) will take longer than expected, since the EU member states are not prepared to bolster their ambitious political goals with adequate financial means. This has positive as well as negative implications. Positive, since the idea of ESDP being a counterweight to the perceived American hyper power will remain an illusion. Negative, because the beneficial concept of ESDP providing synergetic means to complement American military capabilities will take longer to realize as well.

Closely connected to the question of NATO's role of both defence and security is the question of how to deal with Russia. This is a major issue in almost all NATO debates. Even the group that drafted the DAS spent a significant part of its discussion on the Russia question. The dilemma is striking: on the one hand, NATO and Russia are engaged in a unique partnership "at 29" (28 NATO members plus Russia) organized in a special

⁹ http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/news_52838.htm?mode=pressrelease, 11.05.2009

forum, the NATO-Russia Council. On the other hand, a large number of NATO Allies - given their history and geographic location - view Article V as primarily directed against Russia, since there is hardly any other country imaginable that would be able to launch a military attack against NATO territory. The Georgia crisis in 2008 has worsened the situation. In the NATO Council there was no unity on how to react to the military escalation. Media in the Baltic States raised the question of how NATO might have reacted if Russia had chosen to take military action in order to “protect” Russian minorities in Estonia or Latvia. In the meantime, NATO has declared that it will not return to “business as usual” but at the same time that it will re-establish relations between Brussels and Moscow. Hence, it still remains unclear how NATO intends to deal with a partner as important as it is difficult to handle.

5. CONCLUSIONS

In the wake of the fundamental changes in the international security landscape throughout the last decade, the expectations of a new Strategic Concept are very high. The process leading to a new NATO strategy is in its initial stage. It remains to be seen whether the procedures currently envisioned can sustain the complex grid of NATO’s decision making processes. Given the wide spectrum of national preferences, regional priorities and political differences among 28 NATO member states, forging consensus will be an extremely demanding task.

NATO should not miss its goal of formulating concise, coherent and forward looking strategic guidance that can satisfy political leaders, military planners and public elites at the same time.

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