

NATO Threatened

Is there still a future for NATO?

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Introduction

The recent military intervention in Afghanistan and NATO's reduced visibility in that fight against international terrorism has generated a series of debates about the Alliance's role within the current security environment. But that is nothing new.

Debates over the nature, the size, the mission and the capabilities of NATO have been going on since its inception.

One of the most critical points of those debates took place in 1989, following the fall of the Berlin wall and the break up of the Soviet Union. Some critics suggested then that NATO had concluded its mission and would no longer remain relevant in the new strategic security environment.

In fact, when the North Atlantic Treaty Organization was created, in April 1949, it had a clear strategic objective: to deter and defend against the threat, real or perceived, of the Soviet Union (USSR). It also had a political objective – That of upholding Western democratic values based on the rule of law and the freedom of the individual. And with the collapse of the communist system, the Western Alliances *raison d'être* was now at stake... So we assisted NATO's first identity crisis.

During the Gulf War, yet again, when a coalition replaced NATO in the fight to oust Iraq from Kuwait, some analysts predicted that future military operations would assume that same format and that NATO was no longer either adequate nor prepared to face modern challenges. It soon became apparent that those critics were wrong. The number of countries knocking at NATO's doorstep persisted, and not only on the basis of security concerns. Many of them were also seeking support and assistance to their military reforms. What better measure of success could we expect under such circumstances?

NATO was able to adjust itself to the new environment by identifying other missions and playing an important role as an instrument of spreading stability and democratic values. A process of transformation, evolving from the defensive posture adopted throughout the Cold War to a security institution embracing virtually all of Europe and North America, was immediately set into motion.

In 1999, when NATO celebrated its fiftieth anniversary, the transformation process was concluded. A new strategic concept was adopted, a flatter and simplified command structure with increased jointness and multinationality was implemented, and a list of new capabilities required to meet the new challenges was identified.¹

Last but not least, the first step of the process of enlargement was also concluded with the admission of three new member countries. Simultaneously, NATO became increasingly involved in cooperation with Russia, Ukraine and 25 other countries in Europe and Central Asia, building the Partnership for Peace (PfP).

The end result provided NATO with a reasonable leverage to successfully manage several complex crises in the Balkans and even win its first military campaign in Kosovo (although we may agree that this wasn't such a successful campaign – in

¹ Vadm Reis Rodrigues, "What lies ahead for NATO", speech delivered on the 48th ATA General Assembly, Istanbul, October 2002.

fact it was the beginning of a second identity crisis for NATO, based on its legitimacy to act).

Then, the tragic event of September 11 hit the U.S., a tragedy that many considered has changed the world...

Once again, critics stepped forward saying that that was no role for NATO to deal with the threat of international terrorism. In fact, many are the scholars predicting NATO's fall in the near future, specially after these latest events. In fact, as some say "*Each crisis seemed to have in it the seeds of NATO's demise*"².

But this is only one of many arguments put forward to predict NATO's fall in the near future, in what we can call NATO's second big identity crisis.

In this short essay, I try to make the case against these predictions, or at least to question them. In fact I think there is still a long way to go to justify the catastrophic view that NATO's demise is just around the corner.

I will address four of these arguments – the 9/11 consequences, European autonomous forces, Enlargement and EU/US cultural clash – all of them being considered as threats to NATO's 'health'.

1 – 9/11: NATO's failure as a Collective Defense Organization

The arguments invoked by NATO skeptics to defend their points of view are several and diverse in nature, but the most recurrent one nowadays – the one that brought the issue back again into the political-military agenda – is the extremely reduced role NATO played during the US military campaign against the terrorist training camps in Afghanistan, following the attacks against New York and Washington.

Only six hours after the event NATO invoked its Article 5, the first time in the Organization's 52 years history. But United States weren't even expecting this reaction and didn't find it useful. This was considered a non acceptance of the logic of collective defense – the whole basis of NATO's existence was undermined by US's unilateral impulses. The Article 5 seemed to have become merely a way of "*corralling the allies into supporting the US policy*"³, giving US the "Carte Blanche" – the legitimacy of a war against Afghanistan based on self defense.

Perhaps because of the messy experience in Kosovo, US choose to send its own troops to Afghanistan – and if we remember the existent technological gap between US and its European allies, and the difficulty they have to act with speed and efficiency, this doesn't come as such a surprise...

I believe the 9/11 was no sign of death, but a clear lesson for NATO – It means that NATO, who managed to adapt to a rapidly changing international system, will now have to adapt once more to the new international realities.

And in fact, after all these events, Lord Robertson addressed the Us Atlantic Council explaining why NATO is – or should be the key pillar of the coalition fighting for the "civilized world", having the unique strength, composition, cohesion and speed of delivery that other organizations like OSCE, EU or UN cannot achieve so easily⁴. Following this logic, the next Summit in Prague in 21-22 November, is expected to propose a plan of action to counter the transnational threats of terrorism, to be submitted to NATO's member States. So we can see the efforts being put into new international constraints.

²Croft, Stuart. Jolyon Howorth, Terry Terriff and Mark Webber – '*NATO's triple challenge*', in *International Affairs* 76, 3 (2000) p.496.

³ John Chalmers, *NATO's Future in fresh doubt*, DAWN International, December 2001.

⁴ See Van Ham, Peter - *Politics as unusual: NATO and the EU after 9/11*, in *Collegium*, n.23, Spring 2002

I also don't believe that after this events Iraq is the only opportunity for NATO to rebuilt its confidence and credibility. I believe this is not a case of Invocation of article 5, where states have to prove the collective defense nature of the Alliance. I really don't see this as a job for NATO – so I don't agree that its credibility will be damaged if it doesn't intervene.

And we can even apply the same argument to the war against Afghanistan – Indeed, US current policy of favoring temporary coalitions doesn't threaten NATO's continuity in the sense that temporary coalitions are only feasible when they stem from a permanent “core-coalition” and this is a role that only NATO can play. In 9/11, like in the previous Gulf War, NATO was not formally involved, but, Allied forces, bases and cooperation among NATO militaries were critical. All the tasks were facilitated by the existence of common NATO operational doctrines, agreed equipment standards, routine multinational exercises and interoperable secure communications⁵. NATO itself may prove to be the best option for the maintenance of a long-term security force in Afghanistan.

2 - The building of an “autonomous” European force.

Especially since Kosovo, the gradual creation, inside the Alliance, of a stronger and more autonomous European Security capability has emerged not just as a NATO military project, but also as an EU political project. The Cologne and Helsinki EU Councils launched the notion of a Common European security and defense policy (CESDP) as an inherent part of the EU's long term political agenda.

However, this European project is for some scholars, a big threat on NATO's future. The objective is to give Europe an independent voice on security issues – independent from USA, that is. And with a new set of European structures ready to tackle the same problems NATO dealt before, we would no longer feel the need for it or at least we would have an autonomous voice, which US could no longer formally influence.

This would mean, if not its death, at least NATO's weakening.

But also here the opinions diverge, and we could acknowledge already in the negotiations in Helsinki, the existence of a dichotomy between Europeanist and Atlanticists, among the European NATO member States - the first primarily concerned about the European project (France, Spain, Belgium and Luxembourg) and the seconds reflecting on the best ways to safeguard the Atlantic Alliance (United Kingdom, Portugal, Netherlands and Denmark)⁶.

This is a serious dichotomy between those who still see NATO as the Security reference and others who wish to see Europe acquiring greater autonomy.

The question here is – Do European Union initiatives threaten NATO?

On this subject I would say that no – and I find many reasons for this statement. First of all, European initiatives on this area are still on the very beginning – and it looks to be a very long process. This is a very sensitive issue, touching directly States sovereignty. That is why all decisions are taken by unanimity – which leads to almost no decision being taken... In fact, states aren't interested in a system that would bind them more than NATO planning.... Like they also aren't interested in spending more money in defense.

And if NATO has proven to have an effective and efficient structure – Maybe they would prefer to leave this role to the Atlantic Alliance... And NATO has already

⁵ See Gordon, Philip H. – *Reforging the Atlantic Alliance* in *The National Interest*, Fall 2002.

⁶ See Croft, Stuart, op. Cit, p.506.

an integrated military structure with forces of a higher standard that the EU will have to achieve, which makes this process even more complex.

For as long as we keep the same system of decision making for European Security and Defense issues – Intergovernmental decision-making with difficult common voice - NATO will still be more effective.

Also important is the fact that to develop ESDP, EU needs to rely on NATO (to learn from its structures and mechanisms and to get technological support on weaponry and communications). Above all, if we choose to work completely isolated from it we will be duplicating already existing structures. Meaning bigger costs and efforts, that EU members don't seem interested in taking.

And indeed a cooperation is foreseen – The Helsinki Council of 99 decided to “Develop an autonomous capacity to take decisions where NATO as a whole is not engaged” but also to develop “modalities for full consultation, cooperation and transparency between EU and NATO”⁷.

My conclusion here would be that the best achievement will be the building of the ESDP with the maintenance of NATO's structures in deep dialogue. Giving a bigger independence to Europe on security matters but maintaining a support mechanism with American states. I don't see how this can threaten NATO...

3 - Enlargement – NATO becoming an “empty vessel”?

The third argument used by scholars to predict the end of NATO is enlargement and the Threat of losing NATO's natural values in between...

Can we keep a common voice after the enlargement of NATO to the East? Or will we be falling exactly into the same problem that EU already faces in its Security policy?

These authors believe that with the enlargement into the East – into the former NATO enemies, different cultures and different interests – NATO's ability to decide quickly and effectively will be mined.

At the same time, NATO will face the problem of maintaining a healthy and endurable relationship with Russia – and the bigger goal of maintaining stability in Europe will be at stake...

NATO is based on the principles of: Common interest, shared responsibility, concerted resolve, collective action and decision by consensus. All these principles may be at stake with the entrance of maybe 10 new countries, with different interests, different values and cultures – Which make it very difficult for decision by consensus – and with no common voice, we cannot have collective action...

The three values NATO is based on are Democracy, Human Rights and the Rule of Law. Some of these countries may have problems complying with them – This is already happening to Hungary, who cannot comply with the promises and commitments it made to come in – But NATO has no procedure system to deal with the members that violate its rules and standards. Effectiveness asks for consensus – And if we can't find a minimum common denominator... Then NATO may become just an *empty vessel*⁸.

But if we take another case – Poland – Also a fresh new member of NATO – we will arrive to different conclusions. In fact, Poland's improvements show that it can be the enlargement and NATO's countries influence leading to further

⁷ See Croft, Stuart, op. Cit, p.506.

⁸ Wallander, Celeste A. – *NATO's price: Shape up or ship out*, in Foreign Affairs, Nov/Dec 2002

democratization – creating homogeneity and a bigger area of stability – NATO’s bigger goal.

Many countries are willing to change so that they can comply with NATO’s principles and values – and being able to join in. And I think we shouldn’t neglect this will of so many countries to join the Alliance.

About the management of the relations with Russia – and although these have always been difficult relations, agreement isn’t impossible. Indeed, in the last years much has been achieved. USA / Russia relations improved remarkably after 9/11. And a NATO / Russia Council was created last May – deepening the relation and giving Russia a possibility of veto to NATO’s actions in the future. Also important in this area were Putin’s comments on NATO’s enlargement, showing a greater acceptance of these developments.

So, concluding, I would say that if well lead, enlargement will never undermine NATO’s future. But this must be taken as the last stage of a long process which starts with the development of interoperability and other forms of direct military cooperation under the enhanced PfP. Only then, when the country shown already the ability to comply with its compromises, the last step should be taken.

4 - Europe / U.S. - Cultural clash?

One last issue that has been claimed recently as a strong sign of NATO’s fall is the growing cleavage between Europe and USA, strengthened by the already analyzed question of ESDP – Giving EU member states an alternative to the alliance with US, which leads to the strengthening of European individual identity against the American identity⁹.

Following this theory, we would acknowledge that what we call western values is in fact a too broad concept - Europe and US are in fact very different in their cultural background. Even the concept of threat differs from one to another (the different budgets for defense show it). Also the concept of how to use NATO (towards what goal NATO should work), seems to be different. And so, NATO’s actions based on the “common western values” come as empty of real content.

The outcome will be that, *“as soon as NATO’s cultural basis is undermined and its practical relevance diminished”* NATO will slowly *“turn into a convenient, but certainly not pivotal, talking-shop a la OSCE”*¹⁰.

This is a very strong argument, especially now that culture and identity have become such a big issue in international relations, but I would say that the Realpolitik view of International Relations is still the concept of many political leaders. I think that geopolitical interests are still the core of the issue, showing more influence than culture. Otherwise, how could we understand US support on the entrance of Turkey in the EU? And more, how could we even explain Turkey as an ally of US in NATO?

I also don’t think any of the sides wishes to loose the other’s support – Who but Europe could be US ally? *“Surely, if it may be granted that the United States is wise to seek allies, there is no imaginable substitute for the capacities, military and otherwise, that America’s NATO allies can provide”*¹¹.

Conclusion – What lies ahead for NATO

Opposing views are not new in NATO. During the Cold War the fact that we shared a well-known common enemy against which we had to remain united helped

⁹ Van Ham, Peter – *Security and culture, or why NATO won’t last*, in Security Dialogue vol.32, Dec 2002

¹⁰ Van Ham, Peter – Op. Cit., p. 404

¹¹ Gordon, Philip H. – op. cit.

accommodate existing differences and settle conflicts. Today, we no longer share the same compelling reason to stand united against the communist threat but former risks, coupled with new asymmetrical threats, are still valid reasons to maintain robust the cohesion we need to keep security and progress in the world.

Terrorism is one of them. And if we wish to fight a terrorist network we need indeed a counter terrorism network. NATO, as a permanent coalition, can play that role on a permanent basis.

This is, I think, one of NATO's future roles. The other one is Peacekeeping – for which the Alliance as been working in the last years, shifting from Preparation for Article 5 missions, to preparation for Peacekeeping operations.

So indeed, NATO doesn't look dead – it has been proceeding with its own internal military and political restructuring, so that it can achieve its new role on the world security arena. Let's just wait for Prague and see what happens...