Considerations on NATO's Future Direction

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The future direction of the Alliance depends on the answers to two questions. First, what are today's security challenges for member states? Second, which challenges can the Alliance tackle? This article examines four hypotheses which may structure the debate on the future Strategic Concept: i) the focus on the Greater Middle East; ii) the fundamental attention given to weak states; iii) the focus on non-governmental threats; and iv) a re-focusing on Europe.

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NATO is on the defensive: faltering in Afghanistan, divided over Russia, and uncertain about Iran and a host of other security problems. Doubts about the Alliance's future are again on the rise – not for the first time, as seasoned observers will note. Rewriting the Strategic Concept, NATO's core strategy document, is a chance to revitalize the Alliance by redefining NATO's purposes for the future. NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen has assembled an expert team led by a former US Secretary of state to take up the task. But the task will not be easy. Consensus within the Alliance is at historic lows. Not only does NATO comprise nearly twice the members it did the last time the Strategic Concept was rewritten, the nature of the security problems its members face has grown manifestly more complex.[1]

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1. There are already a number of useful studies on the Strategic Concept revision, including: Dan Hamilton *et alii*, 'Alliance Reborn: An Atlantic Compact for the 21st Century,' Center for Transatlantic Relations, Johns Hopkins University, SAIS, February 2009; Zbigniew Brzezinski, 'Towards a Security Web' in this issue of *Politique étrangère*.

A focus on our common problems

On the most basic level, the question that should drive the Strategic Concept revision and thinking about NATO's future in general should be: how can the Alliance best prepare to serve the common security problems of its member states? This question itself has two parts: First, what are the most pressing security challenges facing the member states? Second, which of these can NATO reasonably be expected to help manage, were it

The rewrite process must focus on the threats member states face today

to decide it wanted to? In other words, it is crucial that the rewrite process focus primarily on the threats member states face today, as opposed to NATO's own problems. The key to the latter is to be found in the former,

and the point of the rewrite should not be to 'save NATO' but to identify and articulate a coherent vision of how NATO can help preserve the security of the citizens of its members in a global environment that continues to change and evolve. At the same time, *idées fixes* about what NATO is and is not able to do will have to be relaxed in favor of realistic assessments of what NATO might be if it tried.

Focusing on the threats to member states means accepting, in theory, that an organization like NATO may no longer be needed and might be obsolete. Once the question is posed openly, however, the need for NATO should be self-evident. The vast majority of the security problems member states face today call for a multilateral approach. For this reason, the United Nations, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the African Union (AU) and the EU's developing security policy, the European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP), are all essential parts of the emerging global security architecture. Each has its own strengths and each is appropriate for certain situations and tasks. NATO is no different. It provides a highly developed structure through which the US and Europe can cooperate to improve their security and resolve common problems.

Today's security challenges, of course, take many forms. Not all are military. NATO will not be the appropriate organization to address all these challenges, and it will be able to address very few of them on its own without the support and cooperation of other organizations. Nevertheless, as a multilateral institution its value is as great as ever.

The art of coherence

Although identifying the threats that NATO can reasonably be expected to address is the central task in rewriting the Strategic Concept, there is a

second task of near-equal import, and that involves more art than analysis. This is the public-relations task without which the revision will fall flat. Successful public relations requires public outreach, but it requires more than that. It also demands clarity of vision. Hence, once the problems that NATO is suited to address have been identified, they must be prioritized and brought under some conceptually coherent vision for the Alliance, preferably a vision whose main thrust can be telegraphed to the public in a news headline. If they are to be expected to support the Alliance, the citizens of NATO's member states must be given some understanding of what it is for. During the Cold War, NATO's central purpose was clear: to defend members against the Soviet Union. This was the case despite the fact that NATO had several other purposes – in particular, containing Germany, a purpose, it is worth noting, it served best in conjunction with the predecessors to the European Union. Today, NATO can still serve more than one purpose, but it will be able to do so more effectively if those involved in the rewrite are able to identify some central vision around which the citizens of the main member states can coalesce.

To be sure, the authors of this Strategic Concept will want to build in sufficient flexibility to ensure it would still be relevant should the unexpected occur. Any statement of NATO's purposes will run the risk of being superseded by events. A case in point is the last Strategic Concept, which appeared two years before 9/11, yet barely noted the terrorist threat. It will thus be necessary to balance flexibility with strategic coherence. The risk of incoherence will grow as the need to accommodate the concerns of 28 members weighs on the discussion, but a NATO that seeks to be all things to all members will never generate the energy crucial for effectiveness. The kitchen sink, Christmas tree, and gourmand approaches to the revision simply will not work.

Intellectual challenges

With these pre-conditions in mind, it is worth considering some of the main common security challenges facing NATO members, and some of the directions a rewrite of the Strategic Concept might take. It goes without saying that, throughout their modern histories, the central threats to the security of NATO's members have arisen from other states. The dominant paradigm in the 19th and 20th centuries was large-scale, highly organized war between the armies of industrialized states – what some in that era called 'European War' to distinguish it from the wars fought in the colonies, which were of a different nature and generally less important to European powers. The relative significance of this type of war

We are living the end of 'European Wars'

to the security of NATO's members, however, has declined significantly in the last two decades, while at the same time remaining primary in the national imagination and mythology of many NATO member states. The ghost of major war between industrial nations continues to haunt thinking when it comes to the old East-West conflict in particular – the conflict that was one of NATO's primary *raisons d'être* but is no more. Despite the growing literature on irregular war, war among the peoples, the utility of force, hybrid war, and so forth, the belief that major industrial war is the only security function the Alliance should serve has proven difficult to shake.[2]

The major security problems the citizens of the Alliance face now are of a largely different nature, and arise not, as in the past two centuries, from industrialization and nationalism in Europe's competitive state system, but from the transposition of these ideologies and processes on to a global scale, where their effects create different challenges and pose novel threats to the nation states of the transatlantic region. The social, political, and economic forces at work in the world today are of course far too complex to identify with any specificity, but the fact that the conflicts to which they give rise differ in nature from the overweening threat of industrial war in the 19th and 20th centuries is an empirical fact. While all conflict has certain commonalities, civil, tribal, ethnic, religious and other conflicts in the world today differ significantly in both character and consequence from the European wars that shaped the strategic imaginations in which the foreign and security policies of NATO's member states are grounded. These problems affect the security of NATO's citizens in different ways and require different solutions. It is worth emphasizing that many of the solutions are not military, but that military force may often be part of a broader effort – as in comprehensive peacekeeping, to name a leading example. The test of whether NATO should prepare to respond to a particular threat, however, is not whether or not the threat is military, but whether the resolution of the threat could reasonably be expected to have a military dimension.

Whereas centuries of intra-state war in Europe have left us with a highly developed cultural knowledge about conventional war and inter-state rivalry, we are only on the cusp of starting to understand clearly how the new challenges posed by the dynamics of the globalizing world affect our security, let alone what the optimal ways of dealing with these challenges are. But there is little doubt that they do affect our lives and, without vigilance, could erode our way of life just as any state-centric threat would.

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2. For example, Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force*, New York: Knopf, 2007.

Herein lies a major challenge to any state seeking to build security for its next generation. The challenge is compounded in an Alliance where the diversity of historical experience is bound to produce varying interpretations on how the security problems of the present affect members. The fundamental lack of consensus that many have observed in NATO is, in other words, not only a consequence of different 'objective' interests, but also a consequence of the relative newness of the threats we face, and our continued struggle to understand them and their implications.

This fact only makes the discussion surrounding the Strategic Concept more important. Indeed, one of the main benefits the process of revising the Strategic Concept could offer is to deepen public understanding of these new threats, how they affect our security, and the relative role of the civilian, diplomatic, economic, and military components of their solutions. If the expert group achieves this alone, it would be a significant boon for NATO.

Future directions for the Alliance

We do, of course, know something about the current challenges. It is possible to assess in broad terms what would be involved in gearing the Alliance to address them. Indeed, when one examines the basic challenges we face and narrows the field to those that NATO might reasonably be expected to address, three main directions for the Alliance emerge. These directions are not mutually exclusive, although the precaution about maintaining clear priorities and intellectual coherence poses some restrictions on how they might be combined. In addition to these three possible directions, there are additional considerations about NATO's role in Europe and its global partnerships that will inevitably have to be taken into account in the revision itself, but in such a way as to avoid certain pitfalls and dead-ends.

> **The Alliance needs a 'hard' and 'soft' strategy with respect to weak states**

NATO in the Greater Middle East

The first major new direction that NATO could choose to follow would be to announce a renewed focus on the Greater Middle East. The vast majority of threats NATO allies share emanate from a region that stretches from the Sahara to Pakistan, a region the recent French White Paper on Defense and National Security has dubbed the "zone of crisis." Here NATO members share the joint need to combat Al Qaeda, ensure the flow of energy from the Gulf, address the potential threat of a nuclear-armed Iran, and build

stability in South Asia. Clearly, the solutions to these challenges cannot be solely or even primarily military in nature, but they could all have a military component. Member states' interests in the region are not identical, and preferred strategies will differ, but this does not diminish the importance of the region to the allies' security.

An effective NATO strategy in the Greater Middle East might follow in the tradition of defense and détente. On the one hand, NATO could lead with a soft-power strategy aimed at building regional security through partnerships with Middle Eastern states. This effort would involve training and equipping regional states for peacekeeping and peace-support operations and efforts to facilitate interoperability to a NATO standard for joint operations. These same partnerships could also serve to deepen cultural exchanges and develop cross-cultural awareness within the officer corps of the region. They could eventually become the basis for discussions on regional security issues aimed at building collective security architecture for the region itself. The same soft strategy would also involve readying NATO to play a regional peacekeeping role, if called upon to do so as part of a broader Middle East peace settlement.

On the other hand, NATO would also want to maintain a hard-security strategy as a backdrop for these efforts. NATO's credibility in the region has already suffered as a result of the difficulties in Afghanistan. It would, therefore, be prudent to maintain the ability to project combat forces to the region in order to underpin the broader regional effort with hard security. Maintaining such a capability would require at least ensuring that NATO members did not allow further decreases in defense spending and continued to transform their militaries for out-of-area operations. The need to project power for smaller-scale operations, especially with special forces, would also be desirable. Finally, sustaining NATO's conventional power would provide a flexible and thus more credible deterrent against the threat of an Iranian nuclear missile, although deterrence against such a threat would probably entail a rethink of NATO's nuclear posture as well.

A new initiative in the Greater Middle East would thus not involve major new military challenges. On the political level, however, the undertaking would clearly be more difficult, and apt to meet with objections both in the region as well as in NATO itself. This would be especially the case if the move were misconstrued as a veiled attempt by the United States to transform the Alliance into a means of undertaking further regime change in the region – for example, in Iran. Regional states have proven lukewarm at best to NATO's past initiatives in the region. Further efforts to convince them of the benefit of allowing NATO on their soil

would clearly be necessary. Designing the right partner packages – with the requisite financial and other incentives – would therefore be crucial. The natural starting-point of this would be an objective assessment of NATO's existing programs in the region, the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative and Mediterranean Dialogue.

In short, while encouraging a new focus on the Middle East would directly benefit a wide range of major US and European security needs, the political difficulties involved would be considerable. This is not a reason to reject the direction, but it is a reason to be realistic about the timeframe in which it would bear fruit. If NATO is unable to develop its strategic relationship with the one region where there is the greatest consonance of interests among its members, the vitality of the Alliance can only suffer.

NATO and fragile states

An alternative direction would be to announce a new focus on failed and fragile states. Since the end of the Cold War, the problems created by such states have repeatedly led to military interventions, such as in Afghanistan. They are likely to do so again, whether for humanitarian reasons or for narrower security reasons. These interventions will have multiple dimensions of which the military capability that NATO can offer is only one. Historically, however, there has normally been some military dimension to managing the problem of weak states, and this military dimension will be most effective if handled though a multilateral organization such as NATO. The Alliance would obviously not want to take on an open-ended obligation to address the problem of failed states worldwide, but it may want to ensure that it is better prepared to handle the requisite military tasks should it be called upon to do so again.

The United Nations, of course, will remain the institution of choice for dealing with failed states in many cases. But the UN is not always the most suitable organization, especially as long as the United States and Europe continue to hesitate to place troops under its authority or when the military requirements of an operation appear beyond the reach of the UN. For its part, the European Union is generating growing capacity for dealing with failed states. It is building a raft of different tools for addressing their problems. However, the EU effort is still embryonic, and will not, in and of itself, suffice to cope with the problem of failed states, especially if that problem grows more serious.[3] Neither the EU nor the UN would be able,

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3. See James Dobbins *et alii*, *Europe's Role in Nation Building*, Santa Monica: RAND, 2008.

for example, to handle the military needs of a collapse of Pakistan – a possibility that, however terrible, is far from unthinkable.

A NATO strategy to address the military challenges arising from failed states would, like a new strategy for the Greater Middle East, have both hard- and soft-security dimensions. On the soft side, NATO would work with the European Union and other actors to bolster stability in weak states, through security-sector reform and security-force assistance and training, as it is currently doing in both Iraq (NATO Training Mission-Iraq, NTM-I) and Afghanistan (NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan, NTM-A). At the same time, it would establish mechanisms for integrating non-NATO partner countries into NATO missions in failed states. These partnerships could be permanent, or bounded by the terms of the specific missions. In either case, it would be desirable to offer these partners some conditional representation at the North Atlantic Council, as appropriate to their role and level of engagement. If this representation and the rights pertaining to it were linked to the resource commitment of the partner country – for example, a contribution of 10 per cent of the combat force – it might provide an additional incentive for partners such as Australia and Japan to contribute to NATO efforts.

On the hard side, NATO would need to agree a comprehensive counter-insurgency strategy and commit the resources to make it effective. Even if counter-insurgency were not the main focus of the strategy, it would inevitably be at least an ancillary military requirement. NATO would clearly also need to maintain a large stabilization force (probably the size of a US Army Corps), to have the ability to project it far from Europe's borders, and to sustain it for extended periods.

These military requirements are substantial. Sustained investment and reform would be needed. They are by no means impossible to meet, however, were NATO members to make them a priority. Indeed, NATO has already begun to develop some of these capabilities as a result of its engagements in the Balkans and Afghanistan, although more could be done.

To be sure, any NATO initiative on fragile states would meet with a number of political obstacles. First, as noted, NATO's relative relationship with the EU and UN would have to be delineated, at least in the broad sense. The problem of competition between the organizations is less serious than it appears on the surface, however. In many cases, NATO would prefer to leave such operations to others. Institutions do not normally compete for the prize of conducting stabilization operations, which are often expensive, but rather attempt to shift the burden elsewhere.

Some might argue that NATO's problems in Afghanistan demonstrate that NATO cannot effectively play a role in post-conflict stabilization. But NATO's difficulties in Afghanistan are largely the result of political constraints that could be changed, strategic missteps, and the inherent difficulty of the mission. They should not be seen as the consequence of any inherent incapacity of the allies in this field. That NATO has difficulty with such missions today is clear – and it could still fail in Afghanistan – but this does not mean that it will never be able to overcome them.

Moving in this direction would have the significant, immediate benefit of focusing allied attention and resources on the war NATO is fighting today. This is a strong argument in itself, given that success in Afghanistan may be necessary to ensure the durability of the Alliance as we know it. In short, NATO has been developing these capabilities as a result of its experience with the realities of today's security environment, and a strategic concept that acknowledges this fact is well warranted.

NATO and non-state threats

Just as NATO's members share an interest in the Greater Middle East and in stabilizing some fragile states, they share an interest in combating non-state threats. The threat of terrorist attacks, natural disasters, some forms of cyber war, global organized crime, trafficking in drugs and people, and several other related problems are all increasingly important to the security of the citizens of NATO countries. It follows that a third option would be to declare a new focus on non-state threats. This option would be broader geographically than a focus on the Greater Middle East and would leave more latitude functionally than a focus on failed states. Adopting it as a priority in the Strategic Concept would signal a major shift in NATO's basic purpose and public image.

This direction would require significant military adaptation, and operationalizing it would be challenging. If NATO were to play a central role in combating non-state threats, it would, first and foremost, need to establish mechanisms for closer cooperation with and between the law-enforcement agencies of member states. It would also be desirable to establish closer intelligence-sharing within the Alliance, and develop enhanced capabilities for information exchange on border monitoring, tracking, and pursuit activities. It would require continuing to develop allied capabilities for force projection on the small scale, especially projection of special-operations forces. To combat these threats, NATO would also need to develop partnerships with third states worldwide, although these partnerships would be focused on particular problems and not geared toward membership.

At the same time, it would be desirable to engage in intensive intra-Alliance discussions to develop joint doctrine for combating non-state threats. When it comes to cyber-threats, for example, the Alliance would need to establish doctrine regarding the threshold for a NATO response to a cyber-attack on one of its members, while at the same time determining whether NATO would respond to such an attack in kind or with more conventional military force. Finally, NATO would need to take specific actions to protect its members – for example, by contributing to port security or developing systems to help member states prevent nuclear weapons from entering allied territory by covert means. This might lead to a significant increase in NATO's 'own' capabilities – that is, the capabilities that are jointly owned and shared by NATO rather than contributed by the member states.

By contrast with focusing NATO on the Middle East, the operational challenges involved in making non-state threats a priority would be greater than the political challenges. The first political challenge would be in defining NATO's role relative to the European Union, the body in which many of NATO's members already undertake these tasks. The second would be reassuring East European states, which are still insecure about the future trajectory of Russia's foreign policy, that a non-state focus did not mean the end of NATO's traditional Article V commitments to the territorial integrity of its members, but only a recognition of the protean nature of the threats member states face.

In general, a non-state focus would address the main security threats that most member states face today. It would also leave sufficient flexibility for adapting NATO to these threats in the future, while offering at least a basic degree of conceptual coherence.

Provided that NATO can reassure Eastern Europe, agree to discuss openly the related strategy issues, finance the development of 'own' capabilities, and coordinate domestic law-enforcement, counter-terrorism and other efforts, this could prove another desirable future direction for the Alliance.

NATO'S European core

The non-state direction clearly raises the question of what NATO's future role in Europe ought to be. A number of analysts and commentators believe that NATO should forgo all the three directions outlined above in favor of a 'return to Europe.' In large part this sentiment arises out of a dissatisfaction with NATO's performance in out-of-area missions since the

end of the Cold War. Some analysts also point to unfinished business in the Balkans, but the main argument for a 'return to Europe' is surely uncertainty over Russia's future. Russia's failure to acknowledge fault in the Russia-Georgia war of August 2008 appears to be an intentional effort to maintain ambiguity regarding its willingness to use force on its periphery – an ambiguity that, Russia recognizes, contributes to divisions within NATO. Despite its efforts to transform its military, Russia is not a major security threat to the Alliance. But this does not mean it cannot cause problems, and central and east European states – especially the Baltics, two of which have significant Russian minority populations – have an understandable desire for reassurance from NATO.

It is not the task of the Strategic Concept to determine the precise extent to which NATO should reassure its new members about Russia – that is, to outline specific military measures required. Nevertheless, the Strategic Concept must reaffirm the willingness to use the allies' unsurpassed collective military might to maintain the territorial integrity of its members. Not doing so would be counter-productive to both the credibility of the Alliance and the effort to improve NATO-Russia relations. Without security, NATO's new members will continually sow the seeds of discord over allied strategy toward Russia. Reassuring them is, therefore, a prerequisite for an effective reset of NATO-Russia relations, especially in the aftermath of the Russia-Georgia war.

The Alliance must defend the territorial integrity of its members first and foremost

This argument for reassurance, however, does not amount to an argument for a 'return to Europe.' It amounts to a recognition that any of the new directions proposed above must be coupled with certain guarantees of a more traditional nature, and that this is simply a reflection of the current security environment the allies face. Indeed, a Strategic Concept that outlined a refocus on Europe would be a potential disaster for the Alliance in the long run. For one, the fact that Russia poses a major foreign policy challenge to NATO's member states does not mean that it poses a major security challenge to those states. Moreover, many of the problems that Russia's recent foreign policy creates are better handled by the EU or other organizations. When Russia threatens to deprive Eastern Europe of its energy supplies, this is obviously a security challenge, but it is not a security challenge that has an obvious military solution, and is thus not a security challenge whose resolution should fall to NATO. Economic sanctions and other forms of pressure are the obvious means for dealing effectively with such a move. The European Union, or a joint EU-US body, would no doubt be better suited.

More important, a refocus on Europe would encourage US disengagement from NATO. There is already a growing sentiment in the United States that NATO is not worth the trouble, especially given the difficulties the Alliance has encountered in Afghanistan. It is essential that this sentiment not be underestimated in Europe. Were NATO to refocus on Europe, this sentiment would grow stronger. To sustain US support for the Alliance, NATO will have to address pressing US problems, the majority of which are no longer located in Europe.

To say that the majority of the problems the US faces are no longer located in Europe is not, however, to say that the Alliance should 'go global.' NATO's transatlantic character should remain defined by its membership, not by where it operates. That membership for the foreseeable future should remain limited to the transatlantic area. While there are alluring philosophical arguments for extending membership to create a global alliance of democracies, there are several practical obstacles to doing so. Many of the established democracies that could contribute to NATO operations are simply not interested in joining the Alliance. When it comes to members that are less established but interested in joining, the requisite costs for providing for their military transformation and defense would be prohibitively high. In general, assessments of whether or not a particular state should be invited in should focus far less on the democratic or cultural credentials of the state in question, than on whether the prospective enhancement to the security of existing members outweighs the likely costs.

The challenge ahead

The challenge ahead for the group of experts and those engaged in the revision is quite considerable. The revision process can do a great deal to help build consensus within the Alliance, but it will not resolve all the internal disagreements and divisions that have plagued the Alliance since the end of the Cold War. Moreover, the changing nature of today's security environment will ensure that even the best strategic concept will have a relatively short shelf-life. Nevertheless, the process is well worthwhile if it builds consensus in allied states about the basic problems we face and the appropriate role of military force in resolving them.

If this process of reform and adaptation is successful, the Alliance in a decade will look different than it does today or it did a decade ago. It will play different, perhaps multiple, roles. It will work more smoothly alongside other international institutions. It will be grounded in a common commitment to collective defense, but will have altered its strategies and

developed its capabilities to meet the needs of collective defense and collective security in a new context. Building a strategic concept that sets NATO out in this direction will require a combination of creativity, analysis, and skilled diplomatic deal-brokering. It is a challenge worth taking up, however, both for the well being of NATO's member states and for the broader transatlantic relationship.

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KEYWORDS

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