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The history of the Alliance may be divided into three phases. The first spans the four decades of the Cold War. Next, the Alliance took on a role as a midwife to political change in Europe. Following 9/11, the role of the Alliance has been part of a wider debate about the challenges to international security. This debate is still open, and includes, among other things, the redefinition of NATO's missions and their corresponding means.

politique étrangère

When the 12 founding members[1] signed the North Atlantic Treaty in Washington DC on 4th April 1949, no-one could imagine that they were present at the creation of the most successful politico-military alliance in modern history. What they initially agreed upon was an institutionalized conference of member states, which was developed only step by step into an international organization with powerful military capability. Today, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) consists of 28 member states, and more are awaiting admission. It conducts military operations on three continents, and has institutionalized partnerships with some 20 countries and very close relations with key democracies outside Europe, such as Australia, New Zealand, Japan and South Korea.

Given this amazing evolution, the challenge lies in the question of how to structure NATO's history over the last 60 years. One possibility is to take NATO's disputes and crises throughout the decades as a guiding principle. In 1949, the North Atlantic Treaty – also called the Washington Treaty – was signed as the Soviet Union continued to impose the Berlin Blockade. At the

1. Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, United Kingdom, United States.

same time, many Alliance partners had serious reservations about the newly emerging Federal Republic of Germany. The year 1959 was marked by continuing Soviet pressure concerning the status of Berlin. In 1969, international protests against the war in Vietnam dominated the scene. A year before, NATO had passively witnessed the crushing of democratic tendencies in Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact forces. Some Europeans considered as weakness NATO's lack of action. In 1979, Alliance members took the 'Dual-Track Decision' (also known as the Double-Track Decision) to cope with the emerging threat posed by Soviet SS-20 nuclear missiles in Europe. This was the prelude to one of NATO's most severe crises, which took the Alliance close to breaking up in the early 1980s.

Even after the collapse of the Warsaw Pact and the 'victory' of NATO in the Cold War, disputes seemed to be the guiding element in the Alliance's history. NATO enlargement, the crisis in the Balkans, Afghanistan, and Iraq are catchwords that all stand for heavy transatlantic or intra-European clashes repeatedly putting a strain on NATO's cohesion.

NATO's phases

However, keeping the focus on the crises leaves the questions unanswered, of how NATO could survive and, what is more, how could it emerge as one of the few real success stories in international politics?

This article will follow the classification made by Michael Ruehle, one of the most profound observers of Alliance policy, who took historical developments as markers to divide NATO's evolution into three phases.[2] The first, by far the longest one, stretched over four decades: from the foundation of the Alliance in 1949 to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. During that time, NATO was primarily an instrument of Western self-assertion and self-defense. It protected Europe against a clearly defined and visible threat. In that static situation, NATO's prime role was to be present. It kept the United States in Europe and *de facto* established Europe and North America as a single security space.

The second phase lasted from the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 to September 2001. It was characterized by NATO's interest in shaping the political order in Europe. Partnership, membership and, not least, military action in the Balkans were crucial for transformation in Eastern Europe and for filling the power vacuum left by the demise of the Soviet empire.

2. Michael Ruehle. 'NATO after Riga: A new direction?' *NATO's Nations and Partners for Peace*, vol. 52, no. 1, 2007, p. 36-41.

The terrorist attacks of 11th September 2001 marked the beginning of the third, and current, phase. This phase is characterized by NATO's evolution from a Eurocentric defense alliance into a global stability provider. NATO no longer defines its tasks geographically but takes on threats and challenges regardless of the region they emanate from.

Elaborating on these three phases more closely shows that NATO over time developed a tremendous flexibility, so that it could constantly adapt to new international conditions caused by major historical shifts. It is this adaptability that led to NATO's institutional success.

Phase 1: Four decades of self-assertion and self-defense

NATO was founded, essentially, as a partnership framework without an automatic defense commitment. It was the Korean War, primarily, that transformed it into a genuine military organization.[3] Until June 1950, a few committees and regional planning groups took on certain aspects of transatlantic security. The fact that they were geographically dispersed (in London, Rome, etc.) made coordination almost impossible. By the end of 1951, though, NATO had a Supreme Allied Command Europe, headed by General Dwight D. Eisenhower. The United States agreed to dispatch four divisions to Europe and started building up a coherent overseas command structure.

At the same time, plans were under way to establish a permanent civilian leadership of the Alliance. Initially, the North Atlantic Council met only annually, at the level of foreign ministers. In May 1950, it was agreed to establish a 'Council of Deputies,' which met for the first time in July that year in London. Step by step, more responsibilities were given to these deputies and, as a consequence, a Secretariat was established in Paris. Early in 1952, the Council agreed on a Secretary General to preside over Council meetings and run all the Alliance's civilian agencies.

Shortly after its foundation, the Atlantic Alliance became enlarged. With an eye on the defense of the Mediterranean, Turkey and Greece were invited to join NATO. In February 1952, both countries became full members. Three years later, in May 1955, the second enlargement occurred when the Federal Republic of Germany, having gained (almost) full sovereignty, joined NATO as the 15th member state. Only days later, the Soviet Union and its satellites signed the 'Treaty of Friendship, Mutual Assistance

3. See Lawrence S Kaplan. *NATO Divided, NATO United: The Evolution of an Alliance*. Westport: Greenwood, 2004, p. 9ff.

and Co-Operation' in Warsaw. The Warsaw Pact was born and the bipolar confrontation of blocs, which would determine international relations for the next three and a half decades, had been cemented.

However, the fairly stagnant international situation, with two antagonistic political systems competing, did not lead to a standstill in the relationship between East and West. In fact, the Cold War was much less static, stable and predictable than is implied in recent, sometimes nostalgic retrospection. The bipolar confrontation was in fact characterized by a number of fairly dynamic processes. One of them was the evolution of mutual nuclear deterrence or – as it has been called – "nuclear learning."[4]

Right from its beginning NATO was, in military terms, a nuclear alliance. After the 'atomic age' began with the first nuclear test detonation on 16th July 1945 in the New Mexican desert, nuclear weapons were seen as an efficient and economic means to build up military power, particularly in NATO Europe, where the war-torn and exhausted economies were unable to afford costly conventional forces. It was generally believed that nuclear weapons provided 'more bang for the buck' (more destruction per dollar) and could easily compensate for the lack of tank battalions.

Right from its beginning NATO was, in military terms, a nuclear alliance

After the Soviet Union had achieved its own nuclear capability, it followed the same logic. This mutual trust in the value of nuclear forces (which coincided with the generally positive assessment of nuclear energy at that time) was the reason for thousands of nuclear weapons being deployed on both sides of the Iron Curtain. It took many years and a number of serious international crises – such as the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 – to persuade decisionmakers both East and West to look into the nuclear abyss. The more the qualitative difference of nuclear weapons, compared to all other kinds of arms or explosives, was understood, the smaller grew the temptation to use them in any military exchange. The growth of the notion of mutual assured *destruction* led to the increasing perception of mutual assured *deterrence*. This explains why, since Hiroshima and Nagasaki, nuclear weapons have never been used again, despite the almost 70,000 nuclear warheads that were deployed at the peak of the Cold War on NATO and Warsaw Pact territory.

4. Joseph S Nye. 'Nuclear Learning and U.S.-Soviet Security Regimes'. *International Organization*, vol. 41, no. 3, 1987, p. 371-402.

Nuclear deterrence prevented the Cold War from becoming a hot war, as it burdened even a conventional exchange with the danger of unlimited nuclear escalation. By doing so, deterrence indirectly fuelled another dynamic process throughout the first forty years of NATO: a fierce arms competition. The popular term 'arms race' seems to be questionable, as it was a competition on two different levels. By and large, the Soviet Union – not restricted by market economy conditions or public acceptance – banked primarily on amassing military equipment of all kinds. Much of it was built in so-called 'secret cities,' not indicated on any publicly accessible map. NATO and, first and foremost, the United States instead tried to replace sheer quantity with technological quality. This faith in technological progress, which seems a constant in American culture, sometimes led to weird consequences, such as the widespread faith in futuristic outer-space weaponry to counter Soviet intercontinental ballistic missiles ('Star Wars') in the early 1980s. In any case, since the cataclysmic consequences of an all-out nuclear war made the price of any military hostility prohibitive, the two superpowers carried out their system antagonism on the field of armament rivalry. This arms competition probably wasted an incredible amount of resources, but arguably saved the human race.

A third dynamic process affecting NATO as an alliance and many member states individually was arms control. Although most of the arms-control negotiations were bilateral between the United States and the Soviet Union,[5] both NATO as an institution and individual Alliance members were also affected. One example of a bilateral arms-control process that stirred up the entire Atlantic Alliance was the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF). This agreement on the withdrawal of all intermediate and short-range nuclear forces in Europe, signed by Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev in December 1987, marked the end of a long and vigorous dispute within NATO over the deployment of American Pershing and cruise missiles in Europe.

It is up to debate as to whether it was President Reagan's costly armament programs that were the main cause of the Soviet empire being brought economically to its knees. It is probable that a combination of processes – deterrence, arms competition and arms control – contributed to ending the Warsaw Pact. Certainly, no-one foresaw the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989. However, the longer the Cold War continued, the more it became evident that, in the long run, the communist regime could

5. Only the reduction of conventional forces in Europe, which was initiated in the second half of the 1980s and led to the Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE Treaty), signed in November 1990, was negotiated between NATO and the Warsaw Pact.

not win the contest with the economically superior and politically more attractive West, with its constitutional elements of pluralism and freedom.

Phase 2: NATO as the "Midwife of Change"

Few if any encapsulations better summarize NATO's role in the immediate post-Cold War period than Manfred Woerner's depiction of the Alliance as a "midwife of change."[6] Although the fall of the Berlin Wall came as a surprise to most decisionmakers both East and West, the then NATO Secretary General grasped much earlier than most people the historical opportunities stemming from the end of East-West confrontation and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact.

However, when the threat that provoked its founding dissipated, there was much confusion about NATO's future. Questions arose such as: Against whom should the transatlantic defense capabilities be directed? Where should the united Germany be institutionally located? In the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the Iron Curtain, serious consideration was given to some odd scenarios. It did not come as a surprise that Soviet voices called for abrogation of both NATO and the Warsaw Pact. The request for a unified Germany to be neutral seemed to be justifiable, at least from a Soviet point of view. However, other suggestions – such as that Germany be a member of NATO and the Warsaw Pact at the same time – were simply bizarre.[7]

In the end, it was primarily close German-American coordination and the steadfastness of George Bush, Helmut Kohl and Mikhail Gorbachev that established unified Germany as a full member of NATO – against the resistance of other key NATO members. This was not only a godsend for Germany itself but also a precondition for the viability of the North Atlantic Alliance. It showed that NATO and the transatlantic security relationship – despite the dissipation of the Soviet menace – had a role in shaping the political order in Europe in the wake of the Cold War.

The question remained, however: What would be the main function of the new NATO, with united Germany as a member? Again, various options were intensively discussed in the international strategic community. Some pointed to the "residual threat" of the Soviet Union, in so far as it persisted

6. It is worth noting that Woerner used this phrase even before the Berlin Wall came down. See Manfred Woerner, 'Address to the German American Roundtable of the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung', 25 October 1989, http://www.nato.int/docu/speech/1989/s891025a_e.htm.
7. John Lewis Gaddis. 'For Stability, Germany Needs a Foot in Each Camp'. *International Herald Tribune*, March 24, 1990.

in the new Russia, which made necessary the continuation of a viable defense alliance. Others emphasized NATO's role of institutionally linking the United States and Europe – something that would continue to be necessary in order to ease possible tensions among the NATO members themselves and to stabilize NATO internally.[8] NATO's remaining function of managing common defense planning was also mentioned, as well as its ongoing relevance for political consultations among the member states. The option of NATO providing its military capabilities for operations under the auspices of the United Nations was also seen as a possibility, as was NATO's role as the prime facilitator of arms control in Europe. All in all, the debate showed tendencies of 'anything goes,' giving the impression of an alliance that was desperately looking for a raison d'être, to be communicated to an increasingly critical public waiting for the 'peace dividend.'

Two external developments injected some clarity into the question of NATO's future role and determined the Alliance discussions in the years to come: the emerging crisis in the Balkans and the growing demand of former Warsaw Pact countries for membership in NATO. Both raised questions that were encapsulated in US Senator Richard Lugar's famous warning in 1993 that NATO had to go "out of area or out of business." To remain relevant, NATO would have to expand its area of responsibility as well as its membership.

NATO had to go "out of area or out of business"

Following the gradual dissolution of Yugoslavia, the situation worsened further in early 1992 as heavy fighting broke out in Bosnia after the European Community had acknowledged the independence of Bosnia-Herzegovina. NATO became formally involved in the crisis in autumn that year when it started the no-military flight zone over Bosnia, imposed by the United Nations. However, the crisis intensified as neither NATO (whose action was limited to occasional air strikes), the United Nations nor the European Union could agree on decisive action to stop the civil war in the former Yugoslavia.

In July 1995, Serbian forces seized the UN-controlled zone of Srebrenica, and killed thousands of Bosnians. This catastrophe pointed up the incapability of the 'international community' to get its act together in order to stop the atrocities in the region. At the same time, Srebrenica was a wake-up call, particularly for the United States, to get more seriously engaged in pacifying the

8. "By protecting Western Europe from others, the United States also protected the half continent from itself." Josef Joffe. *The Limited Partnership: Europe, the United States and the Burdens of Alliance*. Ballinger: Cambridge MA, 1987, p. 179.

Balkans. The result was the Dayton Peace Agreement, signed on 14th December 1995. Authorized by the United Nations, NATO provided the so-called Implementation Force (IFOR) to supervise the peace accord. In this way, NATO took on a new role by committing itself to a long-term military engagement beyond its own borders. One year later, IFOR was replaced by the Stabilization Force (SFOR), which was in place until 2005.

The Kosovo war expanded NATO's portfolio even further. The violence of Serbian forces against the Kosovo-Albanians in the second half of the 1990s led NATO to seriously contemplate military action to pacify the situation. In late 1998, NATO developed sophisticated plans for air strikes against the troops of Serbian president Slobodan Milosevic. A couple of months later, on 24th March 1999, NATO began bombing Serbian air-defense sites. Without being attacked and without a mandate from the UN Security Council, NATO had started a war for the sake of humanitarian rights. This war lasted almost three months and cemented NATO's role as peacekeeper in the Balkans. The NATO-led stabilization force Kosovo-Force (KFOR) is still engaged in the region, with more than 13,000 soldiers. The Balkans, therefore, was the catalyst for NATO evolving from a pure defense organization into a European stability force.

In parallel with the widening of its tasks and responsibilities, the Alliance also expanded its membership. In the early 1990s, an increasing number of former Warsaw Pact countries raised the prospect of NATO membership. The motives differed from country to country. Some were searching for protection from Russia; some wanted to visibly shift sides from the 'East' to the 'West,' and others hoped for support in the process of transformation to democratic societies.

NATO's initial reaction was relatively reserved, also for various reasons. Some wanted to avoid provoking Moscow, while others were reluctant to take on security and defense commitments towards the countries of the former Eastern Bloc. Moreover, the question was raised whether decision-making in NATO – already a structural problem for any consensus-based institution – would not be further complicated by new member states bringing their own sets of problems and disagreements into the Alliance.

Thus, when German Defense Minister Volker Ruehe publicly raised the idea of NATO enlargement in March 1993,[9] there was almost no response. The US administration, in particular, was cautious. Key figures in the

9. See Volker Ruehe's Alastair Buchan Memorial Lecture, 'Shaping Euro-Atlantic Policies – A Grand Strategy for a New Era'. *Survival*, vol. 35, no. 2, 1993, p. 129-137.

Clinton administration (such as Secretary of State Warren Christopher and presidential advisor Strobe Talbott) were pursuing a 'Russia First' approach in order not to destabilize the delicate process of transforming the former Soviet Union. Instead of inviting new allies, the Clinton administration developed the 'Partnership for Peace.' Since this partnership was perceived as a waiting loop for applicants, its acronym PfP was mockingly transmogrified into 'Program for Procrastination.' Nevertheless, PfP and subsequent partnership initiatives – such as the 'Mediterranean Dialogue' (MD), initiated in 1994 – opened a new chapter in NATO's history. NATO increasingly became a supporter of military and political transformation far beyond its borders.

In late 1994, Washington completely changed its view on enlargement (mostly due to domestic reasons[10]) and spearheaded the membership debate in the following years. Despite the pressure by the United States and Germany, it took until 1999 to admit three new members: Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic. Five years later – after heavy debates with Moscow about the Baltic states – a group of seven countries (Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia) joined the Alliance. After another five years, Albania and Croatia became members.

The two developments – enlargement and the Balkan crisis – together demonstrate that NATO can go beyond its area and remain successfully in business.

Phase 3: NATO after 9/11

Every year now, the United States and its allies commemorate 11th September 2001 as a tragic date which changed the international security landscape as profoundly as the fall of the Berlin Wall or the end of the Soviet Union. It was not only the loss of thousands of lives in the Al Qaeda attacks against New York and Washington DC that had a lasting impact on Western, and particularly US, security policy. The fact that a small group of people with limited organizational structures, imperfect skills and relatively scarce resources could do so much harm to the largest military power on earth fundamentally changed America's perceptions of the threat it faced and had long-lasting consequences for NATO in general.

10. Strobe Talbott was replaced by Richard Holbrooke, previously US ambassador in Germany and a staunch supporter of NATO enlargement. In addition, President Clinton did not want to provide an easy target for the Republicans in the upcoming mid-term elections in November 1994.

The first main consequence, the war in Afghanistan, continues to affect NATO in a major way. Legally backed by United Nations resolution 1368[11] and politically supported by NATO, which had invoked Article 5 of the Washington Treaty for the first time in its history, the United States started bombing Afghanistan on 7th October 2001. The initial goal was to oust the Taliban regime, which had provided a safe haven for Al Qaeda and its leader Osama bin Laden, but the operations in Afghanistan had a strong motivation of revenge. The incentive to stabilize and reconstruct the country emerged months later when the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) was created, in December 2001. In August 2003, NATO took over the leadership of ISAF, assuming responsibility for securing the entire country.[12]

Since then, NATO has been struggling with the colossal burden of helping to bring security and prosperity to one of the poorest countries in the world that had been torn by war and violence for decades. Much has been achieved, but the Alliance is still burdened by a range of contradictions and shortcomings. NATO's success in the region is highly dependent on a large number of non-military institutions (United Nations, European Union, World Bank, non-governmental organizations) on which it has hardly any influence. What is more, NATO has to communicate the fact that (unpopular) military actions are the precondition for the success of the (much more popular) non-military measures – a task that is not easy in democratic and media-oriented societies. Some allies even conceal the fact that in Afghanistan a war is going on that can lead to harm and sacrifice on all sides. Lastly, although all NATO members emphasize the utmost relevance of succeeding in Afghanistan, few act accordingly and devote an appropriate amount of military and non-military resources to the common effort. Given these deficiencies – some implicit and some self-inflicted – Afghanistan will remain NATO's top priority for many years to come.

Despite all the difficulties in the Hindu Kush, one should not underestimate the high level of cohesion that NATO has shown in recent years. The war in Afghanistan is a bloody conflict that has already lasted significantly longer than the Second World War. However, there is consensus among all Alliance members to stay as long as it takes to prevent Afghanistan from becoming once again a safe haven for Jihad terrorism.

11. This resolution condemned the terrorist attacks as "a threat to international peace and security" and emphasized the "inherent right of individual or collective self-defense" of those who were attacked.
12. ISAF's role was originally limited to providing security in the Kabul area. Two months after NATO had taken over, ISAF's mandate was extended over the whole of Afghanistan.

The second consequence of 9/11 – the war in Iraq – has been much more traumatic. It led, as one insider put it, to a "near-death experience" for NATO.[13] Although the Alliance as an institution was not involved in the regime change in Bagdad, the question of the legality and legitimacy of toppling Saddam Hussein led to some of the fiercest debate among NATO members in the Alliance's history. The George W. Bush administration, supported primarily by the United Kingdom, claimed that Iraq was actively developing weapons of mass destruction. In addition, Washington insisted on the existence of close links between the regime in Iraq and the Al Qaeda terrorist network. These two concerns taken together were interpreted as an existential threat to the United States and its allies that justified military action against Iraq to establish a non-aggressive and democratic government in the country. Further reasoning, which had already been expressed by the Clinton administration, assumed that a regime change in Iraq would lead to a domino-effect towards freedom and democracy in the entire region. As a result, the bombing of Bagdad started on 20th March 2003.

The Iraq war: a traumatic experience for NATO

The dividing line between supporters and opponents of an attack on Iraq went not only through the Atlantic Alliance but through Europe as well. The bitter disputes between the supporters of the war (primarily the Eastern European NATO members) and the critics (primarily France and Germany) were so damaging that many other key aspects of NATO policy were seriously affected. For instance, the security cooperation between NATO and the European Union, which was already a delicate affair due to Turkey's EU ambitions, almost became paralyzed.

Even the critics of the operation, however, did not want to cause too much damage to the transatlantic relationship.[14] Thus, in 2004 NATO members agreed on a training mission for Iraqi forces. In the same year, NATO launched the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI), in order to reach out to the Middle East by establishing partnerships with key countries in the region.

Both wars – the broadly accepted one in Afghanistan and the disputed one in Iraq – spurred NATO's evolution into an alliance with global interests and a global horizon. This trend was further amplified when, from 2005, NATO conducted airlifting operations for the African Union (AU) in

13. These were the words of the former US ambassador to NATO, Nicholas Burns.
14. Some countries opposing the war even clandestinely provided intelligence information to the US-led coalition.

Darfur. Since then, NATO has become a true global actor, running military operations in four crucial regions: Europe, the Middle East, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Asia.

Problems at the Age of 60

However, the evolution of NATO from a Eurocentric defense organization to a global stability provider has left a number of questions, some of them openly debated, and others carefully shielded from public discussion.

The open ones are those that will form the core of the upcoming discussion about a new NATO strategy. The currently valid strategic document, the so-called *Strategic Concept*, was approved in 1999 – in the Phase 2 of NATO – and is clearly not suited to carrying NATO through Phase 3 and beyond. Intermediate papers, such as the *Comprehensive Political Guidance* (2006)[15] or the *Declaration on Alliance Security* (2009)[16] were written to provide the Alliance with at least some political guidance. However, given their very general character, codifying more or less the lowest common denominator, they could not provide serious strategic counselling for NATO's further evolution. Thus, a new strategy is long overdue. It is scheduled to be presented for approval by NATO's heads of state and government at their next summit, in late 2010 in Lisbon.

A new strategy for NATO is long overdue

The core issue to be answered is NATO's role and mission in the coming decade. Is NATO's role primarily the defense of the security of its member states, as codified in Article V of the Washington Treaty, or is NATO rather an instrument for projecting security and stability beyond its geographical boundaries? The politically correct answer might be 'both,' but even such a diplomatic response does not free NATO members from deciding on two intertwined issues: credibility and resources.

Particularly in the first phase of NATO's history, the mutual-defense commitment had credibility for both allies and potential enemies. The first Warsaw Pact soldier stepping on NATO's territory (probably in Germany) would have triggered the Article V mechanism, while the military presence of many NATO allies on German soil would have made highly likely a concerted military response. Today, the meaning of Article V is much

15. The document was endorsed by NATO's heads of state and government at the NATO summit in 2006 in Riga. See http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_56425.htm?selectedLocale=en
16. Agreed upon at the NATO summit in 2009 in Strasbourg/Kehl. See http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/news_52838.htm?selectedLocale=en

more difficult to define, and many Alliance members have their doubts about the credibility of NATO's security assurances. How can they be made plausible to allies and to potential aggressors? Is there a need for contingency plans or military exercises that simulate territorial defense scenarios (probably on the territory of NATO's Eastern members)? What would be the impact of such exercises on NATO's relations with Russia? Is Russia a partner, as a dense network of cooperation indicates, or is it still seen by many allies as an opponent – since it is the only country in Europe that not only *could* but *conceivably* could launch a military attack against NATO territory? This question gained particular relevance during the military exchange between Russia and Georgia in August 2008.

Another matter that affects NATO's spectrum of missions is resources. Given limited defense budgets in all NATO countries (which are likely to shrink further), NATO cannot avoid prioritizing the needs. Even if much of the military posture necessary for expeditionary operations abroad could be used for territorial defense as well, some allies might ask whether NATO is currently able to defend all NATO territory at any time when most of its deployable forces are involved in a long-term commitment in Afghanistan?

Other pressing issues are less openly debated, such as the legality and legitimacy of defense. When is NATO allowed to use military force? During the Cold War, NATO awaited proof that aggression was under way before its own defense operations were set in motion. In an age of the proliferation of missile technology, vital threats might materialize before the deployment of troops – for instance, if long-range missiles tipped with weapons of mass destruction were prepared for launch by potentially hostile regimes. To await hard proof of aggressive intentions would mean waiting for the missile to be launched – with hardly any chance of avoiding the deadly consequences. Given these dangers, can NATO shirk from discussing the element of pre-emption as a means to provide security to its members, even if the term alone – pre-emptive strike – has been discredited since the Iraq crisis in 2003?

A second question that NATO has neglected is the future role of nuclear forces. With a 'Stone Age' regime in North Korea which nevertheless concluded its first nuclear weapons test in 2006 and with Iran continuously working on a military nuclear program, popular ideas of a nuclear-free world will remain pipedreams. Hence, NATO needs to reflect more thoroughly on the role of its nuclear capabilities. In recent years, the Alliance has issued only very general statements about the further relevance of nuclear weapons. Today, pertinent questions need to be answered: What

is the purpose of NATO's nuclear forces stationed in Europe? Against which kind of opponents are they directed? Is there any likely contingency in which they might have a role?

Neither the open questions nor those that have been evaded are easy to answer. Thus, NATO cannot avoid a painful but mind-clearing strategic debate in order to prepare the Alliance strategically for the challenges of the coming years. Clarity about its roles, missions and resources is not only necessary to steer NATO safely through Phase 3 of its evolution. It is also a requirement for Phase 4, for whenever the next step in its evolution begins.

PE

KEYWORDS

Atlantic Alliance
Cold War
International security
New Strategic Concept